

Chapter 5: Discourse aspects of interlanguage

The study of learner discourse in SLA has been informed by two rather different goals.

1. On the one hand there have been attempts to discover how L2 learners acquire the 'rules' of discourse that inform native-speaker language use. This work is analogous to the work on the acquisition of grammar (see Chapter 2) and is essentially descriptive in nature.
2. On the other hand, a number of researchers have sought to show how interaction shapes interlanguage development (i.e. how discourse influences the kinds of errors learners make and the developmental orders and sequences they pass through). This work is explanatory and will be our major concern here. First, however, we will briefly consider some of the descriptive work on learner discourse.

Acquiring discourse rules

There are rules or, at least, regularities in the ways in which native speakers hold conversations. In the United States, for example, a compliment usually calls for a response and failure to provide one can be considered a sociolinguistic error. Furthermore, in American English compliment responses are usually quite elaborate, involving some attempt on the part of the speaker to play down the compliment by making some unfavourable comment. For example:

A: I like your sweater.

B: It's so old. My sister bought it for me in Italy some time ago.

However, L2 learners behave differently. Sometimes they fail to respond to a compliment at all. At other times they produce bare responses (for example, 'Thank you').

The role of input and interaction in L2 acquisition

As we have already seen, the behaviourist view has been largely discredited. We will examine the mentalist position more fully later. For now, we will focus on the interactionist perspective.

One question that can be asked is whether the discourse in which learners participate is in any way different from the discourse native speakers engage in. If learner discourse can be shown to have special properties it is possible that these contribute to acquisition in some way. It does indeed have special properties. Just as caretakers modify the way they speak to children learning their L1, so do native speakers modify their speech when communicating with learners. These modifications are evident in both input and interaction. Input modifications have been investigated through the study of **foreigner talk**, the language that native speakers use when addressing non-native speakers. Two types of foreigner talk can be identified-ungrammatical and grammatical.

Ungrammatical foreigner talk is socially marked. It often implies a lack of respect on the part of the native speaker and can be resented by learners. Ungrammatical foreigner talk is characterized by the deletion of certain grammatical features such as copula be, modal verbs (for example, call and must) and articles,

Grammatical foreigner talk is the norm. Various types of modification of **baseline talk** (i.e. the kind of talk native speakers address to other native speakers) can be identified. **First**, grammatical foreigner talk is delivered at a slower pace. **Second**, the input is simplified. **Third**, grammatical foreigner talk is sometimes regularized. This involves the use of forms that are in some sense 'regular' or 'basic'. **Fourth**, foreigner talk sometimes consists of elaborated language use. This involves the lengthening of phrases and sentences in order to make the meaning clearer.

Type of talk Example Baseline talk You won't forget to buy the icecream on your way home, will you? Ungrammatical foreigner talk No forget buying ice-cream, eh?

Grammatical foreigner talk The ice-cream-You will not forget to buy it on your way home Get it when you are coming home. All right?

TABLE 5. I Examples of baseline and foreigner talk

Type of talk	Example
Baseline talk	You won't forget to buy the ice cream on your way home, will you?
Ungrammatical foreigner talk	No forget buying ice-cream,eh?
Grammatical foreigner talk	The ice-cream- You will not forget to buy it on your way home – Get it when you are coming home.All right?

Input modifications of these kinds originate in the person addressing a learner. We seem to know intuitively how to modify the way we talk to learners to make it easier for them to understand. However, there are times when learners still fail to understand. When this happens they have a choice. They can pretend they have understood. Research shows that learners sometimes do this. Alternatively, learners can signal that they have not understood, This results in interactional modifications as the participants in the discourse engage in the negotiation of meaning. The extract below is an example of an exchange between two learners. Izumi uses a confirmation check ('in him knee') to make sure she has understood Hiroko when he said 'in his knee'. In so doing she introduces an error of her own which leads Hiroko to correct it at the same time as he corrects his own original error 'on his knee'. As a result of this negotiation both learners end up correcting their own errors. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that modified interaction of this kind is common in learner discourse.

Hiroko: A man is uh. drinking c-coffee or tea with uh the saucer of the uh uh coffee set is uh in his uh knee.

Izumi: in him knee.

Hiroko: uh on his knee.

Izumi: yeah

Hiroko: on his knee

Izumi: so sorry. on his knee.

