

FROM PASSIVE RECEPTION TO ACTIVE PARTICIPATION: THE IMPACT OF INTERACTIVE LANGUAGE STRATEGIES ON ENGLISH LEARNERS

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Abstract

This article explores how interactive strategies such as role-plays, task-based learning (TBL), pair work, and group discussions significantly enhance English as a Second Language (ESL) acquisition. Grounded in the principles of neuroscience and sociocultural theory, it contrasts traditional language teaching methods with communicative approaches that lower learners' affective filters, promote engagement, and activate cognitive functions crucial to long-term retention. Building upon the works of Vygotsky, Krashen, Turula, Long, Dispenza and recent advances in brain-based education, the article argues that these interactive strategies not only foster linguistic competence, but also help learners overcome psychological and social barriers in the language learning process. When implemented effectively, they create the optimal conditions for meaningful interaction, internalization of structures, and intrinsic motivation.

Keywords: interactive strategies, communicative competence, language learning, collaborative learning, neuroscience

Introduction: In recent decades, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction has experienced a significant transformation, shifting from traditional teacher-centered approaches to student-centered, communicative methodologies. Research in second language acquisition consistently emphasizes that meaningful communication serves as a **foundation** for language acquisition. However, in many traditional language classrooms, students are still passive recipients often memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary in isolation. Such approaches tend to minimize the importance of authentic language use and often leave learners disengaged or overwhelmed. In contrast, interactive language strategies, rooted in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and supported by neuroscience, invite learners into authentic, purposeful exchanges that simulate real-life communication. The goal of this study is to investigate how interactive strategies enhance English learners' communicative competence and to offer practical classroom-based recommendations for EFL educators **aiming to create** more dynamic and learner-centered classrooms. To fully understand how students learn a second language, it is important to consider ideas from both linguistics and cognitive science. Therefore,

this research will integrate theoretical contributions from Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Long's Interaction Hypothesis, and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, alongside considerations from J. Dispenza and E. Jensen's brain-based learning framework. These combined perspectives show that when communicative strategies are aligned with neurological processes, they support learners in moving from a passive role to becoming competent and self-assured language users. In guiding this research, a selection of interdisciplinary models has been employed to contextualize the findings that explain how language is acquired in socially and cognitively meaningful ways. These include sociocultural, linguistic, and neuroscientific perspectives, which jointly support a comprehensive understanding of how interactive approaches enhance language acquisition.

Understanding how students learn a second language requires looking beyond isolated grammar drills and static vocabulary lists. It requires a more comprehensive understanding, one that acknowledges the role of interaction, emotional safety, and how the brain actually processes new knowledge. Several influential theories provide insight into how language can be learnt more naturally, and how interactive strategies respond to deeper students' needs in the learning process. There are moments in the classroom when learning comes alive not through lecture, but when students support one another. A less confident learner gains a sense of competence when paired with a stronger peer, and ideas take shape through dialogue rather than memorization. These moments reflect Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the distance between what a learner can do alone and what they can achieve with guidance: "What the child is able to do in collaboration today, he will be able to do independently tomorrow" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 87). Interactive strategies like pair work and group discussion mirror this principle: they scaffold learning socially, encouraging students to build meaning through shared effort.

If Vygotsky helps us understand the power of social support, then Krashen (1982) draws attention to something more sensitive, the learner's emotional state, and well-being. His Affective Filter Hypothesis reminds us that anxiety, low self-confidence, or fear of making mistakes can block the natural process of acquiring language. "Language acquisition occurs when language is understood, and when the learner is not 'on the defensive'" (Krashen, 1982, p. 32). Interactive strategies help lower this filter by creating a safe space for a supportive environment where learners feel free to try out new language forms. When learners feel emotionally secure, they are more likely to take risks, listen actively, and speak without fear of judgment.

