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How a 10-Year-Old Acquires English Through Interaction: An Interactionist Perspective on Elementary Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examined the implementation of Vygotsky's Interactionist View by an English tutor teaching a 10-year-old fifth-grade student from a linguistically enriched family background. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis over four weeks. The study focused on interactive teaching strategies, the student's cognitive-bilingual profile, and the role of social environment in second language acquisition. Findings revealed that the tutor consistently employed student-centered strategies including personal greetings, games, role-play, and scaffolding aligned with interactionist principles. The student, exposed to English since age 5 through media and professor parents, demonstrated cognitive advantages of early bilingualism: enhanced executive function, working memory, and metalinguistic awareness, manifesting in A2-level proficiency and active daily conversation ability. The synergy between interactive teaching, cognitive readiness at age 10, and supportive home environment created optimal learning conditions. Results provide empirical evidence that language acquisition occurs effectively through meaningful social interaction rather than passive memorization. The study contributes to understanding how specific interactive strategies facilitate English development in elementary learners.

A. INTRODUCTION

The growing need for English proficiency worldwide highlights the importance of effective language teaching, especially for younger students. Fifth-grade students, who are about 10 years old, are in a key stage for learning a second language. This age is marked by strong cognitive flexibility, which helps them learn language structures more easily (Ang, Embi, & Yunus, 2017). In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Vygotsky's (1978) interactionist theory is a major concept. It suggests that language learning primarily occurs through social, face-to-face communication, where learners engage in 'negotiations for meaning' to obtain comprehensible input (Alharbi, 2023). This theory emphasizes that learning is centered on interaction, and it includes key ideas like the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the difference between what a learner can do alone and what they can achieve with help and scaffolding temporary support given by someone more skilled (Alharbi, 2023; Li, 2016).

Even though the interactionist approach is widely recognized, there is still a need for more research on how its main principles ZPD, scaffolding, and meaning negotiation are used in real-life situations, especially in one-on-one tutoring with young learners. Most current studies focus on classroom settings, leaving out the unique aspects of private tutoring where teachers can offer more personalized and responsive support (Alharbi, 2023). Another crucial concept is negotiation of meaning, which occurs when learners and teachers work together to reach mutual

understanding during communication. When a student does not comprehend, the tutor may provide clarification, confirmation checks, or comprehension checks to ensure understanding.

Moreover, there is limited research on how these interactions work when the student comes from a home environment that already supports English, such as having parents who are professionals in the language (Li, 2016). These students have a stronger base in English, making their learning experience different and offering a unique chance to see how tutors can build on their existing knowledge within the ZPD. The combination of this structured tutoring with the child's natural use of English at home provides an important opportunity to study how formal and informal learning interact within the interactionist framework.

To deal with these gaps, this qualitative case study aims to observe and record how Vygotsky's interactionist theory is put into practice during one-on-one English tutoring for a 10-year-old fifth-grader. limited research has examined the intersection between formal tutoring and informal home language learning for elementary-age students. When a 10-year-old child receives both structured instruction from a tutor and naturalistic language exposure from English-speaking parents, how do these two contexts complement each other? How does the tutor's approach differ when working with such a student compared to a student without home language support? The dynamics of interaction in private tutoring where the tutor can provide individualized attention and adjust scaffolding more responsively, may differ significantly from classroom interactions.

From a psychological standpoint, children who learn a second language at an early age show notable cognitive benefits. Studies based on controlled experiments support the idea that children who know two languages perform better than those who only know one in various areas of cognitive function. A specific study involving 104 six-year-olds childrens from four different language backgrounds found that "all bilingual groups performed similarly and did better than monolingual children in tasks related to executive control." Bilingual children showed better results in these tasks, no matter which languages they knew (Barac & Bialystok, 2012, p. 413). The mental advantages of learning two languages from an early age go beyond just managing tasks and making decisions. Recent comprehensive research demonstrates that early childhood bilingualism provides substantial advantages in "executive function, memory retention, and problem-solving abilities," with bilingual children exhibiting "mental agility, creative problem-solving abilities, and intercultural competencies essential for thriving in a globalized society." (Chandra, 2025, p.336).

For learners at the A2 level, categorize as basic users who "can understand frequently used sentences and expressions related to areas of immediate relevance". The development of speaking confidence represents a critical challenge that extends beyond pure linguistic competence. Recent pedagogical research emphasizes that collaborative learning approaches significantly enhance speaking confidence among A2-level students, particularly in contexts where traditional grammar-focused instruction predominates.

