

**Peer Interaction and
Second Language
Learning:
Pedagogical Potential
and Research Agenda**

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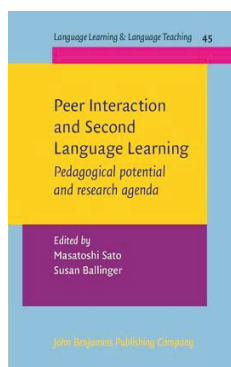
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Michael Long's "Input, interaction and second language acquisition" was published in 1981; Krashen's input hypothesis in 1982 and 1985. According to the input hypothesis, the learner's mental grammar determines both comprehensibility and the next ($i+1$) stage of input relevant to acquisition. Long, while acknowledging the role of input, argued in favour of the facilitative role of interaction in SLA. According to him, learner interaction drives conversational and linguistic modifications that make input comprehensible. As learners "negotiate" with native speakers for meaning, input may get modified, manifesting for example as "foreigner talk". Moreover, it is during interaction and corrective feedback that learners may "notice" lexical or syntactic aspects of the language.



Therefore interaction hypothesis is to input hypothesis of SLA what the "motherese" view of child language acquisition is to the Chomskyan view of it. The Chomskyan view is that a biological faculty unfolds inevitably and unconsciously in an appropriate linguistic environment. The "motherese" view is that a child's caretakers modify their input to the child in ways that facilitate language acquisition. That hypothesis of a straightforward correlation between maternal input and child language acquisition has been argued to be untenable (Newport, Gleitman & Gleitman, 1977; Gleitman, Newport & Gleitman, 1984).

In contrast, the interaction hypothesis (and its extension, the "output" hypothesis of Swain, 1985, 1995), have found wide acceptance in second language research, perhaps due to the formal classroom setting in which much of SLA occurs. The socio-cognitive character of learning in such settings was what interested Vygotsky. The Vygotskian search for socio-cognitive activities to promote cognition is extended and applied to language, foregrounding its "external" or communicative function, and blurring the Chomskyan distinction between conscious and unconscious knowledge (e.g. knowledge of physics versus knowledge of language). Corrective feedback is of "particular importance for acquisition" (Long, 2015, p. 53), as is the "noticing" of formal aspects of language, "nothing in the target language is available for intake into a language learner's existing system unless it is consciously noticed," (Gass, 1991 as cited in Mackey, 1999, p. 561).

Long's hypothesis emerged from Hatch's (1978) discourse analysis of native – non-native speaker interaction, and extended to learner-teacher interaction.

In their Introduction, the editors of this book assert that peer interaction between L2 learners has not received much attention, even though studies on the subject have been in existence since the early 1980s (albeit mainly in adult ESL contexts in North America, New Zealand, and Australia). This book is therefore “the first collection of empirical studies” to focus on peer interaction. The editors argue in favour of a synthesis of research based on the social and cognitive paradigms. The thirteen empirical studies that comprise this book are mostly classroom-based and originate from the Basque country, Chile, Japan, Spain, and Thailand on the one hand, and Australia, Canada and the United States on the other. They have been arranged into three sections of five, six and two chapters each, addressing respectively (i) interactional patterns and learner characteristics, (ii) task types and interactional modalities, and (iii) learning settings.

The introduction recapitulates available research on these variables and the uniqueness of peer interaction by positing that proficient peers may provide input as rich or complex as native speakers. Also, a higher level of comfort in interaction encourages feedback and self-correction in the learners, making this a versatile pedagogical tool. The author concludes the introduction by outlining the teacher's role in promoting and scaffolding peer interaction.

