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Meaningful Classroom Interaction and its Influence on the Speaking Abilities of Young ESL Learners in Pakistani Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of meaningful classroom interaction on young ESL learners' language development, building on Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis. The experimental group (grade 1, public school) received a month-long intervention using the Natural Approach, emphasizing comprehensible input and spontaneous language use. Results show significant improvements in the experimental group's language learning, including increased comprehension (72% vs. 36.5% control group) and full sentence utterances (45.5% vs. 21.25% control group). The experimental group demonstrated enhanced motivation and interest in language learning, highlighting the effectiveness of meaningful interaction in making language more comprehensible and beneficial for young learners. The study's findings suggest that language instruction should prioritize context-based interaction, providing learners with opportunities to engage spontaneously and meaningfully with the language. By doing so, language learning can become more accessible, enjoyable, and effective for young ESL learners.

Keywords: *Interaction, Development, Natural Approach, Motivation, Language learning, ESL learners*

Introduction

Communication is an integral part of human life and language is an instrument of communication. Language is the centre of human life (Cook, 2001). It is the institution where humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral auditory arbitrary symbols (Verplaetse, 2000). In Pakistan, English is used as a second language. It is an international language and has achieved status as the world's lingua franca through globalisation. It is the most common language to communicate scientific, technological, academic and international trade. It is considered to be a useful tool to access the world. In order to survive in this fastmoving globalised world, there is a need to be effective as well as efficient in this mode of communication. Teaching of English as a second language has attracted theorists and practitioners across the world to unfold this puzzle of second language learning. Krashen's Natural Approach lays emphasis on a context-based conversation as well as meaningful interaction (Krashen, 1982; Krashen, 2003). To develop skill and to become effective communicator, students need a wide range of skills and ability as well as an appropriate context. Skills can be developed through structured small group activities, interviews, classroom

discussion and meaningful classroom interaction between teacher and students as well as between students.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the impact of meaningful interaction in classroom for developing speaking skills of students of class One. The common classroom practices are focussed on grammar and translation (Dogar & Shah, 2023; Dogar, 2024). Learning a language through interaction in L2 in not even a concept and traditional teaching methodologies are prevalent (Dogar & Khan, 2025). Moving beyond pen and paper and using meaningful classroom interaction strategy provides students opportunity to express themselves and demonstrate their understanding. This way is still in its embryonic stage in Pakistan while its popularity is strong and its impact on society is readily recognised. A focus on language development through this strategy acknowledges that language which is used in context has more meaning in comparison to isolated words. That's why, this paper observes the impact of meaningful interaction on learners' language input comprehensibility, full sentence utterances and their motivation in learning a language.

RQ: What is the impact of meaningful classroom interaction on speaking skill of grade 1 ESL learners in public schools of Pakistan?

Literature review

Interaction in language teaching means communication between students and teachers while learning language. Interaction is a concept in which different things need to be discussed as "classroom tasks, group dynamics, learning styles, and willingness to communicate" (Nyikos, 1989). Interaction is an approach in which individuals communicate with others through a complex process (Malamah-Thomas, 1987). Interaction is viewed as significant as it is argued that only through interaction can the learners decompose the target language structures and derive meaning from classroom events. Interaction gives learners the opportunities to incorporate target language structures to their own speech. The meaningfulness for learners of classroom events of any kinds; whether thought of as interactive or not, will depend on the extent to which communication has been jointly constructed between the teacher and the learners (Chaudron, 1988). It is also considerable that many theories of communicative competence emphasise the importance of interaction and use of language in contexts to convey meaning or to get one idea out of your head and into the head of another person and vice versa (Brown, 2001). Ellis defines interaction as when the participants of equal status that share similar needs, make an effort to understand each other (Ellis, 1994). He also defines that there are some other factors that influence interaction. These factors are the nature of the task, characteristics of participants and participants' structure. Today, with the focus on process in the path of language acquisition, it is believed that language emerges through interaction and negotiation for meaning (Mackay, 2012).

