

The Role of Classroom Interaction in Developing English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract:

Within EFL framework, classroom interaction plays an important role in developing learners' English as a foreign language. Teachers try to provide EFL learners with the most important interaction strategies to be used in order to communicate effectively and improve their English language competence. Classroom interaction is considered as one of the significant educational strategies to develop students' language teaching- learning process. It is the process of exchanging knowledge between at least two participants through using a variety of strategies. In recent studies, different researchers have raised some basic problems are related to foreign language learning such as prepare learners to be able to use foreign language proficiently. Therefore, this paper aims at presenting the important role of classroom interaction strategies in developing English as a foreign language.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Classroom Interaction (CI); Foreign Language Learning (FLL); Teaching-Learning Process; Strategies.

1. INRODUCTION

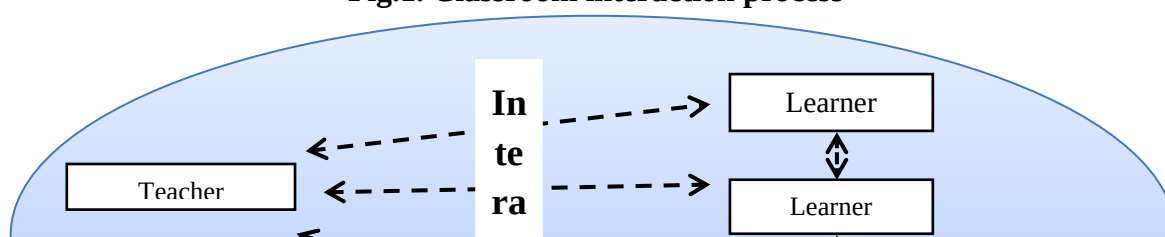
One of the substantial concerns of learning a foreign language is to be used to interact with people especially native speakers. University learners who are trying to acquire English as a foreign language (EFL) may face different difficulties while communicating, which are mainly due to paying more attention to learn grammatical rules, vocabulary and forming correct sentences rather than learning the communicative skills. Classroom interaction between teacher(s)-student(s) is one of the useful techniques used by EFL teachers during oral sessions to enhance their learners' communicative skills. According to (Ellis, 1990; Brown, 2015), interaction is the fundament of FL learning, where learners can exchange information for both boost their communicative potentials or construct their social identity. Moreover, many researchers (Hatch, 1978; Rivers, 1987; Richards and Lockhart, 1996; Pica, 1996; Ellis, 1999) consider that knowledge can be constructed through classroom interaction, since it provides learners with various strategies and opportunities to send and receive data; therefore, interaction has a significant role in the process of foreign/second language acquisition (SLA). Thus, this study attempts to probe the important role of classroom interaction as a pedagogical strategy on developing English as a foreign language.

1. Definition of Classroom Interaction

Classroom interaction is the process of taking and giving (exchanging) information between the teacher and learners as a productive act. Interaction is derivative from the verb “to interact”, which means according to the Cambridge International Dictionary of English “to communicate with or react to (each other)”. Interaction has been considered as a classroom approach to teaching a foreign language since it refers to communication between the instructor and the students or among the students. According to Nunan and Carter (2001), “classroom interaction refers to the interaction between the teacher and learners, and amongst the learners in the classroom” (P.120). Therefore, interaction and communication work together and each one completes the other as Brown (2000) asserts that “...interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication: it is what communication is all about” (P. 165).

Basically, Classroom interaction (CI) is the process that develops foreign languages' skills, as a fundamental element of teaching-learning process, where two or more people are engaged in reciprocal (verbal or non-verbal) communication. In other words, Classroom interaction is the collaboration between the teachers and learners in order to create a positive atmosphere, which can be helpful for the learners to improve their skills and practice their foreign language successfully. Rivers (1987) confirms that interaction is the core of communication and the substantial aim of foreign language learning in oral or written forms, among learners, learner (s) and teacher (s), teacher (s) and learner (s) who seek to interact, cooperate or share knowledge. Figure (01) can show in brief the process of CI:

Fig.1. Classroom interaction process



In addition, Wagner (1994) adds that, interaction could be achieved when two participants at least react on a specific subject or event, which reflects a successful learning and teaching atmosphere in the classroom in order to build their knowledge and develop their communication skills. Thus, we can say that, CI is an interactive process which makes it totally different from any other social settings, where the teacher spends hours talking, lecturing, asking questions, explaining and so on with his/her learners in order to achieve one of its primary pedagogic purposes which is communicating with a foreign language effectively. Gebhard (1998) states that there at least five factors should be taken in to account in order to create an interactive classroom interaction:

1. Reduce the central position of the teacher
2. Appreciate the uniqueness of individuals
3. Provide chances for students to express themselves in meaningful ways
4. Give opportunities for students to negotiate meaning with each other and the teacher
5. Give students choices as to what they want to say, to whom they want to say it, and how they want to say it (P.6).

Theoretically, different researchers like Hatch (1978), Rivers (1987), Richard and Lockhart (1996), Pica (1996) and Ellis (1999) have presented a variety of issues that deals with CI within second/foreign language acquisition. They have all agreed that language learning is an interactive process where CI plays an important role in developing language in general and the process of second language learning (SLA) in particular. Thus, to understand more what is interaction within Foreign/SLA concepts or language teaching and learning in general, we have to shed lights on three main theories are called as follows: the input hypothesis, the interaction hypothesis and the output hypothesis.

a. The Input Hypothesis: it was proposed by Krashen in 1981. He (1982) states that “humans acquire language in only one way _ by understanding messages, or by receiving ‘comprehensible input’”(p. 4), which means that receiving comprehensible input is the only way that can lead to the acquisition of a second language. If a learner’s level in a second language is i , s/he can move to an $i+1$ level only by being exposed to comprehensible input containing $i+1$ (Krashen, 1985).

b. The Interaction Hypothesis: it is a cognitive approach proposed by Michael Long in 1981, which focuses more on face-to-face interaction and communication. Long (1996) confirms that IH is the process when humans engage in a communication talk either with natives or other interlocutors; they negotiate meaning by changing their speech in order to make the input comprehensible and enhance the ability to acquire the target language (Thu, 2009).

The updated version of IH by Long (1996) proposed that:

... [The]environmental contributions to acquisition are mediated by selective attention and the learners' developing L2 processing capacity, and that these resources are brought together most usefully, although not exclusively, during *negotiation for meaning*. Negative feedback obtained during negotiation work or elsewhere may be facilitative of L2 development, at least for vocabulary, morphology, and language specific syntax, and essential for learning certain specifiable L1-L2 contrasts (p. 414).

This hypothesis was supported by some researchers and criticized by others. But the majority agrees that:

- ✓ interaction can facilitate SLA;
- ✓ negotiation of meaning can obviously facilitate acquisition of a second language;
- ✓ that negotiation of meaning supplies learners with opportunities to get feedback from the others;
- ✓ the changes that arise during negotiation facilitate the understanding of the intended messages and this is through the corrective feedback that learners receive from the others (Ellis, 1991; Ellis, 2005; Thu, 2009).

c. Output Hypothesis: comprehensible output hypothesis was developed by Swain in 1985 and asserts that learning a second language can be developed by producing and practicing a comprehensible both spoken and written forms (Swain, 1993)

Therefore, the entire three hypotheses are generated to establish the fundamental elements that enhance language learning, especially, when foreign or second language learners have to interact and negotiate meaning so that creating a comprehensible input and emphasizing the importance of practice and production in F/SLA.

2. Aspects of Classroom Interaction

Classroom interaction includes two main aspects, which are negotiation of meaning and feedback, if these two elements are not available in the classroom, we cannot achieve a successful interaction. Ellis and Fotos (1999) confirm that "Interaction contributes to acquisition through the provision of negative evidence and through opportunities for modified output" (p. 09).

