Interaction and Language Development: A Chameleon's Story

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ABSTRACT

This is a summary of the opening plenary, in the context of FAAPI's XLIX conference, which explores the vital role of interaction in language learning and development. It critiques prevailing ELT trends that overlook interaction, examines the impact of trends on learner outcomes, and emphasizes learner agency. Through Backward Design and clear learning objectives, it highlights the importance of awareness and noticing. Using metaphorical chameleon stories, it contrasts passive adaptation with meaningful, connected transformation in the ELT context, advocating for interaction as a co-constructed, empowering learning process.

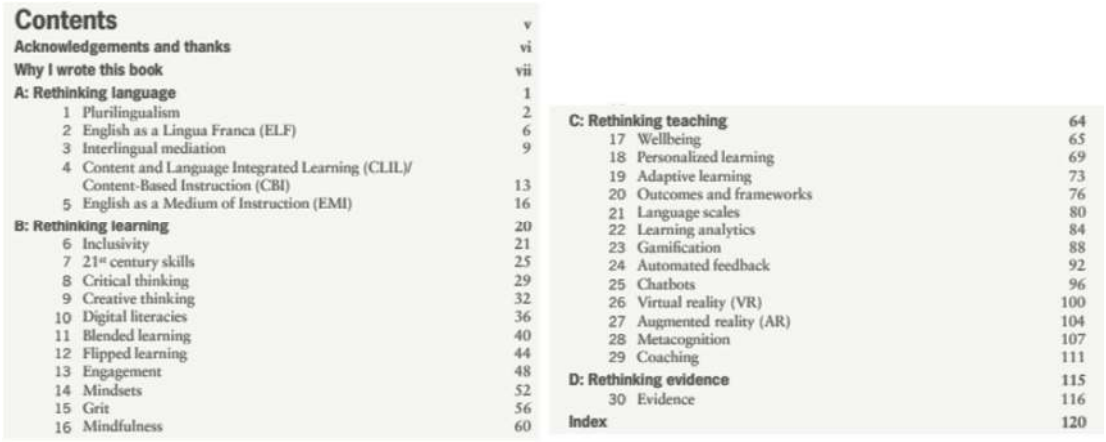
KEYWORDS: interaction, backward design, learner agency

INTRODUCTION

What exactly is interaction? Language is never unequivocal, and the term "interaction" can evoke various ideas. While different researchers offer varied definitions, a common thread unites them: interaction is a dynamic, two-way or multi-way process. It involves listening or reading, understanding, negotiating meaning (verbally or non-verbally, especially when communication breaks down), turn-taking, and responding appropriately. Ultimately, this process involves meaningful language use and results in the co-construction of meaning. There are instances of interaction in teaching materials and courseware, presented as an opportunity to put new language forms into practice. Let us now focus on interaction in the world of English language teaching (ELT).

INTERACTION AND TRENDS IN ELT

Given that interaction is widely considered essential for language development and is an activity students value, how is it represented in the current landscape of ELT? To explore this, two recent publications will be examined.
First, according to Kerr (2022), interaction does not appear to be a major topic of current interest, judging by the contents of his book, *30 Trends in ELT*.



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[Figure 1. Philip Kerr's 30 Trends in ELT Contents]

Second, Motteram & Dawson's (2025) research, an extensive desk-based review which analysed journals, articles, blog posts, and surveyed 1000 teachers, highlights major trends they have been able to identify. New contexts have emerged for English language learning, such as English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), which coexist with English as a subject in primary and secondary schools. Plurilingual practices such as translanguaging are present in many classrooms, which shows a shift away from native-speaker norms. The concept of literacy has been broadened to include digital and critical literacies among other forms. Digital technology and technology-related pedagogies are rapidly developing. The concept of inclusion and diversity is growing in importance, with more inclusive practices becoming visible in different contexts. 21st century skills now include, for instance, employability and global and intercultural citizenship. Finally, assessment for learning is gaining value in education.

