Interaction and Foreign Language Learning: A Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

While interaction has a considerable role in the foreign language learning and teaching processes, how it relates to the current theories is still an unanswered question. Thus, this paper aims to present a theoretical framework that focuses on interaction and the foreign language learning and teaching processes. For this purpose, the paper first introduces the term *interaction* and clarifies its importance in human life, the relationship between interaction and learning. Then, the paper focuses on the factors affecting interaction in the learning process, the importance of interaction in foreign language learning and related theories and hypotheses. The paper concludes that interaction in the foreign language learning and teaching processes enhances personal development, motivation, participation and linguistic knowledge.

Introduction

While interaction has a crucial role in the foreign language learning and teaching processes, its relationship with current theories and hypotheses are unclear. Therefore, this paper aims to present a theoretical framework focusing on interaction and the

foreign language learning and teaching processes. For this purpose, first, the paper presents a general definition of interaction, the importance of interaction in human life and the relationship between interaction and learning. Next, it mentions the role of interaction and its components, factors affecting interaction in the learning process and the importance of interaction in the foreign language learning process. Finally, the paper focuses on theories and hypotheses related to interaction and foreign language learning.

Interaction and human life

Interaction, a reciprocal action or influence that requires at least two objects (Wagner, 1994), is a process in which contributors participate and adjust their behavior according to response (Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977). Interaction in human life is significant, as mentally and emotionally well-being of individuals affect the personal and social development. In other words, interaction enables people to support their cognitive functioning. As people are socially connected to each other, interaction enables them to create tight connections while working, learning or doing something. Moreover, it encourages people to provide efficient coordination to work in harmony to complete some tasks. It is also evident that interaction supports personal growth that affects cognitive development of human (Vygotsky, 1978). Eventually, mental well-being of the human, presence as a society member, personal development and social improvement depend on the effective interaction level with others.

Interaction includes two categories depending on the context (Linell, 1982). The first one is *non-verbal interaction* that embraces written forms and visual aids such as gestures, mimicry, facial expressions, body language, manners and other behaviors of human. The second one is *verbal interaction* that contains sounds, words and word-utterances. In other words, the former one is visual, while the latter one is spoken. These two types increase the effectiveness of the interaction in daily life and nonverbal and verbal interaction could compensate or substitute for each other to enable people to interact more functionally and effectively (Linell, 1982).

Interaction and learning

Interaction is a phenomenon whose value in education dramatically has risen during past decades in the educational context. As it is a connective activity that helps learners contact with each other (Daniel & Marquis, 1988) and is a precondition of the learning process, learners will be able to reach a higher level of cognitive maturity. It is also a component that shapes the learning process and context (Anderson, 2004). Thus, interaction is the starting point of the learning process and the means of cooperation with people (Little, 1995). Since learning requires cooperation and coordination, interaction both operates and controls developmental and experiential learning. In conclusion, interaction is the source of human development (Vygotsky, 1978).

The factors that affect interaction in the learning process are learners' needs and expectations, personality, cognitive abilities and learning styles, learner autonomy, culture, the teaching philosophy of the instructor and interdependence. First, learners' needs and expectations are the factors that affect interaction in the learning process for they have specific needs and expectations (Okan, 2003). Second, personality becomes a significant factor in the learning process because people are individually different; this difference affects the academic success of learners (Komarraju et al., 2011). Third, cognitive ability is one of the factors, which influences interaction in the learning process (Mayer & Massa, 2003). These activities could be listed as coding, deducing, scaling, utilization, confirmation and provision (Sternberg, 1979). Next, learning style is a factor that enables learners to become academically successful (Komarraju et al., 2011) because every learner acquires knowledge differently. Learning styles are also related to the development of autonomy, a process that encourages learners to supply their learning needs and accepts learning as a lifelong process (Gockov et al., 2014). Learner autonomy is also something that continually alters under suitable conditions with regard to creating a balance between personal improvement and interdependence (Allright, 1990). Additionally, culture, defined as the shared goals, interests and historical background of human, is a factor that affects interaction in the learning process. Moreover, culture serves as a stabilizer that enables learners to respect the effects of cultural, social and historical distinctions,

