

INTERACTIVITY IN THE NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA: THE CASE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

Adaobi Nwando Udeze
Department of English Studies
University of Port Harcourt
Nigeria
&

Michael Alozie Nwala
Department of English Studies
University of Port Harcourt
Nigeria

Abstract

The interaction hypothesis states that the development of language proficiency is promoted by interaction and communication. It further states that the conditions for second language acquisition are greatly increased when learners negotiate for meaning which occurs when there is a breakdown in communication. This study demonstrates that interaction is not only needed for second language acquisition but that it also has an impact on students' satisfaction in their overall learning experience. For this study, a structured questionnaire was used for data collection and was administered to 131 distance learning students at the Yenagoa and Port Harcourt learning centres of the National Open University of Nigeria. The simple percentage ratio was used in the analysis of the data obtained. The findings of this study show that there is indeed a relationship between interaction and students' learning experience; hence, the study recommends that, since distance learning by its nature cannot accommodate more frequent contacts with facilitators, interaction among students should be promoted and incorporated as a vital part of the mode of language learning in the National Open University of Nigeria

Key words: Interactivity, NOUN, hypothesis, language acquisition and language learning

Introduction

The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is a tertiary institution in Nigeria that employs the distance instruction method. It was established because the capacity of the nation's tertiary institutions is insufficient to meet the increasing number of people seeking for admissions into the universities. It has become the nation's largest institution in terms of number of students (Jegede,

2009) and it has study centres spread throughout the country. Its mission statement is to provide functional, cost-effective, flexible learning, which add lifelong value to quality education for all who seek knowledge. In Okonkwo (2012), "National Open University of Nigeria's instructional system does not provide lectures to registered students in a normal classroom situation, but provides specialized study materials that are based on self-learning' (p. 223). This means that their language courses lack significant interaction which is 'a key determinant of student success rate' (Ambe - Uva, 2006). Interaction promotes community and connection in the course which creates support systems that facilitate learning. It provides learners a balance view on topics. On the other hand, the lack of interaction isolates students who procrastinate and eventually drop out.

Ariza and Hancock (2015) state that when distance second language course design and practice adhere to quality distance learning pedagogy and are driven by Second Language Acquisition theories and research, the subsequent courses can provide learners with opportunities to acquire other languages in more flexible and accessible settings than traditional classrooms and language labs. Furthermore, these theories provide us with information of how people acquire languages and how certain conditions, when put in place, promote effective learning of a second language.

Review of Literature

A number of works on language learning and theories of language learning abound in the literature, in this article, we review two theories of language learning, and Nwala (2015) and Isaac (2018) opinions of language learning. We begin with the theoretical framework.

Theoretical Frame work

Here, we adopt the Krashen's Input Hypothesis of language learning and that of Long's Interaction Hypothesis. We begin with the Krashen's Input Hypothesis.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis

The term 'acquisition' has been used by language theorists in the field of psychology and linguistics to distinguish between the 'nature' and 'nurture' processes. The principle of 'nature' holds that knowledge of language arises from the human predisposition to acquire language due to the presence of a 'built -in' device known as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), a naturally endowed

or inherited language mechanism, which is responsible for the manifestation of language. On the other hand, the nurture principle holds that all knowledge must come from experience, experience that comes with interacting with our environment through our reasoning or the use of our senses.

Krashen (2013) begins by making a distinction between language acquisition and language learning. He states that while language acquisition occurs subconsciously, language learning is a conscious process. The input hypothesis relates to acquisition, not to learning. According to the Input Hypothesis, we acquire structure not by focusing on structure but by understanding messages containing new structure. The Input Hypothesis also claims that we do not teach speaking directly, rather, through a simply provision of comprehensible inputs. Speech will come when the acquirer feels ready. This readiness state arrives at different times for different people. Also, early speech is typically not accurate; grammatical accuracy develops over time as the acquirer hears and understands more inputs. A third part of the Input Hypothesis is the claim that the "best" input should not be "grammatically sequenced," that is, it should not deliberately aim at $i + 1$ which is language acquirer level of competence plus the next immediate step along the development continuum.

