

Learning English Through Interaction in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract

It is generally accepted that classroom interaction is helpful for language learning. From my observation I have found that learners learn through interaction. Since Interaction is a broad term, I have focused a few elements of interaction. I have taken Long's (1991) psycholinguistic perspective as my theoretical framework. The important part of this theoretical framework is how the learners learn through negotiation of meaning. Many things are included in the negotiation of meaning (like confirmation check, clarification check, reformulation, recast, repetition, etc.), but I have limited my discussion and research focusing on repetition and recast. Through observation and students interview I collected data. In my research I have analyzed data and tried to find out answer of two questions. First one is how does recast help learners learning correct English? And the second one is how does repetition help learners learning speaking skills and noticing errors? Through these questions I have tried to find out how my learners learn English through repetition and recast in the classroom.

Keywords: Interaction, negotiation of meaning, recast, repetition

Introduction

Interaction is considered important word for the ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers. "In the era of communicative language teaching, interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication; it is what communication is all about (Brown, H.D. 1994)".

Some decades of research show that the learner can learn best way through interaction. CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) emphasis on interaction as people use language to negotiate meaning in various situations.

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Through interaction student can use all they have already learnt from classroom or from real life situations. I am interested to find out how interaction take place in the ESL classroom by active participation of the learners towards learning English. In this article I have tried to integrate relevant literature with some classroom observations in the UK.

1. Description of the Classroom

The classroom was well decorated with a white board, a notice board, a record player, a world map, a phonetics chart, a stand fan, a bin to put rubbish, a clock, a heater and a big window made of glass which helped enter light into the room. There were 17 chairs for the student placed like U shape and a desk for the teacher placed in the center. The room was well lit and everyone could comfortably see the white board. The teacher could easily reach the student for any help.

2. Description of the Learners

In my observation I found learner A & Learner B interesting. Learner A with 21 years old was very friendly, curious and interactive. I notice that he was trying to talk with teachers and other students. Learner B with 32 years old was also interactive, jolly and friendly. She could catch anything quickly and liked to talk with other students.

3. What is Interaction?

Wagner (1994: pp8) defines interaction as “reciprocal events that require at least two objects and two actions. Interaction occurs when these objects and events naturally influence one another” Therefore, interactions do not occur only from one side, there must be a mutual influence through giving and receiving messages in order to achieve communication.

3.1. What is Classroom Interaction?

Thurmond & Wambach (2004: pp4) states that:

The learner’s engagement with the course content, other learners, the instructor and the technological medium used in the course.

True interactions with other learners, the instructor and technology results in a reciprocal exchange of information. The exchange of information intended to enhance knowledge development in the learning environment.

From this quote we can understand that there are four types of interaction: learner-course content interaction, learner-learner interaction, learner-teacher interaction and learner-technology interaction. I have focused on this research learner-learner interaction and learner-teacher interaction.

3.2. Importance of Interaction

According to Long (1996: pp. 413) the most valuable way input is made comprehensible is through interactional adjustments. These are the attempts of learners and their conversation partners to overcome comprehension difficulties so that incomprehensible or partly comprehensible input becomes comprehensible through negotiating of meaning. So learner learns through negotiation of meaning.

4. What is Negotiation of Meaning?

Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) define negotiation of meaning as the verbal exchanges that occur when the speakers try to prevent the breakdown of the communication. Classroom Interaction involves two main aspects, which are negotiation of meaning and feedback. If these two elements are not available in the classroom, then we cannot speak of a successful learning through interaction.

Ellis and Foto (1999: p9) state that “Interaction contributes to acquisition through the provision of negative evidence and through opportunities for modified output.” So Interaction is important for meaning negotiation where the learners can receive feedback from their interlocutors. According to Long and Robinson’s Interaction hypothesis (1998), the conditions for second language acquisition are improved when learners negotiate meaning with other speakers.

5. Theory of Interaction

So far we have been informed three theories of interaction. Those are the Input Hypothesis of Krashen (1980), a psycholinguistic perspective of Long (1991) and a socio—cultural perspective of Lantolf (2000). I will analyze my data from psycholinguistic perspective.

