THE ROLE OF INPUT

IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract


The role of input is a major issue in second language (L2) research. Input is a prerequisite for L2 learning. The term "input" is taken from information processing and is deemed as oral/written data to which learners are exposed. According to Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, learners must have access to comprehensible input, and the input should go slightly beyond their current competence in order for acquisition to take place.

The problem presented in this paper was to discover the role of input in second language acquisition (SLA). Another objective of this paper was to identify whether comprehensible input is sufficient in SLA. A brief review of literature on the definition of input and Krashen's Input Hypothesis in SLA was conducted. A second review of literature relating to the insufficiency of comprehensible input and the way that we provide input for acquisition was conducted. Through a review of the literature, it becomes evident that input plays an important role in SLA. The bulk of the SLA research stated that comprehensible input was insufficient in SLA and that we should pay attention to interaction and output as well as other communication aspects, in order to better acquire a L2.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Similar to people's attempts to account for first language acquisition, it has been accepted that SLA is a complex phenomenon that cannot be described in all aspects by any existing model today. What is essential in understanding SLA is to understand how various research areas and theories relate to one another.

While the behaviorism model emphasized the role of imitation and positive reinforcement, a "nurture" position, the mentalists or the innativists shifted to a "nature" position by stressing that human beings, equipped innately with language acquisition device, are capable of language learning provided with adequate input (Retrieved from http://jpkc.ycit.cn/qhkj/yy/yyxgl /2-2/Ch7/section3.htm).

Therefore, it can be seen that currently the models and theories of SLA are mainly divided on the point: to what extent SLA is a function of innateness. Those who adopt an innateness position believe that a learner's structural knowledge allows him or her to construct the grammar of the target language based on limited data. The opposite position holds that language acquisition and social interaction are mutually dependent and that language acquisition cannot be understood if detached from the context where it occurs.

Among different theories and models, Krashen's Input Hypothesis is worth mentioning. Krashen assumed that there were two independent means or routes of second language learning acquisition and learning. Acquisition is a process similar to the way children acquire their first language. It is a subconscious process without minute learning of grammatical rules. Learners are hardly aware of their learning but they are using the language to communicate. People refer it to implicit learning, informal learning, or natural learning, etc. Learning through another route is a conscious learning of the second language knowledge by learning the rules and talking about them. In addition to this distinction, Krashen put forward that learners advance their language learning gradually by receiving "comprehensible input." He defined "comprehensible input" as "i +l": i represents learners' current state of knowledge. The next stage is a i+1. By providing comprehensible input that is bit higher than the learners' current level, the learners' LAD will be activated and contribute to acquisition. In Krashen's view the input hypothesis is central to all acquisition and has implications for the classroom ( Krashen, 1988). Krashen's input hypothesis received criticism later because he mistook "input" as "intake" (the actual share of input that has been internalized by the learner). In additions, some researchers said that comprehensible input is insufficient in SLA that comprehensible input does not always result in language acquisition.

Today, the debate has not come to an end. While more research and anecdotal evidence is available, the sides are still divided, with each side

apparently having enough testimony to support its argument. No doubt, the debate will continue until more longitudinal studies provide definitive answers either for or against the role of input in SLA.

## Statement of the Problem

The problem presented in this paper was to identify whether or not input is essential and sufficient in second language acquisition. Anecdotal evidence and societal perception seems to indicate that it does; however, what does research say? In addition, another objective was to discover the way we provide input for acquisition.

## Purpose of the Research

The perception by linguists and researchers is that input is an indispensable component in SLA, and anecdotal evidence seems to agree. The purpose of this research paper was to determine whether fact-based research, short-term studies, and longitudinal research support this conclusion. In addition, another purpose was to discover whether comprehensible input is sufficient for acquisition.

## Significance of the Problem

Currently, input is often seen as a prerequisite for L2 learning. Supporters use anecdotal evidence to base their claims, while research seems to indicate

that comprehensible input is insufficient for acquisition. Some of the research even says that comprehensible input does not always result in language acquisition.

## Assumptions

For the purpose of this paper, it was assumed that all research and review of the current literature was accurately reported. It is also assumed that the literature will make recommendations on how best to use the research available.

## Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted over 70 days in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. The primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC and Academic Search Elite as the primary sources. Key search topics included "input, " "comprehensible input, "and "second language acquisition. "

## Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the definition of input and Krashen's Input Hypothesis in SLA will be conducted. A second review of literature relating to the insufficiency of comprehensible input and the way we provide input for acquisition will also be conducted. The findings will be summarized and

recommendations made.