2.1. Negotiation of Meaning

It is the process when people (interlocutors) are interacting and discussing their ideas and opinions, meanings are negotiated, they try to clarify their speech and avoid misunderstanding (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). Gass, Mackey & Ross-Feldman (2005) add that, when referring to the term “interaction”, many linguists are also interested in talking about negotiation for meaning. This term refers to the process through which the speakers go to clearly comprehend one another. In other words, negotiating meaning in the classroom is when speakers interact and conceive each other through asking for more explanation (a comprehensible input) in order to produce a clear output. However, whenever there is a lack of understanding or the message is not well delivered among the interlocutors, there are different strategies that can be used in order to achieve a successful interaction.

Mackey (2007) presents three main strategies that can create or repair an interactional environment, “Through processes of repetition, segmentation and rewording, interaction can serve to draw learners’ attention to form-meaning relationship and provide them with additional time to focus on encoding meaning” (p. 12), they are as follows:

- ✓ **Repetition:** it is the process when learners are obliged to repeat more than once “the exact speech” as it is not well understood by the listeners.
- ✓ **Segmentation:** it is when learners repeat and repair the utterances though dividing them into their linguistic segments with rising or falling intonation.
- ✓ **Rewording:** it means uttering the original speech (rephrasing the original utterances) by using other more simple and clear words (Mackey, 2007).

Therefore, it is worth saying that learning a new language can be improved though giving learners the opportunity to negotiate meaning, which makes input comprehensible, provides learners with feedback on how to use the foreign language, and encourages learners to adjust, manipulate and modify their personal output (Long, 1996)

2.2. Feedback

Feedback plays a crucial role in the educational domain in general, a key aspect of interaction, and in developing, learning and acquiring new languages in particular. When learners can recognize their mistakes though receiving an effective feedback from the others (teachers and learners), however, feedback from teachers could be distinct from the one received from learners because teachers employ various types of correction strategies, and they try to make changes and correct their output. Mackey (2007) asserts that, “[T]hrough interaction that involves feedback, the attention[s] of the learners is paid to the form of errors and are pushed to create modification” (P.30) and it “provides learners with knowledge of how successful their performance has been” (Littlewood, 1981, P. 90). Thus, feedback is one amongst the terms that can be used to refer to the concept of errors treatment (such as correction and repair). And it is considered as one of the important elements of interaction that can improve foreign language learning skills.

Ellis (2005) says that corrective feedback is the feedback learners receive from their teacher or other learners when they make a mistake in their output. Furthermore, Li (2010) confirms that corrective feedback is a fundamental aspect in SLA which reflects learners' mistakes when they produce an output (as cited in Bower and Kawagushi, 2011).

Moreover, Makey (2007) proposes two forms of feedback, an explicit and implicit feedback. Explicit feedback which is called also metalinguistic feedback where the teacher notify that there is an error in the learners' speech or output and provides them with the correct linguistic form of the occurred errors. Whereas, implicit feedback is the corrective feedback that involves requests by learners for more clarification or recasts.

In fact, the above mentioned feedbacks are presented by teachers and may appear when correcting their learners' errors and mistakes. However, they may encounter other types of feedback according to its objectives, which is proposed by Tunstall & Gipps (1996) such as:

- ✓ **Specific Attainment Feedback:** it focuses of special features of successful attainment, which encourages student's achievement through rewarding them.
- ✓ **Specific Improvement Feedback:** it specifies what is wrong. It is used by teachers to indicate how something that is being learned can be corrected. It focuses on the learners' errors relating more to their achievement than personal attributes.

Consequently, what is the most effective type of feedback that should be used by teachers when interacting in the classroom? Teachers should not neglect the fact that feedback in the classroom can be double-edged sword, because feedback can have positive or negative effects. The former does not show only learners mistakes but also encourages them to do better. Nevertheless, the latter rises anxiety and stress in the classroom in order to avoid being humiliated. Thus, teachers should not react to every mistake and select the appropriate type of corrective feedback that does not breakdown the effectiveness of the interactive task and fosters their foreign language learning.

