

FROM INPUT TO OUTPUT: THE IMPACT OF INTERACTION IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN A MANDARIN-SPEAKING ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the effect of interaction on ESL acquisition in a Mandarin-speaking environment in terms of comprehension, output confidence, and linguistic accuracy. Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals involving Mandarin-speaking ESL learners. The findings show that interactive learning environments significantly enhance comprehension by enabling learners to negotiate meaning and clarify complex linguistic forms. Besides, the regular activity of interactive tasks enhances learners' confidence and precision in complex language production. Scaffolding by the teacher and corrective feedback, especially through methods like recasting and elicitation, further fine-tune grammatical accuracy and pronunciation to overcome specific problems of Mandarin-speaking learners. The study emphasizes interaction as a necessary bridge between input and output, therefore offering practical insights for ESL instruction in linguistically distinct environments.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Interaction, Comprehensible Input, Pushed Output, Teacher Scaffolding, Corrective Feedback, Mandarin-Speaking Learners, ESL, Linguistic Accuracy, Language Proficiency

INTRODUCTION

Acquisition of language involves an assortment of exposure, incentive and engagement variables. It's important in second language acquisition (SLA) that we shift from passive receiving of language input to active producing of language output. That development is not linear but interconnected through input that is understandable, experience and the need for students to generate language. In interaction with each other, students are not only being exposed to novel linguistic forms but forced to absorb these forms more deeply.

In recent decades, researchers have emphasized the importance of communication in linguistic development. Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis focuses on comprehensible input – language a bit beyond the native level of the student – to stimulate natural language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). However, input alone is insufficient. Interaction and output, as Michael Long (1996) and Merrill Swain (1985) say, are also key in making passive knowledge active. Interaction lets the learners create meaning, get feedback and build linguistic skills in real time via interaction. Swain's Output Hypothesis also claims that the act of producing language entices students to identify linguistic holes and craft more accurate and elaborate forms of language.

In contexts where English is a second language, interaction becomes an important medium through which the gap between input and output is bridged. This is particularly the case for learners whose L1 is radically different from English, as in the case of Mandarin speakers. Mandarin and English belong to different language families—Sino-Tibetan and Germanic, respectively—each with unique phonological, syntactic, and morphological characteristics. Mandarin is a tonal, non-inflected language with a logographic writing system, while English is a non-tonal, inflected language with an alphabetic writing system. These fundamental differences pose quite a challenge for Mandarin-speaking learners, which can affect pronunciation, syntax, and the overall comprehension of English. This paper seeks to examine how interaction influences the acquisition of the target language, English, among Mandarin-speaking learners.

The given research has sought to bring to light how comprehensible input, interaction, and pushed output function in the ESL classroom setting to carry learners across the divide from being passive recipients of a language to being active communicators. This study also investigated how the use of interactive learning strategies may respond to specific linguistic and cultural challenges encountered by Mandarin-speaking learners to develop their English proficiency and improve their communicative competence. Based on the background, this study aims to investigate how interaction in an ESL classroom enhances the understanding of English among Mandarin-speaking learners, examines the ways interaction influences their confidence and accuracy in English output, and explores the impact of teacher scaffolding and corrective feedback during interaction on linguistic accuracy and pronunciation for Mandarin-speaking ESL learners.

METHOD

Qualitative design is selected for the present study to extend how interaction influences English language acquisition in a Mandarin-speaking setting. Indeed, a qualitative approach would delve into the subtle experiences and perceptions, along with learner behaviors occurring during natural interactions. The focus had thus placed attention in grasping how input, interaction, and output manifest themselves in an ESL classroom—and how these elements can result in the comprehension, confidence, and linguistic accuracy of learner performance.

