

The Roles of Language Input and Output in Second Language Acquisition – Discussions and Pedagogical Implications for EFL Teachers

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ABSTRACT: Extensive input and output practice is significantly crucial in language learning. This can facilitate language learners in terms of mastering the target language effectively and sufficiently. Learning a second or foreign language is as similar as acquiring the first language, so the amount of input and output is adequately required. The article first presents key notions of these two principles and how they have been employed in the classroom context. Specifically, this paper then suggests the application of these principles to not only receptive skills but also productive skills to help Vietnamese learners acquire the linguistic competence of the target language.

Keywords: L2 acquisition, language input and output, language production, teaching principle.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is obvious that input is an important factor for language learners to get sufficient exposure to the target language and to fully acquire it. Many language researchers believe that this can be one of the causes of success in second or language learning. Ellis (2008) indicates that extensive input is vital to take into consideration in teaching receptive skills - listening and reading - of a second or foreign language. It is because the learners can develop their linguistic competence or build up background knowledge for their language production if they frequently do tasks or work on the target language. Apart from this, learners also need opportunities to produce what they have gained from the input. Extensive output is also indispensable to language learners for success in all four skills. This article provides useful insights into the roles of language input and output in foreign language learning, some critical discussion and pedagogical implications of these theories in teaching English as a foreign language at TraVinh University.

II. LANGUAGE INPUT HYPOTHESIS

Input “refers to the samples of the oral or written language a learner is exposed to” and is considered as the “data that learners have to work with to construct their interlanguage” (Ellis, 2015, p.25). Of different views on this issue, Stephen Krashen’s input hypothesis (1982), the so – called ‘monitor model’, is known as one of the first ‘theories’ developed specifically to explain second language learning. In the Monitor hypothesis, he explains the correlation between acquisition and learning and describes the influence of the latter on the former. Evidently, of these hypotheses, the Input Hypothesis is the most extensive and controversial although its claim can help answer some crucial theoretical questions related to how second language is acquired in the classroom context. From his point of view, learners are able to acquire language naturally if they are exposed to a great amount of language input. He does emphasize that language acquisition depends on how much learners are able to absorb what they are exposed to in a natural order. According to this hypothesis, learners can progress in their knowledge of language if the input is comprehensive and slightly more advanced than the current level of the learners and is outlined as ‘ $i + 1$ ’. This means acquisition will not take place when learners are exposed to what they have known or the input that is lower than their current stage of linguistic competence.

Krashen claims that with sufficient and comprehensive input, learners can acquire language whereas output does not help them succeed in learning. Krashen (1985, 1993) indicates a number of cases in which learners had acquired language without a significant amount of language production. However, several researches later argue that acquisition process of learners cannot be seen sufficiently if they only access comprehensive input. Specifically, Swain (1985) addresses that learners failed to attain high levels of language proficiency although they received a lot of comprehensible input. Therefore, it is essential to include the output model to facilitate the learning process.

III. LANGUAGE OUTPUT HYPOTHESIS

The word 'output' is generally known as the outcome, or product and used to indicate what the learner has learned. Basing on a study conducted into a French immersion program in Canada, the output hypothesis advanced by Swain (1985) indicates that learners need not only the comprehensive input but also the opportunities to produce what they have learned in order that they can extend their linguistic competence. Swain (1995, p.128) argue that the output hypothesis has three functions. The first one named the noticing/ triggering function in second language learning indicates that when learners produce language – output through speaking or writing they may notice some linguistic barriers arising as they attempt to communicate the target language in a more precise and appropriate way. Doughty and Williams (1998) supportively claim that being aware of their linguistic "hole" may be an important step to spotting the gap. That pushes learners to discover the target language more, then directs them to relevant input to fill the gaps in their linguistic knowledge, and "constitutes" part of the process of language learning (Swain, 2005, p.474). Two more functions mentioned in the output are the hypothesis-testing and the metalinguistic (reflective). The testing hypothesis proposes that learners need to produce (speaking or writing) the knowledge they have gained during the input process and they can recall later – the so-called intake. As they try to say or write something, they can negotiate meaning of words or sentence structures. For that reason, this testing hypothesis claims that learners' output is considered as a way of trying out new forms and structures to meet their communicative needs and to see what they have gained and what have not. The last - named metalinguistic function states that learners are able to use the language to reflect on or discuss their linguistic problems. Swain (2005) claims that the idea of regarding language as a tool conducive to reflection on the language used by the others and the language users themselves originates with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind.

Through the history of language learning and teaching, Swain's hypothesis has proved the important role of language output. Although she acknowledged the importance of comprehensive input in second language acquisition, she argued that the comprehensive output also plays a crucial role since it pushes learners to do something differently if they want to acquire the target language. (Swain, 1985, p. 252, cited in Shehadeh, 2003, p. 156).

