

Krashen's Input Hypothesis on Metaphorical Language of Chinese College Learners

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This paper starts with the descriptions of Krashen's input hypothesis in SLA. Then it goes on to report the results of a survey of metaphorical language input, which is conducted among college students. It also talks about the pedagogical implications on English learning where language input is concerned.

Keywords: Krashen's input hypothesis ; metaphorical language ; pedagogical implications.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The Input Hypothesis by Krashen

According to Krashen [1] language acquisition and language learning are quite different processes. Language acquisition is the process by which children acquire their mother tongue. It is unconscious, effortless, and deterministic' (in the sense that it always happens in more or less the same way). 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.

Language learning is the process whereby we learn about language. It comprises a conscious process which results in conscious knowledge 'about' the language, e.g. that the third person singular of the present tense in English requires '-s', or that the past tense of 'strive' is 'striven'. According to Krashen 'learning' is less important than 'acquisition'.

The Input hypothesis is Krashen's attempt to explain how the learner acquires a second language. The input hypothesis claims that an important condition for language acquisition to occur is that the acquirer should understand input language that contains structure a bit beyond his or her current level of competence. If an acquirer is at stage or level "i", the input he or she understands should contain "i+1". In other words, the language which learners are exposed to should be just far enough beyond their current, competence that they can understand most of it but still be challenged to make progress. However, input should neither be so far

beyond their reach that they are so overwhelmed, nor so close to their current stage that they are not challenged at all. Krashen suggests that natural communicative input is the key to designing a syllabus, ensuring in this way that each learner will receive some 'i+1' input that is appropriate for his/her current stage of linguistic competence. Krashen [1] defined the features of optimal input as follows.

Optimal input should be comprehensible

According to information processing theory concerning comprehension and production [2], 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.

Although some research results show that a large amount of exposure to the L2 leads to proficiency, some had doubted whether it would help by sheer exposure without comprehension. Psychological findings [2] 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 [3] argues that the learner's brain functions like a filter of the information to input provided by the outside world. Only the part that is understandable can possibly pass through the filter and become intake of the learner.

Corder [4] 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.

Optimal input should be interesting and relevant

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 examination, and almost all English tests at all levels have the following items: listening, comprehension, reading comprehension, vocabulary and structure, cloze tests, error correction, and writing with no more than 150 words. This test-oriented system has done serious harm to both teaching and learning. Firstly, it makes language learning less interesting by putting the students on the defensive. Secondly, this kind of test can tell nothing about the students' neither communicative competence nor can it tell anything students' grammar competence. This is contrary to the input hypothesis, which claims that the main goal of the input is communication. Thirdly, it emphasizes the students' receptive rather than productive competence. This makes them develop a bad learning habit. They gradually become passive receivers knowledge instead of active producers is learning.

Optimal input should not be grammatically sequenced

For starters, we must realize that learning does not turn into acquisition. While the idea that we first learn a grammar common and may seem obvious to many, it is not supported by theory nor by the observation of second language acquirers, who often correctly use "rules" they have never been taught and don't even remember accurately the rules they have learned.

However, there is a place for grammar, or the conscious learning of the rules of a language. Its major role is in the use of the monitor, which allows monitor users to produce more correct output than they are given the right conditions to actually use their monitor, as in some planned speech and writing. However, for correct monitor use the users must know the rules they are applying, and these would need to be rules that are easy to remember and and apply—a very small subset of all of the grammatical rules of a language. It is not worthwhile for language acquisition to teach difficult rules which are hard to learn, harder to remember, and sometimes almost impossible to correctly apply.

For many years there was controversy in language-teaching literature on whether grammar should be deductively or inductively taught. However, as both of these methods involve language learning and not language acquisition; this issue should not be central for language teaching practice. There has similarly been controversy as to whether or not errors should be corrected in language learner's speech. Second language acquisition theory suggests that errors in ordinary conversation and monitor-free situations should not be corrected, and that errors should only be corrected when they apply and understand grammatical

rules in situations where known monitor-users are able to use their monitor.

There is a second way in which the teaching of grammar in a classroom can be helpful, and that is when students are interested in learning about the language they are acquiring. This language appreciation, or linguistics, however, will only result in language acquisition when grammar is taught in the language that is being acquired, and it is actually the comprehensible input that the students are receiving, not the content of the lecture itself, that is aiding acquisition. "This is a subtle point. In effect, both teachers and students are deceiving themselves. They believe that it is the subject matter itself, the study of grammar, that is responsible for the students' progress in second language acquisition, but in reality their progress is coming from the medium and not the message. And subject matter that held their interest would do just as well, so far as required extensive use of the target language." And perhaps many students would be more interested in a different subject matter and would thus acquire more than they would in such a grammar-based classroom.

