

The relevance of interaction in English language teaching in Brazilian schools

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ABSTRACT

Interaction has attracted researchers regarding the influence of person-to-person relations in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. The Interactive Hypothesis suggests that communicative interaction relates language input to the learner's learning abilities and output, so learners can change their output given they are provided with comprehensible Input. This paper examines the implications and the relevance of interaction within the framework of the Interaction Hypothesis theory in English Foreign Language Teaching and Acquisition in Brazilian schools. The work aims to present theoretical rationales and relate them to classroom practice. The Brazilian foreign language teaching reality is a starting point for possible applications of theoretical rationales related to this theory. A chronological perspective regarding Krashen's Monitor Model and the dichotomous Hypothesis of Acquisition and Learning is drawn. Krashen's five Hypotheses are presented with emphasis on the Input Hypothesis and the Interaction Hypothesis. The second part refers to a brief analysis of English classes as a foreign language in Brazil. It is suggested how face-to-face interactional processes can occur in the mentioned context between students and teachers. The paper mentions issues related to teachers' attitudes and students' aptitudes, motivation, and special skills concerning the Brazilian language teaching context.

KEYWORDS: Education. English language. Interaction. Interactive Hypothesis.

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1. Introduction

The studies on interaction have attracted researchers in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research in the last decade (ELLIS, 2015; GASS, 2017; GASS *ET AL.*, 2020) regarding the influence of person-to-person relations. The Interactive Hypothesis states that communicative interaction relates language Input to the learner's learning abilities and Output (LONG, 1981). Hence, learners have opportunities to change their Output (SWAIN, 1995), given comprehensible Input is provided (GASS, 2013).

This paper examines the implications and the relevance of interaction within the framework of the Interaction Hypothesis theory in English as a Foreign Language Teaching and Acquisition. The work aims to present the theoretical rationales and relate them to classroom practice. The Brazilian foreign language teaching reality is a starting point for practical applications of theoretical grounds related to this theory.

Firstly, a brief chronological perspective regarding Krashen's Monitor Model and the Hypothesis of Acquisition-Learning is drawn. After that, Krashen's five Hypotheses are presented: first, the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis; second, the Monitor Model; third, the Natural Order; fourth, the Affective Filter Hypothesis; fifth, the Comprehensive Input Hypothesis. Following these definitions, the focus lies on the Input Hypothesis and the Interaction Hypothesis. Input features and Interaction concepts are mentioned due to their relevance to the study.

The second part of this paper refers to a brief analysis of the English language being taught as a foreign language in Brazil. It is suggested how face-to-face interactional processes can occur in the mentioned context between students and teachers. Some emphasis is given to teachers' attitudes and students' aptitudes, motivation, and special skills concerning the Brazilian language teaching context. Finally, the author suggests how teachers can improve their teaching practices in that context.

2. Relevant theory

The studies about communication and face-to-face interactions have been fundamental in Second Language Teaching and Acquisition (GASS, 2017; ELLIS,

2015). Understanding the manifestation and advent of the "Interaction Hypothesis" as a theory is essential.

In the mid-70s, Noam Chomsky (1975) raised questions and made some considerations about the innate human capacity to learn and speak languages, *i.e.*, the faculty of language that would be the precursor to the early stage of human beings, coining the term Universal Grammar (UG). According to Lightbown and Spada (2013, p. 164), some scientists state that the availability and the nature of UG are the same in SLA, while others affirm that the UG might be present but altered by the Acquisition of other languages. Most UG researchers are not concerned with beginners; their work is on complex grammar and advanced learners or native language speakers.

Influenced by Chomsky's theory of First Language Acquisition, Krashen (1978) analyses the acquisition and learning processes by proposing the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis. This theory states that adults learn a foreign language by acquisition, a process in which no formal language is studied. The term acquisition relates to an unconscious phenomenon, the spontaneous and natural development of language without conscious effort. In contrast, the term learning relates to formal language development, the education received from academic instruction and obtained by analysing elements of a particular language. However, there has to be a balance between these concepts to avoid the polarisation of practices since acquisition and learning are not part of a dichotomy.

A driver-mechanic metaphor can be used to illustrate these processes: the acquisition is the driving ability, and the learning is the Mechanics, the area in Physics. The former relates to the user of a particular language who is, sometimes, unaware of formal grammatical rules and uses the language being learnt as a tool for communication, the same way most drivers know how to drive by practising. On the other hand, mechanics and engineers understand the operation or functioning of an engine or a specific tool and its technical details, often dispensable for the user, similar to teachers and grammarians who master grammar rules.

