

# Language Learning through Interaction: Issues in Second Language Acquisition

**Karma Tshering**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17102/bjrd.rub.10.2.001>

## **Abstract**

This study was done to investigate how children acquire and learn languages as they grow mentally and physically. The theories of second language acquisition state that the dominating factor affecting second language acquisition are motivation, cognitive style, sociocultural, and other linguistic factors. The Behaviourist Theory of Language acquisition states that children learn language through motivation while the Cognitivist theory claims that language develops through the concepts of memory and time. Likewise, the Innatists claim that children are born with an innate quality of universal grammar to acquire language automatically as they grow. The socioculturalists claim that language acquisition and learning occurs through social interaction without having required to force them to learn a language. The paper found that “input” factor has improved and progressed the linguistic competence of the learners which is seen in Bhutanese children being able to understand more than two languages like Nepali and Hindi. Most of the Bhutanese children understand the above two languages without having attended any formal classes but all learned through the “Input” factors of exposure to television and contacts. The findings of this paper indicated that conversational interaction in second language learning had enhanced the language development of children at a young age.

**Keywords-** *innatist, cognitivist, socioculturalist, Bhutan, communication.*

## **Introduction**

Different theoretical perspectives are surrounding second language acquisition and second language learning- the behaviorist, innatist, cognitivist, and socioculturalist, and interactionist theory. The **behaviorist** theory hypothesized that children would learn through imitation of the language produced by those around them in their environment. It assumes that children would continue to imitate and practice sounds and patterns of language until they formed habits of correct language use.

The **innatist** focuses on the innate abilities of a child and environments. Chomsky argued that children are biologically programmed for language and that

language develops in a child similar to the development of other biological functions. Children are born with a specific innate ability to discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system based on the samples of a natural language they are exposed to.

The **cognitivist** focused on the interplay between the innate learning ability of children and the environment in which they develop. They hypothesize that what children need to know is essentially available in the language they are exposed to as they hear it used in thousands of hours of interactions with the people and objects around them. **The sociocultural** theory focuses on learning occurring through social interaction.

In the following, this paper discusses more on the interactionist view of language learning, "Learning through interaction" from the perspectives of Bhutanese Children. The main discussion in this essay is to show the differences between a child interacting in English and a child interacting in their first language outside the classroom or at home.

## Literature Review

### *Interaction - the key to Second Language Learning*

The interactionist view of language learning states that language acquisition is the result of an interaction between the learner's mental abilities and the linguistic environment. The interaction approach accounts learning through input (exposure to language), production of language (output), and feedback that comes as a result of the interaction (Gass and Selinker, 2003, pg.260). Lightbown and Spada (2011, pg.30) presented that whatever children need to know is essentially available to them in the language they are exposed to as they hear it used in thousands of hours of interactions with the people and objects around them. Philp, Oliver, and Mackey (2008, pg.152) suggest that taking part in interaction with peers and adults could facilitate second language development, increase fluency and overcome communication obstacles by repetitions, confirmation checks, clarification requests, etc. Krashen (2002, pg.5) also points out that children can advance to a higher level of knowledge and performance if they have a meaningful interaction in the target language.

Gass and Selinker (2003, pg.294) claim that conversational interaction in a second language forms the basis for the development of language rather than being only a forum for the practice of specific language features (lexis, grammatical structures). The interaction between learners and their environment acts as a basic input of language learning and is regarded as a factor that structures the developmental process during language usage (Doughty and Long, (2003, pg.

47). Philp et al. (2008, pg.83) suggest that children can benefit linguistically from interaction with their peers, be their interlocutors native speakers or L2 learners themselves. Peer interaction can foster opportunities for negotiation, feedback, and modified output and offers a source of L2 use and development.

Philp et al. (2008, pg.8) state that children's interactions are often flavored with the frivolity, spontaneity, enjoyment, and experimentation of language play and lead to advancement in language learning. Krashen (2002) explains the importance of interaction and claims that learners will acquire language when they are given the appropriate or comprehensible input. Comprehensible input is that input that is slightly beyond the current level of competence of the language learner. If 'i' is the language learner's current level of competence in the foreign language, then  $i + 1$  is just a step beyond that level (words, grammatical forms, aspects of pronunciation). Therefore, if the goal is to assist the language learner progress in their task, it is essential to provide the student/learner with comprehensible input [ $i + 1$ ]. Comprehensible input is most effective when it is modified through the negotiation of meaning and when learners have greater opportunities to interact with adults and native-speaking peers. It is claimed that the presence of native-speaking peers of the target language would enhance greater social context where child recapitulates the L2 rules and contradictorily, no language transfers in absence of native-speaking peers of the target language.

