Interaction Hypothesis: A Comprehensive Theory of SLA?

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ABSTRACT

The role of interaction in second language acquisition has always been controversial. A bunch of theories have been proposed as to the role of “nature” or “nurture” in SLA. Interaction Hypothesis (IH) introduced by Long accepts the role of “nurture” in SLA claiming that negotiation of meaning through interaction can facilitate the process of language learning. In this review, the IH will be evaluated according to Jordan’s Guidelines for theory construction in SLA. The findings show that IH generally conforms to the Guidelines and, apart from some shortcomings, can be considered a progress toward constructing a comprehensive theory of SLA. Finally, Ellis’s Interactionist Theory, a combination of IH and socio-cultural theory, is suggested as an updated version of IH.

Key words: Interaction Hypothesis, Second Language Acquisition, SLA theory
1. Introduction

In the realm of SLA, theorists have long been concerned with how a second language is learned. A lot of speculations in the form of theories, hypotheses and models have been proposed. But before proceeding to SLA theories, we need to consider major trends in language acquisition in general. According to Trawinski (2005), major approaches to language acquisition are: a) behavioral approach which claims that language is acquired according to general laws of learning and is similar to learning other skills. Learning was viewed as a process of habit formation, b) nativist approach which claims that human beings are born with an inborn mechanism called “Language Acquisition Device” which initiates, supervises and facilitates language acquisition, c) cognitive approach which views language learning as a mental process, and d) social interactionist approach gives environment a major role in acquiring a language. According to this view, people learn a language through meaningful interaction with other people who try to modify the input in order to make it fine-tuned to the needs of the learner. The models of SLA proposed up to now are connected to the aforementioned approaches of language acquisition. These models are: a) Anderson’s Adaptive Control of Thought Model (ACT), b) Parallel Distributed Processing Model (PDP) / Connectionist Model, c) Acculturation Model, d) Gardner’s Socio-educational Model and e) Krashen’s Monitor Model.

2. Review of the related literature

2.1 What is interaction?

Interaction as defined by Longman dictionary of contemporary English means “the activity of talking to other people, working together with them” and “a process by which two or more things affect each other.” These definitions unfold some unique properties of interaction, i.e. interaction involves at least two individuals collaborating in an activity which has an affecting nature. Ellis (1999) defines interaction as “the social behavior that occurs when one person communicates with another.” He also believes that it “can occur inside our minds when we engage in the kind of ‘private speech’ discussed by Vygotsky (1987) and more covertly, when different modules of the mind interact to construct an understanding of or a response to some phenomenon” hence proposing two kinds of interaction i.e. ‘interpersonal interaction’ and ‘intrapersonal interaction’. Moreover, Chappelle (2003) proposes another form of interaction
between person and computer. Gass and Torres (2005) define interaction as exchanges in which there is some evidence that a part of the speech has not been fully understood. The following structure taken from Varonis and Gass (1985) indicates this:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Trigger} \quad (= \text{makes communication breakdown}) \\
\text{Indicator} \quad (= \text{some part of the utterance is not understood}) \\
\text{A resolution} \quad \text{Response} \quad (= \text{response of the NNS}) \\
\text{Reaction} \quad (= \text{reactions of NS to the utterance of NNS})
\end{align*}\]

An example from my own class may clarify this diagram:

Student: I feel lonely in Darab because I have a few friends here. (trigger)

Teacher: You have few friends in Darab? (indicator of the problem)

Student: Yes, few friends. (response)

Teacher: Oh, yes. (reaction)

2.2 Interaction hypothesis

The role of ‘nature’ or ‘nurture’ in learning a language has always been controversial. By nature, it is meant learners are innately able to learn language which was proposed by linguists like Chomsky. Nurture, however, emphasizes on the role of environment as the learners engage in interaction (Ziglari, 2011). Nowadays it is believed that language is developed through interaction and negotiation of meaning.