According to Lewis (1996), the most critical factor for language learning progress may be the quality, and the quantity of input to which learners expose are exposed to a second or foreign language. Learners and teachers must understand words and terms which are not in their linguistic repertoire, and students must have

communicative opportunities to practice phrases, sentences, and lexical chunks to be independent.

The second hypothesis, the Monitor Model, also known as the Monitor Hypothesis, states that learners consciously use and learn grammar rules instead of learning lexical meaning. According to Krashen (2003, p. 3), three conditions must be met to use the Monitor: the first states that the acquirer must know the language rules. Krashen (2003, p. 3) affirms that it is challenging to meet since it is virtually impossible to master all the rules of a language. Another critical point is that several rules are complex to be applied in a conversation. The second relates to language correctness; the acquirer must focus on form. Still, this condition is unlikely to be met because learners generally may not think simultaneously about the meaning and form. The third rule states that the acquirer must have time, but most speakers only need to Monitor occasionally. These advanced learners might have a particular interest in language structure to do so. Consequently, the acquirer will have to slow down to focus on form.

According to Lightbown and Spada (2013), Krashen designed this Input Hypothesis to elucidate learners' acquisition and word choice. This theory states that the acquired system makes assessments concerning the fluency in the correction process in which the learned system works as an editor that somehow refines the acquired system. Input should be comprehensive to the learner's knowledge level, but there should be some stimulus (input). Interlocutors should refrain from using terms that are not comprehensive to the participants due to the risk of breaking down or disrupting communication. In order to understand oneself, one needs to constantly modify the lexical repertoire to make communication accessible and comprehensive to one's interlocutors.

The fourth hypothesis, the "Natural Order", acknowledges a particular order for learning languages. Each learner experiences their stages in the learning process differently. Individuals acquire or gain knowledge differently, *i.e.*, acquiring a second language (L2) is not the same as the process for a first language (L1), but the mechanism is similar. For instance, Krashen (2003, p.2) claims that the *-ing* marker in English is acquired in an early state in L1, but the third person singular *-s* marker is acquired approximately six months or a year later. Regarding L2 acquisition, the *-ing* marker is also acquired early, but the *-s* marker may never occur. Learners can feel

demotivated and frustrated for not learning some grammatical items, but teachers must be aware that it is a natural process.

Another hypothesis is the "Affective Filter," a hypothetical obstacle that hinders students from learning a specific language. This hypothesis is related to the learner's mood, temperament, personality, and cultural and emotional identification that each human being has with a particular language. Some learners have come from other institutions having experienced various traumatic events, so several students feel they cannot learn foreign languages and have high anxiety levels and language barriers (TRAN, 2012). Teachers must understand that every human being has the abilities and strategies to learn foreign languages, despite having distinct economic, emotional, and cultural backgrounds, which should be considered when planning a lesson.

The term Input Hypothesis was coined by Krashen (1985), focusing on the relevance of the input that foments the acquisition. According to Krashen (1978), the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis lies in the idea that acquisition occurs when learners expose themselves to slightly more advanced levels of language expressed by $i+1$ (linguistic knowledge is understood as 'i'), *i.e.*, new words, pronunciation, and grammar topics. Krashen (2004) states that the Input Hypothesis is connected to the concept discussed in this paper – acquisition and learning.

There is a need to provide learners with appropriate input regarding their proficiency level so it does not influence the Affective Filter, which may serve as a barrier to learning a foreign language. Anxiety can also be a determining factor contributing to learners' failure to acquire foreign languages. In opposition to Krashen's proposal, Long (1981; 1996) argues that the Interaction Hypothesis emphasises the relevance of the interaction between interlocutors; these actors or individuals can be regarded as native speakers (NS), non-native speakers (NNS), and more proficient speakers of a particular language.

Another relevant point in this theory is that the concept of Input must be comprehensive; prosody, syntax, and structure modifications may be necessary depending on the interlocutor's proficiency (ELLIS, 1991). The author also claims that the amount of Input provided in an everyday situation should always be in the correct quantity not to overload any of the parties involved in the interaction. However, the proper amount varies from situation to situation. Long (1996) needs to state in what forms or when the Input becomes excessive or insufficient. All Input must be

comprehensive; if the Input fails to meet the requirements, the Acquisition is compromised.