The participants in this study were 5 Mandarin-speaking learners of English, aged 25 to 28, who had enrolled in an intermediate-level ESL program at a language center of a university in Taiwan. Using a snowball approach with purposive sampling, the sample chosen was meant to reflect variability in proficiency level and contact with interactive learning. All participants shared the L1-Mandarin background but differed in the extent of their contact with EFL outside of the class. This diversity allowed us to look deeply into how interaction influenced learners at different stages in their language proficiency.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a view to gaining insight into learners' perception of how interaction influenced their comprehension and production. The questions sought to elicit detailed responses from the respondents regarding experiences with peer discussions, teacher feedback, and interactive tasks. For example, one of the questions asked: "How does interacting with your peers help you understand difficult vocabulary or grammar?" and "How has your confidence in speaking English changed through group activities?". Interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis.

Qualitative data was analyzed by using the thematic analysis method. Analysis followed steps as below:

1. Data Familiarization: Transcripts of interviews, classroom observation notes and the reflective journals were read several times to gain familiarity with the emerging themes.
2. Coding: The data was coded in line with key concepts arising from the research questions which were comprehension through interaction, confidence in output, and teacher scaffolding.
3. Theme Development: Coded data were collated to bring out overarching themes which aligned with the research questions: (1) deeper understanding through interaction; (2) confidence in relation to accuracy of output and (3) teacher scaffolding and corrective feed.
4. Triangulation: Findings from interviews, observations, and journals were cross-referenced to ensure consistency and reliability. For instance, improvements in comprehension noted in the journals were corroborated by observed classroom interactions and interview responses. Informed consent was obtained from participants with regard to the purpose of the study, and all participants were assured of confidentiality. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' identities. The above extensive methodology ensured that data collection aligned with the research questions and allowed the in-depth exploration of how interaction impacts Mandarin-speaking learners' comprehension, output confidence, and linguistic accuracy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Interaction Fosters the Learning of English

These results show that this variable strongly supports better understanding of English among Mandarin speakers: in peer discussions and in interactive classroom activities, learners would often negotiate meaning, clarification of unknown vocabulary, and grammatical structure in context. For example, if they came across complicated idiomatic expressions like "break the ice", learning with interactive explanations where meanings in real-life situations made sense of the phrase became understandable. Reflective journals consistently showed that learners understood complex linguistic forms more effectively when these were

negotiated through interaction rather than by just listening. As one respondent wrote, "I had problems with long sentences during listening tasks, but working with colleagues helped me catch the meaning faster."

These findings are in line with previous research that pointed out the importance of interaction in enhancing comprehension among Mandarin-speaking ESL learners. Following Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996), learners demonstrated a better understanding of complex vocabulary and complicated grammatical structures through peer discussions and negotiation of meaning. This would appear to show that, in interactive learning environments, learners are able to actively process input, transforming passive exposure into deeper comprehension. In other words, for the Mandarin speaker, who has difficulty understanding the idiomatic expressions and syntactic differences, interaction provides context and disambiguates the input, making it more understandable. These findings support Krashen's (1985) emphasis on comprehensible input but go one step further in identifying the vital role of interaction in making such input accessible.

Interaction Grows Confident and Accuracy in output

Regular interactive activities, such as group presentations, role-plays, and debates, resulted in more complex and fluent language production by the learners. Initially, there was a little hesitation in speaking on the part of the participants, perhaps because of the fear of making mistakes; however, continual interaction helped in building confidence. One could notice a better level of fluency and greater syntactic variety among learners. For instance, in role-plays, learners moved from the simple sentences of early modules (e.g., "I want to go to the store") to more complicated structures (e.g., "If I had known the store was closing early, I would have gone sooner"). One participant said, "Speaking in front of others was difficult at first, but after practicing with my peers, now I feel more confident forming longer sentences." There was also a noticeable increase in self-corrections by learners, suggesting greater awareness of grammatical accuracy.

These results confirm Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985), where the subjects gained more confidence and precision in their spoken production, thanks to interactive activities. The learners, who were very hesitant at the beginning to speak for fear of making mistakes, grew gradually in confidence and were able to produce longer, more complex sentences. Notably, this growth took place during role-plays and group presentations, where learners shifted from using simple sentence structures to more complex forms of expression. The constant need to produce language in interactive settings encouraged learners to notice linguistic gaps and refine their language use. For Mandarin-speaking learners, whose L1 lacks inflectional morphology, this process was crucial in internalizing English grammar rules and improving fluency.