The authors also noted a separate section in their report listing topics mentioned by teachers that were not considered new trends, such as adapting and designing context-appropriate resources, collaboration with parents, motivating students, learner-centred learning, the development of the four skills, career planning, and teacher language awareness and level. These teacher-mentioned topics are largely classroom-based and close to real educational settings. One must question why interaction is not included in either publication or in what teachers render necessary. One possible reason is

that it is not considered a trend, a concept addressed by all. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the concept of a trend itself.

Despite nuances in definitions, a constant in the explanations of a trend is change. A trend implies change. Interaction has been present in ELT classrooms for a long time, which can lead to the conclusion that it is not a trend since there has been little visible change in its presence. However, we must consider the extent to which any educational trend actually impacts learning or teacher practices. A trend does not necessarily translate into change, let alone genuine impact in the classroom.

A significant gap appears to exist between academics and specialists contributing to journals and practicing teachers. One should consider whether teachers have access to these publications and, if they do, to what extent the content resonates with their daily practices. Insights into actionable classroom practice are arguably more valuable than statistics about academic literature and perceptions of topics. It could be argued that interaction could have a different standing if research focused on classroom practices.

This concept of educational trends can be represented by the story *The Mixed-up Chameleon* (Carle, 1975). This chameleon once sees animals in a zoo and is amazed at what he sees. He starts wishing he was as elegant as a flamingo, as smart as a fox; he wished he could see things far away like a giraffe…. His wishes came true, and this was the result in the end:

[Figure 2. The Mixed-up Chameleon]

These changes did not become part of his identity or who he is. This represents trends in education: students and teachers are not truly transformed, thus there is little or no lasting impact.

INTERACTION AS EXPOSURE

Since interaction is not considered a trend, it must now be viewed as both an activity and a source of exposure. As indicated above, the key features of interaction are:

- Listening / reading
- Negotiation of meaning (especially after breakdowns)
- Turn-taking
- Responding
- Understanding
- Meaningful language use
- Co-construction of meaning

These features can be used to analyse the following classroom activities and check if they constitute instances of interaction. The first one is a teacher giving instructions for an activity and checking understanding. After going over each of the features, it can be concluded that this is an instance of interaction. The second situation is a teacher explaining a rule to learners, for instance, the rules for the Simple Present Tense. In such situations students listen and read from the board –should there be any relevant information that the teacher is writing; there may be responding if the teacher asks a question, but none of the other features are present. This one is not, therefore, an instance of interaction. The third situation is a teacher helping a learner understand why something is not correct, e.g. the option chosen in a multiple choice exercise. Again, all the features are checked. The fourth and last situation is a learner trying to explain something to another learner. Yet again, a true instance of interaction. In the first two situations of interaction, it is the teacher that initiates the interaction and carries the load of the conversation. In the last one, this is in charge of the learner. Depending on their linguistic level, students will resort to their mother tongue or the language of instruction at school. Yet, this instance of translanguaging does not modify the fact that this is interaction.

This analysis leads to a crucial conclusion: Interaction is not a language practice activity; it is an instance of exposure. It lies at the heart of learning, aligning with Vygotsky's social constructivism (1962), which posits that humans learn and language develops primarily through social interaction. Relating interaction to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD, 1978) highlights the key role of the teacher in the following scenarios which can be a source of interaction as exposure. For instance, teachers can draw attention to interaction instances in a lesson by referring students to successful interactions. The following are questions they can ask their learners: *How did the teacher know negotiation of meaning was necessary? What linguistic*

resources did the teacher use? How did the teacher respond when a student made a mistake? This includes discussing the impact of corrective feedback and recasting, focusing on student noticing. Another activity that will have an impact on learners is the creation of an interaction bank. Teachers can use videos showing instances of natural interaction. Students can notice and record elements like language use, expressions of agreement and disagreement, tone of voice, and gesture. This becomes their personal interaction bank (not just a language bank since there will be records of different features of interaction). Students decide what to include, which contributes directly to their agency. A third instance to relate the teacher's role to ZPD with the focus on interaction is to have students reflect. At the end of a lesson, teachers can ask students to reflect on classroom interactions and keep a record of successful language use, facial expressions, gesture, among others, which will lead to greater learner awareness. It should be pointed out that these are examples and the list is by no means exhaustive.