From the viewpoint that all human beings are different, the correct amount of Input may continue to be discussed for several years. Nevertheless, this topic is fundamental for research because comprehensive Input exerts a notorious function in Krashen's (1985) and Long's (1981; 1996) theories. Nonetheless, some points negatively corroborate the acceptance of the Interaction Hypothesis theory. Language Acquisition theory comprises a relatively limited interaction type that does not cover or manage all the informal and interactive situations which speakers can experience due to the fact that the human communicational scope is vast, rich, complex, and diverse.

Another central issue is negotiation, which could work better with beginners but does so more efficiently with more proficient speakers. In general, beginners have more limited communication tools to negotiate with proficient or advanced speakers because the advanced speakers' repertoire is more ample and complex. There could be conflicts or even embarrassment from this minor setback from both interlocutors. One consequence of this linguistic barrier could be the lack of motivation of both, the beginner and the advanced speaker, to continue the proposed activity. Negotiation of meaning is hindered, and that interaction may never happen again naturally. According to Mackey (2012, p. 113-114), these discourse moves include: "comprehensive checks, confirmation checks, clarification requests, modified output, interactional feedback, recasts, language-related episodes."

Some issues related to English language teaching in Brazil will be discussed in the next section.

3. English Language Teaching in Brazil

The classroom environment is prevalent in an attempt to put these theories into practice because they are the venues by which the interactions in teaching occur. The environment in the classroom should be friendly. Still, more traditional school environments pose an austere atmosphere and strict hierarchical relations in which the teacher is the highest authority in the interaction. Dissociating power relations and authority concerning foreign language teaching takes time and effort. For instance, Effiong (2016) claims that excessive formality in teachers' dress codes, a traditional

cultural element in Japan, can be a causative agent or barrier to foreign language learning and acquisition.

The British Council (2019) elaborated an overview of experiences with Public Policies for teaching English in Brazilian public education, summarising the study's results in identifying the structural level and consolidation of public policies related to teaching English in the states of Brazil. The document states that English would become mandatory in Brazilian education in 2020 due to the need for more people to trade internationally and communicate in English, which is essential and not a privilege. According to the report, 10.3% of young people (18-24 years old) claim to speak English, although the same document does not specify what it would be to "speak English" or the level of proficiency, these young people have while others do not.

According to the study, the Brazilian states have had structural discrepancies in implementing English teaching based on new curricular standards, the *Base Nacional Comum Curricular* (BNCC)², given the emphasis on teaching traditional grammar instead of focusing on communicative skills. Camelo and Galli (2019, p. 165-166) affirm that the viewpoint presented in the BNCC highlights Globalization as "the driving force for a more careful treatment with the language". Language is treated as a tool for accessing knowledge. The authors emphasize that this discussion places language as a simple instrument rather than socially constructed knowledge for elaborating meanings and discourses.

The most affluent students can afford to study in fee-paying courses after school hours. Such data are essential for the country's future, as 87.2% of Brazilian students are in public schools (BRASIL, 2021). The British Council's report indicates data related to synthesising this panorama; this document aims to identify the level of structuring and consolidation of public policies related to English language teaching in each state of Brazil. Studying English in private schools is a costly and unaffordable investment for most students. According to Windle and Nogueira (2015), this internationalisation of education happens to an elite part of Brazilian society. This social group has access to quality fee-paying courses, bilingual or international schools, and the opportunity to travel internationally, in addition to valuing these cosmopolitan experiences. Acquired

²The "Base Nacional Comum Curricular" (BNCC) can be translated into Brazilian National Common Core Curriculum. This document describes which skills and abilities all students are expected to develop throughout their primary and secondary schooling. It is guided by the ethical, political and aesthetic principles outlined by the National Curriculum Guidelines for Basic Education (Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais da Educação Básica) (BRASIL, 2018).

cultural capital is used within the scope of global power as a bargaining chip or token and a way to enter an international selective market.

Speaking English gives Brazilian children a passport to the “first world”, metaphorically, but not all families can afford English classes in private institutions. This investment of money and time in pursuit of the infamous, cherished and imaginative “fluency” in English is beyond the economic power of most Brazilian families. According to Windle and Nogueira (2015), another negative point is related to the few opportunities for oral practice that most Brazilians have, characterising and exposing the English teaching market’s anti-democratic or unequal nature.