By focusing on this specific and favorable context, the study offers a detailed look at how instruction actually works, moving beyond theoretical ideas to show what happens in real teaching situations. This research contributes empirical evidence to the field of Second Language Acquisition and offers valuable insights for educators seeking to understand how interactionist principles function in real-world teaching contexts with elementary students. Rather than describing what tutors should do or evaluating teaching effectiveness, this study describes what actually happens when an interactionist approach is employed with a young learner, thereby illuminating the complex, dynamic processes through which social interaction facilitates English language acquisition in fifth-grade students.

B. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine how Vygotsky's interactionist perspective is applied in teaching English to a 10-year-old fifth-grade elementary student. A case study was selected because it allows for a detailed and context-specific look at how theoretical ideas are put into practice in real classroom settings (Alharbi, 2023). The research takes place in a private tutoring environment where the tutor is known for using an interactionist approach. The student is from a family that is linguistically supportive, as both parents are English language professors. As Ellis (2015) points out, understanding second language learning involves looking at both the mental processes and the social aspects of learning, which this qualitative method is well-suited to explore. The study takes a descriptive and observational approach, focusing on recording and analyzing what happens during the tutoring sessions rather than assessing the effectiveness of the teaching methods or introducing new strategies.

Data were collected through three primary methods: observation of tutoring sessions, semi-structured interviews with both the tutor and student, and document analysis of teaching materials and student work. Multiple tutoring sessions were observed and audio-recorded with participants' consent, allowing for detailed documentation of social interactions, scaffolding techniques, and negotiation of meaning between tutor and student. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to Vygotsky's interactionist framework, including instances of scaffolding, negotiation of meaning, and work within the student's Zone of Proximal Development. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation of multiple data sources, member checking with participants, and rich, thick descriptions of the context and interactions observed. This approach responds to Alharbi's (2023) call for research providing "detailed, qualitative descriptions of specific interactional patterns" and emphasis on understanding how interaction and communication function in English language learning contexts.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to determine children's initial ability to listen and pronounce English vocabulary during the linguistic period. English language skills consist of four aspects, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, this study will focus on two aspects, namely listening and speaking skills.

Fifth-grade students who began learning English at the age of five often reach the A2 level of proficiency. Where they can understand and use simple everyday expressions, participate in short conversations, and express basic needs and ideas. Their early exposure provides a foundation of vocabulary and familiarity with the language, while collaborative learning strategies help them build confidence to speak more fluently and interact naturally with peers. learners who utilize thinking skills are more ac countable of their own learning and exchanging ideas for the development of language.

This section presents findings from field observations regarding the implementation of the Interactionist View by an English tutor and analyzes its impact on the language development of a fifth-grade elementary student (Khalid, 10 years old). The analysis is organized into three main themes: interactive teaching strategies employed by the tutor, the cognitive and bilingual profile of the student, and the role of social environment in second language acquisition.

Creating Bilateral Communication Through Personal Interaction

Observational data revealed that the tutor consistently implemented an interactive, student-centered approach by initiating lessons with personal greetings and engaging questions such as "Have you had your lunch today?" and "How was your school today?" This approach immediately established a two-way communication pattern that required active student response. This practice aligns with the core principles of Interactive Teaching, where "the teacher changes the form of 'one speech hall' in traditional teaching into a 'group speech hall', which is bilateral and multilateral interaction" (Li, 2016, p. 1). In this context, the tutor transformed from a traditional lecturer into an organizer, manager, and classroom leader, positioning the student as the main participant and subject of learning.

The establishment of this bilateral interaction is theoretically significant within the Interactionist View framework. As Alharbi (2023) explains, "The central premise on which Vygotsky's (1978) interactionist theory is based is that children's language skills are shaped through their interactions with more knowledgeable others" (p. 284). Utilization of Games and Role-Play as Communicative Strategies

Given students' preference for competitive activities, the tutor extensively incorporated game activities and role-play into lessons. This strategic choice proved highly effective in motivating students' active participation. Research supports the effectiveness of such communicative activities, as "games for 1st grade learners, role-plays for 2nd and 3rd forms, and discussions for 4th form make students to use English language using genuine materials and motivates students to use like native speakers" (Rafikova, 2021, p. 1383o. The use of role-play in classes created simulations of real-life situations that enabled negotiation of meaning—a core component of the interactionist perspective. Furthermore, research indicates that "game activities can enhance students' enthusiasm and initiative in learning, promote the optimization of teaching effects.