6. How Does Recast Help Learners Learning Correct English?

6.1. What is Recast?

Lyster and Ranta (1997) define recast as a type of feedback in which the teacher implicitly reformulates student's error or provides correction without directly indicating that the utterance was incorrect. Nicholas et al (2001: pp732-733) elaborate that recasts are “utterances that repeat a learner’s incorrect utterance, making only the changes necessary to produce a correct utterance, without changing the meaning.” Recasts are considered to provide the linguistic data of both positive evidence (grammatical) and negative evidence (ungrammatical) at the same time. The following example of a recast is taken from my classroom observation. (Index 2, —2nd day)

T: What did he do in the evening?

S(A): He taked the book. [An erroneous utterance]

T: He took the book? [A recast]

S: Yes.

In this example, the recast informed the learner of both positive evidence (form ‘took’ is grammatical) and negative evidence (form ‘taked’ is ungrammatical). So learner noticed error and easily learnt correct English.

6.2. Analysis

During my observation I noticed learners A made mistakes in grammar and pronunciation, but the teacher made that correct through recast. For example learner A told that “I take this book yesterday,” Teacher said “I took this book yesterday” and he said “Yes” (journal 1). Learner A Instead of uttering subject--/sʌbdʒɪkt/ he was pronouncing soobject-/sʌbdʒɪkt/. So the teacher told him /sʌbdʒɪkt/.

Then he could understand that he had made mistakes, but the teacher did not tell him that he was pronouncing incorrectly (journal 3). Lyster (1998) finds that phonological errors like mispronunciation and grammatical errors such as tenses often make the teacher use the recast technique. However, the teacher seems to “negotiate the form” using elicitation, clarification request and repetition when a lexical error occurs. Sakai’s (2011:377-378) results suggests that recasts do facilitate L2 learners’ noticing of errors even when they did not notice their linguistic problems or errors at the moment of production

Learner B was told to give structure and example of the present perfect continuous tense. She wrote “I have working form morning.” Then the teacher said, “I have been working since morning.” I notice that she could not understand what the teacher said. I observed that she had made more than one mistake and even she had less idea about the grammar so she could not understand the teacher (journal 3). I observed that from long error correction she could not learn immediately. She told “Sorry! I could not understand” (Journal: 3). In this regard, Sheen’s (2006) study found that the number of changes are influential factors of learners identifying recasts. The fewer the numbers of changes, the better the participants could recall the recast. So it can be said that Learner with high-level of proficiency only can understand such type of recast. Scholars like Baleghizadeh & Abdi (2010) claim that recast has some advantages like facilitating the delivery of complex subject matter; the most outstanding disadvantage of it is its ambiguity, which may not help learners notice their mistakes.

Learner B was facing difficulty in writing the example of the present continuous tense. She wrote “students are go to school” Learner A told her “students are going to school.” Then Learner B said, “Yes, yes, students are going to school”(Journal 3). I found that through recast Learner B was learning from Learner A. Learner B was not sure at first, but when he (A) told her the correct form she (B) emphasized uttering “yes, yes” means she(B) had understood and could remember the correct form and structure of the tenses. I observed that recasts become effective when the learner clearly understands that. Learner (B) was noticing the form of the sentence not the content. In this regard Nicholas et al (2001, p. 720) states that, “recast is a reaction to the accuracy of the form, not the content, of the original utterance.”

There are different views about recast as a corrective feedback technique. According to Lyster (2002) recasts helps learners participate in lessons when the target forms are beyond their abilities. However, In L2 classrooms, many recasts can be ambiguous and therefore do not help learners to notice their mistakes. Leeman (2003) considers recast as “an effective corrective feedback technique because they are implicit, unobtrusive, and contingent on the learners’ intended meaning.” On the contrary, Truscott and Hsu,(2008) criticize it as ineffective, inefficient and useless.