Two aspects are key: noticing and awareness. This also shows how important it is for teachers to help students construct meaning (co construction of meaning) all along every lesson, the importance and relevance of mediation, which highlights the need for teachers to use English, even in beginners' scenarios, making it accessible to learners. Accessibility is of paramount importance; it does not mean making language easy or simple. It implies the use of gesture, body language, synonyms that students already know, cognates, among other possibilities so that learners should understand.

This shows us that interaction is not communication practice, but meaning-making and co-construction of knowledge. Apart from Vygotsky's social constructivism (1962), there are further theoretical frameworks to this view of interaction as exposure, which will be briefly described. Within the field of education, sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) explains how individuals construct learning with others, and how culture and social context influence cognitive development and learning.

Apart from these educational theories, from the ELT field, we can present the following theoretical underpinnings that consider interaction the engine for learning or, in other words, interaction as exposure. Long's (2007) Interaction Hypothesis states that when learners struggle to interact, they notice gaps, which leads to acquisition. According Swain's (1993, 2000, 2005) Output Hypothesis, using language helps learners consolidate what they know and identify what they do not, thus leading to learning. Ellis (1999) believes that interaction is crucial for second language acquisition because it provides opportunities for meaning negotiation, corrective feedback, and output production, which are all vital for learners to develop implicit language knowledge through communicative tasks. Interaction helps learners understand input when it is modified so that it should be comprehensible, and

it prompts learners to notice linguistic forms they might otherwise overlook, eventually leading to internalized language. While comprehensible input is necessary, it is not sufficient on its own. Interaction provides modified input through negotiation and recast language, which triggers acquisition. In essence, Ellis argues that interaction, particularly when embedded in communicative tasks, plays a central role in transforming comprehensible input into actual language acquisition by facilitating meaning negotiation, feedback, and the production of language.

From these theories, we can conclude that language is learned through use, not just by studying about it; interaction fosters meaning-making, negotiation, and the co-construction of knowledge, and it encourages active, personalized, and purposeful language use, directly building agency. In other words, interaction serves as exposure.

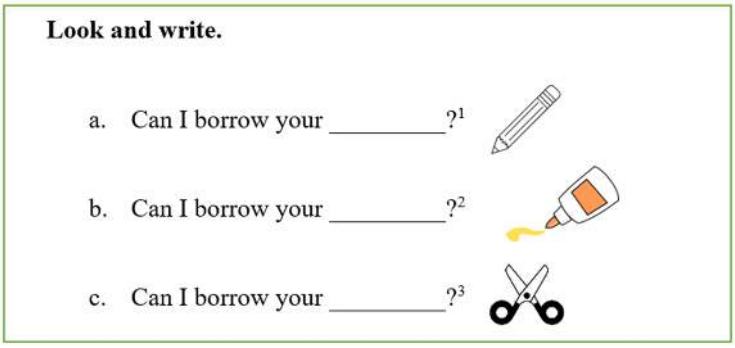
PLANNING FOR INTERACTION ACTIVITES: BACKWARD DESIGN

Can these principles apply when interaction is presented as a communicative activity? If this is the case, how can teachers build towards learners interacting? Rather than starting from bits and pieces and then putting them all together in a dialogue or role-play, teachers can plan using Backward Design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). Backward Design in education, also known as Understanding by Design (UbD), is a method of planning by first identifying the desired learning outcomes and then working backwards to determine how to assess and teach towards those outcomes. It emphasizes starting with the end in mind, ensuring that all learning activities and assessments are directly aligned with the intended learning goals. In essence, Backward Design shifts the focus from simply covering content to ensuring that students achieve specific learning goals, making the learning process more purposeful and effective.

