Learner Self-Perception of Input and Interaction in Second-Language Acquisition

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Abstract: Input and interaction have long been identified as crucial in acquiring a second language. The amount of input received and interaction engaged in play significant roles in assisting second-language learners to learn the target language. Despite the awareness of many regarding the significant roles played by input and interaction in second-language acquisition, there is a lack of studies conducted to examine how English as a second language (ESL) learners perceive the input that they receive in their attempt to learn English as well as how they interact in developing mastery of English. To address this concern, a study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of ESL learners with respect to input and interaction in second-language acquisition. This study contributes to the understanding of how ESL learners perceive the input that they receive, both in formal and informal settings and the nature of the interaction they engage in to acquire English as a second language.

Key words: Input · Interaction · Input and interactional modifications · English as a second language · Second language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

In their efforts to acquire another language, it is imperative that English as a second language (ESL) learners be exposed to a large quantity of English *input* through *interaction* with target-language speakers. They need to be given the opportunity to make sense of what they hear or see, notice the contexts in which the language is used in different ways, interact with others and improve their weak areas. The importance of input has been advocated by a variety of language-learning theories. Though there are many mutually contradictory ideas among linguists and language researchers with respect to both input and interaction that might aid acquisition of a second language (L2), it does seem clear that both input and interaction play significant roles in L2 learning. For instance, [1] says that 'the learner's encounter with users of the language being learned and their resulting language experience, is useful primarily as a source of evidence which can stimulate or trigger internal mechanisms of growth and development' (p. 121).

In view of the significant roles played by input and interaction in improving mastery in English language as an L2, there is still a lack of studies depicting learners' perceptions of the input that they receive, either in formal or informal settings, as well as the extent of their awareness of this input. Are these ESL learners aware of the importance of the second-language input made available to them and how do they interact so that the input received can be sustained and consolidated?.

From the perspective of interaction, in many studies, for example [2], the respondents were closely observed during conversation and audio- or videotapes of their conversations or their writings were scrutinised to probe the degree and characteristic of their engagement. Very few studies in this area ask the participants about their perceptions of the level of L2 use they are capable of in interactions with others, what they expect their language teachers could help them with and how they perceive themselves when they interact with others in the L2. To help address this lack, a study was conducted to explore English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' perceptions around input and interaction in English acquisition. This study endeavours to answer the following Research Questions (RQs): (RQ1) What are ESL learners' perceptions of input and interaction?; (RQ2): Is there a statistically significant difference between male and female respondents with respect to perceptions of input and interaction? and (RQ3): Is there a statistically significant difference among weak, average and above-average ESL learners with respect to their perceptions of input and interaction?.

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Theorists put various values on the roles of input and interaction in second-language acquisition (SLA). The most prominent theory is that proposed by Krashen [3], who argues that SLA is determined by the amount of *comprehensible input*, that is, one-way input in the L2 that is both understandable and at a level just slightly beyond the current linguistic competence of the learner. Krashen further indicates that acquiring language is predicated upon receiving messages the learner can understand. Teachers can make language input comprehensible through a variety of strategies, including linguistic simplification and the use of aids such as realia and pictures. A number of modifications, which may involve linguistic simplification as well as conversational modifications such as repetition, clarification and confirmation checks, may be used in order to gain understanding. In an L1-acquisition situation, what is important for success is that there must be adequate bulk of samples of language input for acquirers to derive grammar; this is also likely true in an L2-learning situation [4].

The *interaction hypothesis* of [5] suggests that when meaning is negotiated, the comprehensibility of the input is usually increased and learners tend to focus on relevant linguistic features. A substantial number of other interactionist theorists employ Vygotsky's *sociocultural theory* of human mental processing to describe the role of interaction in SLA (Lightbrown and Spada, 1983, cited in [6]) and suggest that L2 learners gain proficiency when they interact with more advanced speakers of the language, for example teachers and peers. *Scaffolding* structures such as modelling, repetition and linguistic simplification, which are used by more proficient speakers are believed to provide support to learners, enabling them to function within their zones of proximal development [7].

