Interaction and Second Language Acquisition

A Longitudinal Study of a Child's Acquisition of English as a Second Language

Guo-qiang Liu

北京语言文化大学出版社

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CHAPTER ONE

INTERACTION IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

This book reports a longitudinal study that examines the first twenty-six months of learning English as a second language by a young Chinese boy, Bob. It focuses on four important interactional contexts in which the learner used and developed English as his second language. The first context is the one in which the learner interacted with his supervisors and other children in a pre-school center. The second is the one in which he interacted with his teachers at school. The third is the one in which he interacted with his school peers. The last is the one in which he interacted with the researcher of this study at his own home. In particular, this book aims to document, describe and interpret the relationship between these interactional contexts and the learner's use of English and development of his interlanguage.

The process of second language acquisition (SLA) almost always takes place in the context of interaction with other speakers of the target language. In fact, modern second language pedagogy assumes that it is inconceivable that SLA could occur without interaction of some kind, even if this is not face-to-face. If we wish to develop our understanding of SLA, looking closely at interaction is necessary.

The application of SLA research in education requires an understanding of what people acquire in learning a second language, and how it is acquired. The educational aim is that the development of such an understanding will ultimately be applied to improve the learning and teaching of second languages. From this perspective, SLA is a process in which learners interact with their "teacher", whether a professional or not, and with one another. This makes the role of interaction and its formation in diverse contexts particularly significant aspects of educationally oriented SLA studies.

In the context of this book, "interaction" firstly refers to communication, in which people use language to inform and manage one another. The study here focuses on interaction between a second language learner and various native speakers (including the researcher, a competent non-native speaker) of the target language. Secondly, "interaction" refers to face-to-face communication, and therefore language on radio and television will be ignored. Instead, the study concentrates on "what happens when one person talks to another whom he can see and who is near enough to hear him" (Hudson 1980: 106). Thirdly, "interaction" refers to the

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use of spoken language, with written forms of communication beyond the scope of this book.

This chapter has three major sections. Firstly, the major theories of SLA will be outlined and the place of interaction in these theories will be examined. Theories giving implicit consideration to interaction in SLA and theories explicitly arguing about the place of interaction in SLA will be briefly considered.

In the second section, Gass' (1988) view of the SLA process will be outlined. Gass' model presents a picture of the complex process from input to output, in which interaction plays an important role as it can be considered from the perspective of both input to and output from the learner. Studies of input and output are examined in terms of how they characterize interaction. Although this model was first proposed in 1988, it is a most comprehensive one to date.

The central question underlying any study of interaction is how it impacts on second language use and development. While a number of studies support the conclusion that interaction makes a difference to second language use, a major issue that needs to be explored is whether it affects development. This book aims to provide further evidence that interaction influences second language use. It also attempts to contribute to determining whether interaction impacts on second language development. In seeking to achieve these aims, a set of questions has been formulated in the third section of this chapter.

1.1. The place of interaction in SLA theory

About four decades of advancement in SLA studies have witnessed the formation of various theories concerning the processes involved in SLA. Researchers such as Ellis (1985a, 1994), McLaughlin (1987), and Mitchell and Myles (1998), among others, have provided extensive descriptions and reviews of the major theories of SLA. However, I do not intend to review or evaluate these here. Rather, drawing on these writers, this section will provide a list of major theories of SLA and attempt to locate the place of interaction within these theories.

Theories of SLA can be divided into three broad categories according to the phenomena each of which attempts to account for. Some theories try to explain the process of internalization and/or grammar building in SLA but ignore or downplay context of SLA. These include cognitive approaches (McLaughlin, Rossman & McLeod 1983; McLeod & McLaughlin 1986; McLaughlin 1987, 1990; Hulstijn & Hulstijn 1984; Segalowitz 1986) and Universal Grammar based theories (White 1989, 1990, 1996). Other theories try to account for the role of context in SLA but downplay the process of internalization. These include Social Distance Theories (Schumann 1978a, 1978b; Andersen 1983, 1996) and theories derived from work on identity (Giles and Byrne 1982). A third group of theories seek to integrate the process of internalization and the context of SLA, such as the Monitor (Krashen 1985) and

Variability (Ellis 1985a, 1985b, 1987, 1994, 1999; Tarone 1983, 1988, 1990) theories.

The issue of interaction is handled differently by various theories. Some either treat it implicitly or ignore it altogether; others look at it explicitly but either emphasize or downplay its importance. Theories concerned with context do not necessarily focus on interaction itself, while those that downplay or discount context may still be quite explicit about its role.

