Guest editorial

Introduction to the role of interaction in instructed language learning

The study of conversational interaction among second language learners and their interlocutors has been central to studies of acquisition since the beginning of the 80 s (see Alcón, 2001; Gass, 1997; Gass, Mackey, & Pica, 1998; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994, for a review of the most important research in this area and its theoretical implications). Research has shown that L2 learners' participation in negotiated interaction eases the access to conditions claimed to bolster language learning, namely: comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985; Long, 1985), production of modified output (Swain, 1985, 1995) and focus on form (Long & Robinson, 1998; Schmidt & Frota, 1986). As Gass et al. (1998, p.303) point out, studies carried out within the interaction hypothesis to date suggest that research should focus on the nature of conversational interaction, whether or not opportunities are present for the conditions and processes that are claimed to facilitate language learning, and the nature of the development that takes place.

The present thematic issue focuses on the role of interaction in instructed language learning contexts, in contrast to research on conversational interaction in naturalistic settings. From this perspective, the goal of this thematic issue is to address the effect of conversational interaction on acquiring a second language and to bring insights for a better understanding of the potential benefits of interaction in instructed language learning. Taking into account the interaction hypothesis, which originated in the work by Long (1980, 1983, 1985), the papers in this issue describe learners' work through perceived or actual gaps in communication, report research supporting the relationship between conversational interaction and language learning, and suggest further research issues which may provide both teachers and researchers with new directions in the future.

The contributors come from Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Holland, Spain and the USA. In the opening article, Roy Lyster addresses the issue of form and meaning in teacher–student interaction. In his paper ''Negotiation in immersion teacher–student interaction'' he first looks at interaction in a social studies lesson to illustrate the ambiguity from the learners' perspective of teachers' recasts of ill-formed utterances and repetitions of well-formed ones. Later, he illustrates form-focused negotiation examining exchanges in a grade 4 science lesson and showing that this type of negotiation is ''less likely to create pragmatic ambivalence than recasts embedded in meaning-focused negotiation.'' The author's suggestion is to

allow for a more comprehensive view of negotiation which will involve corrective feedback. With the concept of negotiation accounting for corrective feedback and including focus on form and on meaning it would have a considerable potential as a pedagogical strategy in the classroom.

Gertraud Havranek and Katja Lochtman focus on the issue of classroom feedback and whether or not it is successful in a foreign language classroom. Gertraud Havranek ("When is corrective feedback most likely to succeed?") presents the results of a comprehensive study of oral corrective feedback involving 207 German L1/English L2 learners of six different age and proficiency levels causing 1700 instances of corrective feedback. The goal of this classroom-based study is "to identify situational, linguistic and personal factors that promote or impede the effectiveness of corrective feedback in instructed language learning." The author concludes that second language learners benefit from corrective feedback although the effectiveness of the correction will depend on contextual and linguistic factors. Among the former, the learner's contribution to the correction sequence (self-correction after elicitation) and the length of that sequence can be mentioned; among the latter, the type of errors (learners profit most from the correction of grammatical errors).

Katja Lochtman ("Oral corrective feedback in the foreign language classroom: How it affects interaction in analytic foreign language teaching") explores the role of different kinds of corrective feedback in analytic settings where the focus of instruction is on the form of the foreign language as opposed to more content-based approaches. The experiment takes places in Flanders (Belgium), where German is the third foreign language after French and English, and analyzes 10 h of tape recorded lessons taught by three teachers. The article discusses the role of three different types of oral corrective feedback (explicit correction, recast and teacher initiation of self-correction by pupil) in analytic foreign language teaching.

The next two papers in this issue examine the role of collaborative dialogue in offering opportunities for learning in the classroom context. Merrill Swain and Sharon Lapkin ("Talking it through: Two French immersion learners' response to reformulation") present the case study of two grade 7 French immersion students working collaboratively to construct a story, orally and in writing, from a series of pictures in a jigsaw task. The authors examine the collaborative dialogues, operationalized as language-related episodes, that occur while the students write, notice and reflect on their noticing and conclude that "[...] reformulation of learners' writing, as implemented in our study, is an effective technique for stimulating noticing and reflection on language."

Neomy Storch ("Relationships formed in dyadic interaction and opportunity for leaning") studies the nature of dyadic interaction in a university second language classroom. Her study reports on two of the four patterns in dyads identified in the entire database — the collaborative pattern and the dominant/dominant pattern — and suggests that role relationships in dyads should be considered in L2 pedagogy as they affect the opportunities for learning learners construct as they work together on an assigned task. Her results clearly show that teachers should monitor the individuals that make up the dyads as the different pairings had a direct impact on learning opportunities.

The role of focus on form in developing learners' communicative competence is analyzed by María del Pilar García Mayo, Folkert Kuiken and Ineke Vedder and Eva Alcón Soler. The study by María del Pilar García Mayo ("Interaction in advanced EFL pedagogy: A comparison of form-focused activities") responds to a double call for research on the nature of participants' interaction promoted by different types of grammar tasks and the need for descriptive studies which provide evidence about how learners interpret and complete these tasks. She analyzes learners' dyadic interaction in five different form-focused activities in order to determine which ones seemed more effective for the group of learners in the study as to the amount and nature of attention to form the activities generate. The author argues for a careful consideration of the choice of form-focused activities in advanced EFL pedagogy.

The study by Folkert Kuiken and Ineke Vedder "The effect of interaction in acquiring the grammar of a second language" considers the effect of interaction between Dutch high-school learners of English during a dictogloss task on the acquisition of the passive voice. Although the quantitative analysis they carried out showed that the opportunity for interaction during the reconstruction phase did not result in a better score, the qualitative analysis of the data revealed that interaction often stimulated noticing of the passive structure and focus on the corresponding form.

In her study ("The relationship between teacher-led versus learners' interaction and the development of pragmatics in the EFL classroom") Eva Alcón Soler examines the nature of collaborative dialogue in teacher–students and peer interaction and its effect on the acquisition of pragmatic competence. Results of the study provide us with new insights into the nature of peer and teacher–students interaction in the EFL context, and illustrate the effect that being involved in language problem-solving situations has on awareness and acquisition of the speech act of requesting. Finally, in line with the results reported by Swain and Lapkin and Storch, the study supports the claim that pragmatic knowledge may emerge from assisted performance.

Finally, Alison Mackey ("Beyond production: Learners' perceptions about interactional processes") examines learners' perceptions about interactional processes and compares those perspectives with claims made about interactional benefits. The participants, 46 lower-intermediate ESL learners from different L1 backgrounds, interacted while carrying out communicative task-based activities in dyads (with native speakers and with other learners) and with their teacher and other classmates (in an intact class). All learners then watched videotapes of their previous interactions, and were asked to introspect about their thoughts. Mackey shows that, overall, learners' perceptions about the benefits of interaction overlapped with the claims made by researchers on the issue and suggests that interaction studies may benefit from learners' insights as a supplement to production data.

We hope the articles in this special issue will contribute to a better understanding of the potential benefits of interaction in instructed language learning contexts and will lead to more research on the topic.

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María del Pilar García Mayo
Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Universidad del país Vasco,
Vitoria 01006, Spain
Email address: fipgamap@lg.ehu.es

Eva Alcón Soler
Departament de Filología Anglesa i Románica,
Universitat Jaume I, Castellón de la Plana, 12071, Spain
Email address: alcon@fil.uji.es