In the field of education, the learning environment created by the teacher significantly shapes students' affective behaviours, such as motivation, engagement, anxiety, and attitudes toward learning. The way in which a teacher structures the classroom climate, manages interpersonal interactions, and designs instructional

activities plays a crucial role in fostering either a supportive or an inhibiting atmosphere. When educators intentionally organize conditions that promote emotional safety, autonomy, and meaningful engagement, students are more likely to develop positive emotional attitudes that enhance their overall learning experience. Conversely, environments marked by stress, ambiguity, or lack of emotional connection may contribute to disinterest or affective resistance. Therefore, the affective domain in student development should not be viewed as a secondary outcome, but rather as a direct result of thoughtful pedagogical design and the broader classroom ecology (Păun, 2017, p. 149). But why does interaction matter so much? Long's Interaction Hypothesis answers this question directly: it is through interaction that learners negotiate meaning, clarify misunderstandings, and push their language boundaries. Unlike static grammar drills, interactive tasks invite learners to be problem-solvers. "It is interaction and the opportunities it affords for negotiation of meaning, which is central to the development of second language proficiency" (Long, 1996, p. 451). Communicative language teaching draws from this view, placing learners in situations where they must use language to achieve real outcomes, collaborate, persuade, question, or respond.

Having explored the emotional and social dimensions, we now turn to the cognitive aspect. Jensen's brain-based learning theory shows that language learning is most effective when it is emotionally engaging and physically active: "Learning is profoundly influenced by emotion, social interaction, and the learner's state of mind" (Jensen, 2005, p. 45). Tasks involving movement, storytelling, or collaborative planning activate memory and build stronger neural connections. As Păun E. reflects, teaching is not just about transmitting knowledge, it also means living the activity alongside students, connecting emotionally, and being fully present (Păun E. 2017, pp. 147–148). These ideas also resonate with Anna Turula's emphasis on learner agency, affective engagement, and reflective interaction. She argues that modern language teaching must support the development of communicative competence not only through interaction, but also through meaningful reflection and emotional connection. According to her, effective language learning happens when students feel empowered to take ownership of their learning process, engage with content personally, and collaborate in socially supportive settings. Rather than being passive recipients, learners become active participants in shaping classroom meaning, guided by trust, choice, and authenticity (Anna Turula, 2021, p.14). These principles closely align with Vygotskian scaffolding and Krashen's emphasis on emotional safety, while also reinforcing the teacher's role as a reflective facilitator of interaction and autonomy. Similar views are reflected in the work of Tokuhama-Espinosa (2014), who emphasizes that neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to rewire and adapt, gives educators the opportunity to design educational initiatives that support all learners, regardless of background. "Neuroplasticity allows educators to design interventions that help every child learn, regardless of prior experiences" (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2014, p. 45). Teaching, then, is not just about delivering information, but about shaping the brain through meaningful interaction. Similarly,

Sousa reminds us that stress impairs learning by blocking access to higher-order thinking: “Stress impairs learning because the amygdala blocks access to higher-order thinking skills” (Sousa, 2016, p. 94). These insights offer a scientific foundation for communicative strategies that reduce pressure and promote trust, crucial conditions for second language acquisition. These ideas are integrated into the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which redefines language competence as the ability to interact meaningfully in real-life contexts. Rather than focus solely on grammar or vocabulary, CEFR descriptors emphasize the integration of speaking, listening, and mediation skills. “Users and learners of a language draw upon a full range of communicative language competences to engage in meaningful interaction” (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 35). In this way, interactive strategies are not simply methodological choices; they are reflections of a broader educational philosophy that centers on authenticity and purposeful communication. Together, these theories support the idea that interactive language strategies are not just effective, but they are essential. They respond to the way we learn best: socially, emotionally, cognitively, and communicatively. In this sense, interactive strategies align with how the brain learns best: through experience, not abstraction. Well-being in classes is built on a deep understanding of human needs and on a collaborative and well-organized climate, not just through symbolic or short-term initiatives (Tîrcă, 2022, p. 53).

Methodology: To explore the impact of interactive strategies on second language development, we conducted a planned series of lessons with a first-year group of undergraduate students from the Faculty of History and Philosophy, **with a specialization in History and English**. The implementation took place over one academic term, September-December, during weekly 90-minute practical seminars. The class consisted of 19 students with mixed CEFR proficiency levels ranging from A2 to B2. The goal was to switch from a predominantly teacher-centered grammar and translation model to a learner-centered format using communicative techniques such as role-plays, task-based learning (TBL), pair work, and group discussions. As students were following a general English course, thematic content was selected from everyday topics relevant to young adults. One recurring theme was *Healthy Lifestyle*, which lent itself well to a wide range of communicative tasks including giving advice, comparing habits, discussing routines, and role-playing health-related scenarios. For instance, in Week 7 students participated in a TBL activity, where they worked in small groups to design a seven-day programme promoting physical and mental well-being. As part of the task, students conducted research on well-being themes and shared their insights via digital poster creations and accompanying presentations. In another session, students engaged in a role-play simulating a doctor's appointment, where one played a patient describing symptoms and the other, a doctor giving lifestyle recommendations. These activities required students to use vocabulary related to health, modals of advice (should, ought to, must), and discourse markers to organize their speech. Thus, formative feedback was collected