Lightbown and Spada (2011, pg.30) argues that language develops primarily from social interaction and children can advance to a higher level of knowledge and performance in a supportive interactive environment. It is claimed that for the learner to communicate, they must learn the language, and to learn it they must interact. As such, interaction plays a paramount role in L2 acquisition and it takes place in a collaborative social interaction when learners are accessible to comprehensible input and modifications. Lightbown and Spada (2011, pg.53) states that modified interaction is a necessary mechanism for making language comprehensible with corrective feedback during the interaction. It is claimed that what learners need is not necessarily a simplification of the linguistic forms but rather an opportunity to interact with other speakers, working together to reach mutual comprehension. They must negotiate for meaning when communication is difficult and this negotiation is seen as the opportunity for language development.

## Methodology

This study was conducted to determine language acquisition and development in children through interactions and exposure to target language "English". A triangulation method was used in this study by administering an interview and observation research tools. A triangulation methods was used to confirm the

validity and reliability of the study (Golafshani, 2003). The interview records of the participants were analysed and transcribed using Speech Analyzer v.3.0.1.

## Data Collection

The data collection for this study was done by administering interview and observations. Two participants from a primary school in Bhutan were chosen randomly for this study who were learning English as a second language. The students chosen for this paper were from the same school studying in grade (class-4) having equal English learning hours in the school and the only difference between them was the exposure to the target language (English). The interviews were done in the school while observations were made both at home and the school. One of the participants use English at home for communication while the other participant use English only in school. The participants were interviewed using the following questions and they were asked to respond only in English.

1. At what time do you wake up in the morning?
2. Who wakes you up in the morning?
3. What do you do in the morning?
4. Which language do you speak at home?
5. What is your ambition? Why?

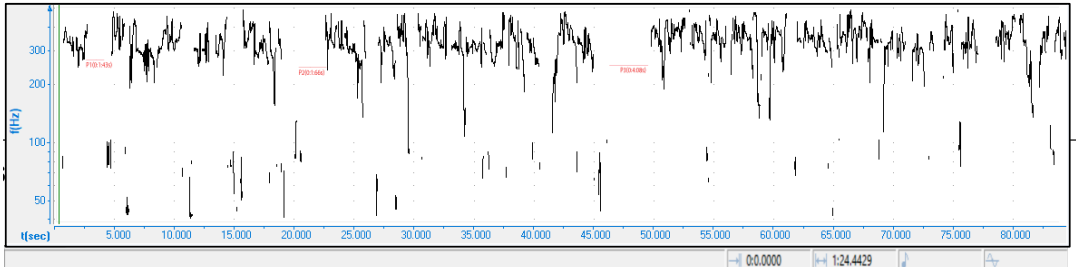
## Results and Discussion

Transcribing the responses of the two children- one having English interaction at home and one interacting in L1, the following differences were noted in their conversation. It was observed that Child-1 had more automaticity and spontaneity in making utterances compared to child 2. Similarly, it was observed that the Child-2 had difficulty in production of words and required more pauses to answer. This fact can be drawn from the responses transcribed as indicated with the use of fewer words to express what they were interviewed. Although they were asked the same interview questions, child-1 made more elaborations while communicating compared to Child-2. The transcription text is longer or more in the case of the Child-1 and comparatively less for Child-2. Therefore, the speech features of the two children indicated that interaction is very important for second language acquisition.

In line with the above statements, Child-1 stated that he interacts or speaks in English with siblings at home and this fact strongly supports the view that conversational interaction helps in language acquisition and development. It was observed that Child-1 had developed better language proficiency than Child-2 as he interacted in English outside the classroom while Child-2 does not have the same opportunity to use the target language at home. The difference in their language

structures and proficiency can be identified based on the characteristics of L2 learning through interaction (Lightbown and Spada, 2009).

### Child 1 (Male): Speech Analysis



Child-1: Auto Pitch (P1, P2, P3 = Pauses)

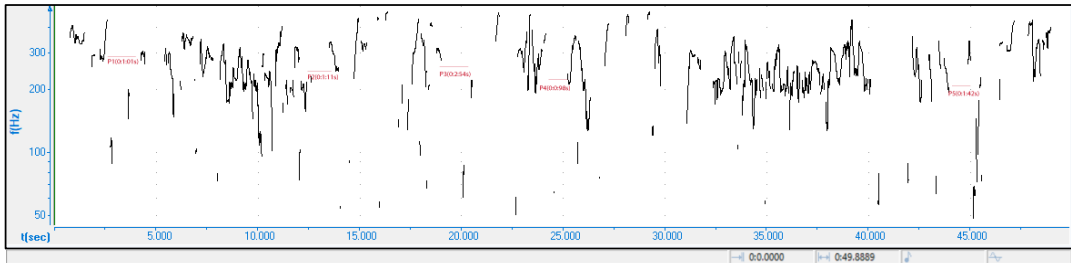
### Child-1: Transcription of speech.