In accordance with Paiva (2011, p.41), speaking English as a foreign language implies “being able to engage with other community members, interaction, negotiation of meaning, learning rules and norms that govern that community”. Moreover, the question of identity is very relevant. English learners aim to speak English in order to be able to ascend socially, enter the job market, travel and enjoy the globalized culture in contexts such as the one in Brazil. Beyond fluency, learners wish to participate and participate as influential citizens, and an obstacle seems to be access to the English language.

Regarding this unequal and unfair nature of English learning and teaching in Brazil as a second language, Windle and Nogueira (2015) state that:

Familiarity with English is therefore understood by Brazilian economic and cultural elites alike to be a basic lifestyle requirement. Further, fluency in English holds value in the labour market for those who hold other qualifications and executive positions. (WINDLE AND NOGUEIRA, 2015, p. 188)

Consequently, competition in the labour market between members of the economic elite and members of the majority of the population is inequitable, especially among specific privileged contexts, having become *sine qua non* or an essential requirement to find a job in some fields. One of the differential social markers of the member of this group is to speak three or four foreign languages, such as French, German or another prestigious language. This unequal situation is an almost impossible mission for members of society's financially less privileged strata; cosmopolitan cultural

capital (WEENINK, 2008) occupies a relevant place in Brazilian symbolic goods, that is, being fluent in English, according to Windle and Nogueira (2015).

The commodification of education is a question which needs to be further discussed, and it is a research trend in Brazil, as Windle (2019, p. 196) claims:

The symbolic profits of English fluency remain concentrated amongst those who can pay for long years of instruction for their children from an early age. The rise of high-end language courses and bilingual/binational schools reflects the imperative felt by dominant groups to reinforce their linguistic capital, while low-end language courses attempt to present a mirror image with anything but the conditions required for effective participation on the terms dictated by the linguistic market. (WINDLE, 2019, p. 196).

A possible action to be taken might be related to a more extensive workload which would be ideal for learners to have more contact with the target language. This strategy might mitigate the country's gap between the rich and the poor. The interaction can be made primarily through role-plays or simulations of daily situations when a learner experiences this type of activity with an NS, an advanced NNS or a speaker with the same or similar proficiency. Students not only practise the language orally but also experience situations more faithfully and intensely, which is different from only studying one language structurally focused on grammatical topics.

In order to perform these simulations most authentically, media resources (internet, interactive applications, gadgets, films, *inter alia*), facilities, and realia must be used. These resources aid in accomplishing the exercise aims besides providing students with more dynamic classes and increasing student motivation. There must be a feeling of collaboration from the students to construct knowledge and communicate during the activities.

These tasks must be feasible to be contextualised according to the interlocutors' authentic contexts so they can be meaningful. This point is essential because motivation (DÖRNYEI, 2001; SPOLSKY, 2000) often comes from the type of activity proposed. Teachers should adapt and assign unsuitable tasks for a given context, for local reasons or cultural beliefs. Tasks must be dynamic and enriching, keeping the target language as the primary tool. Teachers must know how to assign tasks and help students conduct

and execute the proposals. Instructions must be clear, precise, and follow a logical and comprehensive standard, and Input must be given before the task.

This theory is simplified because several other ingredients comprise an L2 learning environment, and every group's complexity level must be considered, according to Dörnyei and Muir (2019). As the authors highlight:

The development of a successful motivational teaching practice should begin with the development of an awareness of the vast repertoire of techniques that are at a teacher's disposal, before a choice being made to identify specific techniques, based on the specific needs of a specific classroom learning environment. (DÖRNYEI AND MUIR, 2019, p. 733–734).

Equally relevant is to be aware of the student's social background as much as possible. Teachers always deal with people with various skills, and educators need to explore them fully. This viewpoint is supported by Harmer (2007, p. 85), cited by Hall (2011), who comments on students' individuality regarding the need to respond to every student's individuality instead of understanding learning and teaching as something done in groups.

Nevertheless, in most cases, teachers cannot teach children or adults individually if school is an environment for socialisation and learning. The theory analysed emphasises interaction as one of the key points from all over the acquisition process of a foreign language, implying that the student is inserted in a cultural environment propitious to the Acquisition. However, it is undeniable that people have particular learning skills to learn other languages, and some people are keener on numbers and hard sciences. This predilection is also part of the idiosyncratic and diverse human nature that must be acknowledged and respected.

In the same way, Hall (2011) mentions some critical features of which teachers must be aware regarding the students' profiles. The author points out the age factor and mentions the belief some people have that adults learn languages slower and, in general, have more difficulties than children who are more agile and, consequently, acquire language faster. However, the author says that this is mainly because the expansion of English language teaching has mainly taken place among youngsters.