In a controlled study involving lecture comprehension, [8] investigated the extent to which modified target-language input affected the level of comprehension attained by college students who were non-native speakers (NNSs) of the target language (English). Long [8] reported that learners displayed better comprehension of a lecturette recorded in English by a native speaker (NS) using *foreigner talk* (FT) features (including reduced syntactical complexity, rephrasings and restatements, slow speech rate and clearer articulation) than for a lecturette containing the same content but intended for a NS audience and recorded by the same NS without these FT features. Other researchers also offered evidence to support this claim. For example, [9] found that university ESL students completed

dictation with significantly greater accuracy and reported greater comprehension of the passage when the rate of dictation was slower. However, [9] found no significant difference in accuracy or perceived comprehension for grammatically modified dictation texts.

Parker and Chaudron (1987, cited in [6]) investigated the effects of *input modification* on reading comprehension. Although their investigation did not specifically address teacher talk, it is included in this discussion since their findings do cast light on the issues addressed here. Parker and Chaudron distinguish between three types of modifications which might facilitate the comprehension of L2 input: two are modifications of input-(1) simplification and (2) elaboration-and the third is modification of interaction. Parker and Chaudron proposed that the modifications most critical for comprehension are in fact repetitions (redundancy) and clearer signalling of the thematic structure of the message; they include these modifications under the rubric of modifications to input but distinguish them from simplifications by calling them elaborative modifications. These authors contended that although elaborative modifications might be promoted through verbal interaction, they do not depend on an interactive setting. Parker and Chaudron conducted a small-scale study designed to explore the effects of elaborative modifications on reading comprehension. The subjects read two passages (one with increased elaboration and one with redundancies eliminated and thematic structure reduced) and were required to complete a cloze test o measure comprehension. They failed to find a significant effect for the elaborated passage over the non-elaborated passage.

In a descriptive study of teacher–student interaction, Gaies (1983, cited in [6]) focused on *learner feedback*, which is defined as 'information provided by a learner to a teacher about the comprehensibility and usefulness of some prior teacher utterance(s)' (p. 192). Gaies postulated that when participating in verbal communication, 'learners regulate the nature of the content to which they are exposed in the classroom and the rate at which it is presented' (p. 196). By recording, transcribing and analysing the classroom interaction of teacher–student dyads and 'teacher-students' triads participating in a communication task, the author provided evidence that the learners did, to a certain extent, show control over their own intake. Gaies classified learner feedback based on a four-type model of pedagogical moves (responding, soliciting, reacting and structuring). Utterances were assigned to these major categories on the basis of

functional properties rather than syntactic features. The author also developed several subcategories for the particular data collected. The analysis revealed a teacher-centred approach, probably due in large part to the nature of the task observed. However, the learners were able to control the discourse through the use of questions to solicit from the teacher the information they felt necessary. Gaies summarises his findings as follows: (1) collectively, the learners made use of feedback in all four of the major categories; however, not all of the learners used all of the moves; (2) there was considerable variation among learners in the amount of feedback provided; (3) reacting moves were by far the most frequent form of feedback and structuring moves occurred the least frequently; and (4) in each of the triads, one learner provided considerably more feedback than the other. In order to investigate the effect learner feedback produced on classroom discourse, the author used a model presented by Glucksberg and Krauss (1967, cited in [6]) to classify the post-feedback utterances made by the teachers into one of five categories (verbatim repetition, reduced repetition, expanded repetition, restructuring and question). This analysis revealed little in the way of a relationship between learner feedback and teacher post feedback. The only immediately apparent pattern detected was the tendency of teachers to expand utterances rather than reduce them in length.