Optimal input should 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[1] 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 language learning in the mother tongue environment and SLA in the target language environment lies 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 their textbooks for learning the target language. They spend most of their class hours making use of their textbooks. In learning each unit, the teacher usually plays the role of a big taker, explaining to the students every grammatical and language item. Sometimes the class ends with this, sometimes it is followed by some practice on these items with learning partners or with the teacher.

Teacher talk is also important part of input that L2 learners receive in classroom settings. The language that teachers address to L2 learners is treated as a register, with its own specific formal and interactional properties. Studies of teacher talk in subject lessons involving L2 learners include Chaudron [5] and Wesche and Ready [6]. Both these studies looked at teacher talk in university classrooms. The studies showed that the talk directed at L2 learners was grammatically simpler,

was slower, with more and longer pauses, and contained more repetition.

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 $i+1$.” “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. In order to reveal the true state of the language input that university students receive, the author has conducted the following survey, and the questions are just based on Krashen’s input hypothesis.

A Report on Language Input Subjects

The subjects, all first-year students, were chosen at random in Hunan Normal University. Among them are 52 females and 96 males, who come from three different classes, one class majoring in mathematics, the other two in physics and the Chinese language. The three classes are taught by three teachers with an average age of 28. The textbook they were

using when this survey was conducted was New Horizon College English (Book Three, First Edition), published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in 2001.

METHODS

A questionnaire in Chinese was used. Each subject was given a copy of the questionnaire which took them about a quarter to complete. Every question in the questionnaire does not involve anything subjective when it is answered, since all the answers for a question are given numbers which indicate different values with a scale. The appendix is an English version of the Chinese questionnaire used in this survey.

The instrument for data analysis is SPSS. All the data I’ve collected are fed into a computer and processed by SPSS.

RESULTS

The results of the survey are the following statistical charts:

Chart 1 (Questions 1-7)

| 分值题号 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------|------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| 1 | 2.7% | 31.1% | 49.3% | 10.8% | 6.1% |
| 2 | 4.1% | 23.0% | 60.1% | 11.5% | 1.4% |
| 3 | 5.4% | 45.3% | 33.8% | 12.8% | 2.7% |
| 4 | 7.4% | 60.8% | 27.7% | 4.1% | 0 |
| 5 | 9.5% | 35.1% | 36.5% | 16.9% | 2.0% |
| 6 | 1.9% | 48.6% | 23.6% | 8.8% | 0 |
| 7 | 6.1% | 29.1% | 45.3% | 14.2% | 5.4% |

Chart 2 (Question 8)

| | | | |
|-------|------|------|-----|
| A | 14.2 | AE | 1.4 |
| AB | 20.3 | B | 5.4 |
| ABC | 8.8 | BC | 4.7 |
| ABCD | 2.7 | BCDE | 3.4 |
| ABCDE | 2.0 | BCE | 2.0 |
| ABCE | 2.7 | BD | 1.4 |
| ABD | 2.0 | BDC | .7 |
| ABE | 2.7 | BE | .7 |
| AC | 9.5 | C | 1.4 |
| ACD | 2.7 | CD | .7 |
| ACDE | 1.4 | CE | 1.4 |
| ACE | 3.4 | D | .7 |
| AD | 2.0 | E | 1.4 |

Chart 3 (Question 9)

| A | B | C | D | E |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|---|
| 20.3% | 35.8% | 25.7% | 18.2% | 0 |

DISCUSSION

According to Krashen, language input should be comprehensible. It’s true that the textbook that our

students were using provide a large bulk of the language input. The statistics show that the textbook was accepted by 60.1% of the subjects as neither difficult nor easy and that 23.0% of the subjects viewed

it as a little difficult. Still, nearly half of the subjects expressed a neutral attitude to the textbook when asked whether they liked it or not; meanwhile, nearly half of the subjects showed their interest in the textbook. All this indicates that the textbook is acceptable on the whole, but should be made more interesting.

A much balanced distribution was achieved in subjects when they were asked whether their study materials were sufficient or not. Compared with those thinking that the materials were a little less than they wanted, there were 15% more subjects who thought the materials were a little more wanted.