Krashen (1985, p.3) claims that people acquire language faster by understanding target language inputs, that is, a little beyond their present level of competence. The foreign/second language teacher should always send meaningful messages, which are roughly tuned, and 'must' create opportunities for students to access $i+1$ structure to understand and express meaning. For instance, the teacher can lay more emphasis on listening and reading comprehension activities.

Specifically, the theory hypothesizes that if there is successful communication and the acquirers understands the message contained in the input, $i+1$ will automatically be provided in just the right quantities. Acquirers will receive comprehensible input containing structures just beyond them if they are in situations involving genuine communication, and these structures will be constantly provided and automatically reviewed.

According to the Input Hypothesis, if students can follow the general meaning of a discussion, $i + 1$ will be provided for them, different $i+ 1$ for different students. With natural comprehensible input, students need not worry about missing a class and thereby missing the topic taught forever. The topic may come up again and again, both in class discussion and in reading. Finally, there is no need to

worry about contextualizing a different structure of every unit because the topic itself is embedded in every lesson. The focus, at all times, is on helping students understand messages and not rules of grammar. In other words, input for acquisition need not focus only on $i + 1$, it only needs to contain it. Thus, $i + 1$ will be supplied, and naturally reviewed, when the acquirers obtain enough comprehensible input.

According to Krashen (1983), the Input Hypothesis similarly accounts for the success of immersion programmes and also helps explain why certain bilingual education models work well in teaching English and others do not. They work because they supply large amounts of comprehensible input via comprehensible subject matter teaching. He claims that such programmes often teach English more effectively than all-day sub-immersion programmes, even when pull-out ESL is included.

Krashen states that the goal of the formal instruction is to provide students with a sufficient base so that they can take advantage of the 'real world', and thus continue acquiring language. But it is not known, neither does the model speculate about how much exposure to optimal, comprehensible input is necessary for language learners to make that successful transition from the controlled and supportive environment of the classroom to the much more personal and disinterested environment of the outside world. This leads us to consider the Interaction Theory.

Long's Interaction Hypothesis

In the Interactionist theory, the acquisition of language is viewed as the result of an interaction between the learners' mental abilities (cognition) and the linguistic input, (Long, 1981). This model seems to combine both naturist and the nurturist ideas.

The interaction hypothesis states that the development of language proficiency is promoted by interaction and communication. The hypothesis agrees with the need for comprehensible input but adds that the effectiveness of comprehensible input is greatly increased when learners negotiate for meaning which occurs when there is a breakdown in communication which the interlocutors attempt to overcome. In this situation, one of the participants will say something that the other does not understand which will lead to the use of various communicative strategies to help the interaction progress. By so doing, the learners receive feedback from their production and on the grammar that they have not

mastered. This process even leads to more inputs from the participants in that exchange than they would otherwise. But more importantly, interactions show the learners the difference between their knowledge of the target language and what they actually hear, which makes them to pay even more attention to the part of the target language that they are not aware of.

Therefore, according to this theory, the conditions for acquisition are especially good when interacting in the second language; specifically, conditions are good when a breakdown in communication occurs and learners must negotiate for meaning. The modifications to speech arising from interactions like this help make input more comprehensible, provide feedback to the learner, and push learners to modify their speech (Long, 1996).

Language Learning

Language, either acquisition or learning is a process through which the acquirer or learner masters a habit. It is a linguistic and biological habit formation process, which involves knowledge and use of speech. Language learning unlike acquisition is a conscious activity or action which involves a formal or semi-formal setting, with well-defined methods and processes According to Nwala (2015), language learning generally involves second or foreign languages, which means the learners must have acquired a first language and must have come of adult age. The exercise according to him is usually formal and guided.