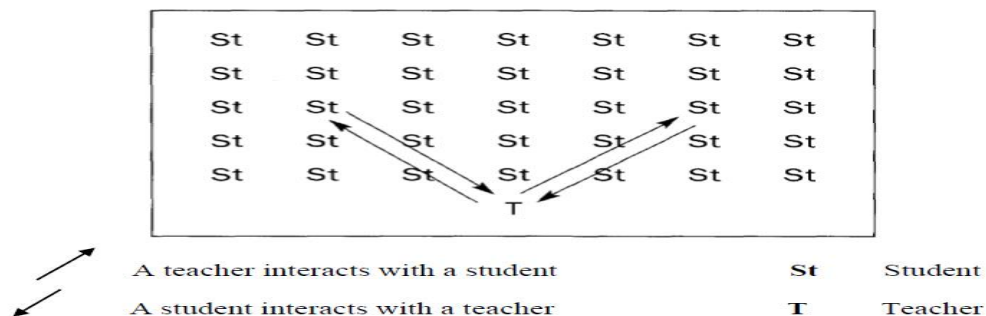
3. Types of Classroom Interaction

Classroom interaction can occur in different manners, either between the teacher and the students or between the students themselves, individually or collectively due to the communicative context, but all these types are generated to achieve one goal, which is improving language learning communicative skills. Johnson (1995) confirms that classroom is a peerless communication situation with highly regulated patterns of communicative behavior that are actively negotiated between teachers and learners. In order to know the effect of classroom interaction in developing the speaking skill in particular and foreign language learning in general, one should mention its main types depending on who communicates with whom as follows: Teacher with learner(s) or learner (s) with learner(s).

3.1. Teacher-Learner (s) Interaction

Coulthard (1977) states that this type of interaction happens between the teacher and one learner or many other learners, when the teacher plays an essential role through negotiating the lecture's content with his/her learners such as: asking questions, receiving ideas, involving them, giving positive feedback, etc. During this type of interaction the teacher should involve all the learners in the interactive activities and reduce his/her time of interaction and permit them to do most of the talk (Adaba, 2017). Scrivener (2005, P. 85) creates the following diagram to show clearly how the classroom interaction happens between the teacher and the student (s).

Fig.2. Interaction between the teacher and student (s)



Source: Scrivener, 2005, P. 85

This type of interaction has a significant role in the classroom, since a variety of difficulties are encountered when using it such as: passive learners and the teacher's talk dominate the class while waiting for their feedback (Snell, 1999, Scrivener, 2005). Moreover, Harmer (2009) states that teachers should focus on three things when they talk with their students: firstly, teachers should provide a comprehensible output (understandable language due to their level), secondly, teachers must think about what they will say to their students, hence the teacher speech is as a resource for learners. Finally, teachers also have to identify the ways in which they will speak such as the voice, tone and intonation.

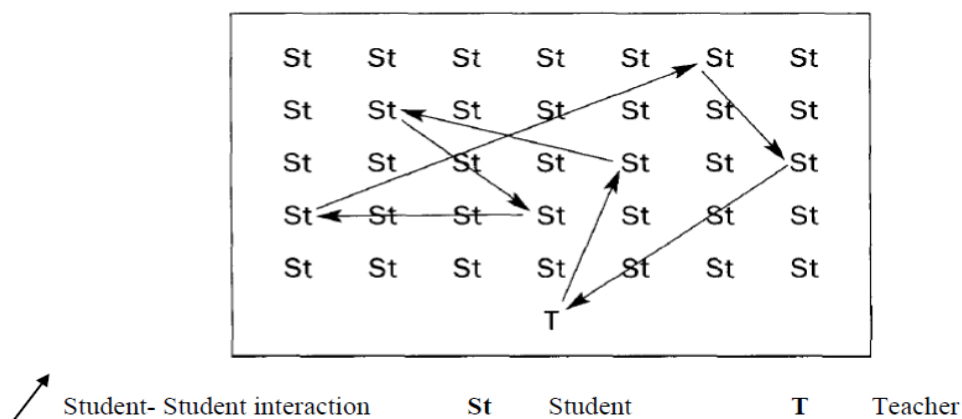
3.2. Learner (s)-Learner (s) Interaction