Of the theories listed above, those which treat interaction implicitly are the Cognitive Theory and Social Distance Theories. The Cognitive Theory sees that the acquisition of a language involves the acquisition of a hierarchically organized set of cognitive skills. Second language learners need to automatize selected sub-skills of the totality of the processing cognitive skills, and to restructure progressively their internal representations of sub-skills. Pienemann and Johnston (1987) claim that only cognitive and linguistic factors can be convincingly said to influence sequencing (what is acquired first, and what is acquired later) in second language development, since SLA research has produced consistent evidence in support of this claim with no counter-evidence. This implies that interactional factors do not play an important part. Karmiloff-Smith (1986) argues for a three-phase learning process, from data to internal generation, and then to an integration of both data and internal generation. This process also applies to second language learning (McLaughlin 1987). Signs of internal generation were

observed in the subject of this study (Chapter Seven). Interaction is only implicitly treated in this approach since it is assumed that second language data is accessed by the learner through it but its role is unanalyzed.

Social Distance Theories include Schumann's (1978a) Acculturation Theory, Andersen's (1983, 1990) Nativization Theory, and Giles and Byrne's (1982) Accommodation Theory. These all take various "socio-psychological" perspectives on SLA, and focus on how learners relate to the target language culture/group, which, it is argued, determines learners' accessibility to the target language input. Although these theories deal with the context of SLA, they do not treat interaction explicitly.

Those which do treat interaction explicitly include Monitor Theory, Discourse Theory, Variability Theories, and Universal Grammar based Theories. The Monitor Theory (Krashen 1977a, 1977b, 1978a, 1978b, 1981, 1982, 1985; Krashen & Terrell 1983) has five central hypotheses: it makes a distinction between subconscious acquisition and the conscious learning of the second language; SLA proceeds in a natural and predictable order; learned competence monitors second language output; comprehensible input is essential for SLA to take place; and input is filtered by an Affective Filter. Using studies of "motherese", with which mothers talk to young babies, as a basis, this theory assumes an important role for interaction, although it does not always explicitly discuss examples of how second language interaction modifies second language internalization.

The Discourse Theory (Hatch 1978a, 1978b, 1992) looks specifically at the context of SLA. It investigates how learners gain target language input by focusing on the role both learners and native speakers play in negotiating and shaping the input available. It also explicitly examines the relationship between interaction and SLA. Some of the particular claims of this model will be examined later in this chapter.

The Variability Theories include Ellis' (1985a, 1985b, 1987, 1994, 1999) Variable Competence Model and Tarone's (1983, 1988, 1990) Capability Continuum Paradigm, which maintain that the learner's language is a variable system. Second language learners have the ability to vary second language output in interaction with their interlocutors according to the task. Ellis and Tarone give interaction a central role in SLA, one that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Universal Grammar based theories (White 1989, 1990, 1996) propose that Universal Grammar, which contains a set of principles that influences how the child organizes language and restricts how grammar is constructed (White 1990: 124), is innately present in humans. Universal Grammar also consists of a set of parameters, which congregate seemingly unrelated properties of language (White 1990: 125). Languages are different from one another in that parameter settings are different. In some approaches, second language learners access Universal Grammar through their first languages. Universal Grammar based theories are

explicit in their view that the role of interaction is trivial: it is simply the means of providing the triggers to set the parameters of the Grammar.

It seems that there is a spectrum of ways in which various theories of SLA treat the issue of interaction. Although the actual status awarded to it in SLA varies from marginal (White 1989, 1990, 1996; Gregg 1990) to central (Tarone 1990; Ellis 1990, 1994), all theories of SLA acknowledge that it plays some role.

Learning a second language enables a speaker to communicate in that language and, as has been stated at the outset, SLA frequently takes place through interaction. It can be argued that the whole process of SLA is, to a large extent, submerged in the context of interaction. Thus, regardless of one's theoretical position, SLA is never assumed to take place without interaction. For this reason alone, it seems reasonable to attempt to deepen our understanding of how learners interact in gaining access to and using the target language. In order to begin this process, it is necessary to review what has been found out about interaction in studies of SLA and how this relates to input and output.

1.2. Input, output and interaction

Superficially, one can say that there are at least two different ways in which interaction can be viewed. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) imply that it can be one-way, in which the native speaker does the talking and the learner listens without talking, a view that focuses on linguistic input

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