The Interaction Hypothesis is founded on early works on foreigner talk seeking to examine how native speakers respond to communication impasse. These studies led to the fact that native speakers do modify their input to adapt it to the non-native speech just as what caretakers do when interacting with babies. IH was also influenced by Hatch’s (1978b) work in which she emphasized that learners learn a second language through interaction, not just from what they have already gained in interaction (Ellis, 1999, p1). Stephen Krashen’s views also affected IH in which Krashen (1977, 1980)
believed that acquisition takes place when the learner focuses on meaning and obtains comprehensible input. The process of obtaining this comprehensible input is facilitated through foreigner talk and interlanguage and also extralinguistic context (cited in Ellis, 1991). In Long (1981), Long studied modifications in native speaker input to NNS and made a distinction between linguistic modifications and interactive modifications. Interactive modifications he attributed to NS input are as follows (as cited in Hall & Verplaestete, 2000):

1. “Topics are treated simply and briefly as compared to NS-NS talk.”
2. “Topics are dropped unexpectedly and shifted to accommodate miscommunications by NNS.”
3. “Topics initiated in FT are signaled by additional stress, left dislocation, intersentential pauses, question forms as topic initiators, and frames (e.g. “ok”, “well”).”

He also proposes some techniques associated with foreigner talk that are used to lighten the interactional burden on NNS. These include:

1. “NS engage in cooperative dialogue by supplying information to the NNS’s utterances to help the latter express an idea.”
2. “NSs answer their own questions and ask rhetorical questions.”
3. “NSs frequently use an integrative style, thereby requiring answers and, hence sustaining the conversation.”
4. “NSs use many and frequent clarification devices to avoid conversation problems and to repair miscommunications.”
5. Long (1981) claimed that these modifications are crucial and facilitative to SLA and are found in all cases of the successful acquisition of a full version of SL.

Long’s IH has two versions. The early version (Long, 1980; 1981; 1983) emphasizes the role of Krashen’s comprehensible input reporting as Long (1983) states:
1. “Access to comprehensible input is characteristic of all successful first and second acquisition.”

2. “Greater quantities of comprehensible input seem to result in faster acquisition, and,

3. Lack of access to it results in little or no acquisition.”

Therefore, the role of comprehensible input was considered crucial for acquisition. As Ellis (1991) argues in his article, Long doesn’t explain the effects of different interactional modifications. As a result, he adheres more to the quantity of these modifications than to their quality.

Long’s later works along with those of Pica (Long, 1989; Long & Crookes, 1987; Long & Porter, 1985; Pica, 1987) shows a step forward to introduce some proposals for pedagogy such as using two-way tasks as well as group work. In all these studies, Ellis (1999) states, Long refers to the psycholinguistic rationale for his proposals. The evolution of IH has been discussed by Ellis (1991) from two respects. First, Long recognizes that in spite of the facilitative role of comprehensible input in language acquisition, it may not be sufficient. Second, Long, drawing on the comprehensible output hypothesis proposed by Swain (1985), credits interaction with the role of supplying the learners with opportunities for production.

The early version of IH was questioned by some scholars (Faerch & Kasper, 1996; Smith, 1986) casting doubt on Long’s hypothesis that comprehension promotes acquisition. They believed that processing input rather than comprehending input is crucial for acquisition (Ellis, 1999). Some other studies tried to examine Long’s hypothesis that interactionally modified input works more professionally than premodified input. Some of these studies led to supporting evidence for this hypothesis (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Pica, 1989; Pica, Young & Doughty, 1987) while some weren’t so promising (Aston, 1986; Ehrlic, Avery & Yorio, 1989; Ellis, 1991; Hawkins, 1985; Loschky, 1994; Sato, 1986) and also criticized the early version of IH.

Trying to respond to criticisms, Long (1996) updated his IH and introduced the concept of ‘noticing’ (Schmidt, 1990, 1994, 1996, cited in Ellis, 1999) into his model. In this version of the IH, the role of negotiation is to facilitate kinds of conscious noticing. As Ziglari (2008)
states, in his updated version of IH, Long emphasizes on the learner internal mechanisms when she/he is interactionally involved in modified output. Interaction is approached both ‘interpersonally’ and ‘intrapersonally’. In the former IH, the learners notice input, while in the latter, they process information they got through input. In the second version, emphasis is shifted on the role of negotiation in providing learners with negative evidence, positive evidence and opportunities for modified output (Long, 1996, cited in Ellis, 1999). Long sees interaction as a connection between ‘input’, ‘learner internal capacities’, and ‘output’. This new version of IH was also criticized on a number of fronts. The role of negative evidence, for instance, which is mainly obvious through recasts (i.e. rephrasing of a deviant structure by changing one or more of the sentence components while still referring to message) was said to embrace some problems. Ellis (1999, p11) mentions two problems regarding negative evidence. The first one, he says, is of a theoretical nature. “Acquisition takes place if learners pay attention to the form of the recast and it is not clear that this is what they really do”. The second problem, a methodological one, is that it is not always possible to make a distinction between recasts and meaning negotiation as Long (1996) believes. The focus on modified output (Swain, 1985) also went under some questioning. Swain (1985) proposed that comprehensible output is as important as comprehensible input for achieving grammatical and sociolinguistic competence in L2. The first question was whether learners really modify their output as a result of meaning negotiation. The other was whether modified output assists language acquisition (Ellis, 1999).”