In morning, I get up at six...(Pause-1: 0:1:43s) six o'clock and I - My mother used to wake me up and I - I wear my dress. I eat food, I wash my face and come to school... (Pause-2: 0:1:66s). wash my leg, wash my face, wash my hand and I go to study and speaking in English. If - at home, if I don't speak in English, my mother used to - my mother - used to - mm - my mother this I have to pay 5 rupees to my mother. And if I talk with my sister I have to pay 10 rupees .... (Pause-3: 0:4:08s). I want to - I want to become army officer because to serve my - first, I want to serve my parents because they are putting me in schools giving - buying me a dress and second I want to serve my country, like government they are giving free this table, chairs and blackboards like this no madam. A like this, I want to serve my countrys and I want to serve my King. He loves childrens very much and he gives moneys to the poor.

### Child-1: IPA transcription of speech.

ɪn 'mɔ:niŋ, aɪ ɡɛt ʌp æt sɪks...(Pause-1: 0:1:43s) sɪks ə'klɒk ænd aɪ - maɪ 'mlðə ju:zd tu: weɪk mi: ʌp ænd aɪ - aɪ weə maɪ drɛs. aɪ i:t fu:d, aɪ wɒʃ maɪ feɪs ænd kʌm tu: sku:l...(Pause-2: 0:1:66s). wɒʃ maɪ lɛɡ, wɒʃ maɪ feɪs, wɒʃ maɪ hænd ænd aɪ ɡəv tu: 'stʌdi ænd 'spi:kɪŋ ɪn 'ɪŋɡlɪʃ. ɪf - æt həʊm, ɪf aɪ dəʊnt spi:k ɪn 'ɪŋɡlɪʃ, maɪ 'mlðə ju:zd tu: - maɪ 'mlðə - ju:zd tu: - mm - maɪ 'mlðə ðɪs aɪ hæv tu: peɪ 5 ru:'pi:z tu: maɪ 'mlðə. ænd ɪf aɪ tɔ:k wɪð maɪ 'sɪstə aɪ hæv tu: peɪ 10 ru:'pi:z .... (Pause-3: 0:4:08s). aɪ wɒnt tu: - aɪ wɒnt tu: bɪ'kʌm 'ɑ:mi 'ɒfɪsə bɪ'kɔz tu: sɜ:v maɪ - fɜ:st, aɪ wɒnt tu: sɜ:v maɪ 'peərənts bɪ'kɔz ðeɪ ɑ: 'pʊtɪŋ mi: ɪn sku:lz 'ɡɪvɪŋ - 'baɪɪŋ mi: ə drɛs ænd 'sɛkənd aɪ wɒnt tu: sɜ:v maɪ 'kʌntri, laɪk 'ɡʌvnmənt ðeɪ ɑ: 'ɡɪvɪŋ fri: ðɪs 'teɪbl, tʃeəz ænd 'blækbo:dz laɪk ðɪs nəʊ 'mædəm. ə laɪk ðɪs, aɪ wɒnt tu: sɜ:v maɪ 'kʌntrɪz ænd aɪ wɒnt tu: sɜ:v maɪ kɪŋ. hi: ʌvz 'tʃɪldrənz 'veri mʌtʃ ænd hi: ɡɪvz 'mʌnɪz tu: ðə pʊə.

### Child 2 (Female): Speech Analysis



**Child-2: Auto Pitch (P1, P2, P3, P4,P5 = Pauses)**

#### Child-2: Transcription of speech.

In the morning I wake up ... (Pause-1: 0:1:01s) em 7.30 am. In the morning, my mothers wake up. I wake up and I... (Pause-2: 0:1:11s) wash my face. I wash my face and... (Pause-3: 0:2:54s) and I wear my ... (Pause-4: 0:0:98s) uniform. And eat - eat breakfast and go to school. I speak Shar chop and Dzongkha at home. I want to become a... (Pause-5: 0:1:42s ) teacher, because I like teach the student.