When planning along these lines, the first question teachers need to ask is *What do I want learners to be able to do by the end of this lesson/week/ unit in terms of interaction?* If the answer is *I want them to interact*, it is evident that the goal is too broad. Backward Design helps teachers focus on what exactly they want their students to do that can be achievable in the given time. So there is a need to make this learning objective (LO) more granular, much more specific. Is it interacting in class, meaning using classroom language? Is it participating in a guided debate? Is it completing or writing a review on a video game, on a story they have read, on a film or show they have seen? It is necessary to think in terms of S.M.A.R.T. objectives (Doran, 1981), which acronym stands for objectives being **s**pecific, **m**easurable, **a**chievable, **r**elevant and **t**ime bound or constrained. For the sake of an example, the analysis will be on the first LO: Students using classroom language. Though this LO is much less broad than

learners interacting, it still needs more specificity. Is it interaction initiated by the teacher or learner initiated? Will the learners interact with the teacher or among themselves? Backward Design is a magnificent resource to narrow down LOs so that teachers can concentrate on what they want learners to be able to do as a result of instruction. Once the LO is defined, the first step in Backward Design, it is necessary to focus on assessment, the second step. How will it be evident that students are making progress? In other words, what evidence of getting towards the LO will be necessary? It does not mean designing the assessment instruments to be used; it helps teachers identify the evidence they need to get. Or in other words, focusing on assessment for learning. For instance, if the LO is oral classroom interaction, is this activity/exercise relevant?

Consider the following activity:



[1]https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pencil_%28480248%29_-_The_Noun_Project.svg
[2]https://freesvg.org/glue-bottle
[3]https://freesvg.org/open-scissors-icon-vector-drawing

[Figure 3. An activity]

Even though language is presented in Can I borrow….? requests, this is an activity to practice a lexical area – school objects – rather than an instance of interaction. Backward Design makes it clear that this exercise will not lead learners to interaction. However, if this is an exercise in the materials used, there is always the choice of making it relevant. For instance, after learners complete the exercise, they can be asked to tick the most frequent requests in class, or to add what else they usually borrow in class. Another possibility to work on the notion of borrowing – something they need to know to interact – is to give learners a list of elements. Students have to tick off the ones they can borrow at school. The list should include elements they can borrow at school, elements they can see at school but which they do not borrow and some other elements they can borrow but not at school: a sandwich, a bottle of water, a jacket, a ball, a board game, an eraser, trainers, scrunchies. This evaluation of an activity is part of the third step: designing or adapting pedagogical strategies.

What pedagogical strategies do teachers need to plan, or what activities, texts, etc. will they use for students to be able to reach the goal? This means not only

the linguistic resources but also the texts –reading, listening, multimedia– to expose students to what is new, the situations they need to plan, the activities students will engage in. For instance, in this case, in particular working with beginners, teachers may design a classroom poster with useful language created with learners, acting out activities, maybe even a classification of classroom language into requests, permission, etc. which students can use as reference. At this stage, teachers also need to think about the challenges they may face, or the barriers they may encounter. These barriers will negatively affect learners' performance. Might there be linguistic barriers, pedagogical? If there are quite a number of students in the group, is acting out the way to go? Will pair-work function in this group? Are there learners who need more support than others? This reflection is essential in the third step: designing pedagogical strategies, or planning learning experiences. It should be evident that planning along the lines of Backward Design ensures that all teachers and students do is aligned with the desired LO. Even the teacher's feedback and assessment will be specifically targeted towards the desired outcome. When this process and the goal are shared with learners, their agency increases significantly because they know exactly where they are going and what resources they need to get there.

INTERACTION AND TEACHER PRACTICES

It has been shown that teachers play a significant role in helping students notice and become aware. What teacher practices are crucial and key in interaction? One essential aspect is scaffolding.

Scaffolding is a key concept in Vygotsky's work on the relationship between thought and language (1962). Bruner's research (1975) also looked at this and suggested that language learning is scaffolded by what he termed the learner's Language Acquisition Support System (LASS). More recently, practitioners like Gibbons (2015) have emphasised the importance of scaffolding language as well as learning when working with English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners.

