Long’s ‘Interaction hypothesis’

Long went on to propose his Interaction hypothesis as an extension of Krashen’s original Input hypothesis. For his own doctoral research (Long, 1980, 1981, 1983a), Long conducted a study of 16 native speaker-native speaker and 16 native speaker-non native speaker pairs, carrying out the same set of face-to-face oral tasks (informal conversation, giving instructions for games, playing the games, etc.). He showed that there was little linguistic difference between the talk produced by native speaker-native speaker and native speaker-non native speaker pairs, as shown on measures of grammatical complexity. However, there were important differences between the two sets of conversation when these were analysed from the point of view of conversational management and language functions performed. Specifically, in order to solve ongoing communication difficulties, the native speaker-non native speaker pairs were much more likely to make use of conversational tactics such repetitions, confirmation checks, comprehension checks or clarification requests (see Table 6.1 for examples).

As in child-directed speech, native speakers apparently resort to these tactics in order to solve communication problems when talking with less fluent non-native speakers, and not with any conscious motive to teach grammar (Long, 1983b). However, from the perspective of the Interaction hypothesis, such collaborative efforts should be very useful for language learning. As they struggle to maximize comprehension, and negotiate their way through trouble spots, the native speaker-non native speaker partnerships are incidentally fine-tuning the second language input so as to make it more relevant to the current state of learner development. That is, they are collaborating to ensure that the learner is receiving i + 1, in Krashen’s terms, rather than i + 3, or indeed i + 0.