Interactionism

Social interactionist approach

The last theory, the social interaction, “assumes that language acquisition is influenced by the interaction of a number of factors – physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social,” (Cooter & Reutzel, 2004). This theory shares many of the same explanations as the other three theories. Perhaps two of the biggest names in the Interactionist Theory of Language acquisition are Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner.

This article explores the Interactionist Theory of language acquisition, another theory that encompasses how children and adults learn and acquire languages.

Language Learning at an Early Age

From birth, children are surrounded by others who talk to them or with them. This communication plays a part in how the baby learns to speak his or her native language. Some argue that "nature" is entirely responsible for how a baby learns a language, while others argue that "nurture" is responsible for how a baby picks up his or her mother tongue. Social interactionists argue that the way a baby learns a language is both biological and social.

Everyone loves to coo at babies, and this “baby talk” is exposing the child to language, whether we realize it or not. Interactionists believe that children are born with brains that predispose them to the ability to pick up languages as well as with a desire to communicate. Some Interactionists even argue that babies and children cue their parents and other adults into giving them the linguistic exposure they need to learn a language. The Interactionist Theory posits that children can only learn language from someone who wants to communicate with them.

Vygotsky and Bruner

A. Vygotsky

Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory

Vygotsky's work is often placed with this theory because of the emphasis he placed on the importance of social interaction to learn language. Another influential author, M.A.K. Halliday, believes that children learn language out of need to function in society: “Babies acquire language in order to survive, have their needs met, and express themselves.”

Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory is the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), who lived during Russian Revolution. his work was largely unkown to the West until it was published in 1962.
Vygotsky created a model of human development now called the sociocultural model. He believed that all cultural development in children is visible in two stages:

- First, the child observes the interaction between other people and then the behavior develops inside the child. This means that the child first observes the adults around him communicating amongst themselves and then later develops the ability himself to communicate.
- Vygotsky also theorized that a child learns best when interacting with those around him to solve a problem. At first, the adult interacting with the child is responsible for leading the child, and eventually, the child becomes more capable of problem solving on his own. This is true with language, as the adult first talks at the child and eventually the child learns to respond in turn. The child moves from gurgling to baby talk to more complete and correct sentences.

Vygotsky’s theory is one of the foundations of constructivism. It asserts three major themes:

**Major themes:**

1. Social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development. In contrast to Jean Piaget’s understanding of child development (in which development necessarily precedes learning), Vygotsky felt social learning precedes development. He states: “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological).” (Vygotsky, 1978).

2. The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The MKO refers to anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, with respect to a particular task, process, or concept. The MKO is normally thought of as being a teacher, coach, or older adult, but the MKO could also be peers, a younger person, or even computers.

3. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is the distance between a student’s ability to perform a task under adult guidance and/or with peer collaboration and the student’s ability solving the problem independently. According to Vygotsky, learning occurred in this zone.
Vygotsky focused on the connections between people and the sociocultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences (Crawford, 1996). According to Vygotsky, humans use tools that develop from a culture, such as speech and writing, to mediate their social environments. Initially children develop these tools to serve solely as social functions, ways to communicate needs. Vygotsky believed that the internalization of these tools led to higher thinking skills.

Applications of the Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory

Many schools have traditionally held a transmissionist or instructionist model in which a teacher or lecturer ‘transmits’ information to students. In contrast, Vygotsky’s theory promotes learning contexts in which students play an active role in learning. Roles of the teacher and student are therefore shifted, as a teacher should collaborate with his or her students in order to help facilitate meaning construction in students. Learning therefore becomes a reciprocal experience for the students and teacher.

B. Bruner

Bruner, best known for his discovery learning theory, believes that learners, whether they are adults or children, learn best when they discover knowledge for themselves. He believes that students retain knowledge best when it is something they have discovered on their own. Bruner argues that an adult and an infant have conversations despite the child being unable to speak. The interaction between the two, such as games and non-verbal communication, build the structure of language long before the child is able to communicate verbally.

Bruner’s Discovery Learning Theory

Discovery learning is an inquiry-based, constructivist learning theory that takes place in problem solving situations where the learner draws on his or her own past experience and existing knowledge to discover facts and relationships and new truths to be learned. Students interact with the world by exploring and manipulating objects, wrestling with questions and controversies, or performing experiments. As a result, students may be more more likely to remember concepts and knowledge discovered on their own (in contrast to a transmissionist model). Models that are based upon discovery learning model include: guided discovery, problem-based learning, simulation-based learning, case-based learning, incidental learning, among others.

Proponents of this theory believe that discovery learning has many advantages, including:

- encourages active engagement
- promotes motivation
- promotes autonomy, responsibility, independence
- the development of creativity and problem solving skills.
- a tailored learning experience
Critics have sometimes cited disadvantages including:

- creation of cognitive overload
- potential misconceptions
- teachers may fail to detect problems and misconceptions

The theory is closely related to work by Jean Piaget and Seymour Papert.

**Interactionist Theory and ESL**

How does the Interactionist Theory fit in with ESL in a classroom? When faced with learning English as a second language, the student is essentially an infant. They cannot communicate with the teacher except through non-verbal communication. Therefore, it is up to the teacher to act as the adult in the infant-adult relationship. He or she is responsible for leading all interaction at first, and as the student becomes more familiar with the English language and able to communicate, the control of the interaction can be relinquished a bit and the students can take more control of their own language learning. Also, if students are encouraged to experiment with the language and learn that it is okay to make mistakes, they will be able to discover for themselves how to combine words and phrases to form full sentences and dialogues.

**Bibliography**