In an effort to describe and compare the input and interactional features of communication activities as carried out in small groups vs. as in teacher-fronted formats, [10] found that the teacher-fronted activities provided more grammatical input and a greater number of features of negotiation, while the small-group activities provided individual students with more opportunities to use the target language. These findings led [10] to conclude: 'we feel that small-group use of communicative activities can be effective in the ESL classroom but that its benefits may be more limited than had previously been assumed' (p. 132). In reflecting on the results, [10] hypothesised that two-way communication tasks carried out by pairs of learners might ultimately be shown to be most conducive path to negotiated modification of interaction and hence to L2 acquisition.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study, which employed a survey approach, examined how ESL learners perceived the input that they received in their attempt to acquire and learn English as well as how they interacted with other learners, by gender as well as by level of English competency (weak, average and above-average). The respondents were 128 ESL students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Alor Gajah Campus, Melaka, Malaysia.

A questionnaire was developed based on extensive review of the relevant literature. The reliability of the questionnaire was determined by calculating Cronbach's alpha. By using reliability analysis, it was found that the reliability of the items was 0.67, which was acceptable. The finalised questionnaires were distributed to the respondents and consisted of 27 items covering the respondents' demographic details, perceptions regarding the importance of input in language learning, perceptions regarding the use of English in providing and receiving input and perceptions regarding interaction in language learning. These items were developed into a Likert-type questionnaire (1: strongly disagree; 5: strongly agree). SPSS software was employed to process the data. The data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. A t-test was conducted to find whether there was a significant difference between males and females with respect to their perceptions on input and interaction, while a one-way analysis of variation (ANOVA) was performed to examine whether there was a statistically significant difference among weak, average and above average ESL learners in this regard. A p-value of < 0.05 was used to determine significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that majority of the respondents noticed the significance of input in language learning. This could clearly be seen in that a large portion of them 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' (selected 4 or 5 on the Likert-type scale) that lecturer feedback was necessary in learning English. This finding was further strengthened in that none of the respondents in the study disagreed or strongly disagreed with the importance of lecturer input (in the form of feedback). Seventy respondents, or 54.7%, 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the notion that they preferred their language errors to be commented on as well as corrected by their English lecturers. As well, 120 respondents, or 93.75%, preferred to receive immediate feedback regarding their language errors.

ESL learners also perceived interaction as a way to fortify their language skills as well as a method to gather input because when they communicated with others, they could ask for clarification if they were unable to understand what the speaker was trying to convey.

Therefore, the speaker would adjust his/her speech so that the learner would understand what the speaker was trying to say. In other words, input modification was done by the speaker to accommodate the learner's language ability. This way, instead of just being passive listeners, the learners would be able to communicate with others and reply to their speech content. Should they encounter troubles in conveying their message, they would rephrase. More than half of respondents (76, or 59.3%) agreed with the statement that they would rephrase their sentence to ensure the person that they communicated with would get their message clearly. By rephrasing their sentences, they were performing interactional modifications to overcome any communication breakdowns. This is in line with [10], who said '[...] interactional modifications do in fact serve as an important stimulus or vehicle for the repetition of input [...] crucial to comprehension' (p. 753). In addition, through these interactional modifications, the ESL learners were in fact *negotiating* the meaning of their utterances with their interlocutors. This finding supports the conclusion of [11] that concluded 'negotiation of meaning is a powerful tool in facilitating comprehension' (p. 122).

The t-test showed no significant difference in perceptions pertaining to input and interaction in SLA between male and female ESL learners ($t = .573, p > 0.05$) at UiTM. The mean scores indicate that the perceptions of male ($M = 4.29$, SD = .42) and female ($M = 4.33$, SD = .39) ESL learners were more or less the same. Thus, there was no statistical difference in terms of gender. The one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in perceptions pertaining to input and interaction in SLA between weak, average and above-average ESL learners ($F = 6.739$, $p < 0.05$), increasing progressively for each level.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the understanding of ESL learners' perceptions of input and interaction in second-language acquisition; hence, this study may enrich the understanding of researchers, teachers, lecturers and primary, secondary and higher learning institutions regarding input and interaction, whether written or verbal. These findings might help English teachers develop better approaches. The findings also provide insights and understanding of the importance of the provision of a platform for ESL learners to interact with others to maximise the input that they receive and to provide input to other learners. It is hoped that ESL learners would put

to good use knowledge received in the form of language exposure in their quest to acquire (and hasten their acquisition of) English or other target languages throughout their lifelong learning journey.

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