7. How Does Repetition Help Learners Learning Speaking Skills and Notice Errors?

7.1. What is Repetition?

It is generally known that repetition in the classroom means the teacher repeats the student's error and changes intonation to draw student's attention to it. According to Skehan (1998:p33) “ In acquisitional terms, repetition in conversation can serve to consolidate what is being learned, Since the conversation may act as an unobtrusive but an effective scaffold for what is causing learning difficulty.” In the same way Lyster (1998:P 57) consider repetition “ as a means of fostering conceptual understanding.”

7.2. Analysis

During my observation I found that through repetition learners engaged in conversation, which helped them to be a good speaker and noticed errors. I noticed that learner A was taking about his hair style he(A) told, “I want to have my haircut. I don’t know to have my haircut is correct”. Teacher said “yes, to have my haircut is ok” (Journal: 4). So, the conversation was going on and there was no conversation breakdown. Some scholars consider repetition as a communicative tool. As Knutson (2010: p21) thinks that students use repetition to obtain clarification and express empathy. As a cognitive instrument and a form of private speech, repetition helped learners focus their attention and think of what to say next.

I knew that learner A could not speak more, but for the repetition he could continue conversation. As the teacher was helping him continue, he (A) did not feel bored. Learner A was telling about luck.

Teacher was asking, “do you believe in luck?” Learner A said, “I don’t believe in lucky” then the teacher said, “You don’t believe in luck” then he said “yes, I don’t believe in luck” I observed that learners were learning from the teachers’ repetition (Journal 4). Being a low fluency speaker he could continue the conversation. Repetition was helping him become a good speaker. According to Knutson (2010) pedagogically, repetition contributes to fluency and allows even low-fluency speakers to maintain face, and stay in the game.

Repetition can be useful for communicative purposes. Learner A was talking with Learner B. He(A) said “from my job yesterday I go back home,” Learner B said “you went back home.” He(A) replied, “Yes I went back home.” I noticed that through repetition he could continue speaking and learnt correct English (journal 4). Repetition was working as a helping hand for Learner A. In this regard DiCamilla and Anton (1997:p 617) demonstrate that “as two students worked together, they repeated each other’s ideas and phrases aloud in the foreign language. This repetition provided a kind of scaffolding, allowing them to hold in place and consider the meaning they had constructed up to that point.”

Learner A was talking about his friend. He told that his friend “goed market yesterday.” The teacher said “Do we say ‘goed?’” then he said “my friend went to market yesterday.” So learner A learnt past tense from repetition (journal 4). Researchers have suggested that oral feedback is one of the key beneficial aspects of interaction, which can promote learning. According to Mackey (2007: 30) “through interaction that involves feedback, the attention of the learners is paid to the form of errors and are pushed to create modification.”

8. Conclusion

From the above discussion I have found that through interaction that means through repetition and recast learners A & B learnt English and noticed their errors. Recast helped them know correct English and repetition helped them both learning speaking and noticing errors.

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Appendix

First Observation Journal

Date: Tuesday, February 28, 2012

Name and Location of the Institution: A Private Language School in Shepherd's Bush, London.

I. Description of the Classroom

The classroom was well decorated with a white board, a notice board (which was used to inform the student about upcoming events, including some motivational expression), a record player, a world map, a phonetics chart, a stand fan, a bin to put rubbish, a clock, a heater and a big window made of glass which helps enter light into the room. For the student there were 17 chairs that were placed like U shape and a desk of the teacher that was in the centre. The room was well lit and everyone could comfortably see the white board. The teacher could easily reach the student for any help.

II. The Lesson

The lesson began sharply at 8:30am. Total number of students in the class was 15. Among 15 students 11 students were present. Student were of various nationalities like 2 Japanese, 1 France, 1 Turkish, 1 Iraqi, 2 Thai, 3 Korean and 1 Colombian students. 5 of them were females and 6 were males. Break time of the class was 10:15am and at 11am the class ended. The lesson opened with vocabulary learning and then there was pair work on real life situation about the personal job experience focusing on interaction, conversation and analysis.