## Definition of Terms

**Input**. The term input is taken from information processing and is deemed as oral/written data to which learners are exposed.

**Input Hypothesis**:   According to Stephen Krashen, the only way we can acquire language is by receiving comprehensible input. That is, we have to receive input that is just beyond our competence but not beyond our understanding.

**Acquisition.** According to Krashen, the "acquired system" or "acquisition" is the product of a subconscious process very similar to the process children undergo when they acquire their first language. It requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances, but in the communicative act.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Definition of input

Input - Information processing

In information processing, input refers to either information received or the process of receiving it:

- In human-computer interaction, input is the information produced by the user with the purpose of controlling the computer program. The user interface determines what kinds of input the program accepts (e.g., control strings or text typed with keyboard and mouse clicks).

- Input also comes from networks and storage devices such as disk drives.

  e.g., $1 + 2 = 3$

- 1 and 2 are the inputs while 3 is the output.

---- Encyclopedia II, 2005

Input is an indispensable component in SLA. According to Ellis (1986), input may be provided by interaction with native speakers in a natural setting or by formal instruction. Input can be spoken or written, and it is the data that

learners use to determine the rules of the L2. Ellis, by defining input, establishes two important distinctions in the field of SLA research. First, he makes the traditional distinction between incidental and intentional acquisition, frequently referred as acquisition versus learning (Krashen, 1981) or implicit versus explicit learning (Bialystok, 1978; Ellis, 1990). When input is provided by interaction in a natural setting, learners are concerned mainly with trying to understand and to produce a message, although they can also acquire L2 rules incidentally. Second, if learners focus on the language form itself, they acquire the language intentionally. By considering input to be both spoken and written data, Ellis considers both comprehension and production processes that may occur in the learner in response to language input.

### The Input Hypothesis of Krashen's theory of SLA

*Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill.*

*Acquisition requires meaningful interactions in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding.*

*The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement*

*comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production.*

---- Stephen Krashen (1987, 1988)

Stephen Krashen (University of Southern California) is an expert in the field of linguistics, specializing in the theories of language acquisition and development. Krashen's widely known and well accepted theory of SLA has had a large impact since the 1980s in all areas of second language research and teaching.

Krashen's theory of second language acquisition consists of five main hypotheses:

- the Acquisition-Learning hypothesis,

- the Monitor hypothesis,

- the Natural Order hypothesis,

- the Input hypothesis, and

- the Affective Filter hypothesis.

The Input Hypothesis is the central part of the overall theory of SLA. It claims that language can be acquired only by understanding contents, that is, by receiving "comprehensible input." It is Krashen's attempt to explain how the learner acquires a second language. In other words, this hypothesis is Krashen's explanation of how SLA takes place. Thus, the Input Hypothesis is only concerned with "acquisition, " not "learning." (Krashen, 1988)

Krashen makes the following claims:

1). Learners' progress along a natural order by understanding input that contains structure a little bit beyond their current level of competence.

2). Although comprehensible input is necessary for acquisition to take place, it is not sufficient, because learners also need to be disposed affectively to "let in" the input that they comprehend.

3). Input becomes comprehensible as a result of simplification and with the help of contextual and extralinguistic clues.

4). Speaking is the result of acquisition, not its cause. If the learner receives a sufficient amount of comprehensible input, speech will "emerge" on its own. Learners' production does not contribute directly to acquisition.

5). If input is understood and there is enough of it, the necessary grammar is provided automatically.

The input hypothesis answers the question of how a language acquirer develops competency over time. It states that a language acquirer who is at "level i" must receive comprehensible input that is at "level i+1." "We acquire, in other words, only when we understand language that contains structure that is 'a little beyond' where we are now." This understanding is possible due to using the context of the language we are hearing or reading and our knowledge of the world. ( Krashen, 1987)

However, instead of aiming to receive input that is exactly at our i+1 level, or instead of having a teacher aim to teach us grammatical structure that is at our i+1 level, we should instead just focus on communication that is understandable. If we do this, and if we get enough of that kind of input, then we will, in effect, be receiving and thus acquiring out i+1. "Production ability emerges. It is not taught directly." (Krashen, 1988)

Evidences for the input hypothesis can be found in the effectiveness of caretaker speech from an adult to a child, of teacher-talk from a teacher to a language student, and of foreigner-talk from a sympathetic conversation partner to a language learner/acquirer. One result of this hypothesis is that language students should be given a initial "silent period" where they are building up acquired competence in a language before they begin to produce it.

