

Features of Input of Second Language Acquisition*

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Abstract—Input plays a significant role in second language acquisition; some researchers classify input into conscious and unconscious. What kind of input is most helpful to learner? This paper discusses the optimal input Krashen defined compared with first language acquisition.

Index Terms— optimal input, first language acquisition, second language acquisition

I. FEATURES OF INPUT

The general term input might include a variety of student and teacher characteristics, such as intelligence, sex, personality, general learning or teacher style, previous experience, motivation, attitudes, and so on. Here we narrow down or simplify the term input on general learning or teacher style. Most learners of English in China, who have little contact with the second language (L2) environment, are likely to depend mostly on conscious classroom learning to improve their English. The only place most L2 learners are exposed to the L2 is in the classroom. The kind of language used in the classroom is known as Teacher talk. This has also been studied and its main characteristics are that:

- language teachers usually use short, simple, grammatically correct sentences and general, high frequency vocabulary. They adjust their speech to reflect feedback from L2 learners. If they recognize that learners do not understand them, they too repeat, rephrase or expand the intended message.

- typical interactions in the classroom follow a very rigid three-part pattern: teacher initiates, learner respond, and the teacher provides feedback to the learner. An example:

Initiate: Is the clock on the wall?

Respond: Yes (it is.)(The clock is on the wall.)

Feedback: Good. The clock is on the wall.

- teachers ask a lot of unreal questions, questions to which they and the learners already know the answers. As a result, learners are trained to use the language in unnatural ways. They are taught how to reply, but not how to initiate conversation.

- the topics dealt with, the contexts in which the L2 is set, are often uninteresting and bear little relationship to the possible needs and interesting of the learners.

- teachers, not learners, do most of the talking.

If we compare the language environments provided for L1 and L2 learners, we find that Teacher Talk: Emphasizes the production of correct grammatical forms. Teachers are not really interested in what the learners have to say. The L2 is used unrealistically for the sake of practicing structures, not in order to DO things that the learners wish or need to do in the L2. Teacher talk does not focus on topics that are in the learners' 'here and now', such as topics that are of immediate relevance and interest to what are usually adult or adolescent learners. As a result of the above, Teacher Talk allows learners very little chance to test out what they can do with the structures that they know. There are thus few chances for learners to obtain tangible proof of their progress in the L2. This is likely to negatively affect motivation.

Much L2 input and output emphasizes correctness of form, having little concern for the meanings which forms can express and the uses to which they may be put. The result is often that L2 learners may appear to be more or less equally proficient at the passive recognition of correct grammatical forms but are very varied in the extent to which they are able to use the forms they appear to know.

Teachers need to try and provide their learners with opportunities for more than merely mechanical classroom practice. If SLA does have parallels to L1 Acquisition, then both the input that they are given and the chances they have to produce the L2 should enable learners to develop and test hypotheses about how the L2 actually works in real-life. In practice, this means that teachers should: Try to use the L2 for organizational and social purpose in the classroom from the very beginning of students' L2 learning. Activities in the classroom are, after all, a valid and naturally occurring context. Begin the production part of language teaching by using the 'here and now'. There are a number of relevant topics within the classroom: the learners themselves--appearances, families, clothing, likes and dislikes; items found in the classroom--their shapes, sizes, colors and what they are made of. Interesting topics from outside the classroom

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should also be selected. Devise language activities that enable learners to see clearly the relationships between forms and meanings, activities that expect them to show understanding of listening and reading input, by using it to DO something, activities that demand that they use the spoken or written forms of the language to achieve a certain goal.

II. OPTIMAL INPUT

Krashen (1982) defined that optimal input should be comprehensible, be interesting and /or relevant, not be grammatically sequenced, be in sufficient quantity. If the learner can be exposed to input having to these features, it is considered acquisition is more likely to occur.

A. *Be Comprehensible*

According to information processing theory concerning comprehension and production (Carroll, 1990), if the learner cannot keep up with the rate of exposure and the input content is far beyond his linguistic competence, he will fail to comprehend and therefore, to acquire. Therefore the teacher must ensure that the material he chooses is not so demanding on student. Although some research results show that a large amount of exposure to L2 leads to proficiency, some had doubted whether it would help by sheer exposure without comprehension. This point of view was derived from the observation and study of the 'Motherese' (Snow, 1977) in first language acquisition and was extended to second language acquisition theories. Psychological findings (Carroll, 1990) have also provided evidence that only when the meaning of an utterance or a sentence is understood and processed can it be stored in the long-term memory. Krashen (1978) argues that the learner's brain functions like a filter of the information or input provided by the outside world. Only the part that is understandable can possibly pass through the filter and become intake of the learner. Not only does the incomprehensible part fail to facilitate acquisition to occur, but also it will take too much effort on the part of the learner to filter it out. Therefore, the incomprehensible part of the input contributes little to learning but only hinders it by frustrating the learner.

