



# Evolution of Language Learning Perspectives: From Imitation to Interaction

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**Abstract.** This reflective analysis explores the transformation of perspectives on language learning and teaching methodologies throughout a semester of study. It investigates the shift from initial beliefs to evolved understandings, highlighting three specific areas of change. The study focuses on the transition from imitation-based learning to interaction-driven language acquisition, emphasizing the significance of pedagogical theories such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Sociocultural Theory, Interactionist Theory, Krashen's  $i+1$  Hypothesis, and the role of Correct Feedback (CF). The paper underscores the importance of preserving students' autonomy, the benefits of high-challenge and high-support classrooms, and the multifaceted nature of feedback in language learning. These reflections provide valuable insights into the complex process of language acquisition and pedagogical approaches, enriching the understanding of language education.

**Keywords:** language learning, language acquisition, pedagogical theories, autonomy, high-challenge classrooms, Correct Feedback (CF), Sociocultural Theory.

## 1 Introduction

This paper serves as a reflective analysis of the transformations that have occurred in my perspectives on second language acquisition (SLA) and teaching methodologies over the course of this semester. It is essential to acknowledge that my initial beliefs, held at the commencement of this term, have evolved in response to newly acquired knowledge and insights. These shifts in attitude encompass three distinct aspects, with varying degrees of alteration. Notably, my stances have transitioned from a stance of "disagree somewhat" to "strongly disagree" concerning the mechanisms underlying language acquisition and the utility of employing non-challenging materials in teaching. However, the most notable transformation pertains to the approach a teacher should adopt when responding to students' verbal expressions. This reflective endeavor aims to elucidate the driving factors behind these shifts in perspective, which can be attributed to pedagogical theories such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT),

Sociocultural Theory, Interactionist Theory, Krashen's  $i+1$  Hypothesis, and the significance of Correct Feedback (CF). The subsequent sections will delve into these specific reflections in greater detail.

## **2 Languages are learned mainly through imitation.**

In contrast, my perspective has shifted from a position of "disagree somewhat" to "strongly disagree" with this statement, aligning more closely with the principles of behaviorism theory. Behaviorism posits that learners are positively reinforced when they imitate language input from their environment, gradually forming "habits" of correct language usage through repetition and practice [1]. It places great emphasis on the role of the environment as the primary source of learning, shaping learners' behaviors in response to external stimuli.

While behaviorism has some relevance in second language learning and teaching, it falls short in explaining crucial aspects of language acquisition [2]. Language learning encompasses not only pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar memorization but also the ability to use these elements effectively in communication [3].

To address this evolving educational landscape, the communicative language teaching (CLT) movement emerged [4]. CLT emphasizes that the primary purpose of language learning is effective communication [5]. Task-based language teaching (TBLT), an outgrowth of CLT, prioritizes meaning and the application of language in real-world contexts [6]. Instead of focusing solely on rote memorization and imitation, TBLT encourages learners to use language to achieve objectives beyond linguistic mastery [7].

Additionally, from a sociocultural perspective, language acquisition extends beyond mere imitation. Learning through social interaction plays a pivotal role in this framework [8]. Within this perspective, both teachers and learners actively engage in the learning process, moving beyond passive imitation [9].

Scaffolding, a key concept in sociocultural theory, involves temporary but essential assistance from teachers to help students perform new tasks successfully [10]. Teachers scaffold students by offering guidance, asking questions, and providing instructions to help them process language and achieve their goals [11]. This interaction fosters a deeper understanding of language and its use [12].

Learner autonomy and student-centeredness further underscore the importance of active participation in the learning process [13]. In learner-centered classrooms, students take responsibility for their learning, connecting their experiences to real-life contexts and having a say in content, methods, and assessments [14].

Moreover, the Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC) emphasizes students' active involvement throughout the learning unit [15]. Students contribute to knowledge building, co-construct writing with teachers, and eventually engage in independent writing and self-reflection [16].

### **3 Teachers should use materials that expose students to only language structures they have already been taught.**

My position on this statement has evolved from partial disagreement to strong disagreement. This change is primarily influenced by the sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD represents the cognitive gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more skilled expert, typically a teacher [17]. It's important to note that the ZPD can occur not only between a teacher and a novice but also between novices and between learners themselves [18].

When teachers provide students with learning materials that offer no challenge, as suggested in the statement, it can result in low-challenge classrooms, limiting students to their current level of development, referred to as the zone of current development (ZCD). In contrast to the ZPD, which facilitates learning, the ZCD represents the realm where learners can operate independently, without further development [19]. However, the ZCD is not conducive to learning, unlike the ZPD. According to sociocultural theory, learning occurs when a learner interacts with a more knowledgeable interlocutor within the ZPD, enabling the learner to engage in higher-level tasks with guidance [20]. Effective teacher support expands the boundaries of the ZPD, creating a new ZCD [21].

To extend the original ZCD and promote learning, students benefit from high-challenge and high-support classrooms, where they are pushed to use "stretched" language, attempting to express themselves using language that is beyond their current proficiency level [22]. These challenging moments are crucial for language learning, especially when learners interact with supportive facilitators [23].

Numerous studies have highlighted the positive effects of high-challenge and high-support classrooms. They foster high expectations, resulting in greater learning achievements, bridge equity gaps, and support learners from diverse backgrounds [24]. Additionally, these classrooms promote inquiry-based and dialogic learning environments that facilitate language development [25].