#### Child-2: IPA transcription of speech.

ɪn ðə 'mɔ:nɪŋ aɪ weɪk ʌp ... (Pause1:0:1:01s) ɛm 7.30 æm. ɪn ðə 'mɔ:nɪŋ, maɪ 'mʌðəz weɪk ʌp. aɪ weɪk ʌp ænd aɪ... (Pause-2: 0:1:11s) wɒʃ maɪ feɪs. aɪ wɒʃ maɪ feɪs ænd... (Pause-3: 0:2:54s) ænd aɪ weə maɪ ... (Pause-4: 0:0:98s) 'ju:nɪfɔ:m. ænd i:t - i:t 'brɛkfəst ænd ɡəʊ tu: sku:l. aɪ spi:k ʃɑ:rtʃɒp ænd dʒɒŋkʰɑ æt həʊm. aɪ wɒnt tu: bi'tʃɑ:m tɪ... (Pause-5: 0:1:42s) 'ti:tʃə, bi'kɒz aɪ laɪk ti:tʃ ðə 'stju:dənt.

**Table-1:** Summary of linguistic characteristics of the participants

Characteristics	Child 1:	Child 2:
	Interacts in English at home	Interacts in L1 at home
<b>Automaticity/ fluency</b>	Choosing words and pronouncing was more automatic and spontaneous	Less fluent and automatic to respond to questions (break in timing).
<b>Simple vocabulary</b>	Complex compared to child 2: uses conjunction 'if' and makes the connection to next sentences.	Simple

<b>Production</b>	Speech production was faster and spontaneous.	Speech production was slower and limited.
<b>Long pauses</b>	It was observed the child had paused three times as indicated in the auto pitch record.	It was observed that the child had paused five times as indicated in the auto pitch record.
<b>repetitions and elaborations</b>	The child gave more elaborations and observed more repetitions. Total time taken to answer was 1:24:4429 seconds.	The child could not make more elaborations and observed lesser repetitions in her speech. Total time taken to answer was 0:49:8889 seconds)

The summary table indicated that the interaction approach accounts for learning through the input (exposure to language), opportunity to use the language productively (output), and feedback that comes from interactions. The results showed that a child having more exposure to language at home (Child-1) could speak spontaneously, pronouncing the words correctly as compared to child-2 who only uses their first language at home. Further, the ability to use words in a sentence construction was more with child-1 marked with several repetitions which is an indication of language acquisition and learning through interaction. Pienemann (1998, pg.306) mentions that repeating of lexical items influences the overall rate of accuracy of language production and development. The connectionists mention that learners gradually build up their knowledge of the language through interaction and exposure to the thousands of instances of the linguistic features they eventually hear from their surroundings. This fact can be strongly supported with practical examples of people interacting daily for various purposes. For instance, a language learned in the classroom may not have communicative functions outside the classroom and the learners will have to learn the language of the community to interact outside the class. Likewise, a Bhutanese businessperson could gradually build up speaking Hindi with the Indian counterparts through interaction and vice versa. Most of the Indians living near Bhutan can fluently speak the Bhutanese language, which is learned through interaction and would follow the same trend anywhere around the world. Therefore, all the shreds of evidence and facts mentioned above justify the fact that interaction is necessary for successful language learning and acquisition. It is also clear from the spoken data of the two children how interaction has helped them in language acquisition.

## Conclusion

The Critical Period Hypothesis suggests that children who are not given access to language in infancy and early childhood will never acquire language if they have been deprived of contact with the language. Hence, interaction is crucial for children in their language learning and development as they grow up. Given the opportunities, children begin to interact and play with one another and it promotes positive social and emotional development. Through interaction, children learn to imitate, recast, and reproduce the sound of the language as they hear people speaking around them.

In conclusion, it was found that interaction is a recursive process in language learning and acquisition. The learner receives input from their interlocutors and the input becomes the intake of language when they process the information internally. The learner then produces the output which in turn becomes the input for the interlocutors and they provide feedback to that input. Concurrently, this process continues through conversation or communication and therefore enhances second language learning. It was observed that interaction provides an opportunity to use the target language in social interactions enhancing second language learning and development in children.

## References

- Doughty, C.J and Long, M.H. (2003). *The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Gass, S.M and Selinker, L. (2008). *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. (3 ed) Routledge: Routledge.
- Golafshani, N. (2003). *Understanding Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research*. The Qualitative Report , 597-606.
- Krashen, S.D. (2002). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. London: Pergamon Press Inc.
- Lightbown, P.M and Spada, N. (2009). *How Languages Are Learned*. (3rd ed) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pienemann, M. (1998). *Language Processing and Second Language Development-Processability Theory*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing Company.
- Philp.J, Oliver R, and Mackey A. (2008). *Second Language Acquisition and the Younger Learner*. Amsterdam: John Benjamin's Publishing Company.



## About the Author

**Karma Tshering** is an English Language teacher at Wangbama Central School in Thimphu. He has a B.Ed (Secondary) in English and Geography from Samtse College of Education and Master of Arts in English Language and Linguistics from University of Brunei Darussalam, Brunei. He had obtained a certificate in “English as a Foreign Language Assessment” from the University of Maryland, Baltimore Country