Whenever language acquirers try to produce language beyond what they have acquired, they tend to use the rules they have already acquired from their first language, thus allowing them to communicate but not really progress in the second language.

<u>The insufficiency of comprehensible input</u>

In his input hypothesis, Krashen (1985) highlights the significant role that comprehensible input plays in SLA. He argues that the success or failure of

acquisition relies on whether or not input is comprehensible to learners. The Input Hypotheses, however, has also brought a considerable amount of criticism. First, Rost (1990) claims that being able to understand the meaning of input is not equal to the acquisition of it because one may still not know the forms of sentences in a target language even though s/he successfully comprehends messages. Secondly, Faerch and Kasper (1986) believe learners pay very little attention to linguistic items when they use top-down processing to reach comprehension. White (1987) holds a similar view, contending that being able to comprehend input does not necessarily lead to acquisition; however, acquisition occurs when learners fail to understand the meaning of messages because the failure of comprehending input draws their attention to unfamiliar linguistic items and hence results in acquisition.

The evidence of the insufficient comprehensible input in L2 learning can be seen from the study of Swain (1991) and of Schmidt (1983). Swain (1991) found that although immersion students of French achieved native-like proficiency in terms of listening and reading comprehension, they failed to reach native-like proficiency in production, which was shown in their grammatical errors, e.g., verb tenses, prepositional usage, and gender making. Hence, Swain (1991) concluded that although the immersion students of French were exposed to L2 and received comprehensible input, their productive skills "remain far from native-like" (p.98). Another evidence of the insufficiency of comprehensible input in SLA comes from a case study

conducted by Schmidt (1983). Schmidt (1983) did a 5-year longitudinal case study of Wes, an adult Japanese naturalistic learner of English in Honolulu, who could use English to reach basic purposes, such as ordering food. Wes' English knowledge in morphology, however, did not advance despite living in an English-speaking place.

Besides the empirical evidence of the insufficiency of comprehensible input in SLA, it has been argued that comprehensible input does not always result in language acquisition because learners may understand meanings of input without knowing forms (Long, 1996). According to Faech and Kasper (1986), some input is used for comprehension, when it is used in immediate communication, and as in this case, it is less likely to result in acquisition because there is too little time for learners to pay attention to input (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Furthermore, it is claimed that acquisition does not occur if learners always use top-down models to process information because the use of contextual clues or schematic knowledge do not induce learners to notice their interlingua and to attend to linguistic items. In other words, only when learners become aware of gaps between their interlingua and a target language and when they consciously attend to input does language acquisition take place (Shardwood S., 1986; Faech & Kasper, 1986).

In addition, input has to be assimilated into intake for acquisition to occur. "Intake" is defined as "that part of input that the learner notices" (Schmidt, 1990, p.139). According to Schmidt (1990), noticing is an indispensable

condition in language acquisition. He argues, "if noticed, it becomes intake" (p.139). Hence, "intake" eventually takes place if learners consciously notice input. Schmidt's view of noticing derives from his own Portuguese-learning experience. Schmidt studied Portuguese in Brazil for five weeks while spending time interacting with NSs of Portuguese. Schmidt compared the recordings of his own speech to his diary and notes in order to find a link between noticing and language output. However, the relationship between input and output was insufficient to explain Schmidt's production. What was significant was the relationship between what Schmidt found in his diary and the emergence of these forms in his speech as Schmidt (1990) noted:

> … when we learned question words, we were told that there are alternate short and long forms like a *que* and *o que e que, quem or quem e que*. I have never heard the long forms, but today, just before we left Cabo Frio, M said something to me that I didn't catch right away. It sounded like French *que'est-ce que c'est* [sic], only much abbreviated, approximately [kekse], which must be *(o)que(e)que(vo)ce…*(p.140)

Schmidt continues to say, "He heard the input and processed it for meaning from the beginning, but did not notice the form for five months" (1990, p.141). Therefore, Schmidt concluded that noticing input consciously results in the ability to produce it.

The evidence from the studies of Swain (1991), Schmidt (1983) also argues that the use of top-down models in reaching comprehension seldom

leads to language acquisition. We learn that not all-comprehensible input ends up in language acquisition because only understanding the general meaning of input is insufficient for language acquisition to take place (Long, 1996; Faerch and Kasper, 1986; Gass, 1997; Gass & Seliker, 2001). If one is to make language acquisition occur, the conversion of input into intake is necessary in L2 learning. Schmidt (1983) argues that learners need to notice input before assimilating it into intake. Learners cannot simply have the ability to understand a general meaning of input, but they also need the capacity to analyze input syntactically and to produce comprehensible output. Because the ability to analyze input syntactically and to produce comprehensible output aids learners not only to convert input into intake but also to make them pay attention to their gaps between the correct and incorrect use of a target language, which eventually results in the acquisition of an L2.