3. Concluding remarks

The interaction Hypothesis has been challenged by many researchers and theorists e.g. Ellis (1991, 1999). Ziglari (2008) summarizes Ellis’s (1999) findings about the limitations of IH in the following:

1. “Interaction facilitates comprehension (not causes it): when learners have opportunity to signal their non-understanding and try to ask for clarification,

2. There are individual differences with regard to the amount of their participation,

3. Comprehension does not depend on negotiation, learners may benefit from the dialogic interaction by other learners,
4. Modified input facilitates acquisition of word meanings,

5. The most important factor to acquisition of word meaning is range (different contexts).”

With all its demerits, Interaction Hypothesis has proved to be a promising move toward constructing a comprehensive theory of SLA. As Ellis (1991) believes: “….there is still no direct evidence to link interaction to acquisition and precious little to demonstrate that it promotes comprehension,……[however] the absence of supportive research does not warrant the abandonment of a hypothesis that, in many ways, has contributed substantially to our current understanding of how leaning takes place in the classroom context.”

Now let’s evaluate this theory of SLA according to Jordan’s (2004) Guidelines for theory construction in SLA.

Guidelines for SLA theory construction are:

1. An external world exists independently of our perceptions of it,

2. Research is inseparable from theory,

3. Theories attempt to explain phenomena,

4. Research is fundamentally concerned with problem-solving,

5. We cannot formalize “the scientific method”,

6. There is no need for paradigmatic theories,

7. Research, hypotheses, and theories should be coherent, cohesive, expressed in the clearest possible terms, and consistent,

8. Theories should have empirical content,

9. Theories should be fruitful,

10. Theories should be broad in scope,

11. Theories should be simple.
Regarding number 4 of the guidelines, research must be concerned with problem-solving, IH tries to address the issue of acquisition in SLA by drawing on different theories such as Krashen’s comprehensible input, Swain’s modified output, Hatch’s works, Schmidt’s noticing and some other, then combining them into a general theory. IH seems to be a coherent, cohesive, and consistent theory and there don’t seem to be any internal contradictions inside it and the terms used are, to a large extent, well-defined. There are, however, some conclusions in IH which are not supported by evidence as discussed earlier. All in all, the theory can conform to number 7 of the guidelines. The variables and terms used in IH are completely operationally defined and the theory has been investigated in classroom contexts abundantly, so conforming well to number 8 of the guidelines which states theories should have empirical content. IH favours using tasks in which there is a need for the participants to exchange interaction with each other and thus promoting more interactional restructuring (Ellis, 1991). This shows Long’s support of a task-based approach to language teaching. Therefore it can be said that IH is fruitful as stated in number 9 of the guidelines. The theory is also stated in a simple form, so conforming to number 11 of the guidelines. Regarding the scope and domain, number 10 of the guidelines, IH may not be so promising since it does not answer many questions raised in SLA. It doesn’t pertain to individual differences either (Ellis, 1999). Findings of this review are in line with those of Jordan where he says the hypothesis is generally in sync with the Guidelines.

Finally, I’d rather join Ellis (1999) in accepting the idea that we’d better blend interaction Hypothesis with perspectives of socio-cultural theory proposed by Vygotsky and coin a new theory named “interactionist theory”. In this new theory, a number of demerits of IH will disappear. For instance, Interactionist theory is broader than IH in the sense that IH only considers one type of interaction i.e. meaning negotiation while the new theory concerns interaction more generally. In IH, interaction facilitates learning and is neither necessary nor sufficient. In the new theory it is not only necessary, but primary in learning.

References