Environment has more influence according to interactionists(Lightbown, 1999). In child language development, child directed speech should be understood so that language of complex interchange between a child's innate aptitude and linguistic environment could be comprehended. Interactionists have seen language development as a part of environment or with in a context. Vygotsky (1978) determined that a supportive environment with a lot of interaction helps a child to develop a language. Language should exist in its context. To show the importance of interaction, Vygotsky cites the case of Jim, a hearing child with deaf parents whose lack of normal one on one interaction resulted in his abnormally delayed FLA (first language

acquisition)(Vygotsky, 1978). Lowen &Sato (2018)) agrees that while it used to be generally held that mere exposure to language is sufficient, it is now clear that successful language learning takes place through interaction, rather than exposure. Children do not learn language from overhearing the conversations of others or from listening to the radio, and must, instead, acquire it in the context of being spoken” (Brown, 2000). In other words, interaction is very much necessary for language learning and it plays a vital role in learning. Michael Long believes that modified interaction is necessary for input to be comprehensible (Long, 1983; 2017).

The interactionists agree with Krashen’s comprehensible input but focus on the question of how input could be made comprehensible. Krashen argued that L2 learners acquire language by understanding input that contains structures one stage beyond the learner’s current level of competence (i+1) (Luo,2024). Comprehension is achieved in part with the help of extra linguistic information in the context. According to Krashen (1982, 1985), two-way interaction is a particularly good way of providing comprehensible input which plays a critical role in language learning since there is no learning without output. Output produced by students reflects the input given by teachers. In Krashen’s view, learning only takes place by means of learner’s access to comprehensible input and will occur when unknown items are only just beyond the learner’s level. It is explained in detail “i+1” structure. “i” stands for learners’ current linguistic competence and “1” stands for the items learners intend to learn. The role of teacher in creating input as teacher talk actually serves as the main source of input in second language learning. Thus, teacher should make their Input comprehensible and in right quantities (Bailey & Fahad, 2021). In the second language classroom, teacher questioning facilitates students’ output in the target languages. Questions asked by teachers act as language inputs and students’ answers to questions are language output. Interaction between students and teacher is fundamental to the learning process.

According to Doughty &Long, interaction is not a forum for practice, but it forms a basis for development (Long, 2003; Long 2015). Some researchers have shown the relationship between interaction and L2 acquisition. Mackey (1999) carried out research to address the issue of the relationship between interaction and second language development. He asserted that the nature of interaction and the role of the learner are the critical factors along with the type of structure that may be affected through interaction. He concluded in his study that one feature that interacts with the learner internal factors to facilitate development is the participation in the interaction through which the condition is provided for the negotiation of meaning. Interaction creates condition to facilitate language acquisition or make incidental acquisition rather than intentional acquisition (Mackey, 1999). Meaningful interaction basically depends on surroundings and context. Just sharing personal opinions is not merely a meaningful interaction at all. An interaction should stimulate the learners’ intellectual curiosity and engage them in productive instructional activities, so that there learning might get influenced (Mackay & Goo, 2007). Meaningful classroom interaction becomes a valuable tool for communication at school and its a vehicle to help learners develop speaking and comprehension skills as well. According to Lyster (2007) learning language through interaction has a pedagogical focus because interaction provides teachers and learners with strategies for facilitating comprehension, formal accuracy, academic achievement and literacy development.

Theoretical Framework

Interaction is a vital component of second language acquisition (SLA), playing a crucial role in the learning process. The interaction hypothesis, proposed by Long (1983) and revised in 1996, emphasizes the importance of interaction in SLA. This review aims to provide an in-depth examination of the four key components of interaction: input, negotiation for meaning, negotiation of form, and output.

Input is a necessary component of all theories of language acquisition, including the interactionist approach (Mackay & Goo, 2007). It refers to the language that learners are exposed to, which can be naturalistic, pre-modified (i.e., simplified and/or elaborated), or interactionally modified. The effects of input on comprehension and L2 development are two critical issues in interactionist research. Input can be provided through various means, including teacher talk, classroom discussions, and authentic materials.

Negotiation for meaning is a crucial aspect of interaction, driven by a breakdown in communication (Long, 1983; 2007). When learners and their interlocutors encounter difficulties in understanding each other, they may signal a communication breakdown, leading to clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks. These discourse moves are essential in facilitating comprehension and promoting L2 development.

Negotiation of form occurs when learners and interlocutors focus on linguistic accuracy, often in response to a desire for correction (Lyster, 2007). This type of negotiation is particularly relevant in instructed SLA, as it involves teachers' pedagogical intervention, often in the form of corrective feedback. Negotiation of form can help learners develop their linguistic knowledge and improve accuracy.