The Effect of Scaffolding and Corrective Feedback by the Teacher

It was clear from the classroom observations that teacher scaffolding and corrective feedback are crucial in fine-tuning learners' linguistic accuracy and pronunciation. Notably, when teachers used such stratagems as recasting—rephrasing what the learner says inaccurately—and elicitation, learners almost immediately produced target forms correctly. This includes instances where a learner has said something like "He go to school yesterday," and the teacher responded or recast with a positive form: "He went to school yesterday," followed by the learner repeating after her. Over time, participants internalized these corrections, leading to fewer grammatical errors. Pronunciation also improved with teachers providing focused feedback on problem sounds like /l/ and /r/, that are often difficult for Mandarin speakers to pronounce. A participant commented, "I now notice when I mispronounce things because my teacher often points it out during class discussions".

It also underlines the critical importance of scaffolding and corrective feedback by the teacher in fine-tuning linguistic accuracy and pronunciation of learners. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) identifies the social aspect as crucial in cognitive development, an angle brought out well in learner responses to interventions by teachers. The techniques used—recasting and elicitation—had the learners correct themselves and internalize grammatical rules. Such gains in pronunciation, particularly the discrimination of problem sounds /l/ and /r/, were attributed to specific feedback during the interactive sessions. The results point out the need for a teacher in an interactive learning environment, especially for learners whose L1 is tonal, as they are likely to experience phonological problems.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effect of interaction on the acquisition of English by Mandarin-speaking learners, in terms of three key aspects: comprehension, output confidence and accuracy, and the role of teacher scaffolding and corrective feedback. The results indicate that interaction is a strong means to promote SLA through the bridge between input and output, especially in a linguistically different environment.

This study confirms that interactive learning environments improve learners' comprehension of English significantly. Peer discussion and negotiation of meaning allow Mandarin-speaking learners to clarify complex vocabulary and grammatical structures that might have been otherwise incomprehensible from mere passive input. This supports Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996) that interaction facilitates the processing of input to make it comprehensible and more accessible to them. In the case of learners whose L1 does not possess the certain syntactic and idiomatic equivalents in English, interaction supplied necessary context and instantaneous explanation that resulted in deeper understanding and better retention of linguistic forms.

The results also suggest that interaction creates confidence and accuracy in

language production. While initially hesitant and prone to numerous errors, learners gradually developed the ability to produce more complex and grammatically accurate sentences through continuous engagement in interactive tasks. This progression aligns with Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985), which posits that producing language compels learners to notice linguistic gaps and refine their language use. The shift from simple to complex sentence structures and the increased use of self-correction observed during the study reflect the significant role of interaction in transforming passive knowledge into active language use.

The critical role of teacher scaffolding and corrective feedback was evident in improving learners' grammatical accuracy and pronunciation. Such techniques as recasting and elicitation helped learners internalize correct language forms and self-correct errors, supporting Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) that emphasizes the role of social support in cognitive development. Moreover, targeted pronunciation feedback addressed specific phonological challenges faced by Mandarin-speaking learners, such as the pronunciation of /l/ and /r/, which showed noticeable improvements in spoken English.

Interaction not only promoted linguistic growth but also aided learners in overcoming cultural obstacles to communication. The stress patterns, intonation, and idiomatic expressions of English proved particularly formidable for Mandarin speakers, whose L1 is a tonal language. Through interactive, culturally embedded practice, learners adjusted to such differences, developing their linguistic proficiency along with cultural understanding. Moreover, the supportive character of interactive environments diminished learners' anxiety, which, in turn, made them more willing to participate and take more linguistic risks, so essential for language acquisition.

In a nutshell, interaction has been shown to be important for the acquisition of English by Mandarin-speaking learners. By providing an overall understanding, building confidence in output, and fine-tuning linguistic accuracy through scaffolding and feedback, the interactive learning environment offers a holistic approach toward both linguistic and cultural challenges. Further studies could check how these findings generalize to other L1 backgrounds and provide deeper insights into the universal benefits of interaction in SLA contexts.

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