The Relationship between Interlocutor Type and Learner Proficiency Level in L2 Feedback Sequences*

Haemoon Lee • Yundeok Choi

I. Introduction

Since the interaction hypothesis (Long 1983) was proposed in early 80s, there have been a large number of empirical studies that investigated the effects of communicative interactions on the acquisition of L2 from various perspectives such as the amount of input, output, feedback, and meaning negotiation in relation to the learners' participation type (Ellis Tanaka, & Yamazaki 1994; Pica and Doughty 1985a, 1985b), the type of interactional tasks (Pica, Kanagy, Faloudon 1993), and the type of interlocutor (Plough & Gass 1993; Zuengler & Bent 1991).

Among the various interactional features, however, the effects of interlocutor type in relation with the learners' proficiency level on L2 learning in particular warrant more empirical studies for three reasons: First, in the EFL situation, there are fewer opportunities to have communicative interaction with a native speaker, whereas there are more opportunities to interact with a nonnative speaker for L2 learners in the classroom or other settings aimed at improving English proficiency. Second, given the lack of NS interlocutors, it needs to be examined which proficiency group is more benefited from the NS interlocutors than other groups. Third, in spite of the above practical importance, the studies are rare in the literature that examined whether the variable of interlocutor type is differentially influential to high and low proficiency groups, though each variable was examined separately in a few studies (Iwashita 2001; Lee 2005; Lynch & McClean 1999; Mackey, Oliver & Leeman 2003; Mackey & Philp 1998; McDonough 2004). Therefore, the effects of interlocutor type and learner proficiency on L2 learning need to be examined for the purpose of individual learners’

* This paper has been developed from the reanalysis of the second author's MA thesis research at Sungkyunkwan University.
acquisition of L2 as well as for establishing the more effective educational policy.

The role of the interlocutor has been proposed differently over the past two decades since the earlier version of the interaction hypothesis was proposed. Long (1983) first proposed that the interlocutor is the source of comprehensible input, which is the core element for language acquisition. That is, by responding to the learners' negotiation moves for the clarification of the incomprehensible input, the interlocutor provides the modified input which is fine-tuned to the learners' level, which in turn increases comprehension of more input. Once the comprehension of input is promoted, then the acquisition was assumed to be easily facilitated, following Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis. However, Swain's output hypothesis (1985) claimed that input comprehension is not sufficient for SLA as proved by Canadian immersion program and that learners' output production pushed by the interlocutor who did not understand the learners is more important than the input comprehension. The theoretical reason for her claim was that the pushed output modification leads the learners to attend to the language form more than input comprehension in such ways as to (1) notice the gap between the target language and their interlanguage, (2) test the current interlanguage hypothesis (3) to be metalinguistically aware of their language use (Swain 1995). Therefore, in the framework of Swain's output hypothesis, the role of the interlocutor seems to 'push' the learners to produce better output when the learner's first output was not comprehensible to the native speaker interlocutor. The 'push' for output modification is realized through the interlocutor's negative feedback, or negotiation moves, to the learner's erroneous output such as recasts, clarification requests, confirmation check, etc. that provides the learners with the opportunities for modified output. Therefore, though both Long (1983) and Swain (1985, 1995) proposed the theory about the meaning negotiation, they differed in that Long emphasized the role of interlocutor and meaning negotiation for the learners' input comprehension whereas Swain emphasized the role of interlocutor and meaning negotiation for learners' output production and learners' attention to form.

In Long's (1996) updated version of the interaction hypothesis, the role of the interlocutor and meaning negotiation was newly proposed as attention promotion following Swain, on the reasoning that either for better input comprehension or for better output production, the mean-