Cognitive Readiness for Second Language Acquisition

A student at 10 years old and in fifth grade, demonstrated cognitive characteristics that support logical and structured foreign language acquisition. He was able to respond to complex questions with complete sentences such as "I went over a dive" and "May I go to the restroom?". This ability is consistent with Piaget's cognitive developmental stage for children aged 9 to 11 years, during which "egocentric thinking begins to decrease and children begin to think logically and understand the ideas and experiences of others" (Guapacha Largo, 2022, p. 1329). Khalid's capacity to understand game instructions and respond to social contexts in class demonstrates that he has reached this cognitive stage, enabling him to process English language input more effectively (Guapacha Largo, 2022, p. 1330).

This cognitive readiness at age 10 aligns with broader research on optimal periods for language learning. Studies indicate that "children at the elementary school level possess highly flexible brains that enable them to absorb vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar structures more efficiently than older learners" (Ang, Embi, & Yunus, 2017, p. 47).

Early Childhood Bilingualism and Executive Function Enhancement

Research specifically examining children in this age range (6-10 years) has found that "early childhood bilingualism is linked to enhanced cognitive functioning, such as attentional control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility" (Mai & Anh, 2024, p. 735). Khalid's early access to English, through subtitled dinosaur cartoons starting at age 5, played a key role in his later success in language development.

Media with subtitles offers what researchers call "incidental learning," where language is picked up naturally through enjoyable content rather than through direct teaching. When audio, visual images, and written text (subtitles) are presented at the same time, they activate several areas of the brain, which helps improve the ability to recognize sounds, remember words, and identify patterns. Emotionally, Khalid described feeling "kind of amazing" when he first discovered English through dinosaur cartoons, showing the development of intrinsic motivation—a psychological element considered the most significant factor in successful language learning (Ang et al., 2017, p. 52). Khalid's ability to achieve A2 level proficiency and engage in daily conversation actively suggests he has developed strong metacognitive awareness—the capacity to monitor and regulate his own learning processes.

Metalinguistic Awareness in Bilingual Children

Beyond executive function, bilingual children at Khalid's developmental stage "often show greater metalinguistic awareness, namely the ability to think about and manipulate the structure of language itself, such as recognizing grammatical rules and linguistic nuances" (Mai & Anh, 2024, p. 714). This metalinguistic advantage explains why Khalid could achieve A2 level proficiency and participate actively in daily conversations. The A2 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), describes basic users who "can understand frequently used sentences and expressions related to areas of immediate relevance" (CEFR, 2025, as cited in Camacho et al., 2025, p. 809). Khalid's performance at this level at age 10 indicates accelerated language development facilitated by both his bilingual cognitive advantages and the interactive instructional approach.

The enhancement of metalinguistic awareness plays a crucial role in learning grammar. Conventional, strict methods of teaching grammar can often hinder students like Khalid. Nevertheless, thanks to the tutor's use of fun and relevant techniques, Khalid was able to pick up language structures without feeling overwhelmed. As noted by Silalahi (2019), "for children to retain grammar knowledge in their long-term memory, it needs to be presented in a unique or enjoyable way, as the right hemisphere of the brain tends to grasp such concepts more easily" (pp. 503-504). The tutor's approach of incorporating games aided this cognitive development, allowing grammar learning to occur naturally through meaningful interaction rather than explicit memorization.

Language Proficiency Development Through Home Environment Support

The influence of Khalid's linguistically enriched family background cannot be understated. Research specifically examining bilingual children from families where parents are language professionals has documented distinct advantages. The alignment between home language exposure and formal instruction significantly impacts outcomes, as "the best performance was achieved by bilingual children whose language of instruction was the same as the language of testing and whose languages had more overlap" (Barac & Bialystok, 2012, p. 413).

While Khalid's case differs in that English is not his primary home language, the consistent support and positive attitude toward English from his professor parents created a favorable affective environment that complemented formal tutoring.

Observational data revealed that Khalid felt "kind of amazing" when first introduced to English and preferred it over Indonesian—indicating strong intrinsic motivation. Research on language learning strategies confirms that motivation is among the most powerful influences on strategy choice and learning outcomes. As Ang et al. (2017) found in their study of successful language learners, "the degree of expressed motivation was the single most powerful influence on the choice of language learning strategies" (p. 52). The intrinsic motivation generated by Khalid's early positive experiences with English, combined with ongoing parental encouragement and the tutor's engaging methods, created optimal conditions for sustained language development.