Teacher talk functions as important part of the language input for college students in classroom settings. In our survey, nearly half of the subjects said their teachers' oral English were fluent, which is a very encouraging situation. However, there was still a large part of the subjects, rated 23.6%, who took a neutral position.

A most dispersed distribution of subjects was achieved in the survey when they were asked how well they understood the teacher talk. This shows that teachers should make more adjustments in their talk to cater to students' comprehension or students should work harder to improve their listening comprehension, a problem which needs further research.

Another point concerned is that the ways that students learn or use English are so narrow. Chart 2 reveals that textbooks, newspapers and magazines are more frequently used reading materials which may benefit their language learning, while watching TV, speaking in English, etc. that can provide learners with more authentic settings are less used. Therefore, learning under this condition may not turn to acquisition easily.

We also find that the time when students expose themselves to English learning is not too adequate. Without much time for learning, they are not likely to intake knowledge effectively, let alone produce language output or conduct communication. That is why 'dumb and deaf English' is so common among non-major English students.

CONCLUSION

Krashen's optimal input hypothesis gives us useful insights into SLA, but English learning in our country belongs to the category of EFL, so we can not apply his theory to our learning mechanically. We should, in accordance with the real situation in China, adopt it non-inclusively and reject it non-exclusively.

In order to facilitate the transfer from learning to acquisition, teachers play an essential role in this process. Teachers, guidance for student's learning, can help them transfer in a more efficient way. Based on

their many years' teaching experience, the authors put forward some points, modified from Krashen's optimal input hypothesis, to guide Chinese students' classroom learning. They are listed as follows: 1) comprehensible optimal input should be hierarchical. Comprehensibility is the key factor of SLA, but this feature varies from student to students. Because of some intelligent and non-intelligent elements, students differ in their learning. In classroom instruction, teachers should input knowledge according to each student's ability, so everyone can absorb knowledge within intellectual reach helps to keep students' emotional stability. 2) Optimal input should be interesting and informative. In addition to the feature of being interesting and relevant, the input that students accept should be informative. Teachers can input messages by way of colorful teacher talk to arouse students' curiosity. At the same time, teacher talk should contain large amounts of useful information to make students accept knowledge unconsciously. What's more, materials that students have a touch on should also be interesting and informative to create authentic learning environment for students. 3) input should be grammatical sequenced and communicatively based. English learning in China is quite different from that in Western countries. In China, most learners' study English for some specific purposes such as exam-taking, job-hunting, etc. and most of leaning are grammar-centred, so English instruction can not neglect grammatical points. However, after China joined WTO, communicative skills are emphasized by authorities, schools and the like, so how to make English learners communicate successfully calls for special attention to instruction of language skills. As for teachers, their task of teaching grammatical points is far from being satisfactory, and they should avail students of more chances to develop student's communicative strategies. 4) optimal input should be in an appropriate quantity. Krashen maintains that sufficient quantity of input is essential for SLA. While in China, for most non-majors, learning is conducted in the classroom environment, so too large amounts of input will give learners a burden within a limited time. Psychological research [7] shows that the human brain's capability of information processing is limited, and the brain filters part of information because of memory and notice limitation. Therefore, classroom instruction should be selective and the quantity should be psychologically appropriate for student's intake. Too much input may lead to students' tiredness and too little will not satisfy some learners' needs.

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Appendix: The Questionnaire for College Students' language Input

Directions: For each question, five numbers are given. The numbers indicate different values which vary in degrees and number 3 indicate the medium level. Circle the number which you think is most suitable for the question.

1. Do you like your present English textbook (most) 1_2_3_4_5 (least)
2. Do you think your textbook is easy or difficult? (most difficult)1 2 3 4 5(easiest)
3. What do think of the study material in your textbook? Are they interesting? (most interesting) 1 2 3 4 5 (most boring)
4. What language does your English teacher speak while giving lessons? (English) 1 2 3 4 5(Chinese)
5. How well do you understand when you teacher gives lessons in English? (fully) 1 2 3 4 5 (least)
6. What do you think of your teacher's oral English? (fluentest) 1 2 3 4 5 (most awful)
7. Are the study materials in English class sufficient or not? (too much) 1 2 3 4 5 (too little)
8. What are the ways you learn or use English?
 - A. read the textbook
 - B. read newspapers or magazines or something
 - C. watch English films or TV programs
 - D. talk with others in English
 - E. surf the net
9. How much time do you spend every day learning English after class?
 - A. very little time
 - B. half an hour
 - C. an hour
 - D. more than an hour