III. Observations

The majority of the students were present in the class. The environment of the class was very lively and enjoyable. Overall the environment of the class was favourable to the teaching environment. The student in the class sat comfortably in the chair. In the pair work when they were instructed to discuss their previous job experiences about their liking and disliking of the job, everyone was interacting actively. Every pair was helping each other to understand the lesson and correcting error like "form of tenses," using "s" or "es" at the end of the verb. As the topic was related to their experience they became interested to contribute more information about the job experience.

I was observing the learners specially two learners, learner A (male) and Learner B (female). Learner A was making mistakes in subject verb agreement and past form of the verb.

Teacher uttered the correct form and was helping learner A to understand the right grammar and to know the correct form of grammar and verb. Learner A was telling that “I take this book yesterday,” Teacher said “I took this book yesterday” and he said “oh sorry, I took this book yesterday.” I observed that learner A was learning from the interaction. From interaction he understood he was making mistakes, but the teacher did not tell her that he had made mistakes.

After group discussion, the individual group shared their own opinion to the whole class. It was very interesting to hear the personal experiences. Some experiences were very funny. So everyone in the class start laughing. I saw those students were engaged in good interaction with argument. As it was a broad topic, the student could expand it as much as they could. The topic was related to real life situation. So, natural information was coming from the student. The students were getting interest and engaged in interaction as a result the whole class become live. I observed that the students are trying their best to speak with other students. Though they were making mistakes, there was no breakdown of the conversation. I observed that the interaction was helping them speak spontaneously. I noticed that when they were talking with their friend they were interacting more lively. But when they shared ideas to the teacher or to the whole class they were not such spontaneous. I observed that in front of their friend they got more freedom and they could easily share ideas.

During this activity, everyone was talking, interacting, giving their opinion and arguing with others. I believe the reason of their interaction was that the topic was interesting and the students could easily relate it to their own experience.

IV. Planning for Next Observation

It is uncertain what I will observe in the next class. Since I have observed the class and most students were present I can say that except 3 or 4 students most of the students were interactive. Generally I want to focus on the whole class and then I want to narrow down my observation of the learner A and learner B since I found them interesting. After the class I talked with them. Learner A, who shared several things about his learning, was very friendly and curious. He was 21 years old. During the class I found him very interactive. He told me that during interaction he could not remember some grammatical rules like verbs and tense form. I saw that he was trying to talk with teachers and other students of the class. Learner B with 32 years old was also interactive. She made the class laugh. She could catch anything quickly and liked to talk with other students. Although I am not quite sure what my focus will be, I am aiming to focus on classroom interaction of the learners especially of these two Learners. I would like to find out how they learn through interaction.

Second Observation Journal

Date: Tuesday, March 6, 2012

Name and Location of the Institution: A Private Language School in Shepherd's Bush, London

I. The Lesson

The lesson began sharply at 8:30am. Among 15 students 13 students were present. In the class there were 6 Male students and 7 female students. Break time of the class was 10:15am and at 11am class ended. The lesson started with “How to use an article in a sentence.” Then there was a group discussion about “what are the physical and psychological differences between men and women” focusing on the interaction.

II. Observations

The lecture began with how to use an article in a sentence intended to teach grammar and speaking. In the pair work students were instructed to discuss why there were articles before the noun and why there were no articles before the noun. The teacher called some students and asked them to write how they use the article in their own language and told them to find out similarities and difference between English article and the articles used in their mother tongue. I found that student could easily learn the use of the article when the teacher asked them to find out the similarities and differences of the use of article between their mother tongue and English.

I noticed that students were engaged in good interaction with argument on the differences between men and women and every group was contributing to each other. I was observing my learners group. Luckily, I got my two learners in one group. Sometime I found learner A less interactive. He was facing difficulty making grammatically correct sentence. He could not deliver appropriate vocabulary, tense or grammar or sometime he could not pronounce the words. So the teacher helped him and was making his sentence correct. There was no conversation break down as Learner B was helping Learner A. I noticed that they were good friends. So I observed a good interaction between them, but at the beginning I could not find learner A such interactive when he was interacting with other learner of this class. I found that intimacy helped the student be more interactive. As the learner A and the learner B were close friend they were helping each other and they were enjoying the lesson. The topic of discussion was difference between men and women. But the learner A could not pronounce “men” correctly. So the learner B was helping him how to pronounce correctly.

