

## **Research on Student Interaction and Second Language Acquisition**

Previous research and theory suggests that student-to-student language experiences facilitate second language learning. By talking with others, second language learners:

- engage in turn-taking which enables further negotiation of language structure (Boxer, 1993)
- clarify the meaning of new words and grammatical structures they hear
- try out new and previously taught vocabulary and structures in conversation,
- receive feedback from their conversational partner on parts of their speech that were incomprehensible,
- notice their errors, and
- rephrase or recast their statements to clarify the meaning for their partner.

All of these activities are considered helpful to second language learning.

### **History of interest in Student Interaction**

Even before the 1970s, conversational practice was considered to be helpful in providing practice with and reinforcement of vocabulary and grammatical structures that the teacher had previously explained. Research beginning in the mid-1970s (Wagner-Gough and Hatch, 1975; Hatch, 1978; Hatch and Wagner-Gough, 1976) showed how learners' participation in conversational interaction provided them with opportunities to hear and produce the second language in ways that went beyond mere practice of previously instructed material (Gass, Mackey, and Pica 1998). Various research since then has expanded and deepened this line of inquiry, teasing out the ways in which student-to-student conversational interaction facilitates their second language development.

### **Comprehensible Input**

- Students improve their comprehension by asking their conversation partner to clarify things that they don't understand. This allows the learner to receive "comprehensible input," a necessary first step for second language learning.

If a second language learner does not understand something either in the oral or written instructions for a teacher-assigned pair work task, the learner usually asks his or her partner for clarification. In this way, learners get "comprehensible input" on the task to be done and/or the language needed to complete the task. Comprehensible input, originally claimed by Stephen Krashen to be all that was needed for language learning to take place, is now seen as necessary but not by itself sufficient. Later research, such as Sato (1986), has shown that it is quite possible for learners to understand the input they receive without improving their own speaking or "output." Researchers discovered that the role of interaction was more complex than they had originally thought.

### **Comprehensible Output or Pushed Output**

- In conversation, learners must try to say something that their partner will understand. This “pushes” learners to test their second language pronunciation, vocabulary, word order, and other grammar and structures to try to produce “comprehensible output.”

Swain (1985) argued that through conversational interaction, learner participants are “pushed” to try to produce “comprehensible output,” or language that their partner can understand. This requires much more of the learner than merely comprehending what was heard, which does not always require a complete understanding of the vocabulary, grammar or word order of the message heard. To provide comprehensible output, the learner must organize and use grammar and vocabulary—and especially syntax or word order—to communicate their meaning. Because participation in conversational interaction forces or “pushes” the learner to attempt comprehensible output, Swain later called this process “pushed output.”

### **Negative Feedback and “Noticing”**

- When learners are not understood, their partners ask them questions. This helps learners see or “notice” what they need to change (and ideally learn) to communicate more clearly.

Research following up on the role of comprehensible output in second language acquisition has looked at the specific interaction or “negotiation” around learner output. Schmidt (1994) and Tomlin and Villa (1994) for example, have looked at the role of negative feedback that learners receive from their conversation partners and how that feedback helps them to “notice” their errors. When second language learners try to produce comprehensible output, they inevitably make mistakes that cause their partners not to fully understand their message. When the partner provides information that the message was not understood, this provides “negative feedback” to the language learner. Sometimes this feedback is very general, such as a question like “what?” or “Huh?” At other times, the listener identifies that word or phrase that was not understood. This negative feedback focuses the learners’ attention on some part of their second language use that is not sufficiently proficient to be understood. In this way, they notice that they are mispronouncing a word, using the incorrect verb form, or syntax, etc. Noticing what they are having problems with in communication is essential to improving their second language output.

### **Rephrasing, Recasting, Repair**

- When a misunderstanding occurs between learners, the learners try to correct or repair (Wong, 2000) the cause of the misunderstanding. This may take several attempts.

Students tend to improve their second language “output” through these repeated attempts. Second language learners respond to negative feedback by trying to correct the misunderstood part of their speech—their pronunciation of a word, the word choice, syntax, verb form, etc.—so that their partner will understand their message. Research has shown that this recasting has at least short-term benefits in the learner’s second language production (Holliday, 1995; Linnell, 1995; Pica, 1994, 1996), and many researchers theorize that it may have longer term benefits, too (Noyuyoshi and Ellis, 1993, LaPierre, 1994; Donato, 1994).

### **Interaction Facilitates Second Language Learning**

Researchers caution that it is not possible to claim that interaction “causes” second language learning. The process is much too complex to reduce it to a single cause. They do believe that interaction and the negotiation of meaning and form that happens during interaction facilitates or helps students to learn a second language.

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This summary was compiled by Reuel Kurzet. To read the more detailed history of interaction and second language acquisition from which this summary is drawn, and for a fairly complete bibliography on the subject, see Gass, Mackey, & Pica (1998).

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