Teachers may find chapter two and chapters four to ten of special interest with regard to the methodology of teaching. These chapters are based on the premise that interaction and communicative activities promote language acquisition. In these studies, the authors investigate not just acquisition, but interaction as well, for e.g. “whether learners can be explicitly taught to be better interactors and feedback providers” (Chapter 2, p. 64). Other studies include how two low-proficiency learners engage in small groups at various proficiency levels (Chapter 4), differences in peer interaction patterns in proficiency-homogeneous and proficiency-heterogeneous groups (Chapter 5), and characteristics of learner interaction in face-to-face and computer-mediated contexts (Chapter 6). In Chapter 8, the author addresses how learners attend to linguistic form in these two modes, and in Chapter 10, there is a comparison of the collaborative writing in these two modes.

Chapters 7 and 3, cover a study of an EFL class in a Thai university and a Grade 10 class in Chile. These are of special interest to India because of the ecological relevance of their settings. In these chapters, the authors report a collaborative writing task and an intervention to promote past tense usage respectively. This mention of a grammatical item serves as an occasion to ask the question lurking at the back of our minds—what is the nature of linguistic knowledge that is offered or acquired in these studies? What happens when the peer input offered is incorrect?

To address these concerns, Chapter 3 offers only the promissory note that “productive knowledge of the past tense” exhibits

greater gains in the lower proficiency group, stating that its “primary focus is on the interaction data” (p. 100). Chapter 1, which also addresses the second question, is an insightful account of the “silent learner” in a group activity, whose language gains compare well with those of the “contributors” and “triggers” (learners who set off “language related episodes” or LREs through their queries or errors). The LREs, which could be grammatical, or lexical, together with CF (corrective feedback), comprise the central unit of analysis in these studies. Chapter 1 further reports lexical LREs that instantiate Spanish words prompted by picture cues: words for objects and persons (*boat, cruise, fortune teller*), as also actions (*predict, meet, take*). It would be of interest to check whether the “unresolved” or “incorrectly resolved” LREs pertain more to verbs than nouns, given that predicates pose an acquisitional challenge that nouns do not (Gentner, 2006; Snedeker & Gleitman, 2004). Interestingly, the percentage for learning or consolidation of wrong input (e.g. *to rain* instead of *to cry*) is lower than that for correct input; and the percentage for “missed opportunities” for wrong input (where the input is ignored) is twice as much for incorrect as for correct input (50 per cent to 24 per cent, p. 44)! This remarkable learner ability to privilege correct input over incorrect input calls to mind Gleitman, Newport and Gleitman's (1984) observation that “the child is selective in WHAT he uses from the environment provided; he is selective about WHEN in the course of acquisition he chooses to use it; and he is selective in

what he uses it FOR (i.e. what grammatical hypotheses he constructs from the data presented)” (1984, p. 76). Moreover, “the character of the learning is not a straightforward function of the linguistic environment” (p. 44). Just like the finding that silent learners also learn, it reminds us of the abstract, mind-internal nature of language learning.

Evidently, language is itemized in these studies (and more generally in this paradigm) as instances of vocabulary and grammar (“past tense”). Chapter 11 may be of particular interest to the reader with its metalinguistic task—construction of the grammar of the Spanish pronoun *se*, based on three 90-minute presentations of the target item in a narrative context. With this, the book comes full circle, from communicative through structural to grammar-translation approaches to language teaching. It is indeed salutary to remember that some SLA has successfully occurred through each of these methodological eras. The true strength of the interaction paradigm may lie, then, in its innovative approach to classroom activity, which learners may find more engaging and authentic than a teacher-fronted class.

Chapter 12 includes a sociocultural study in a multilingual environment. It brings together English and Spanish learners in an alternative space, an idea that has the potential to address concerns around privileging English and English language learning in our country. In Chapter 13, there is a unique, thought-provoking inquiry into the learning opportunities (if any) provided by a partner-reading task between learners

having different skill levels (two adolescent females, an Amharic newcomer with prior schooling and beginning-level oral English, and a Somali with strong English skills but low literacy and no prior schooling). Here the focus is on peer interaction during “the routine classroom literacy activity of reading a book aloud together”.

The book concludes with an epilogue that has a useful discussion on the scaffolding and social significance of peer interaction.

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