Scaffolding means providing temporary support for an inexperienced learner in order to help them to complete a task or acquire a skill, and then gradually withdrawing that support. Scaffolding language and learning includes well-known strategies such as modelling and demonstrating language, providing language prompts and frames, using visuals and graphic organizers or incorporating collaborative work. Less frequently utilized, yet very efficient strategies comprise encouraging the use of first language skills, not for translation, but for noticing *how* learners interact in L1 and then applying those interactional strategies (like turn-taking or showing agreement or disagreement) in English. Another efficient way of scaffolding learners is to activate prior knowledge, i.e. referring students to successful instances of

interaction in class to help them focus on, for instance, how they previously negotiated meaning. Having learners use reference materials is also a way of providing scaffolding. This can include, among other ideas, collaboratively created classroom posters and their Interaction Banks. Scaffolding is vital because it enables teachers to maintain high expectations of learners rather than simplifying the task itself.

Scaffolding is essential; teachers' reflection and awareness-raising are also key**.** The goal is to move from simply knowing interaction is beneficial to actively and consciously making it effective in the classroom. This means making the implicit explicit across four areas which will be subsequently explored: classroom dynamics, learners, learning and teachers.

Classroom dynamics encompasses several aspects, some of which teachers can reflect upon. One possibility is turn-taking, i.e. whether they follow a pattern, which can help those who need more support; when they do not follow a pattern, if they ever call on a student they have called on before. Wait time is also an interesting aspect to explore. How much time do teachers give students? How do they know how much is enough? When can wait time negatively affect learners' performance? It may be the case that students should feel that silence in the classroom has become unbearable and they start giving random answers with the hope of getting it right by chance.

When reflecting on the learner, two key areas are agency and scaffolding. Reflecting on instances in which scaffolding could have been a better option, or those cases in which scaffolding was provided even before it was necessary can shed light on these actions that go unnoticed but definitely affect learning. Also going back to different activities in class to see if there were missed instances of agency development can be an eye opener for teachers.

In the case of language development, teachers should focus on thinking if there were instances of construction of knowledge on the part of the learners, if there has been any sign of impact in the activities presented, among other ideas. This reflection will make teachers go back to the stages in Backward Design, in particular to the coherence there has to be between the learning experiences planned and the set learning goals.

As regards the teacher, it is advisable to go back to lessons and reflect on how the teachers' actions influence classroom dynamics, learners and their learning, and in view of this, think about what they can do differently. Teachers can develop the habit of writing a line or two after a lesson, so that there should be a record they can go back to and learn from their own experience.

This reflection can uncover personal beliefs and habits, e.g. teacher talk, reaction to mistakes. It can also deepen teachers' understanding of classroom dynamics. By observing and reflecting on learner-learner and teacher-learner

interactions, teachers can gain insight into who talks, who does not, why, what connection there may be between grouping strategies and student participation, among other possibilities. It also promotes professional autonomy since teachers will be less reliant on external advice and can set paths for self-directed professional development.

CONCLUSION

Interaction is integral to learning and language development. It is not merely an activity teachers set up; it is the process of learning itself. When teachers focus on raising awareness in their learners and on helping them notice language and interaction features, they contribute not only to their students' language development but also to learner agency. Students learn how to communicate without relying solely on the teacher or materials for guidance.

To conclude, *A colour of his own* (Lionni, 1997) provides a synthesis of how interaction can contribute to learning. This is a story about a chameleon who is very sad because he does not have a colour of his own, like all other animals do. He once meets another chameleon, and he realizes that together, they can be the same colour wherever they go, wherever they are. The chameleon is happy to see that the action he has taken has transformed him, not only him, but others as well. It also shows the importance of the context, and how it influences learning: a representation of the social nature of language learning.

[Figure 4. Carle, E. *A colour of his own*]

It has been established that interaction is not a trend. Interaction may sometimes be overlooked or considered simple language practice, but it is much more. Despite its conspicuous absence in recent ELT publications, interaction is at the heart of learning. Interaction is learning.

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