Output refers to the language produced by learners during meaning-focused interaction (2005). The comprehensible output hypothesis posits that output is not only a representation of L2 development but also a causal factor in promoting L2 development. Output allows learners to practice language, test hypotheses, and receive feedback, thereby facilitating language learning. In conclusion, interaction is a multifaceted construct that plays a vital role in SLA. Understanding the components of interaction – input, negotiation for meaning, negotiation of form, and output can help researchers and language teachers design more effective language learning environments and promote L2 development.

Methodology

Since the purpose of this study was to inquire about the development of skills especially speaking skills of the students of class One and how meaningful interaction strategy could improve the development of language learning, the experimental research method was used to investigate the impact of meaningful classroom interaction on language learning. The research was carried out at a public school in Lahore with the students of class One. A convenient sample of 40 students, divided into two groups, were selected in this research. All were girls aged 6 to 7 years. Students shared same socio-economic status. As it was experimental research, to measure the required data, speaking test/interview was considered as a bench mark for this research.

To analyze the impact of meaningful interaction on language learning, an experiment was designed on the students of class One in a public sector school. Difference between experimental group and control group were determined by analyzing and observing five factors of language learning. Each group consisted on twenty students. Experimental group was taught for a month, six days a week and six hours a day, with the method of 'Natural approach' where focus of language instruction was on providing learners with a rich variety of comprehensible input and

had opportunities to use language spontaneously and meaningfully. Simplified and meaningful input was given to the young learners with the use of context. The input was carefully planned and executed by the researchers themselves. A sample lesson plan is as follows.

Topic: Words with letter A

Objective:

- 1) Teaching of structure, "this is"
- 2) Exposure to the use of 'a' and 'an'

Interaction pattern: Teacher utterances are provided and students repeat after the teacher

T: class open your books and read with me. (makes sure that all students open their books)

T: A for apple. This is an apple (pointing to the apple).

A for aeroplane; an aeroplane; this is an aeroplane.

A for ant; an ant; this is an ant.

A for alligator; an alligator; this is an alligator

The students choral read after the teacher. The interaction can extend adding adjectives; this is a red apple. For the experimental month the focus on form was indefinite articles and the utterance "this is a" and "/she/they am/is/are a girl/girl"

Data analysis

Four factors are analysed and observed to check the impact of meaningful classroom interaction on language learning; comprehension, complete sentence utterances, use of L1 and motivation. Pre-test and post-test, having open ended questions, were conducted to analyze and compare the result.

The following table shows the percentages of pre-test and post-test results in the control group that is taught in the traditional way. It is observed that the percentage score across all four variables almost remained the same with the difference of plus minus one.

Table 1

Comparison of pre-test and post-test scores of control group

Factors	Pre-test	Post-test
Comprehension	35%	36.5%
Complete sentence utterance	20.75%	21.25%
Use of 1 st language	38%	37.5%
Motivation	25.23%	25%

In the following table, percentages of pre-test and post-test results of the experimental group are compared. The table shows quite remarkable increase in comprehension, complete sentence utterances and motivation with a slight decrease in the use of L1.

Table 2

Comparison of pre-test and post-test scores of Experimental groups

Factors	Pre-test	Post-test
Comprehension	40%	71.77%
Complete sentence utterance	20%	44.5%
Use of 1 st language	34.23%	31%
Motivation	24.78%	46.38%

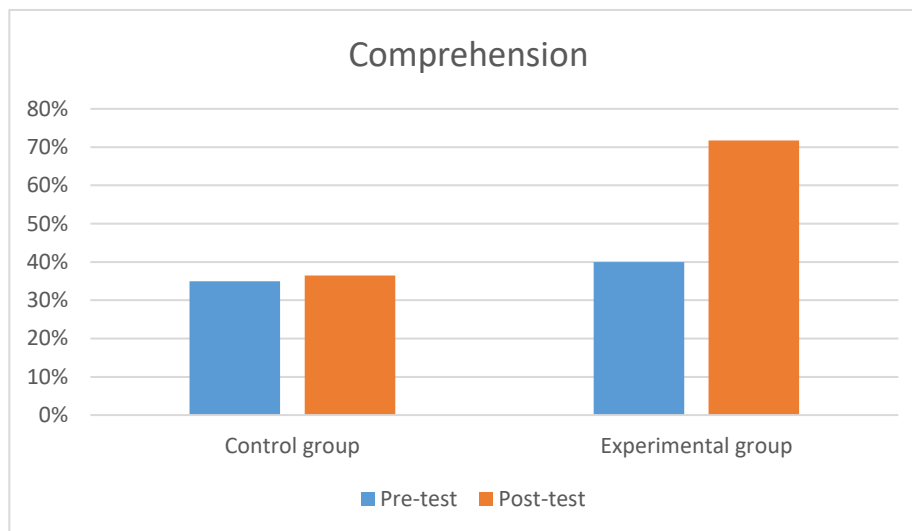
For a detailed comparison of experimental and control group, bar graphs are presented below for each variable.

