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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8s93n323>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 46(0)

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Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed

The role of interaction in online language learning

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Abstract

Social interaction plays a fundamental role in language acquisition. Although adult learners can acquire language through passive instruction, they also benefit from interaction. We asked whether these benefits are due to interaction providing information about communicative context. We designed an online interactive game where participants communicated in an artificial language with a computer partner. We contrasted 3 conditions: a fully interactive condition, a passive condition in which participants learned through passive exposure, and a third condition, in which participants were exposed to the language in context but without involvement in interaction. We found that interaction produced the best results, and that mere exposure to context did not help: even when tested interactively, passive learners did better than participants who had been exposed to, but not involved in, interaction. The main benefit of interaction therefore, at least in an online learning environment, is not merely to provide context for language use.