《研究ノート》

The Interactive Approach

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Abstract

The dual task of teaching and learning a second language is a challenging enterprise; a challenge that is compounded by the need to choose from numerous teaching methodologies all vying for centre stage in the classroom. Although each methodology has its own unique vision of how learning should take place in the EFL classroom, they are all, in varying degrees, restrictive. The following paper will explore the interactive approach to language learning and argue that it offers possibilities that more prescriptive methodologies do not. It is an approach that is governed by tenets not steadfast rules; one that views the learner as an active participant in the classroom not as a passive learner; one that maintains that language should not only be an object of study, but rather an interactive experience in which learners willingly engage with each other and communicate using the second language.

A second language classroom is at times a dreary and monotonous place depending on which approaches the teacher brings to it. Rivers (1987) accurately points out, "a diet of grammar exercises and drills cannot give the feeling for other living, breathing human beings that exploring the things they enjoy can do" (p. 14). This human element is often lacking in classrooms where grammar explanations and drills are the focus. The essence of communication is the exchange of feeling or meaning that takes place between two people and language is the means to achieve this goal. We think the interactive approach both in theory and in practice is the most effective and lively method of teaching a second language. Through the interactive process, passive students become active, and boredom is replaced with creativity. This paper will briefly touch upon other common theories in second language acquisition; define the interactive approach; explain the importance of input in interactive language learning; consider some of the possible shortcomings of the interactive approach and finally explore the pedagogical implications and applications of the interactive approach.

The innatist theorists, Krashen and Terrell (1988), contend that the natural approach to

language acquisition is implicit and is not learned—"speaking fluency is thus not (taught) directly; rather, speaking ability (emerges) after the acquirer has built up competence through comprehending input" (p. 20). Communication and comprehensible input are two essential components of this theory and ones shared with the interactive approach theory but the input and learning process is quite different. Another theory, the cognitive approach, views language acquisition as a conscious process. Brown (2007) refers to McLaughlin's 'attention processing model', which accounts for a controlled process which has limited capacity and is specific to the acquisition of new skills and is an automatic process which is lasting and effortless (as in the case of a learner who has mastered a second language). The cognitive approach is formal, with an emphasis on learning rules and structures. It does not appear to account for the importance of social interaction as a learning process. Ellis (1994) explains that behaviorists like Skinner and Pavlov, under the mantel of operant conditioning, believe that language acquisition is governed by outside influences that provide "stimuli and feedback" (p. 243). Feedback is reinforced and or corrected (p. 243). The student is viewed as a "passive medium" (p. 243). This theory ignores the creative side of learning and restricts the learner's ability to become an active participant in the learning process. None of the theories alluded to consider social interaction, a crucial aspect of second language learning: the tenet of the interactive approach.

The interactive approach, as defined by van Lier (1988), "...holds that language learning occurs in and through participation in speech events, that is, that talking to others, or making conversation is essential" (1988, p. 74). This approach is rooted in Long's (1985) interaction hypothesis, which Brown says emphasizes "the dynamic nature of the interplay between learners and their peers and their teachers and others with whom they interact" (2007, p. 304) and holds as a premise that "any learning that takes place in the classroom arises in the course of interaction of these players" (Ellis, 1987, p. 191). From both the teacher and learner's perspective, the interactive approach is attractive because it is an active approach to learning and teaching, which breathes life, freedom, and creativity into what is often a tedious, ineffective, and constrained formal approach to teaching (which includes grammar drilling, lectures and repetitions of correct forms) with the teacher assuming the role of leader, rule enforcer, and student evaluator. In the interactive approach the responsibility of learning and teaching is shared between the student and teacher. Language is developed through the cycle of interaction, which begins with input.