Learner (s)-Learner (s) interaction is considered as one of the methods used in the classroom to enhance learners' FL abilities that occur among learners. In this form of interaction, learners are the main participants since they need to interact among themselves in order to negotiate meaning through speaking tasks. Learner-Learner interaction can be occurred either in groups called Learner-Learner interaction or in pairs called peer interaction in order to give students the opportunity to speak and practice speaking skill in the classroom for the sake of receiving feedback in the target language through correcting each other's errors or asking questions to each other when working in groups (Mackey, 2007, p. 30)

In the same line, Johnson (1995) states that the existence of this type among the learners is considered as a positive behavior of the learning process in which learners can improve their knowledge and capacities that make them more active during the lectures. Similarly,

Neagle (2002) adds that interaction between learners in the classroom is appreciated and required, since interaction between classmates can promote the learners' capacities. Besides that, learner (s)-learner (s) interaction is really essential in the sense that it permits learners to share their ideas and enhance their communicative abilities. In addition, Scrivener (2005) affirms that inside classes, learners are more interacting with their teachers than among them. Likewise, he suggests some points in order to increase learners' interaction such as: establishing a relaxed atmosphere inside classes, learners should have the opportunity to express themselves, design pair work and group work that evolve interaction among learners, etc. He presents the following diagram that shows the way of this interaction in the classroom (2005, P. 86).

Fig.3. Interaction among students



Source: Scrivener, 2005, P. 86

In a nutshell, whatever the applied type of classroom interaction, it has to be controlled by the teacher, unless noisy classes will disapprove the teaching-learning process. Since classroom interaction allows students to be active in the teaching-learning process, when the teacher affords chances to students to talk and develop effectively their FLL.

4. The Importance of Classroom Interaction

The classroom is considered as one of the appropriate environments where a variety of educational skills are enhanced. Johnson (1995) confirms that classroom is a unique communication situation with highly regulated patterns of communicative behavior that are actively negotiated between teachers and learners. He (1995) adds that "When second language students enter classroom, they enter into a communicative context in which the norms of participation tend to be established by the teacher" (p. 33). Also, classroom is a "pseudo real" context or an academic situation where learners are engaged in speech exchanges (interaction) which look like daily life conversations, but are restricted by institutional rules. Interaction is one of the essential strategies used in language teaching-learning process in order to build knowledge and improve language skills.

Many linguists argue about the role of interaction in Language learning since it provides various benefits especially to foreign language learners. Interaction has a prominent role both in the classroom and outside, where teachers as well as students should deal with it as a fundamental strategy for teaching and learning language skills, especially speaking skill. According to Hedge (2000), interaction is an important factor for learners in order to produce a comprehensible output, because it permits them to practice their language in the classroom. In addition to that, it provides learners with different opportunities that improve their language system through getting feedback from the teacher or students. Interacting in the classroom makes learners capable to cope with their lack of language knowledge; for example: students speak slowly, repeat or clarify their ideas while talking together is regarded as a negotiation of meaning (discussion to reach agreement) which aims at making the output more comprehensible. This means that in ELT practice, interaction pushes learners to produce appropriate language when they are working in pairs or in groups; because when a student produce the suitable language, this language will be as an input for other students; therefore, in language learning, group work has an important role since it investigates the ways in which language input and output differs in the classroom (Hedge, 2000, p. 13)

Furthermore, Long (1996) states that interaction plays a key role in developing foreign language since the primary source of data for learners is taken during a meaningful interaction with more competent speaker, this means that interaction is considered as the only source which provides learners with opportunities in order to control the input. In addition, interaction makes the learners able to test their communicative success through exchanging information with the teacher or among the students themselves (as stated in Lyster, 2007, pp. 102-103). Therefore, Classroom interaction, contributes to language improvement through supplying target language practice with opportunities by designing classroom interaction activities that permits learners to use the target language. In this line, Littlewood (1981) affirms that there is an advancement from “pre-communicative” to “communicative” activities which involves many forms of interactive language practice, this means that practicing such activities should progressively related to the “real-life” language use (p. 16).