Corder (1981) has also pointed out that simply presenting a certain linguistic form to a learner in the classroom does not necessarily qualify it for the status of input, since input is "what goes in", not what is "available" for going in. Those language forms which cannot be processed by the learner can by no means become the intake of the learner, let alone to become the output of the learner. To look at this question from another angle, it is generally agreed that comprehension usually precedes production, and without comprehension learning will not occur.

B. *Be Interesting*

It is often found that the input available to the Chinese students can seldom meet this third requirement. Textbooks are designed to cater to the needs and taste of examinations, and almost all English tests at all levels have the following items: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, vocabulary and structure, close tests, error correction, and composition writing with no more than 150 words. This orientation of the testing system has done serious harm to both teaching and learning.

To pass these tests, the student has to do a lot of simulated test papers and have little time to read more authentic and interesting materials. Collection of test papers are often so badly compiled that they contain a lot of errors. Such activities are not only boring and time-consuming, but also misleading and harmful.

C. *Be in Sufficient Quantity*

The purpose of language teaching, in a sense, is to provide optimal samples of the language for the learner to profit from. However, if the quantity of input cannot be ensured, the input still cannot be said to be optimal. That is why Krashen (1982: 71) has claimed that optimal input should be in sufficient quantity.

Actually the quantity of input is the main concern of our optimal input hypothesis, since the big difference between foreign learning in the mother tongue environment and SLA in the target language environment lies in the amount of input that is available to the learner. In this regard, Chinese learners of English are at a big disadvantage. They usually depend on only one textbook for learning the language. The textbook is really made full use of. In learning each text, the teacher first explains to the student every grammatical point and language item in detail, and then there is usually an exercise-book which contains nearly everything related to the content of the text. After that, the text is read over and over again until it is memorized by the student. The students' attention is, most of the time, focused on the language forms rather than reading for meaning. The students have so much homework to do that they can hardly squeeze any time for extra-reading by themselves outside the class. This is how language input is supplied for the beginners at middle schools.

For learners of higher levels--the college students, there is little difference. Only the text is longer and there is an intensive/extensive reading class distinction. However, Emphasis is laid on the intensive part in the division of class hours. The extensive reading course is only secondary for most students. In order to prove that the student can learn more easily and better if they are given more input than is required by the syllabus.

D. *Be Authentic*

I had a persistent misconception about "authentic language" that all the natural meaningful sentences or utterances produced by native speakers are authentic language until one day I read the book entitled *Second Language Learning*

and Language Teaching by Vivian Cook. He cited the following conversation from the textbook *Flying Colors* by Garton Sprenger and Greenall in 1990 (Cook, 1991:93):

(1) Nicola: Do you like this music?

Roger: Not very much. I don't like jazz.

Nicola: What kind of music do you like?

Roger: I like classic music...

To most people, this is perhaps authentic language; Cook, however, comments that in real-life conversations, people do not speak in such full grammatical sentences, and do not keep to a clear sequence of turns. They may just say "Like this music?" "Not very much. Not jazz." "So what?" (with rising pitch). "Classical." Evidently, this dialogue is intended for the students to learn the expression of "Do you like...?" and "What kind of...do you like?".

Cook also supplies an example of authentic language from the course book *English Topics*:

(2) Mrs bagg: Oh, how extraordinary.

Jenny Drew: So 'cos quite a quite a lot of things like that.

Mrs bagg: I mean were they frightened? 'Cos I think if I actually...

Jenny Drew: No.

Mrs bagg: saw a ghost because I don't believe in them really, I would be frightened you know to think that I was completely wrong. (ibid.)

This conversation about a ghost is an example of authentic language since it is "created to fulfill some social purpose in the language community in which it was produced." (in Cook, 1991:93)

For students who are living in the target language environment, this informal spoken English can possibly be heard and acquired in daily communication. But for Chinese students who are learning a L2 mainly from the textbooks, they mistake the non-authentic conversation in (1) for the way English is actually spoken on every occasion, so they are being handicapped by never hearing authentic speech in all its richness and diversity. No wonder one American professor I encountered said that her students are very bookish, when they were talking to her they spoke so formally as if they were reciting from a textbook, but when they turned to writing, their language use was so informal as if they were talking to her. Cook (1991) reported that the exercises and courses have taken a turn away from specially constructed classroom language to any pieces of language that have been really used by native speakers. The use of authentic text in teaching has been adequately justified by Little et al (See Cook, 1991:94).

Another feature of non-authentic material is that our texts are often simplified both lexically and syntactically by the compilers and thus lose their naturalness and appropriacy, since it is almost impossible for the wording to be changed without losing some of its original nuances and flavor. In addition, some cultural meaning is also lost during such rewriting. In a word, simplification is often achieved at the expense of authenticity.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we may tentatively include the above as the most important features of optimal input though they do not exclude any others. What we want to point out is that these features should be borne in mind. The immediate implication of this hypothesis is for English language teachers to provide the learner with optimal input and encourage him to also explore optimal input on their own outside classroom. If teachers could employ this strategy in their teaching, they should find their teaching more effective.

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