Comprehension

It is very important to find out how well a speech is understood. Comprehensibility is an ability of a listener to understand utterances produced by a speaker. According to the results of pre-test, 35% students of control group and 40% students of experimental group comprehended the questions. In post-test 36.5% students of control group and 71.77% students of experimental group comprehended the questions.

Figure1

Bar graph of Comprehension across control and experimental group



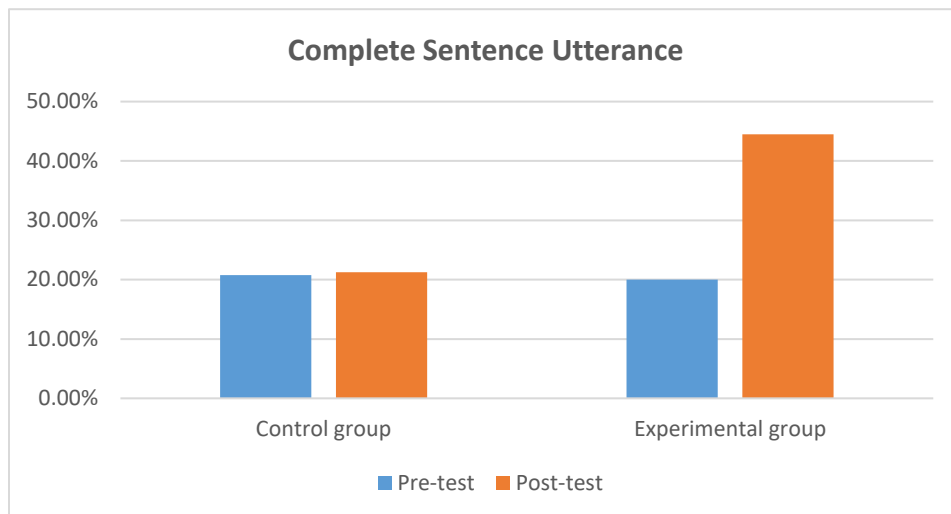
The results depict the positive impact of using meaningful classroom interaction method. In post-test 35.27% more students of experimental group were able to comprehend the questions.

Complete sentence utterances

Mostly students answer in one word rather than speaking full sentence like 'my name is Sana'. It shows that students are not only able to comprehend the question but can also speak in English and have confidence in themselves. Data revealed that in pre-test 20.75% students of control group and 20% students of experimental group gave answers in full sentences. In post-test 21.25% students of control group and 44.5% students of experimental group gave answers in full sentences.

Figure2

Bar graph of complete sentence utterance across control and experimental group



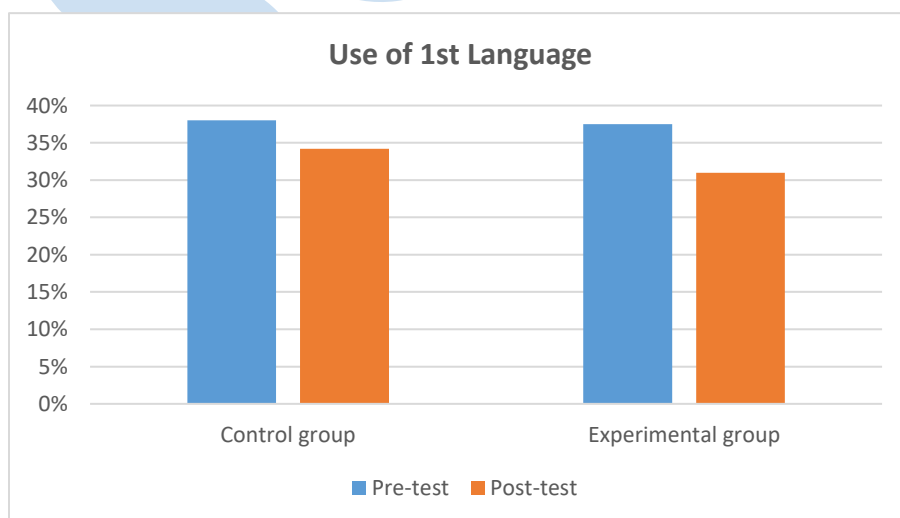
Meaningful classroom interaction by the teacher not only helps the students in understanding the question but it also improves their ability to speak in full sentence structure. In post-test 23.25% more students were able to give answers in full sentences.