In a related opinion, Isaac (2018) submits that language learning involves a second language learner (an older person) who must have had an L1 or first language or mother tongue. Like Nwala, Isaac admits that the learning exercise is usually conscious and in a formal context, with the teacher or facilitator acting as the main agent of exposure to tame the learner systematically to attend the desired level of proficiency. Because the exercise is formal and guided, Isaac notes, *Practice, reinforcement* and *mediation* as three basic necessary conditions that promote effective learning.

From the foregoing, it is crystal that language learning is different from language acquisition even though there are some common overlaps. The NOUN students are basically Nigerians who have acquired their various L1 or mother tongues and are therefore learning or using the English Language as their second language. The learning method used in this institution is programmed, well-

defined and guided no matter the level of contact and interaction between the students and their facilitators or their facilitating modules.

3.0 Methods

The paper implored the quantitative research design. Using it, the data got from the questionnaire administered to 131 distance learning students at the Yenagoa and Port Harcourt learning centres of the National Open University of Nigeria were analysed, in tables. Two research questions were used, while a simple percentage ratio was used to interpret the responses.

4.0 Analysis

Here, we present and analyse the responses got from the research population. The corresponding questions from each of the broad research questions are put in tables, named tables1-3. We begin with the research question 1.

Research question 1: To what degree are language learners at NOUN satisfied with their learning experience?

Table 1: What can you say about your overall learning experience at NOUN ?

Learning Experience Ratings	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Poor	70	53.4
Satisfactory	24	18.3
Good	22	16.8
Very good	13	9.9
Excellent	2	1.5
Total	131	99.9 (approx. 100%)

In table 1, 53.4% of the respondents rated their overall learning experience at NOUN as poor, 18.3% of the respondents rated their experience as satisfactory, 16.8% of the respondents said it is good, 9.9% of the respondents found it very good while 1.5% of the respondents rated their experience as excellent.

Table 2: I would like to have more frequent contact with my facilitator?

Response options	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	63	48.1
Agree	52	39.7

Disagree	10	7.6
Strongly disagree	6	4.6
Total	131	100

In table 2, 48.1% of the respondents strongly agreed to have more frequent contact with their facilitators; 39.7% of the respondents simply agreed to the question. 10 respondents which represent 7.6 disagreed to have frequent contact with their facilitator, while 6 respondents which represent 4.6 strongly disagreed to have frequent contact with their facilitator.

Research question 2 : To what degree does interaction with facilitators affect students learning experience

Table 3: Relationship between interaction with facilitators and students’ learning experience

Test question	SA	A	D	SD	TOTAL
1	26	86	11	8	131
2	39	61	22	9	131
3	58	49	14	10	131
4	40	70	12	9	131
5	69	39	12	11	131
6	53	54	15	9	131
TOTAL	285	359	86	56	786

Discussion of findings

We investigated issues of interaction and, more specifically, the degree of interaction with facilitators, the adequacy of such interaction and the learners’ desire for more frequent contact with their instructors. Almost 50% of the respondents describe their degree of interaction as lacking with another 24% as moderate. This is to be expected in distance learning programmes as they, by their very nature, lack significant face-to-face time between facilitators and their students. Again, a total of 51.4% of the respondents were of the opinion that their level of contact with their facilitator was not adequate with another 87.6% expressing their desire for more frequent contact with their facilitators. These results are not surprising since interaction creates a rich feeling of community and banishes isolation. The facilitator is also key in giving feedback with which

the learner measures his/her progress. He provides guidance and enables the learner recall previous information. He serves as the most important source of input in the language class because his assessment of their performance serves as the standard yardstick for measuring their progress.

Table 1 presents the overall learning experience ratings. Over 50% of the respondents rated their learning experience at the institution as poor. From the results obtained in table 1, we may infer that this could be attributed to their limited level of interaction with their facilitators with most of them expressing their desire for more of such interaction. Since this cannot be obtained due to the nature of distance learning programs, it has led to students' dissatisfaction.