weekly through reflective learning journals and brief peer surveys. Students were encouraged to assess their own participation, difficulties, and use of strategies. Over time, a consistent increase was observed in self-reported confidence during speaking tasks and a noticeable shift from memorized language to spontaneous expression. For instance, during Week 10's simulation "Tour Guide at a Historical Site," over 70% of the learners voluntarily expanded beyond provided prompts and introduced historically accurate content in fluent English. These qualitative results support existing research suggesting that when tasks are meaningful and socially scaffolded, learners internalize both linguistic forms and confidence (Krashen, 1982, pp. 35–36; Turula, 2021, p. 16; CEFR, 2020, pp. 55–56). In alignment with Vygotsky's ZPD, pairing students of differing levels promoted collective learning, while brain-based principles (Jensen, 2005, p. 45) helped guide task sequencing to reduce cognitive overload and maximize long-term retention. The implementation demonstrates that even within academically diverse student profiles, interactive techniques can be successfully integrated into content-rich English language programs when scaffolded intentionally, adapted to learners' interests, and supported through ongoing reflection. The results of this classroom intervention demonstrate the significant impact that interactive strategies have on promoting language development, particularly in a mixed-level context such as the one described. The heterogeneous group of learners initially presented a challenge in task design and classroom management. However, as tasks became more student-centered and scaffolded, students across proficiency levels began to engage more actively. This confirms Vygotsky's premise that collaboration within the Zone of Proximal Development allows weaker learners to benefit from peer interaction while stronger students consolidate their knowledge through explanation (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 85–86).

The topic of Healthy Lifestyle proved especially effective in motivating learners, regardless of their background. Because it was universally relevant, students were able to draw from personal experiences, reducing affective barriers and enhancing both fluency and risk-taking. This is supported by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which emphasizes that emotionally positive learning environments lead to greater acquisition (Krashen, 1982, pp. 31–32). Furthermore, the integration of digital tools, collaborative projects, and real-life simulations activated what Eric Jensen calls "emotionally positive and socially engaging learning zones," facilitating memory retention and learner autonomy (*Teaching With the Brain in Mind*, 2005, pp. 44–46). From a neuro-pedagogical standpoint, this type of task-based engagement enhances neuroplasticity by encouraging the brain to form new pathways through multisensory interaction and problem-solving (Valentina MÎSLIȚCHI, 2023, pp. 92–93). Motivation also increased as learners reported a greater sense of purpose. The use of meaningful tasks allowed them to apply English in practical contexts, aligning with the CEFR's emphasis on communicative competence in real-life situations (*CEFR Companion Volume*, 2020, pp. 35–38).

Students began to take greater control over their learning process, a feature central to self-determination theory, which suggests that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are key to sustained motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). We are shaped by the experiences we live. In order to learn something new, our brain needs to connect it to previous experiences and build upon them. Learning helps us transform: the brain's neuroplasticity enables us to change our behavior and achieve the desired outcomes (Dispenza, 2019, pp.194-199).

This discussion reveals that interactive strategies do more than just teach language; they transform the learning environment and empower students cognitively, emotionally, and socially by making language learning a relevant, shared, and brain-aligned experience. This study reinforces the value of interactive language strategies as both pedagogically sound and neurologically informed approaches to second language instruction. By integrating role-plays, task-based learning, and peer collaboration into a supportive classroom environment, learners are empowered to engage actively, think critically, and communicate meaningfully. Grounded in sociocultural theory and neuroscience, such strategies not only develop communicative competence but also foster emotional safety, motivation, and learner autonomy. Ultimately, transforming passive reception into active participation is not simply an instructional change, it is a human-centered response to how language is truly learned.

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