Use of 1st language

Students understand the questions in English but are not able to answer in English instead they use their first language. According to the data in pre-test, 38% students of control group and 34.23% students of experimental group use Urdu words while answering the questions. In post-test 37.5% students of control group and 31% students of experimental group use Urdu words. Hence the use of L1 vocabulary is less for the experimental group and more for the control group. It dropped by 6.5% which is a clear indication of the improvement in the learning of the second language.

Figure3

Bar graph of Use of L1 across control and experimental group



1st language has a strong impact on the learning of 2nd language especially on the young learners. The main difficulties are the acquisition of the vocabulary and sentence structure which take time to overcome. With meaningful classroom interaction, the percentage use of L1 vocabulary dropped by 6.5% in the experimental group.

Motivation

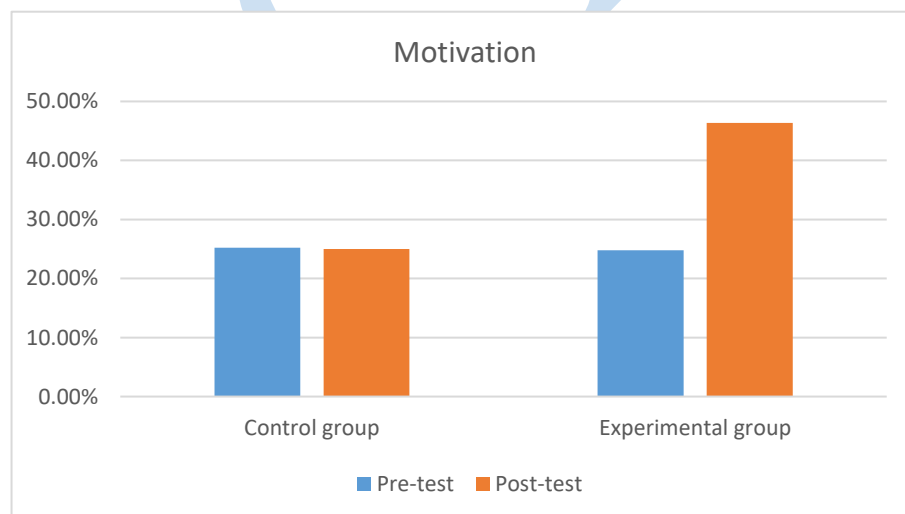
In pre-test questions 'do you like to speak English, is it boring or interesting' are asked to check the interest of the students. The data showed that in pre-test 40% students of control group and 43.94% students of experimental group are interested in learning a language. In post-test the percentage of the students of control group remains same while 58.13% students of experimental group are interested in speaking English. Meaningful classroom interaction develops interest in the student. 18.13% more students of experimental group are interested and want to learn and speak language.

To check the motivation of the students, 'why do you want to learn English, to watch English cartoons or to read books' are asked. According to the results, in pre-test 25.23% students of control group and 24.78% students of experimental group were motivated to learn English. In post-test 25% students of control group and 46.38% students of experimental group want to learn English

There is a direct relationship between successful learning and motivation. As the students take interest and start to comprehend the language, they will be motivated and want to learn more. Meaningful classroom interaction has a positive impact on students and 21.38% more students were motivated towards learning English.