alters the psychological condition of the individual and improves one's condition (Wertsch, 1991). Teaching philosophy is another factor that affects interaction in the learning process the length and the nature of interaction in the learning environment (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Finally, interdependence is a factor that affects interaction in the learning process (Johnson et al., 1991) because an individual has both personal responsibility and interdependence to a group.

Interaction in foreign language learning

Over 40 years, interaction has been a popular and deeply investigated subject in foreign language learning (Gass & Mackey, 2002). Hence, there have been varied definitions of interaction in the language learning process. For instance, Long (1990) defines the term *interaction* as a provider of linguistic forms and functions. Alternatively, Brown (1994) defines interaction as the core of communication for learning a foreign language and a way to interact with the target people. In addition, it is a way to acquire new perspectives to comprehend the world better, get in touch with different cultures and define common features and differences (Archila, 2014). Thus, learning a foreign language is regarded as a social process so interaction between social context and learner are interrelated and inseparable parts of language acquisition (Foster & Ohta, 2005). Interaction in foreign language learning is important in the language learning and teaching processes due to several reasons. First, interaction affects personal capacity in a positive way and improves motivation. Namely, interaction strengthens the self-confidence of the learner, enhances motivation and improves the ability to apply the target language (Wu et al, 2011). Second, interaction creates an effective environment, which is positive, rich and full of co-operation (Long & Porter, 1985). Active participation in interaction facilitates language learning in the way learners are able to come across the structurally advanced output (Mackey, 1999). It also enables learners to cooperate and collaborate in the language learning process. That is, learners feel attachment and motivated (Lee et al., 2009). Because of this cooperation and collaboration, learners receive feedback (Mackey, 2006). Third, interaction helps learners to provide input and output (Braidi, 2002). With the help of input and output provided by interaction learners' capacity to obtain linguistic knowledge increases. In addition, interaction enables learners to

perceive semantics and syntax of input and modify the output to become more comprehensible (Hegelheimer & Chapelle, 2000). It also supports both the reception and production process in language learning (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Pica et al., 1986) and enables them to adjust their output according to the context. Last, interaction provides learners for negotiating the meaning for better communication and conducts their attention to language learning process (Chapelle, 2003). In conclusion, interaction in the language learning process not only affects the improvement of individuals' capacity but also develops cooperation, collaboration and improvement of reception and production process.

Theories and hypotheses related to interaction and foreign language learning

This sub-section presents the theories and hypotheses related to interaction and foreign language learning. Within this scope, the section introduces *Interaction Hypothesis*, *Constructivism and Social Constructivism*, *Cooperative Learning*, *Autonomous Learning*, *Developmental and Experiential Learning, Sociocultural Theory, Comprehensible Input* and *Input Hypothesis.*

Interaction Hypothesis that relates to the foreign and second language acquisition and learning processes is partly based on Krashen's Input Hypothesis. However, this theory is credited to Long (1996) because these two hypotheses are different on the base of *Comprehensible Input*. Long (1996) states that interactive input is effective, as the effectiveness of comprehensible input has positive effects on negotiating for meaning and facilitates the language learning process. Moreover, according to Long (1996) interaction connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways. In other words, an active participant could connect forms and structures and then produce output as a result of this interaction.

According to Krashen's *Input Hypothesis*, learners acquire language when they comprehend the messages or receive adequate *Comprehensible Input* (Krashen, 1985). In other words, the precondition of the language learning process is that learners are able to understand the target language input beyond their current level of knowledge that is called *i+1*. Specifically, *i* stands for the current level of language competence and, *+1* stands for the level that is beyond the current level that is also the

next stage of the acquisition process (Krashen, 1981; 1982). Interaction with the instructor or other learners supplies learners' need for extra-linguistic context. Moreover, improving individuals' language competence takes place when interaction is supported because, in that way, interaction provides a required condition for acquisition.