<u>Providing Input for Acquisition</u>

Various research studies have been done that compare the amount of language competence and the amount of exposure to the language either in classroom-years or length of residence, the age of the language acquirer, and the acculturation of the language acquirer. The results of these studies are consistent with the acquisition hypotheses: the more comprehensible input one receives in low-stress situations, the more language competence that one will acquire.

Once it is realized that receiving comprehensible input is central to acquiring a second language, questions are immediately raised concerning the nature and sources of this type of input and the role of the second language classroom (Reid, Retrieved from http://www.languageimpact.com/articles/rw/ krashenbk.htm).

To what extent is the second language classroom beneficial? Classrooms help when they provide the comprehensible input that the acquirer should receive. If acquirers have access to real world input, and if their current ability allows them understand at least some of it, then the classroom is not nearly as significant. An informal, immersion environment has the opportunity to provide significant input; however, this input is not always comprehensible to a beginner, and often for an adult beginner the classroom is a better place than the real world to provide comprehensible input.

However, for the intermediate level student and above, living and interacting in an environment where the language is spoken will likely prove to be better for the student, especially considering the fact that a language classroom will be unable to reflect the broad range of language use that a real world experience provides. The classroom's goal is to prepare students to understand the language used outside the classroom.

What role does speaking (output) play in SLA? It has no direct role. Because language is acquired by comprehensible input, someone who is

unable to speak for physical reasons can still acquire the full ability to understand language. However, speaking does indirectly help in two ways: 1) speaking produces conversation, which produces comprehensible input, and 2) your speaking allows native speakers to judge what level you are at and then adjust their language downward to you, providing you with input that is more easily understood.

What kind of input is optimal for acquisition? The best input is comprehensible, which sometimes means that it needs to be slower and more carefully articulated by using common vocabulary, less slang, and shorter sentences. Optimal input is interesting and/or relevant and allows the acquirer to focus on the meaning of the message and not on the form of the message. Optimal input is not grammatically sequenced, and a grammatical syllabus should not be used in the language classroom, in part because all students will not be at exactly the same level and because each structure is often only introduced once before moving on to something else. Finally, optimal input must focus on quantity, although most language teachers have to date seriously underestimated how much comprehensible input is actually needed for an acquirer to progress.

In addition to receiving the correct kind of input, students should have their affective filter kept low. This means that classroom stress should be minimized and students "should not be put on the defensive." One result of

this is that students' errors should not be corrected. Students should be taught how to gain more input from the outside world. This includes helping them to acquire conversational competence, which is the means for managing conversation.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through a review of the literature, it becomes evident that input is an indispensable component in SLA and that it is often seen as a prerequisite for L2 learning.. It would seem that a bulk of research states that input is essential but not sufficient for SLA. Clearly, studies that are more definitive need to be done to better study this debate.

Arguably, input is an indispensable component in SLA. Krashen's Input Hypothesis, as the central part of an overall theory of SLA, is worth mentioning. It claims that language can be acquired only by understanding contents, or by receiving "comprehensible input." It is Krashen's attempt to explain how the learner acquires a second language. In other words, this hypothesis is Krashen's explanation of how SLA takes place. It highlights the significant role comprehensible input plays in SLA.

Another consideration is that comprehensible input is insufficient in SLA. The evidence of insufficient comprehensible input in L2 learning can be seen from the study of Swain (1991) and of Schmidt (1983). In addition, it has been argued that comprehensible input does not always result in language acquisition because learners may understand meanings of input without knowing forms (Long, 1996). Finally, input has to be assimilated into intake for acquisition to occur.

Since various research studies have been done comparing the amount of language competence and the amount of exposure to the language, we come to know that we should choose the best input for acquisition. The optimal input is interesting and/or relevant and allows the acquirer to focus on the meaning of the message and not on the form of the message.

In addition to receiving the correct input, students should have their affective filter kept low. Classroom stress should be minimized and students "should not be put on the defensive." One result of this is that students' errors should not be corrected. Students should be taught how to gain more input from the outside world, including helping them to acquire conversational competence, which is the means for managing conversation.

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