Nowadays, the educational system obliges learners to interact more than just listening (being passive) to their teacher’s speech. Hall & Verplaetse (2000) state that CI is a process that develops two major skills (speaking and listening); it makes students critical thinkers, who can share their views among their peers. Ellis & Fotos (1999) declare that interaction facilitates foreign language acquisition because:

- 1- It guides the learners to communicate with their peers easily and gives them an exposure to the target language;
- 2- It gives the students the opportunity to share their ideas with their peers and provides them with chance to practice what they have learnt;
- 3- It encourages the learners to help each other by correcting each other’s errors;

- 4- It helps the student to hear voices and answers as well as their points of view;
- 5- It gives the learners a chance to get things right;
- 6- It allows the learners to play the teacher's role in the classroom.

5. Strategies of Promoting EFL Classroom Interaction

As aforementioned, Classroom interaction requires at least two people to exchange and share a variety of ideas, feelings, information, etc. In order to achieve a successful communication, that is considered as an essential part in learning and teaching process. Brown (2001) defines interaction as being a "Collaborative exchange of thoughts, feeling or ideas between two or more people, resulting in a reciprocal effort on each other" (p.165). Teachers across the globe use different techniques and strategies in order to enhance their students' classroom interaction, and especially their foreign/second language communicative skills. Because of that, researchers set out the following strategies and principles to interact effectively in English in real situations.

On the one hand, some researchers have presented a set of strategies than can help to promote CI like Jia (2013) who states that, there are five strategies of promoting classroom interaction. They are as follows:

- 1- Improving Questioning Strategies:** the teacher should ask the question that can be answered by the learners then the teacher adapts his/her questions to the levels or abilities of the learners.
- 2- Attending to Learners' Linguistic Level:** the activities should give different language level to different learners. The offered material reflects the unique needs of those learners at the level they have reached.
- 3- Implementing Cooperative Learning:** working cooperatively can help development of learner's social skills. Cooperative learning means that every member of the group is included and differences among group member are resolved by the group members.
- 4- Building Positive Teacher-Learner Rapport:** mutual respect between teacher and learners is essential part of education. The dynamic qualities of classroom learning need the responsible from both of teacher and learner.
- 5- Reducing Classroom Anxiety:** the teacher helps the learners to boost their self-esteem and self-confidence and create comfortable and non-threatening environment (as cited in Hanum,n.d., P. 06).

On the other hand, other researchers have proposed different principles that can improve CI. Brown (2001, PP. 55-68) set out seven principles as follows:

- 1- Automaticity:** for best achievement of interaction, students must pay attention to meanings and messages that they want to convey rather than grammar and other linguistic forms. This lack of control promotes automaticity in students.
- 2- Intrinsic Motivation:** during peer interaction, students enjoy their own competence to use the language and to develop a system of self-reward.

3- Strategic Investment: interaction demands students to use strategic language competence; exactly by learning how to open and close a conversation, how to take and yield the floor and how to repair the errors they may produce.

4- Risk-Taking: in interactive classroom, students are subjected to their shyness of failing to produce intended meanings, interpreting the interlocutors' meanings, or even fearing of being rejected or neglected. Hence, students have to change these risks for the sake of interaction.

5- The Language Culture Connection: students are required to be systematically knowledgeable about the culture of the language being learnt.

6- Interlanguage: the role of the teacher's feedback is essential to the developmental (production and comprehension) errors made by students during the second language acquisition process.

7- Communicative Competence: interaction is regarded as a significant factor in achieving communicative competence because it involves all its elements (grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic).

6. The Role of the EFL Teacher in Classroom Interaction

Within the academic context especially the classroom, there are many aspects that can improve or disapprove the success of language teaching and learning process. In addition to all what we have mentioned before (theories, strategies and principles that help to improve CI), no one could neglect the crucial role of the teacher who motivates and creates interest inside and outside the classroom, and changes his/her roles according to the students' needs. Therefore, the teacher has many roles which could be changed according to the classroom situation.