(from S. Gass and E. Varonis. 1994. 'Input, interaction and second language production.' Studies in Second Language Acquisition 16:283-302)

How do such input and interactional modifications contribute to L2 acquisition? There is still only limited empirical evidence that these modifications do assist interlanguage development. Arguments have been proposed, however, that suggest they do.

According to **Stephen Krashen's** input hypothesis, L2 acquisition takes place when a learner understands input that contains grammatical forms that are at 'i + 1' (i.e. are a little more advanced than the current state of the learner's interlanguage). Krashen suggests that the right level of input is attained automatically when interlocutors succeed in making themselves understood in communication. Success is achieved by using the situational context to make messages clear and through the kinds of input modifications found in foreigner talk. According to Krashen, then, L2 acquisition depends on comprehensible input.

Michael Long's interaction hypothesis also emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input but claims that it is most effective when it is modified through the negotiation of meaning. It is not difficult to see why. As the interaction between Hiroko and Izumi illustrates, learners often receive negative evidence. That is, their interlocutors indicate when they have not understood and, in the course of so doing, may model the correct target-language forms. Thus, learners receive input relevant to aspects of grammar that they have not yet fully mastered. There is another way in which interaction may assist learners. When learners have the chance to clarify-something that has been said they are giving themselves more time to process the input, which may help them not just to comprehend but also to acquire new L2 forms. However, sometimes interaction can overload learners with input, as when a speaker provides lengthy paraphrases or long definitions of unknown words. In such cases, acquisition may be impeded rather than facilitated. The relationship between modified interaction and L2 acquisition is clearly a complex one.

Another perspective on the relationship between discourse and L2 acquisition is provided by **Evelyn Hatch**. Hatch emphasizes the collaborative endeavours of the learners and their interlocutors in constructing discourse and suggests that syntactic structures can grow out of the process of building discourse. One way in which this can occur is through scaffolding. Learners use the discourse to help them produce utterances that they would not be able to produce on their own, as in this example from Wagner Gough:

Mark: Come here.

Homer: No come here.

Homer, the L2 learner, produces a negative utterance with the common 'no + verb' pattern by repeating his interlocutor's utterance and attaching the negator no at the front. Scaffolding of this type is common in the early stages of L2 acquisition and may account for some of the early transitional structures that have been observed in interlanguage.

Other SLA theorists have drawn on the theories of **L.S. Vygotsky**, a Russian psychologist, to explain how interaction serves as the bedrock of acquisition. The two key constructs in what is known as 'activity theory', based on Vygotsky's ideas, are 'motive' and 'internalization'.

Motive: concerns the active way in which individuals define the goals of an activity for themselves by deciding what to attend to and what not to attend to.

Internalization : concerns how a novice comes to solve a problem with the assistance of an 'expert', who provides 'scaffolding', and then internalizes the solution.

In this respect, the notion of the zone of proximal development is important. Vygotsky argues that children learn through interpersonal activity, such as play with adults, whereby they form concepts that would be beyond them if they were acting alone. In other words, zones of proximal development are created through interaction with more knowledgeable others. Subsequently, the child learns how to control a concept without the assistance of others. Seen this way, development manifests itself first in social interaction and only later inside the learner. According to activity theory, socially constructed L2 knowledge is a necessary condition for interlanguage development.

The negotiation of meaning illustrated in the exchange between Hiroko and Izumi and the discourse scaffolding which Hatch and others have observed can both be interpreted as evidence of the applicability of Vygotsky's ideas about cognitive development in children to L2 acquisition.

The role of output in L2 acquisition

So far we have concentrated on the roles of input and interaction in L2 acquisition, but we also need to consider whether output plays any part in interlanguage development. After all, discourse supplies learners with the opportunity to produce language as well as hear it. Here we find conflicting opinions. **Krashen** argues that 'speaking is the result of acquisition not its cause'. He claims that the only way learners can learn from their output is by treating it as auto-input. In effect, Krashen is refuting the cherished belief of many teachers that languages are learned by practising them. In contrast, **Merrill Swain** has argued that comprehensible output also plays a part in L2 acquisition. She suggests a number of specific ways in which learners can learn from their own output. Output can serve a, consciousness-raising function by helping learners to notice gaps in their interlanguages. That is, by trying to speak or write in the L2 they realize that they lack the grammatical knowledge of some feature that is important for what they want to say. Second, output helps learners to test hypotheses. They can tryout a rule and see whether it leads to successful communication or whether it elicits negative feedback. Third, learners sometimes talk about their own output, identifying problems with it and discussing ways in which they can be put right.