

**The Nature of Interaction in the Language Classroom:
Towards Organic Collaboration Among Participants**

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Abstract

“Interaction” has long been a core of English language teaching (ELT), and it has been also treated as one of the key terms in second language acquisition (SLA) studies. This trend seems to be reinforced in response to the recent needs to develop the 21st century skills (e.g., Griffin, McGaw & Care, 2012) and the corresponding attention paid to active learning (e.g., Bonwell & Eison, 1991) in general education. While understanding the significant role of interaction, both researchers and practitioners in ELT have also been aware that every sort of interaction does not necessarily lead to learning opportunities for the second or foreign language (L2) development. In this regard, previous SLA studies have investigated the variables that are likely to contribute to the success of learner–learner interaction (i.e., peer interaction) such as tasks, peer dynamics, and pedagogical interventions. Few studies, however, have thus far provided us with a holistic framework of the nature of classroom interaction due to (a) the lack of attention paid to invisible aspects of interaction, such as participants’ values regarding working together in the language classroom, and (b) the consistently overlooked role of the teacher in peer interaction. In order to realize organic collaboration among participants, we need to obtain a better understanding of the nature of interaction among all class participants. This dissertation therefore attempts to provide a holistic picture of the interactive language classroom by integrating both visible and invisible perspectives of students, teachers, and the class as a whole. In addition, as described below, positioning *cooperative* and *collaborative* engagement at the center of its theoretical foundation, an extensive literature review and a series of empirical and exploratory studies are conducted.

The main research question (RQ) addressed in this dissertation is as follows:

RQ. What is the nature of interaction among all class participants in the language classroom?

In order to explore the research question above, the present research formulated the following three sub-questions (Sub-Qs):

Sub-Q1. How do learners interact with each other in cooperative and collaborative tasks?

Sub-Q2. How do teachers view learners' interaction from cooperative and collaborative learning perspectives?

Sub-Q3. How do learners and teachers interact in the collaborative language classroom?

The typical smallest unit of interaction in the language classroom would be pair work (i.e., interaction between two learners). Starting with the exploration of this small unit, the first study describes the nature of learner–learner interaction (Sub-Q1). The next study then extends the unit to small groups and enriches the concept of learner–learner interaction from teachers' perspective (Sub-Q2). Then, the final study explores the possibility of learner–teacher interaction, which might have the most significant influence on shaping the classroom interaction (Sub-Q3). These interactions among class participants are investigated from both visible (e.g., utterances between pairs) and invisible (e.g., belief on peer interaction) aspects.

This dissertation is composed of the following six chapters to address the three sub-questions outlined above. Chapter 1 provides an overview of interaction in ELT. The significance of research into interaction and the increased attention to interactive aspects of teaching in both language and general education are discussed. This will be followed by an outline of the purpose and scope of the present research based on a brief review of previous studies. Chapter 2 reviews the extensive literature on interaction in four main areas: (a) SLA theories behind peer interaction, such as cognitive-interactionist, sociocultural, and sociocognitive perspectives; (b) variables affecting peer interaction including tasks, pedagogical intervention, and peer dynamics; (c) a clarification of the confusing concepts of *cooperation*, *collaboration*, *cooperative learning (COL)*, and *collaborative learning (CLL)*; and (d) a holistic view of interaction in the language classroom including a discussion of the notions of *team* and *values*. One of the main contributions of Chapter 2 is the clarification of cooperative and collaborative concepts in ELT, which reveals the underlying philosophy of cooperation (and COL) to be the construction of a structured and harmonious relationship in a small group, achieved mainly by the division of labor, and the philosophy of collaboration (and CLL) to be a more dynamic, mutual, and synchronous interaction among the participants that could result in an unexpected process and product. Based on these theoretical backgrounds, the subsequent studies in the dissertation attempt to answer the aforementioned three sub-questions by exploring the nature of interaction from the viewpoints of learners (i.e., Sub-Q1 in Chapter 3), teachers (i.e., Sub-Q2 in Chapter 4), and the class as a whole (i.e., Sub-Q3 in Chapter 5).