After 2 or 3 time pronouncing the sentence learner A could pronounce the word correctly. I noticed that they were learning through interaction. As the topic was interesting they were talking spontaneously. I observed that the interaction was helping them become fluent in speaking. I also concentrate other groups who were talking with huge interest. Even they were arguing about various matters of men and women. Female students were arguing that “men are not responsible.” on the other hand male students were arguing that “female are so sensitive.” I noticed that any debatable topic gave the student opportunity to interact with the class.

Since the topic was related to the real life situation and the topic was too broad, everyone could take the opportunity to contribute in the interaction. Even the topic was very familiar to them so they could easily deliver the information to the group.

It was not an unknown topic or beyond their experience so easily they could contribute, interact and debate about the topic. In this discussion I found students were helping each other to continue the conversation and some time correcting others to make an error free sentence. So students were learning from the interaction.

III. Planning for Next Observation

Since I have observed the class and most students were present I can say that except 3 or 4 students most of the students were interacting especially my learners who were engaged in interaction. However, after observing other classes I will be able to find out more ideas about interaction, about my learners and the whole students of the class.

I am aiming to focus on interaction, and want to discover how these two learners learn from the interaction. I would like to find out similarities and differences in their learning strategies regarding their age and gender, and also find out how these things influence their interaction.

Third Observation Journal

Date: Tuesday, March 13, 2012

Name and Location of the Institution: A Private Language School in Shepherd's Bush, London.

I. The Lesson

The lesson began at 9am. Total number of students in the class was 15. Among 15 students 13 students were present. In the class there were 6 Male students and 7 female students. The lesson started with the task to write down tense form and giving examples of each tense.

II. Observations

The teacher instructed students to do some task on tenses. I was noticing my learner A who was doing the task together with the learner B. Learner B was facing difficulty in writing the example of the present continuous tense. She wrote present continuous tense "students are go to school" Learner A told her "students are going to school." Learner A said, "yes, yes, student are going to school." I found that through interaction learner B was learning from learner A. Learner B was not sure at first, but when learner A told her the correct form she emphasized uttering "yes, yes" means she had understood and could remember the correct form and structure of the tenses.

Learner A uttering wrong pronunciation. Instead of uttering subject--/sʌbdʒɪkt/ he was pronouncing soobject-/subject/ so the teacher told him /sʌbdʒɪkt/ then he could understand that he had made mistakes but the teacher did not tell him that he was pronouncing wrongly. He was instructed to write an example of present indefinite and present continuous tense on the board.

He wrote “She study English” teacher told “she studies English.” Then he told “sorry! She studies English.” He did not know the subject verb agreement of studies. But when teacher uttered the right word he learned it from the teacher. Then he was told to write an example of the present continuous tense. He wrote, “He studying English” the teacher said “yes, she is studying English.” I noticed that he understood the thing properly but the teacher did not tell him about the mistake he did.

Learner B was told to come to the board and wrote structures and examples of present indefinite and continuous tenses. She wrote “the student going to school” teacher said “The students are going to school” then she uttered , “o!,o!, The students are going to school. So hearing the teacher's sentence she could understand she was missing an auxiliary verb from the sentence. She was told to give structure and an example of the present perfect continuous tense. She wrote “I have working form morning. The teacher said, “I have been working since morning.” I notice that she could not understand what the teacher said. I observed that it was a long sentence and she had made more than one mistake even she had less idea about the grammar so she could not understand the teacher. I observed the student made more than one error so when the teacher tried to make error correction she could not understand or uttered the entire sentence.

So I observed that from long error correction they could not learn immediately. They faced difficulty to utter or to understand the long sentence. She told “Sorry! I cannot remember what you have told” Hearing such comment, all the students in the class burst out laughing. So I noticed that the student could not remember all the components of sentence though the teacher repeated the long sentence with correction.