According to Gass (1997), "the concept of input is perhaps the single most important concept

of second language acquisition" (p. 1). Therefore analysis of how input is processed according to the interactive approach theory is necessary. The term *input* refers to comprehensible language the learner takes in through reading or listening. The term *output* is connected to speaking and writing (Brown, 2007). More specifically output is the open declaration of the acquisition process (Gass, 1997). In the interactive approach input is made comprehensible through what Long (1983) termed modified interaction. This is a process by which speaker and listener cooperate to develop understanding. Long (1983) claims interaction must lead to learning by virtue of this fact (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006, p.43). Some modifications that might occur include: slower speech on the part of the native or proficient speaker, questions that probe comprehension, paraphrasing or rephrasing complicated sentences, and general clarifications (Brown, 2007, p.305). Once input has been rendered understandable, the knowledge is integrated into the learner's working grammar or stored for future use through the process of intake (Gass, 1997). Intake is, as Gass (ibid.) defines it, "… the process of assimilating linguistic material; it refers to the mutual activity that mediates input and grammars" (p. 5). Simply put, input might be compared to the ingestion of food and intake to the digestion process.

Ultimately, the grammatical structure (the input) can be: accepted or refused; ignored because it is already understood; stored for future use or modification; not used because it is not properly understood; or it produces outcome. Outcome leads to feedback, which in turn results in a modification of the input and reemerges as a revised output (Gass, 1997). This is illustrated in the following exchange:

> Teacher: Where did you go yesterday? (Teacher may point to calendar for clarity).
> Student: I go to movie. (Student understands input, integrates it into existing grammar and produces a response)
> Teacher: You went to a movie? (Teacher offers corrective feedback)
> Student: I went to a movie. (Student modifies response and produces a grammatically correct sentence that is incorporated into the learner's developing grammar.

The interactive approach requires interaction between two interlocutors to develop functional and accurate grammar. This contrasts with Krashen and Terrell's (1988) input hypothesis as it claims that the learner acquires language by being exposed to slightly challenging, (yet comprehensible) input over time. The process is subconscious and is comparable to Krashen

and Terrell's (1988) view of the way a child passively acquires language. There is no emphasis on corrective feedback in this acquisition process. Rivers (1987) argues that even a baby does not acquire language passively, but instead actively tries to communicate from the beginning. Evidence for this would be in their attempts to move their lips and experiment with sounds, along with gestures like waving hands (p. 7). Furthermore there is a distinction between first language and second language acquisition because all second language learners already have access to a primary reference language they cannot ignore. The human being is a social creature whose survival depends upon others. Language is a means for us to communicate concepts and emotions to each other so that we can learn and evolve. Fundamentally, all communication requires at least two people collaborating towards that end. This "collaborative activity… should be the norm from the beginning of language study" (Rivers, 1987, p. 4).

Alternatively, Brown (2007) warns that interactionist research is still in its infancy and is based on a Western model. He claims that studies are disconnected with regard to "specific linguistic features, stages of learner development, pragmatic contexts, and pedagogical setting" (p. 305). Certainly the interactive approach, although relatively new, can evolve and develop for this is the nature of collaborative learning. The Western model it represents may offer some challenges to Eastern learners and contexts, but English is originally a Western language and Western culture is imbedded in it. Therefore perhaps, students should be exposed to English with a Western approach. The need for specification and corroboration of research findings might be warranted as Brown (2007) suggests, yet the interactive approach is not, and never will be, a one-fits-all system because it is highly dependent on classroom variables such as: context, student, teacher and the interaction between all three. There is no set formula for teaching the interactive approach, but the classroom can be set up in a way that promotes interaction and learning. The question naturally arises, how is this type of classroom set up, and what are the pedagogical implications?

First, some practical preliminary considerations for appropriate tasks and activities would be the age of the learners, their background and language ability, their culturally determined ways of learning, and their goals (Rivers, 1987). These factors can help the teacher determine what materials to organize and present to the class. In terms of the interactive approach, the teacher acts as a guide to involve students in "task oriented", "purposeful", and "cooperative" learning. (p. 10) The student is not a passive observer, but in fact, an active and responsible participant in the learning process. Rivers (1987) explains "cooperative learning means

sharing, encouraging, and accepting responsibility for one's own learning and that of others (Rivers 1983: 77-8.) not leaving all responsibility to the teacher" (Rivers, 1987, p. 10). Another of the teacher's concerns would be to create a learning environment that is both relaxed and comfortable as Krashen and Terrell (1988) emphasized, while incorporating the enthusiasm and inventiveness that interaction brings to the equation. Learners who invest in their own learning process attach value to it and are motivated to exhibit their abilities (Rivers, 1987). This motivation is essential in the development of proficiency in a second language because, as Gardner (1985) suggests, motivation is the driving force behind communication competence.