Chapter 3 investigates the nature of learner–learner interaction in the language classroom. Focusing on the task as one of the most influential variables on the nature of

interaction, this study compares interaction in two types of learner–learner tasks: cooperative and collaborative writing. While the former is seen to assist learners’ equal contribution to the task through the division of labor, the latter encourages dynamic engagement in the task without the division of work. Six dyads of low-intermediate students (i.e., 12 students) participated in the study and completed both tasks in pairs, which was followed by an individual writing exercise in the subsequent week. The data were analyzed based on the process-product approach (e.g., Donato, 1994, Storch, 2002). The findings revealed that the collaborative task elicited more evidence of learners’ L2 development as well as conversational turns between peers. However, more negative evidence was also found in the collaborative task, which implies that collaborative tasks are more likely to both succeed and fail than cooperative ones. The results revealed the “double-edged sword” nature of collaboration, which has rarely been discussed in previous ELT literature. The study in Chapter 3 thus unveils the rich and complex nature of collaboration in learner–learner interaction, which also emphasizes the need to discuss learner–learner interaction in a more comprehensive manner, including psychological aspects such as belief on peer interaction.

Chapter 4 then shifts the focus and explores learner–learner interaction from the language teachers’ perspective. Four teachers of English at secondary school in Japan were interviewed about their reasons for, or beliefs behind, the use of small group activities that involve two or more students working together. The transcribed data were analyzed using the Steps for Coding and Theorization (SCAT) (Otani, 2008). The findings indicated that there were two main reasons for utilizing small group activities in the language classroom: (a) as a tool for classroom management and (b) as a necessary condition for language development. In addition, when asked to categorize

their practice as COL- or CLL-oriented, one of the teachers judged their practice to be COL-oriented while two of them answered CLL-oriented. What was curious about their judgment was that another teacher reported his shift from COL-oriented to CLL-oriented practice. This shift seemed to occur because he felt that cooperative style of teaching might prevent learners from interacting with each other in a more dynamic way in the classroom. The results indicate that teachers' philosophy behind utilizing small group activities was likely to differ and shift depending on their *sense of plausibility* (Prabhu, 1990), which is formed based on their knowledge and experiences. These findings revealed that the belief teachers bring into the classroom would affect the style of classroom learning and teaching, though few studies on learner–learner interaction have thus far discussed this issue. The next chapter therefore elucidates “class as a whole” interaction in the language classroom including teachers.

Chapter 5 discusses the nature of learner–teacher interaction in the language classroom. More specifically, the study in this chapter proposes and explores an innovative view of classroom interaction, which regards all class participants as “co-researchers” (e.g., Allwright, 2003; Hanks, 2017; Pinter, Mathew, & Smith, 2016) of their shared puzzle. One teacher and 39 students participated in the case study that was conducted in an EFL classroom at a university in Japan. The class was motivated to explore the use of Meaning-order Approach to Pedagogical Grammar (MAP Grammar) (Tajino, forthcoming), which was a new topic for all class participants at that time. This unfamiliarity in fact contributed to making the class into a “team.” All class participants including the teacher as well as his students collaboratively engaged in their shared puzzle (i.e., How can we make the best use of MAP grammar?). The evidence from reaction papers, classroom observations, and follow-up semi-structured interviews

suggested that (a) the participants mutually developed their understanding of the new grammar through collaborative interaction and that (b) this co-researching process had a positive influence on their engagement in language learning and teaching as active practitioners.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by synthesizing the aforementioned findings and by discussing tentative answers to the research questions. It first reviews the results obtained in the present studies, and then revisits the conventional model of dyadic interaction (Storch, 2002, 2013; Tan, Wigglesworth, & Storch, 2010). Based on the findings of these studies, the present research proposes a new variable to the conventional dyadic model named *shared values*, which is invisible and can be defined as “the degree of understanding the participants have in common regarding the benefits of working together.” The existence of this shared value can change the nature of classroom interaction not only among learners but also within the class as a whole including teachers. Theoretical and pedagogical implications as well as several limitations and suggestions for future research are stated. This chapter also provides a framework (i.e., from cooperation towards collaboration) for analyzing and utilizing interaction effectively in the language classroom.