

Considering the Interaction Hypothesis: Clarification, Elaboration and Paraphrasing.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the Interaction Hypothesis is considered in an analysis of a short script between a native English speaker and three Japanese ESL learners (non-native English speakers). Through this analysis, the roles clarification, elaboration, and paraphrasing play in creating and improving comprehensible input and output are identified and discussed, thus providing support for the Interaction Hypothesis.

INTRODUCTION

A very common practice in the ESL/EFL classroom is for the instructor to teach and focus on target language structure and then, after the students have learned or at least comprehended the language, apply the newly acquired language in the context of conversation. In other words, students practice what they have learned through talking to one another (Byrne 1976; Hall 2011; Richards and Rodgers 1986). However, Evelyn Hatch (1978) proposed a revolutionary educational concept for the field of ESL/EFL: “One learns how to do conversation, one learns how to act verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed” (p. 404). Hatch (1978) suggested that students should not only practice (through conversation) what they learn, but that they may learn through their conversations and theorized interaction leads to comprehensible input. Later, Michael Long (1981; 1983; 1996) expanded on Hatch’s proposition, suggesting that interaction facilitates acquisition because it “connects input . . . and output in productive ways . . .” (Long 1996, p. 452), which led to the Interaction Hypothesis.

THE INTERACTION HYPOTHESIS

According to the Interaction Hypothesis, the interaction between a non-native speaker (NNS) and a native speaker (NS), or even between a lower and higher non-native speaker, creates a natural environment for L2 acquisition because it is in the context of interaction that the NNS learns about the correctness and/or incorrectness of their utterances (Ehrlich, Avery & Yorio, 1998; Gass & MacKey, 2007). The Interaction Hypothesis presents several strategies a NS or higher-level NNS may use to communicate to a NNS that help bring about improved comprehension, such as speaking slowly or clearly, elaborating, requesting clarification, repairing the NNS’s

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speech, or paraphrasing (Brown, 2000). For the purposes of this paper, clarification, elaboration, and paraphrasing will be the primary focus.

Clarification, elaboration, and paraphrasing in context

In order to test the Interaction Hypothesis and the roles elaboration, clarification, and paraphrasing play in bringing about improved communication, a short script between three Japanese ESL learners (NNSs) and myself, a native English speaker (NS), is analyzed. In this script, the NNSs read a number of questions from a script to the NS. The NS then attempted to freely answer these questions. In several instances, the NNS was unable to understand the NS's response and thus requested clarification. The NS then employed elaboration and/or paraphrasing to help bring about understanding in the NNSs.

Example 1

NNS: There has been a lot of talk lately about additives and preservatives in food. In what ways has this changed your eating habits?

NS: Uh, I avoid them, I d-, I don't buy prepackaged foods uh, as much...Uh, I don't buy...say...potato chips that have a lot of flavoring in them...And uh, I eat better, I think.

NNS: Pardon me?

NS: Ummmm, I, I eat better, I think. I, I don't buy so much food that's prepackaged.

In this first example, the NNS requested clarification immediately after the NS's answer. It should be noted that the NNS's request, "Pardon me?" is indicative of a novice, and therefore, despite the awkwardness of the clarification request, the NS responded without hesitation, restating his original statement, but, this time, leaving out the less important information, i.e., "Uh, I don't buy...say...potato chips that have a lot of flavoring in them..." The NS simply restated his main point: "I eat better . . ." and ". . . I don't buy so much food that's prepackaged." In other words, he paraphrased. Though not visible in the script, following the paraphrase, the NNS indicated comprehension by nodding and putting the script down on the table. Therefore, it seems that the extra information the interlocutor provided in his original answer may have been difficult for the NNS to follow—the NNS may have had difficulty understanding the interlocutor's main point. Thus, in this example, it seems that input comprehension very likely was improved after the NNS's clarification request and the NS's subsequent paraphrasing.

Example 2

NNS: How have increasing food costs changed your eating habits?

NS: Well, we don't eat as much beef as we used to. We eat more chicken, and uh, pork, and uh, fish, things like that.

NNS: Pardon me?

NS: We don't eat as much beef as we used to. We eat more chicken and uh, uh pork and fish. We don't eat beef very often. We don't have steak like we used to.

Again, the NNS request for clarification was unnatural, but as in the first example the NS attributed the clumsy request to NNS's language ability. However, unlike the first example, where the NS condensed his original answer in order to paraphrase, the NS actually elaborated, presenting the NNS with more information.