Littlewood (1981, P.92) states that the teacher is a '**facilitator of learning**', which includes the following interrelated roles:

- A general **overseer** of learning, who coordinates the activities so that they form a coherent progression from lesser to greater communicative ability.
- A classroom **manager**, who is responsible for grouping activities into lessons and for their overall organisation.
- A language **instructor**, who presents new language, controls, evaluates and corrects learners' performance.
- In free communicative activities s/he will act as a **consultant** or **adviser**, helping where necessary. He may move around the classroom and monitor student's progress, strengths and weaknesses.
- Sometimes s/he will participate in an activity as a '**co-communicator**' with the learners. He may encourage learners without taking their main role.

Furthermore, Hedge (2000) and Harmer (2001) identify important roles the teacher can play such as:

- 1. Controller:** the teacher is a transmitter of knowledge from him/herself to the students through giving explanations, organizing questions and lecturing.
- 2. Assessor:** the teacher gives feedback to students by giving correction or by praising them about their performance. The students have to know how and for what reason they are being assessed; the teacher should tell them their strengths and weaknesses, so that, they can have a clear idea about their levels and what they need to concentrate on.
- 3. Corrector:** the teacher decides when and where to correct students' output, and s/he should be careful when correcting learners' pronunciation mistakes or errors commit during classroom interaction.
- 4. Organizer:** the teacher should organize students in the classroom into pair/group works in order to do different tasks, engage all the class in the interaction and ensure its participation, give instructions when needed, and manage time when it is over.
- 5. Promoter:** the teacher encourages students to think creatively and to become independent.
- 6. Resource:** the teachers should be in/outside the classroom as a resource of information through answering students' questions and orient them to look for the right material, but not to spoon-feed them and become over-reliant of their teacher.
- 7. Observer:** the teacher should observe his/her students' classroom interaction and attract their attention in order to behave naturally and spontaneously so that s/he can evaluate the success of classroom interaction in improving learner's language skills.

7. CONCLUSION

To conclude, classroom interaction (CI) is considered as one of the important educational strategies in the field of foreign language Learning since it requires at least the contribution of two persons who participate in face-to-face interaction when using language in a real communication context in order to enhance the learning process, and because it provides learners with a variety of opportunities inside or even outside the classroom by their teachers as well as other learners. Therefore, classroom interaction within the process of FL learning needs to adopt a variety of strategies and principles to facilitate language learning in reality since interaction is in the heart of communication in an era of communicative language teaching. In a nutshell, we can say that successful interaction is the core of positive human relationships among people. Similarly to everyday-life interaction, students have to be trained to become effective communicators in a foreign language Learning.

8. Recommendations

Overall, due to all the above-discussed ideas, this research paper recommends the implementation of the following ideas:

- ✓ Teachers as well as learners should be aware of the importance of classroom interaction as an essential academic strategy to improve English as foreign language.

- ✓ Teachers seek to improve their learners' EFL through giving them the opportunity to negotiate meaning during classroom interactions by using different strategies so that positive development in the target language can be accelerated.
- ✓ Teachers should avoid giving negative feedback in the classroom and select the suitable corrective feedback that does not breakdown the effectiveness of the interactive task and fosters their FLL.
- ✓ Teachers can make CI more effective through applying a variety of its types instead of merely lecturing.
- ✓ Teachers can improve classroom interaction by applying different strategies in order to develop FL learning such as: asking questions, implementing cooperative learning, reducing anxiety, motivation, etc.
- ✓ Teachers can dominate a variety of roles in the classroom interaction such as a controller, promoter, organizer, observer, and more than that, according to the classroom context and their learners' needs.
- ✓ Teachers should create a convenient classroom atmosphere so that learners can speak and interact freely inside and outside the classroom in order to achieve their academic needs, levels and interests.
- ✓ Learners should be more active inside/outside the classroom when they interact with their teachers or classmates through involving themselves in every activity in the teaching and learning process.

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