Constructivism has established the idea that individuals construct knowledge from experiences, ideas and beliefs (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992). According to Vygotsky's *Social Development Theory*, social interaction has a crucial role in cognitive development. In this sense, Vygotsky underlines the importance of social interaction and cooperation in the learning process. According to *Social Constructivism*, social interaction enhances knowledge and enables learners to form meaning. Interaction is also a component that provides learners to engage with the subject in the learning process. In other words, knowledge is based on social interaction (McDonald & Gibson, 1998) and interaction helps learners to overcome learning obstacles with the help of technology through social interaction and collaboration among learners (Huang, 2002).

Cooperative Learning depends on cooperation among learners to reach a target (Johnson et al., 1986). Hence, social interaction becomes a precondition for learning. In that way, learning experiences become reconstructed and broadened. In foreign language context, *Cooperative Language Learning* emphasizes the importance of interaction in the language learning process as learners acquire adequate comprehensible input, output and opportunity for negotiation of meaning (Zhang, 2010). Specifically, interaction enables learners to negotiate the meaning and clarify vague input (Crandall, 1999). Interaction helps learners to perform language better in more accurate and suitable way for ongoing context. As a result, interaction becomes an inseparable part of communication and listening comprehension in *Cooperative Learning* (Zhang, 2010).

Autonomous Learning is the capability of taking the responsibility of own personal learning process (Holec, 1981). Hence, learners become aware of their learning process and take the charge of their personal decision. Autonomy in language learning is based on the improvement of making decisions and acting independently (Little, 1991; Littlewood, 1997). Thus, improving the consciousness of a language learner

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directly affects the language learning process. In this sense, interaction enhances learners' awareness of language, makes them more systematic because it enhances their critical and creative thinking. Learners become autonomous and actively participate in their personal learning process. As a result, when a learner becomes autonomous, she becomes more aware of her strength or weakness.

Developmental Learning relates to "learners' serious efforts to establish knowledge in a social context" (Zuckerman, 2003, p. 177). That is, a learner is in charge of the learning process and she defines the target and finds ways to reach it. In addition to its current complementary role, interaction enhances learners' capacity and reshapes it for future experiences because in a social context the ability to launch and preserve interaction becomes useful (Zuckerman, 2003).

Experiential Learning is a process that underlines the importance of personal efforts and experiences for learning process (Oxendine et al., 2004). It provides knowledge about the way people learn, live and improve (Kolb et al., 2000). Personal improvement, learning process and task are components that support the language-learning process in experiential learning (Kohonen, 1992). Interaction both enables learners to develop personal concepts and form these concepts (Rogers, 1975) and encourages them to evaluate their level and progress (Kohonen, 1992).

Sociocultural Theory describes learning as a social process and defines its origin in the society or culture. Therefore, social interaction is crucial to enable human to develop personal cognition. That is, interaction with other people is the first step of cognition development and integration of knowledge into the mental structure of human (Vygotsky, 1978). *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* is one of the aspects of Vygotsky's *Sociocultural Theory*. It is defined as "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development through the problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). That is, learners' effort to acquire a language can be enhanced on condition that suitable assistance is provided (Orey, 2010, p. 48). Thus, interaction with more knowledgeable peers or the instructor increases learners' performance and this appropriate assistance is defined as *scaffolding,* which enables learners to overcome and achieve the task (Orey, 2010)

Comprehensible Input in language acquisition and learning is every piece of foreign language input which language learners are able to understand (Higgs, 1985). *Comprehensible Input* is required to be beyond learner's current knowledge and comprehending the received message enables learners to acquire a language (Krashen, 2013, p. 3). Learners become successful if they able to understand written or spoken forms of the target language because it is the key component to acquire a language (Krashen, 2013). Additionally, *Comprehensible Input* simplifies the language learning process because learners become competent by comprehending language structures (Higgs, 1985). Namely, *Comprehensible Input* provides input that is the pre-requisite of language acquisition process. Moreover, language competence is developed with the help of *Comprehensible Input* since it provides a challenge for the learners with knowledge. In this way, the language-learning process is supported.