From the observation I saw that my learners (A&B) learnt some grammatical rules and pronunciation. The teacher without telling or showing their error directly just uttered the correct word or form and from that utterance they could understand the error and could understand the form. So interaction helped them learning sentence correctly.

III. Planning for Next Observation

From my three observations I have got much data about how students learn through interaction. I want to observe the next class for more data on interaction and I want to find out how interaction helps them learn English. So far I have seen that learners are learning through interaction. In interaction there are many elements so I want to find out particular learning elements by which my learner's learn English. So I want to notice some other interesting points in my learners' conversation as I want to find out more elements from learner's interaction.

Fourth Observation Journal

Date: Wednesday, March 21, 2012

Name and Location of the Institution: A Private Language School in Shepherd's Bush, London.

I. The Lesson

The lesson began at 8:30am. Total number of students in the class was 15. Among 15 students 11 students were present. In the class there were 5 Male students and 6 female students. The lesson opened with a speaking task. The task started with the individual learner and after a while it consisted into pair work. The topic of the speaking task was about personality and luck.

II. Observations

The students came in pair to discuss the topic. I observed that student from same culture did not interact spontaneously. I saw that my learners A & B were talking spontaneously as they were from different cultural background. So I observed that in the same culture and same community learners didn't feel comfort.

I noticed that learner A was talking about his hair style he (A) told, "I want to have my haircut. I don't know to have my haircut is correct". Teacher said "yes, to have my haircut is ok". So, the conversation was going on and there was no conversation breakdown. I observed that he had learnt a special phrase from interaction.

The conversation was going on about own cultural belief in the same community. So students from different community were describing. Learner A was telling about luck. Teacher was asking, "do you believe in luck" Learner A said, "I don't believe in lucky" then the teacher said, "You don't believe in luck" then he said "yes, I don't believe in luck" I observe that learners was learning from the teacher's repetition. The teacher only repeated that sentence several times and the learner learnt that. When the learner A was telling his personality, he said "some time I feel pessimis". Then the teacher said "You feel pessimistic" then he said "yes, sometimes I feel pessimistic"

Learner B was talking about luck. She told that she believed in luck 50, 50. She said my "boyfriends don't believe in luck" then teacher with a smile said, "Your boyfriend doesn't believe in luck" the student with a smile said "yes my boyfriend" so I saw the student learnt singular and plural form from the repetition of the teacher. She was learning that where she would use 's' or 'es.' From the conversation she knew the use of 's' or 'es.'

Learner B was talking about luck. She was talking about her exam result. He said that "sometime we depend on luck for our /resolt/" then the teacher said "you depend on luck for your result /rɪzʌlt /." She said "yes I depend on luck for my result /rɪzʌlt /" so through the teacher's utterance she learnt correct pronunciation. I observed that she learnt from the teacher and then I notice she used the word "result" several times when she was talking with her fellow students.

Learner A was discussing with Learner B. He (A) said "from my job yesterday I go back home," Learner B said "you went back home." He (A) replied, "Yes I went back home."

I noticed that through the help of learner B he could continue speaking and learnt correct English. Learner B was like helping hand for learner B. It seemed to me without the help of learner B learner A could not continue his conversation. I notice that through interaction learner B was learning speaking skills.

Learner A was talking about his friend. He told that his friend “goed market yesterday.” The teacher said “Do we say ‘goed?’” then he said “my friend went to market yesterday.” So learner A learnt past tense from interaction. I observed that he learnt the correct form from teacher’s speech. At the beginning he overgeneralized the past participle form of verb “go, but teachers conversation helped him learning correct past participle form of verb.

Learner A was talking about his luck. He was talking about the changes in his life after coming to the UK. He told to his colleague “My life has changed” the teacher told him “your life has been changed, really” he told “yes” but I observe that he could not understand the teachers correction because he did not know about the passive form of the sentence. So he uttered only. He was asked about his mistake, but he could not give an answer. So I observed that if a student didn’t have prior knowledge about the grammatical rules or other rules they could not learn from the teachers or from their colleague’s utterances.