This strategy, i.e., elaboration, is designed to better help the interlocutor understand a previous utterance and seemed to help the NNS understand because following the elaboration the NNS showed satisfaction with the answer by enthusiastically smiling and not pursuing the question any further. The increased amount of information very likely helped the NNS better understand the NS's answer because the interlocutor provided an example of how his eating habits have changed: "We don't have steak like we used to." Thus, the NS did not provide extra information, but simply elaborated on the information he had already stated.

In this last example, the NS, much like in the previous example, elaborated on his original answer after the NNS requested clarification:

Example 3

NNS: There has been a lot of talk lately about additives and preservatives in food. In what ways has this changed your eating habits?

NS: I try to stay away from nitrites.

NNS: Pardon me?

NS: Uh, from nitrites in, uh, like lunchmeats and that sort of thing. I don't eat those.

According to Derwing (1996) and Loschky (1994), NSs modify their language (output) when addressing NNSs, and this is observed in this final example. Very likely, the NNS did not understand the word "nitrites." Therefore, the request for clarification is very natural in this final example. The NS clearly modified his output for the NNS because rather than explaining that nitrites are a salt or ester of nitrous acid containing the nitrite ion chemical compound NO_2 , he simply gave an example of something that contains nitrites and explained that he does not eat it: ". . . [Nitrites] in . . . lunchmeats and that sort of thing. I don't eat those." The NNS then signaled she understood by nodding her head and ending the conversation.

The NS's modified output, i.e., giving an example of something with nitrites rather than giving the definition of nitrites, assisted in improving comprehension (Carroll, 1999). Though it is possible the NNS went away from that conversation still not knowing what nitrites are, the learner at least gained an understanding of something that contains nitrates, and, more importantly, how the interlocutor's eating habits have changed.

Implications for the classroom

The Interaction Hypothesis rests on the notion that "conversation is not only a medium of practice, but also the means by which learning takes place," especially when it comes to the negotiation of meaning (Gass p. 234). Therefore, it is a natural proponent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and other similar approaches. Taking the Interaction Hypothesis into consideration, educators must begin incorporating such approaches into their classrooms. By providing their students with opportunity to communicate in meaningful conversations that encourage such strategies as clarification requests, educators foster growth and skills that provide students with opportunities to engage in their own learning (Brown 2012). Since the Interaction Hypothesis encourages learners to essentially take hold of the reigns of their own learning by identifying input they need to understand and then pursuing it through clarification requests, learners are given the chance to consciously register their misinterpretations and learn more quickly, in accordance with the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt 1990).

Though the Interaction Hypothesis advocates communicative activities and provides learners the opportunity to notice the areas in which they need further comprehension and then seek out that comprehension, educators must be careful not to push students too far beyond their internal learner capacities. As Krashen's (1981) Input Hypothesis states, acquisition occurs when L2 learners receive comprehensible input ($i+1$), i representing language competence and $+1$ representing input above this level. Students need to be challenged, but only slightly beyond their levels. Therefore, educators must keep in mind that the Interaction Hypothesis' strategies, i.e., both the input and output, should not exceed the $+1$ needed to help language learners grow.

CONCLUSION

Considering Long's (1996) statement "[Interaction] facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (pp. 451-452) in juxtaposition with the three examples presented in this paper, it is clear how the interaction between the NS and NNS accomplished this.

First, in example one, the NS focused on or gave "selective attention" to the fact that he eats better because he does not eat so much prepackaged foods. The NNS could have then inferred from the NS's statement that prepackaged food is unhealthy, whether or not the NNS understood the word "prepackaged." In example two, the NS elaborated on his original answer by providing the NNS with an example: "We don't eat steak as much as we used to." The use of the example did two things: 1) It helped the NNS better understand the NS's point, and 2) it showed the NNS how examples may be used to bring about comprehension.

Lastly, we saw how the NS modified his input to connect to the NNS at the NNS's comprehension level. The NS and NNS accomplished comprehensible input/output because the NNS first requested clarification and the NS then provided clarification by recognizing the NNS level and avoided impeding comprehension through an explanation of nitrites by simply giving an example of a food that contains nitrites and a food he no longer eats. Therefore, in the three examples presented in this paper, we have seen how, in fact, it is very possible that clarification requests followed by elaboration and/or paraphrasing can bring about comprehensible input.

It is important, however, that educators consider both the Noticing Hypothesis and Input Hypothesis when incorporating clarification, elaboration, and/or paraphrasing in communicative activities. Though through such strategies learners have the opportunity to take control of their on learning and progress further, this can only occur if the elaboration and/or paraphrasing that follows the clarification request does not extend too far beyond the NNS's comprehension.

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