Conclusions and discussion

Several conclusions were reached in this paper. To begin with, interaction can be defined as the mutual influence of interlocutors and this interaction has effects directly to every participant. Moreover, interaction affects the mental and emotional well-being of human. The role of interaction in the learning process is crucial because interaction creates a connection between learners, process and context. In this sense, some factors affect interaction in the learning process such as learners' needs and expectations, personality, cognitive abilities and learning styles, learner autonomy, culture, the teaching philosophy of the instructor and interdependence. In foreign language learning context, interaction can be defined as a provider of linguistic forms and functions, the core of communication and a way to acquire new perspectives. Hence, interaction in language learning process facilitates personal development, motivation, participation, and improvement of linguistic knowledge. In other words, interaction enhances the improvement of individuals' capacity, develops cooperation, collaboration, improvement of reception and production process.

As current literature suggests, interaction is the core of the theories and hypotheses that have profound influences on the foreign language process. For instance, according to *Interaction Hypothesis,* interaction is the precondition of the learning process, as it supports the participation of the learners and enables them to create

connections between forms and structures that help to produce an outcome. For *Constructivism* and *Social Constructivism,* learners are able to construct their knowledge with the help of interaction. In a similar way, interaction has a fundamental role in the development of cognition in *Social Development Theory,* whereas*,* according to *Cooperative Language Learning*, interaction supports learners need for comprehensible input, facilitates output and provides opportunities for negotiating the meaning. *Autonomous Learning* enhances learners' awareness, creative and critical thinking process and interaction makes them more systematic, whereas, in *Developmental Learning,* interaction facilitates learners' capacity and organizes it for forthcoming experiences. To add, according to *Experiential Learning,* interaction supports personal development and forming concepts. In *Sociocultural Theory,* interaction is a precondition for cognitive development. Interaction provides the suitable assistance to overcome and achieve the task when a learner is in *ZPD* because, in that way, language learners enhance their personal development. Interaction is also the supporter of *Comprehensible Input* as it provides necessary written or spoken language to comprehend the target language. Last, in terms of *Input Hypothesis,* interaction supports learners' need for linguistic context and enhances learners' language competence.

Given that interaction is an inseparable part of human life and the foreign language learning process, several recommendations can be noted. First, teachers should focus on the possible interaction opportunities. In a narrower scope, they should encourage learners to participate in interaction, as it supports interaction and provides satisfying social relations in the learning and teaching contexts. Second, teachers should focus on the cooperation and collaboration effects of interaction. In other words, supporting active participation of the learners and cooperation are possible ways to enhance interaction. Moreover, responsibilities shared by all interlocutors and being respectful to diversities of these interlocutors are helpful for learners. Third, other stakeholders of the language learning process could regulate current positions according to the needs of language learners. For instance, course book designers and curriculum developers should focus on the efficiency of interaction since it affects the development, competency and participation of learners. In this sense, materials used

during learning process and curriculum can be revised. That is because interaction that is supported by course books, curriculum or other materials enables teachers and language learners to become an active participant in the process. Fourth, as interaction enables learners to become a participant in the learning process, teachers should encourage taking the responsibility for their own learning and enable learners to improve personal development and make necessary adaptations. In other words, as interaction in foreign language learning enhances motivation and engagement, teachers should develop strategies to support input, output and feedback requirements of learners. Additionally, an environment that supports these opportunities can foster the process and harmony among the teachers and other interlocutors and provide a supportive environment.

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