In assessing the degree to which interaction with the facilitator affects students' learning experience, we had to determine if a relationship did exist in the first place between interaction with the facilitator and students' learning experience. To do this, several test questions were asked (see questions 1 to 6 of section B in appendix I) to determine the benefits of the facilitator in the language class. The respondents were tested for feedback, assessment, guidance, recall of previous information, community experience and motivation. At the end, it was discovered that there was indeed a significant relationship between interaction with facilitators and students' learning experience. What this proves is that the lack of or very limited interaction between the students and their facilitators have led to dissatisfaction with their overall learning experience.

However, since interaction is a vital part of the language learning process, we recommend that interaction at other levels should be promoted. For instance, interaction among students should be promoted and incorporated as a vital part of the mode of language learning in NOUN since it is well-known that students do not only learn from their teachers but they also learn from each other.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined Krashen's input hypothesis and Long's interaction hypothesis from the examination of these theories, it has been discovered that interaction plays a vital role in the acquisition of the target language both at the input and output stages. When there is little or no interaction between learners and their facilitators or among students, the students' learning experience and overall satisfaction diminishes. Therefore, for second language learning to be successful in distance learning programmes, the interactive aspects of learning must be promoted. Unlike the traditional

classroom settings with face-to-face courses, the distance learning course design should be tailored to promote interaction especially among learners which is vital for feedback and serves as a measure of the learner's progress.

References

- Ambe-Uva, T. N. (2006). *Interactivity in distance education: The national open university (NOUN) experience*. Online Submission
- Ariza, E. N. & Hancock, S. (2003). Second language acquisition theories as a framework for creating distance learning courses. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*. 4(2)
- Isaac, T. (2018). *Applied linguistics: Teaching English as a second language*. Port Harcourt: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing
- Jegede, O. J. (2009). The beginning of a new dawn for education in Nigeria. *Convocation speech delivered at National Open University of Nigeria's 1st Convocation Ceremony*
- Krashen, S. D. (1983). Second language acquisition theory and the preparation of teachers: Toward a rationale. *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics*, 255-263.
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. Addison-Wesley: Longman Ltd.
- Krashen, S. (2013). *The case for non-targeted, comprehensible input*. *Journal of Bilingual Education Research and Instruction*, 15(1), 102-110.
- Long, M. H. (1981). Input, interaction, and second-language acquisition. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 379(1), 259-278.
- Long, M. H. (1996). *The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition*. In W. Ritchie and T. Bhatia (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 413-468).
- Nwala, M. A. (2015). *Introduction to Linguistics: A first course.(rev)*. Port Harcourt: Obisco Nig. Enterprises

Okonkwo, C. A. (2012). A needs assessment of ODL educates to determine their effective use of open educational resources. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*.13(4) 293-312.

APPENDIX I

AN EVALUATION OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMMES IN NIGERIA QUESTIONNAIRE

The researcher is conducting a study in order to improve the language learning programme. Gathering information from the students is a vital part of this process. Please complete the following questions to reflect your opinions as accurately as possible and to answer factual questions to the best of your knowledge. Your information will be kept strictly confidential. Thank you.

SECTION A

1. Level of study:
2. Age: 21 – 30 yrs () 31 – 40 yrs () 41 – 50 yrs () 51 – 60 yrs () 61 yrs and above ()
3. Gender: Female () Male ()

SECTION B

Research Questions

1. To what degree are language learners at NOUN satisfied with their learning experience
 - a. What can you say about your overall learning experience at NOUN ?
 - b. I would like to have more frequent contact with my facilitator
2. To what degree does interaction with facilitators affect students language learning experience?

For the following questions, please tick the number that best reflects your opinion in the answer column to the left of the question.

(SA = strongly agree, A = agree, D = disagree, and SD = strongly disagree)

S/N	QUESTIONS	SA	A	D	SD
1.	The level of contact with my facilitator is adequate.				
2.	I received feedback faster in my tutorials.				
3.	My performance was easily assessed by the facilitators in the class.				
4.	I received better guidance by the tutor in the class.				
5.	My tutor enables me to recall previous information.				
6.	The instructor created a feeling of community in the class.				