

SLA Essential III: Interaction

With appropriate input and output, one is on the right track in English language teaching. Yet a third essential in second language acquisition is interaction.

Interaction

Building on work in input and output, Michael Long's (1996) *interaction hypothesis* agreed that comprehensible input is necessary for SLA, but added that modified interaction makes such input comprehensible, where students negotiate for meaning and reach mutual comprehension. Such modified interaction might not just involve simplification, but through breakdowns in communication would require comprehension checks, contextual cues, elaboration, repetition or paraphrase, or requests for clarification during classroom interaction. In developing this hypothesis, Long suggested that cognitive factors such as noticing or corrective feedback in interaction help students when communication is not easy. Interaction thus offers students the opportunity for modified input and output through the negotiation of meaning.

Loewen (2015) summarizes the empirical evidence on interaction: “There are multiple individual studies, as well as meta-analyses, that have found interaction in the classroom to be beneficial for L2 development” (p. 50). Further, “communicative interaction can have a positive effect on L2 acquisition,” yet “not all interaction is successful in all contexts” (p. 52). As a result, Loewen proposes several pedagogical implications. First, he indicates the importance of bringing “communicative tasks into the classroom” that allow for the exchange and negotiation of meaning (p. 52). Second, such activities should allow for the pushed output outlined in Chapter 4, providing opportunities for students to communicate in the target language, which is “important for the development of implicit knowledge, procedural knowledge, and communicative competence” (p. 53). Third, teachers in second or foreign language contexts should tell students “the benefits of peer interaction” and educate them on “how to recognize learning opportunities during interaction and how to seek and provide communicative assistance” (p. 53).

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- How do you encourage interaction among students in your class? What benefits of communicative interaction do you highlight for students?

In many ELT contexts teachers have classes of 40 to 50 (or more) students, and they may rightly wonder if it is really possible to incorporate interaction into such courses. Yet with clear directions and modelling, in my experience it is possible. For example, while working for over a decade in Japan, I taught an English listening skills course with 40 to 50 students in each section. In order to go beyond the textbook and other listening materials and to allow for mixed input and output among students, I used pair work and occasionally small-group work in every class, including brainstorming, exchanges of ideas and opinions, information gap tasks, and so on. These activities came from both our text as well as handouts and prompts on the board. I worked with students so they learned to see one another as potential sources of input and interaction.

According to Loewen (2015), a range of activities, including discussions, games, information gaps, and role-plays, helps students interact with one another in class, often after considering “examples of authentic L1

interaction” (p. 53). Models are great, yet teachers need to move students beyond simple repetition to enabling them to negotiate for meaning in class as much as possible. As Benati and Angelovska (2016) explain, “Output practice should help learners to use the target language for a specific purpose and intent rather than simply learning by rote” (p. 12). Interaction thus requires negotiation involving both input and output—much more than students simply reciting famous speeches in English!

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What activities in your class enable students to produce modified input and output? How can they help students truly negotiate in interaction?

Types of Interaction

Given that interactions with native English speakers may well be different than with students’ peers, Loewen (2015) believes it is “important to consider what types of possibilities there are to encourage learners to engage with L2 speakers outside of the classroom” (p. 54). An example of this comes from one of my graduate students who teaches English in a tourist city in Japan. She prepares her high school students in class with the English input and practice useful for output in order for them to conduct short surveys with people from other countries visiting the city. This teacher then helps her students engage in face-to-face interaction with native and nonnative English speakers in English about tourist sites and the visitors’ comments on and opinions of them. While this type of interaction is not possible in every context, Loewen suggests computer-mediated communication is another option, and I know of teachers who have used key pals for their students to experience different types of written interaction practice.

In these types of interactions, students need to ask for clarification, check their understanding, negotiate meaning, and so on, all of which provide opportunities for the communication of meaning, noticing, and L2 learning. As Benati and Angelovska (2016) summarize, “Conversation and interaction make linguistic features salient to learners and therefore increase their chances of acquisition” (p. 141). Arguing “the more interaction, the better,” VanPatten (2003, p. 108) encourages teachers to move beyond

interaction with students in their classes to engage students in various level-appropriate tasks with one another, where students themselves help manage and perhaps modify their input and output. In short, input and output come together in interaction, supporting ESL/EFL students' SLA.

Here are some specific ways to encourage interaction in English language classes and to support appropriate input and output:

- Clearly explain and model the benefits of peer interaction to students.
- Allow enough time in class for activities and tasks to enable students' pushed output and the modified interaction discussed above.
- Teach students in class how to bridge communication breakdowns in pair work.
- Use prompts to help students offer one another feedback in interaction, especially when something communicated is unclear or not understood.

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- How could you incorporate these options to encourage and enable better interaction among students in a specific class you teach?

Conclusion

This chapter introduced interaction as an essential SLA topic in order to help English language teachers understand and reflect on the importance and roles of input, output, and interaction in ELT. Please consider the following vignette and reflect on the questions that follow.

Vignette 1: Teaching College ESL

Joe teaches intermediate ESL at a community college in Toronto, Canada, a diverse international city. He has 20 students from different language/cultural backgrounds, including many from Asia, Europe, and Central America. Students range in age, and most are learning English so they can attend university, be exempted from

further ESL courses, or apply for certification in their professions. Joe helps learners improve their English proficiency, yet some students skip class, saying they're too busy studying for the TOEFL to regularly attend class.

Joe uses a current, four skills textbook that helps students review important English grammar and vocabulary, and use oral and written skills. His students do extensive reading and use vocabulary learning strategies to expand and practise their lexical knowledge. Joe works hard to ensure a good balance in his classes between input, output, and interaction among students.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What are three positive things Joe does in his course? How does his teaching seem appropriate for his students? How might you learn from his approach?
- What sources of input do you observe? Opportunities for output? Interaction? What might you say to Joe's students who regularly miss class?