Some other "rationales" that Di Pietro (1987, p. 9) lists concerning the interactive classroom are: the creation of realistic scenarios in which the learner must respond intelligibly to an explanation of the theme and lesson target that is meaningful and connected to a specific communication purpose, and the teachers do not impose their authority on (pp. 9-10). The teacher must, Rivers (1987) explains, "step out of the limelight, to cede a full role to the student in developing and carrying through activities" (p. 9). This transfer of power from the teacher to the student might have unpredictable consequences. In theory the students will be imbued with a sense of responsibility and the motivation to do the task, but they may react in a negative way and abuse the freedom offered by disrupting the class and/or ignoring the task completely. The teacher must balance freedom and order in the classroom, however Rivers (1987) reassures teachers that once the students are given respect, responsibility and an interesting task to make their own, they respond positively.

The final pedagogical concern and perhaps the most challenging in the interactive classroom, is the evaluation process. Traditional written tests, van Lier (1988) writes, "are inadequate in terms of the learners' actual performance and progress in interaction with peers and/or in target settings, so that they only give a very partial indication of communicative competence" (p. 233). Students could be recorded during language exchanges, given one-on-one teacher interviews, or given oral projects to perform in groups like scenarios and skits. Due to time constraints some of these might be challenging for the teacher to apply. Accurate student evaluation that takes in all the aspects of language competence is still a field that demands more research. One possibility could be to allow students to contribute to their overall grade by evaluating themselves and each other (van Lier, 1988). Rivers (1987) suggests that tests should be "interesting and absorbing" and that students should be "mentally interacting with the test writer or administrator or with other students..." (p. 13). Another alternative would

be to place more emphasis on the evaluation of in-class activities rather than final tests. This might lead the student to focus more on the daily activities than to cram for tests.

Some of the classroom activities that can be used in the interactive classroom described by Rivers (1987) are: listening to material in the first language, discussion of pictures or objects, pair work, the incorporation of films or T.V. series, poetry reading and writing, cross-cultural sharing of perspectives, reading and interpretation, grammar as an interactive task, testing of ability to produce real-life language, community interaction, and specialized classes (pp. 10-14). Some of these activities the authors already incorporate in their classes such as pair work, first language materials, and cross-cultural discussions. Ones that could be experimented with are poetry reading— as is would be interesting to see how students in Japan would respond to it, community interaction (perhaps via the internet), an interactive approach to testing because conventional tests often do not measure a student's overall ability, and possibly the most intriguing the interactive approach towards grammar. Inspring students to study grammar can be challenging. Comeau (as cited in Rivers, 1987) offers a complete overview of how to teach interactive grammar. For example, fill in the blanks activities require students to select which verb (according to its tense) fits into a dialogue. After students have inserted the correct verbs they practice the reading and then perform it. This performance gives meaning to the exercise. The students must put in practice what they have learned without focusing on the specific grammar, but rather on the task in its totality. Since it is a thinking exercise and not a mere repetition task the student will need to focus on the input and the appropriate response. Creative completions, translation exercises as a dialogue, visual cues to form dialogues and guessing games are all exciting ways to activate the student's mind and imagination.

These are some of the ways in which the interactive approach can be manifested in the classroom. As Brown points out this approach is still in its early stages, but this does not diminish its importance. Other theories briefly mentioned in this paper, the innatist, cognitive, and behaviorist, all have merit but one key element is conspicuously absent—the notion of interaction as a constructive learning process. The importance of interaction can be understood in terms of the process by which input is conceived, transformed and developed into learning. Long (1985) paved the way with his social interactionist theory, and others like Rivers expanded upon it and applied it in the classroom with propitious results. The interactive classroom is dynamic and inventive because everyone contributes to the direction of the activities by investing their own thoughts and feelings. The teacher gives up control and

the student assumes leadership and responsibility. There is no manual that applies to every situation in the interactive classroom and there will inevitably be challenges, but at least the classroom will never be a room filled with dull expressions of students who must passively learn about a language instead of how to use it.

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