Khalid's success in language acquisition cannot be separated from the support of his social environment, both at home and in the tutoring setting. Observational data showed that Khalid's parents supported English introduction from an early age through conversation, and the tutor facilitated social interaction through role-play and collaborative activities. This phenomenon is highly relevant to Vygotsky's constructivist theory, which views "children as active seekers of knowledge" (Guapacha Largo, 2022, p. 652). According to Vygotsky, "children's cognitive and language development is strongly influenced by social interactions in their environment, where knowledge is constructed through interaction experiences" (Guapacha Largo, 2022, p. 656).

Implications for Interactionist Theory in Elementary Education

Overall, the synergy between the tutor's interactive approach, Khalid's cognitive readiness, and supportive social environment has created an ideal learning ecosystem. This case study provides empirical support for the relevance and effectiveness of interactionist theory when applied to elementary school-age children. The findings demonstrate that language is acquired through active use in meaningful social contexts rather than through passive memorization—a core tenet of the interactionist perspective.

The situation involving Khalid demonstrates that when an experienced instructor uses interactive teaching methods, supported by a language-rich home setting, and paired with a learner who is mentally prepared and self-motivated, the environment for effective second language learning is most favorable. The interactionist perspective, which focuses on meaning negotiation, understandable input and output, as well as support within the Zone of Proximal Development, offers a strong theoretical base for comprehending and promoting English language growth among elementary students. These results have important consequences for teaching English, indicating that more interactive, student-focused strategies should be favored over traditional grammar-translation techniques, especially for younger students who are in the concrete operational phase of cognitive growth

D. CONCLUSION

This study examined the implementation of Vygotsky's Interactionist View in English tutoring for a 10-year-old fifth-grade student from a linguistically enriched family background. The findings demonstrate that effective second language acquisition at the elementary level is strongly influenced by the interaction between interactive teaching practices, learners' cognitive

readiness, and supportive social environments. Rather than relying on traditional teacher-centered instruction, the tutor applied interactionist principles through student-centered strategies such as personal English greetings, game-based activities, role-play, and scaffolding within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development. These practices transformed learning into a two-way communicative process and created an equal, supportive teacher–student relationship that reduced anxiety and increased speaking confidence.

The results confirm that social interaction plays a central role in language development, as proposed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. The tutor's consistent use of implicit feedback and meaningful communication opportunities allowed the student to negotiate meaning naturally and become an active participant in learning. Over time, the student showed increased willingness to speak, improved interaction skills, and greater communicative confidence. This supports existing research which suggests that interactive learning environments encourage learners to move beyond passive reception toward active language use.

The study also highlights the significant contribution of early bilingual exposure and cognitive development. The student's exposure to English from the age of five through subtitled media and family interaction provided long-term input that supported vocabulary growth, metalinguistic awareness, and cognitive flexibility. At the concrete operational stage, the learner demonstrated readiness for logical thinking and meaningful communication, enabling him to benefit fully from interactive instruction. His achievement of A2-level proficiency and ability to engage in daily English conversations illustrate how sustained exposure, combined with effective teaching and motivation, can lead to strong language outcomes at a young age.

Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of a supportive social environment. Parental involvement, interactive tutoring, and positive early experiences with English worked together to create an optimal learning ecosystem. This environment lowered affective barriers and encouraged risk-taking in language use. The harmonious teacher–student relationship and the low-pressure learning atmosphere played a key role in maintaining motivation and concentration, confirming research that links supportive interaction with increased participation and speaking confidence.

Based on these conclusions, several important implications emerge. English teachers and tutors are encouraged to adopt interactive, student-centered approaches that prioritize communication over rote memorization. Errors should be treated as part of the learning process through implicit feedback and scaffolding rather than strict correction. Parents should support early language exposure through age-appropriate media and simple daily interactions in English, while avoiding excessive pressure. Educational institutions and policymakers should reconsider grammar-focused curricula and invest in teacher training that emphasizes communicative competence, interaction, and supportive classroom environments. For researchers, further longitudinal and comparative studies are recommended to explore how interactionist approaches function across diverse contexts and larger classroom settings.

In conclusion, this study reinforces that effective English learning for elementary students occurs through meaningful social interaction, appropriate scaffolding, and supportive environments. When these elements work together, young learners can develop not only language proficiency, but also confidence, cognitive advantages, and positive attitudes toward language learning that extend beyond the classroom.

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