Age may affect learning, but linguistics must do intense research to clarify this further. According to Paiva (2011, p. 33), children who study in private schools start to learn English at a young age, but the teaching is focused on teaching mainly vocabulary,

singing songs and playing games. In fact, there is little or no social practice. Paiva (2011) affirms that the language market promotes and sells the English language as a necessary commodity, attracting families who can afford these schools. These parents believe they are helping their children because they would start learning English from an early age.

Hall (2011) elucidates that the way adults and children learn is distinct; adults can use the cognitive faculties they have developed to use their mother tongue, also known as L1, and life experience to use the language more abstractly.

Another critical factor, according to Hall (2011), is aptitude. As a matter of experience, some teachers can recognise students with a particular predilection to learning than others who are weaker or slower in the language acquisition process. A significant part of success in acquiring a foreign language depends on the student's motivation to learn a particular language. This factor is one of the most crucial elements for learning other languages.

Nevertheless, the origins of motivation are diverse. Gardner (1985) mentions a distinction between integrative guidance that deals with the learner's identification with the target language culture and instrumental orientation characterised by the need of the learner to use that language as a tool in the work environment or pass a test. In conformity with Gardner's observations (1985), Hall (2011) also indicates that intrinsic motivation, which, as its name implies, "comes from within", relies heavily on the pleasure that the student feels when learning a specific language. In contrast, extrinsic motivation comes from "outside" the learner, who can compete for a prize, receive any benefit, or be promoted at work by speaking a foreign language. Other factors should also be mentioned, related to personality, gender, beliefs, preferences, prejudice and preconceptions that learners have or learn at home or in the society where they live.

4. Conclusion

This paper looks at how interaction fits into the Interaction Hypothesis theory of English as a Foreign Language regarding teaching and acquisition. The work aims to present theoretical rationales and relate them to classroom practice. Brazilian teaching environments provide a starting point for empirical application of theoretical grounds related to this theory.

The process is influenced by several relevant teaching factors, including good didactic textbooks, updated media resources, a pleasant and healthy working environment, and motivated students. Regardless of the approach they take, teachers should be able to teach dynamic and meaningful classes.

Foreign language teachers should be aware that they will have to deal with students from all social backgrounds, which should enrich interactions in language lessons. Languages are understood as a means of communication for social interaction, conveying values and shaping power relations and culture. The English language can be a positive tool or force for the promotion of shared values, such as democracy, human rights, and individual and collective opportunities. Therefore, it can serve as a global language that encourages more fraternal and equitable relations between nations.

Teachers and scientists explore alternatives to transform meaningless classroom practices into substantial teaching approaches that captivate, motivate, and empower students with robust tools to change their community and language learning experiences. Therefore, language has the potential to change minds and attitudes, but this change depends on meaningful interactions.

A relevância da interação no ensino de língua inglesa nas escolas brasileiras

RESUMO:

A interação tem atraído pesquisadores no âmbito da influência das relações pessoais na aquisição de segunda língua (SLA). A Hipótese de Interação afirma que a interação comunicativa relaciona o insumo de linguagem às habilidades e aos resultados de aprendizagem do aprendiz (output), de modo que os estudantes possam alterar seus resultados, desde que receba um insumo compreensível. Este artigo examina as implicações e a relevância da interação no âmbito da Teoria das Hipóteses de Interação no Ensino e Aquisição de Língua Inglesa em escolas públicas brasileiras. O trabalho visa apresentar os fundamentos teóricos e relacioná-los com a prática em sala de aula. A realidade brasileira do ensino de segunda língua é o ponto de partida para possíveis aplicações dos fundamentos teóricos relacionados a essa teoria. Uma perspectiva cronológica em relação ao Modelo Monitor de Krashen e a hipótese dicotômica de Aquisição e Aprendizagem é delineada. As cinco hipóteses de Krashen são apresentadas com ênfase na Hipótese de Insumo e na Hipótese de Interação. A segunda parte refere-se a uma breve análise da realidade das aulas de inglês como língua estrangeira no Brasil. Sugerem-se como processos interacionais pessoais podem ocorrer no referido contexto com alunos e professores. Em seguida, questões relacionadas às aptidões dos alunos, atitudes dos professores, bem como motivação no contexto do ensino de línguas no país são mencionadas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Educação. Hipótese de Interação. Interação. Língua Inglesa.

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