In comparison, Krashen's  $i+1$  hypothesis offers a more explicit counterargument to the statement. The "i" represents a learner's current language ability level, while " $i+1$ " denotes language knowledge that is slightly more advanced [26]. This concept suggests that learners should encounter materials that are slightly above their current proficiency level, referred to as comprehensible input [27]. Comprehensible input allows students to understand the general meaning of language, even if they do not grasp every word's meaning [28].

While adopting the " $i+1$ " approach can be beneficial for maintaining student engagement, it's essential to strike a balance. If the content is too challenging, students may lose motivation [29]. Teachers can enhance comprehensibility by providing scaffolding, as discussed earlier.

It's crucial to emphasize that the ZPD and Krashen's  $i+1$  hypothesis is distinct and cannot be directly compared. They offer different perspectives on how learning and development occur [30]. Krashen's  $i+1$  focuses on language structures that are slightly above students' current competence level, while the ZPD centers on co-constructing knowledge through interactions with peers, teachers, or private speech. Furthermore,

students require exposure not only to language structures but also to academic registers and modes. In classrooms with a significant number of English language learners, group work alone may not provide exposure to unfamiliar academic registers [31]. In such cases, teachers may need to model academic language explicitly, either to the entire class or through individual interactions [32].

The sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), highlights the importance of high-challenge and high-support classrooms for promoting learning and language development. While Krashen's  $i+1$  hypothesis suggests the value of comprehensible input, finding the right balance between challenge and comprehension is essential for effective learning. These two theories offer distinct but complementary perspectives on language acquisition and development.

#### **4 Teachers should respond to students' errors by correctly rephrasing what they have said rather than by explicitly pointing out the error.**

In light of this statement, my stance has shifted from "somewhat disagree" to "somewhat agree." My inclination toward agreement is grounded in the recognition that, in certain circumstances, directly addressing errors may prove effective, particularly concerning time management. Nevertheless, I lean more toward agreement because, in such instances, students may not actively participate in the error correction process. This omission of student involvement contradicts the principles of dynamic assessment, which emphasizes collaborative performance construction [33].

Notably, pointing out errors represents just one type of intervention within the framework of dynamic assessment. However, it may not always align with the precise intervention required. In dynamic assessment, interventions can be broadly categorized into two groups: pre-built (interventionist) and unprepared (interactionist) approaches [34]. Pointing out errors aligns more closely with the interventionist approach, which follows a predefined sequence of providing established cues and hints, sometimes including explicit corrections with explanations. In contrast, the interactionist approach is more responsive to individual errors, continually adjusting feedback based on each student's responsiveness. Interactionist approaches offer tailored support that can enhance fairness and equity by accommodating each learner's specific developmental needs.

Beyond the realm of dynamic assessment, the term "correct feedback" (CF) is more pertinent to this discussion. CF pertains specifically to responses addressing students' errors and encompasses multiple functions. It plays a crucial role in scaffolding students' second language (SL) development. Lyster and Ranta (1997) identified six types of CF, which can be further categorized into reformulations and prompts. Reformulations provide learners with the target language form in response to their non-target utterances, while prompts aim to offer various signals facilitating self-correction. CF involves strategic responses that extend beyond merely pointing out errors. Research indicates that learners who receive CF tend to perform better than those who do not.

However, the diversity of CF types, which goes beyond straightforward error rephrasing, underscores why I do not strongly agree with the statement. Correct rephrasing represents just one type of explicit reformulation within a more comprehensive taxonomy. Other CF categories encompass implicit reformulations (conversational recasts), implicit prompts (repetition and clarification), and explicit prompts (metalinguistic clues, elicitation, and paralinguistic signals). While students may express a preference for explicit CF, research suggests that implicit CF can yield more significant effects.

Teachers, when confronted with errors in student responses, sometimes opt to modify their questions. Zamel (1981) posits that the most effective responses to student answers involve pointing out key language features, providing information to help students independently discover rules and principles, and aiding in clarifying their choices. Sociocultural and interactionist SLA theories echo similar sentiments. Within a sociocultural framework, it involves teacher-guided reporting, wherein educators scaffold the collaborative construction of student intentions through clarification, questioning, and modeling. McNeil (2012) identifies three key strategies in teachers' responses to student answers: reformulation, repetition, and elaboration. Interactionist SLA theory, focused on meaning negotiation, suggests that teachers help students formulate referential questions. Farooq (2007) outlines three methods for modifying questions: repetition, slowing down speech pace, and allowing students more time for thoughtful responses. These strategies prioritize fluency over accuracy and present additional, potentially superior, options for teacher feedback.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper underscores the multifaceted nature of language learning, emphasizing that it encompasses not merely imitation but also interaction. This perspective arises from the recognition that the fundamental purpose of language acquisition is effective communication. Moreover, it advocates for the preservation of students' autonomy within the learning process, which is achieved through the provision of scaffolding. This concept is further reflected in the principles of dynamic assessment and the teaching and learning cycle, which both emphasize the gradual release of responsibility to learners. Furthermore, the paper contends that exposure to familiar content alone is insufficient for optimal language development. Instead, it urges educators to cultivate high-challenge and high-support classrooms that propel students towards their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This dynamic approach to teaching ensures that students are consistently engaged and making meaningful progress. Finally, the paper highlights the importance of feedback in language learning, particularly the preference for implicit responses that guide students toward self-correction. This approach is rooted in the intent of response, which is to empower students to identify and rectify errors autonomously.

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