Its role is, at minimum, to provide opportunities for contextualized, meaningful use, to test out hypotheses about the target language, and to move the learner from a purely semantic analysis of the language to a syntactic analysis of it. (Swain, 1985, p. 252).

In terms of language teaching, both the comprehensive input and output hypotheses complement each other in classroom context because of the claims mentioned.

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LANGUAGE INPUT AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

Krashen's Input Hypothesis to some certain extent, significantly draws some attention to language teaching issues of a second or foreign language teacher in the classroom practice in relation to instructional language input and teaching methodology to enhance the input model. Swan (2011) addresses that by looking at the overall structure of language learning there are three kinds including extensive input, intensive input and analysed input. According to Swan, the approach that second language learners acquire language fully is similar to what small children do. Evidently, children receive massive extensive language input surrounding them with their mother tongues, which is somewhat helpful for their language development. Importantly, they also get substantial intensive input daily with repeated pieces of language through bedtime stories, legends and nursery rhymes or songs. In addition, the people around them - their family members - always try to interact with them by their mother tongue. From this input, they are likely to build up their linguistic competence day by day. Specifically, many researchers observed the babies' talks and argued that babies cannot produce 4 to 5 – word sentences if they are not able to speak one-word utterances. First, comprehensive input is obviously an overall requirement and a principled approach to language teaching. Input is believed as important to second language learners as it to the first language. Language that is heard or read should be understood (Larsen-Freeman & H. Long, 1991, p. 242). Therefore, a language teacher should make his or her message meaningful and understandable to students or just 'a little beyond' students' level. Krashen does say that an approach that provides substantial quantities of comprehensible input will focus on the meaning of the message and not the form. A good implementation of this assumption is for beginners to receive ESL classes at the beginning level. One teaching approach developed by James Asher (1972) and mentioned by Krashen is "Total physical response" in which learners simply listen and show their comprehension by actions. For example, they participate in activities in which they hear a sequence of commands in the target language such as 'walk to the door', 'put your hands up', or 'clap your hands'. Asher shows that this kind of active listening offers beginners a good start although there are clearly some limitations on the kind of the language that students can learn in such

an environment. Research has shown that this approach can facilitate language learning without feeling the nervousness that often accompanies the first attempts to speak the new language. Such an input does help the learners to be fun with learning instead of giving them strict rules. At the first stages, it is crucial for language learners to access language environment so that they can gradually accumulate the knowledge of words. Then, language learners need to be exposed to other aspects of linguistic areas such as the explicit grammatical structures or forms. Language teachers need to present them one at a time and allow time for the learners to perceive, practice and perform what they have already acquired.

Second, Krashen's concept of comprehensible input implies the role of the teacher as the source of the learner's input and the creator of an interesting and stimulating variety of classroom activities. It is essential for a language teacher to know what the level of learners is in order to give them appropriate material to read and to listen. Larsen-Freeman et al. cite that 'language that is not understood does not help; it is too advanced, just the noise in the system' (Larsen-Freeman & H. Long, 1991, p. 242). From Krashen's view, language teachers are not going to look for easy or simple materials or say plain words but find a number of ways to make the input accessible to learners and challenging enough to arouse their interest in learning.

One more helpful thing that language teachers can consider the Input in real teaching context is that speaking is not taught straight at the beginning in the language classroom. It is true that without sufficient input knowledge, the learners find hard to produce the target language or they just transfer the knowledge from their first language. In such a case, learners may feel unmotivated, uncomfortable and anxious. As Krashen indicates in his claim, when the filter is 'up', it will affect the learner's language acquisition process. Although it is hard to see whether a negative affective disposition prevents a learner from acquiring a second language, creating a comfortable and stress-free learning environment is good for the learners' speech to 'emerge'.

From Krashen's assumptions, second - language teachers should be aware that input alone does not constitute the success in language learning. In the previous paragraphs this paper has discussed that Krashen does mention the adequate quantity of the input but not clarify how much is enough in order to speed the language production; therefore, language teachers should be careful not to make the learners overwhelmed by so many rote activities.

V. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LANGUAGE OUTPUT AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

Ellis (2008) argues that learners acquire better when they have more opportunities for language output to draw on their intake of linguistic competence or knowledge in the target language. It is considered as an indispensable part of language acquisition. Children usually speak out words that they perceive from people around them even words they create by themselves. For older learners, their language performance is promoted through speaking and writing skills. Swain (1995) indicates that the Output Hypothesis has three functions occurring interchangeably: the noticing function, the hypothesis testing and the metalinguistic function. She refers the first function as the consciousness-raising function since young and adult language learners will notice what they have mastered fully and what they have not learnt yet while performing their target language. This producing activity may prompt language learners to be more aware of their linguistic difficulties and try to fill in their language gaps. In other words, Swain's studies (1985, 1995, and 2005) claim that when trying to produce the language learnt (by speaking/writing) the learners may recognize gaps in their knowledge, and then set up their future aims to language improvement. Additionally, Shehadeh (2005) indicates some perspectives on the roles of output in language learning in his study. He claims that output facilitates language learners' fluency as it helps them absorb the rules and structures of language quickly and unconsciously. More specifically, it enables them to transform declarative knowledge or knowledge about a linguistic form into procedural knowledge (the so-called knowing how). It is inevitable that activities boosting learners' output systematically and regularly are encouraged to make language learning far more fruitful. Moreover, output is considered as a source of generating feedback. While learners apply what they know in practical linguistic contexts they certainly make errors. They may use wrong tenses, incorrect structures or inappropriate word use. However, this leads to how they notice those errors and generate more comprehensible input through feedback they receive from teachers or classmates. Then they can replace the incorrect linguistic forms with the more appropriate ones day by day. It is, therefore, undeniable that output plays an important role in language learning.

To boost learners' output in language classrooms is indispensable. For the oral skills, it is essential to create a warm, interesting and embracing atmosphere in which students are engaged in casual conversations with two or more people to exchange ideas about common topics (weather, hobbies, and sports) or perform some social interaction such as asking and giving directions, giving advice and reacting, asking for opinions and replying, or proving an argument and making comments. Honestly, a majority of adult learners are reluctant to speak due to their anxiety and language ego or their fear of losing face. Therefore, language teachers should focus on more message orientation rather than leaning strongly towards language orientation. Instructors or teachers should create an environment in which learners feel at ease to talk with a good command of linguistic

competence and communicate their thoughts effectively and intelligibly in order to achieve significant output (Richar, Platt and Webber, 1985, as cited in Shehadeh, 2005, p.3). At the initial stage of speaking lessons, the teachers can instruct them some simple interactional exchanges in which adult learners know how to produce only one or two utterances at a time in brief, casual conversation. Besides, asking students to do some simple exercises on sound discrimination at the beginning of lesson is good to make their pronunciation acceptable in speaking activities. Also, helping the learners to distinguish the so-called adjacency pairs, which the second or next speaker allows to take turn, is also useful for them to keep the conversation going on. These initial steps can motivate the learners and give them a willingness or readiness to start speaking. Moreover, while working with others, they can learn many useful things (new words, sentence structures, accents or stress) from their partners. Moreover, an input for interaction of teachers with relevant or related reading materials before starting the speaking tasks can prepare some thoughts for the learners in case of having nothing to say about the topic. More importantly, reading materials such as short stories, news articles, and book reviews can be considered as a means of language input that helps create speech production in which the students are required to retell or summarize those written texts orally in pairs or small groups. These will give students opportunities to interact and use the target language confidently.

In an effort to facilitate students to use the target language to write down their thoughts, language teachers can create real situations or clear purposes in which the learners can use their own voice to express naturally through written words. It is necessary to offer the learners opportunities to brainstorm the ideas and share in groups so that they can further expand their own ideas and have more details to support their opinion at the first stage of writing. Like speaking skill mentioned above, the focus on the learner's production is about message-oriented or language-used and how the meaning is conveyed. Therefore, asking the learners to write freely without being concerned about spelling or grammatical mistakes at the free-writing stage. This can be also applied in self-writing where students write thoughts, feelings and reactions in personal journals or diaries. One of the most important steps in guiding writing classes is to ask students to look for common errors in peer-editing after they finish their first draft. In order words, guiding learners how to recognize and correct major mistakes from their own writings and others' work is to aim at helping them avoid similar mistakes in their future writings. Working on this, learners will not only improve their writing day by day but they also become independent skilful editors (Ferris, 2002, p. 334). Besides, incorporating online assignments into teaching writing, teachers can also help enhance students' production skills. By giving students a certain topic and asking them to write emails or chat via forums or discussion boards with their course mates will motivate them to actively use the target language to communicate. With these activities, the teachers can arouse their learners' interest in this productive skill.

VI. CONCLUSION

The intensive input is fundamental to language learning but opportunities for extensive output is indispensable for achieving fluency and mastering all linguistic forms to language learners. Creating an effective connection between input and output enables teachers and learners to shorten the length of time to reach their target language. This essay has just clarified how the two principles -extensive input and opportunities for the learner's output-can be applied in teaching the receptive skills and facilitate the productive skills respectively. In fact, choosing suitable principles for the skill and learning objectives and understanding the processes of each macro skill will assist language teachers to perfectly plan the activities and motivate the learner's proficiency development.

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