Figure4

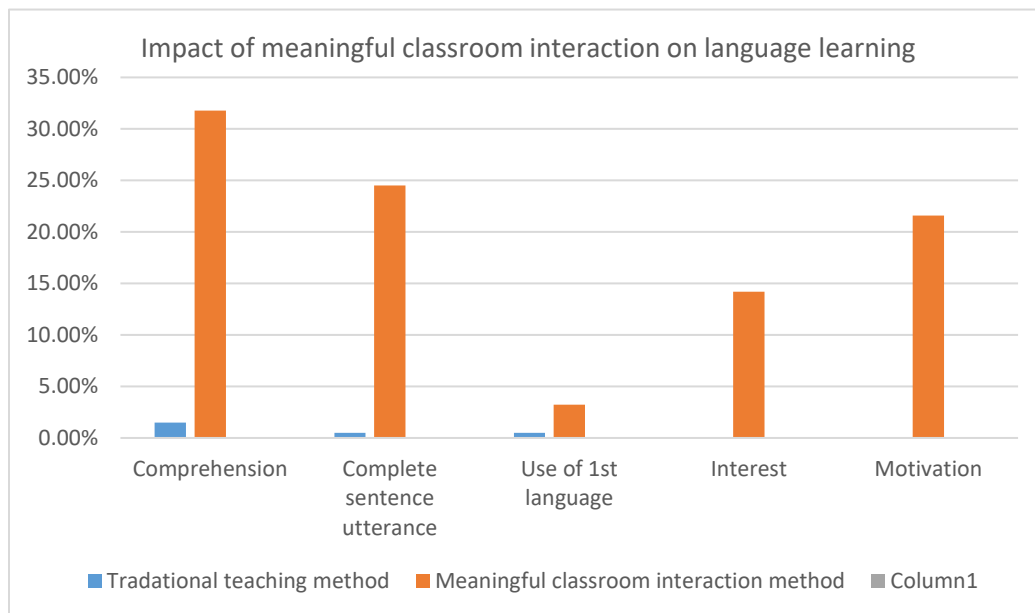
Bar graph of Motivation across control and experimental group



Findings

Figure 5

Bar graph of across meaningful classroom interaction and traditional teaching method



It is evident from figure that the language learning of the learners increased hugely by the meaningful interaction approach at all variables. Students started comprehending more and full sentences responses increased immensely. This led to increased motivation and interest in second language learning. Whereas it can be seen that the interest and motivation of the control group remained at the same level as traditional teaching doesn't give any improvement over a month. Motivation is in fact a self-triggering phenomenon, learning leads to motivation and this increased motivation leads to more learning. It exactly happened with the experimental group students. It is noticed that the overall improvement in one months' time in the control group is only 1% while it is 19% for the experimental group.

Discussion

Impact of meaningful classroom interaction is directly on the subconscious learning of the students. The primary goal of using this strategy is learning a language within context. Analysis of the data shows that students start to achieve their goal through direct exposure. It is found that if language is used within its context, then it will be more beneficial and understandable for learners. As interaction plays an important role in providing comprehensible input, the focus must be on meaningful learning because output never exist without meaningful input. Students acquire language subconsciously since their whole attention is engaged in classroom and they tried to produce small sentences orally. Results also shows that meaningful classroom interaction is beneficial for sentence formation. For example, a question 'what is your good habit' is asked from a girl and she says, 'my good habit is maa baap ka kehna manena (obeying parents)'. Literary, she picks up the sentence structure and tries to speak by mixing both languages. Students understand what is being asked and try to pick structure to answer it in a sentence although many of them have used wrong structure still they try to speak in English. After successful learning the students are interested and motivated towards learning a new language and their pronunciation improves as it is vital for spoken (Shoukat, Bilal and Dogar, 2020)

Recent research papers highlight the significance of interaction in language learning, emphasizing its role in developing communicative competence and promoting meaningful communication.

Studies suggest that incorporating interaction into language instruction can lead to improved linguistic accuracy, fluency, and motivation (Chen & Loewen, 2024; Sybing, 2021, Dogar et.al. 2024)

Conclusion

There is a positive impact of meaningful classroom interaction on language learning of the students of class One. Comprehensibility of the students has been increased; students try to use English in a complete sentence. Students start to take interest and speak small phrases and sentences in classroom. Through interaction, they are motivated but it is very important to consider that interaction should be according and within the context. Earlier, students have no interaction between teacher and students and also among students. After providing an environment of learning through this strategy, learners' communication skills have been improved and they start to develop interest in English which is the primary goal of English language teaching.

Implications

The study highlights the effectiveness of meaningful interaction in language teaching, suggesting a shift from traditional methods to more interactive approaches.

The findings emphasize the importance of creating opportunities for students to engage in meaningful interactions, promoting language acquisition and development.

The study underscores the need for teacher training programs to focus on strategies for creating meaningful interactions in the classroom.

Recommendations

It is recommended that language teachers should incorporate meaningful interaction into their teaching practices to enhance students' speaking skills and motivation.

Teaching materials should be designed to promote interactive learning, encouraging students to engage actively in the language learning process.

Future studies should investigate the long-term effects of meaningful interaction on language learning and explore its application in different contexts.

The study demonstrates the power of meaningful interaction in enhancing ESL learners' speaking skills and motivation, providing valuable insights for language teachers and educators.

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