

Overview of the Role of Input in Language Learning

Somayeh Sharifi (M.A)

sharifi_samin@yahoo.com

Sama Technical and Vocational Training College, Islamic Azad University, Bandar Abbas Branch,
Bandar Abbas, Iran

Marzieh Khamesipour

Marzieh.Khamesipour@yahoo.com

Sama Technical and Vocational Training College, Islamic Azad University, Bandar Abbas Branch,
Bandar Abbas, Iran

Abstract

An enormous research that has been conducted about input clearly highlights the importance of input which has been a widely recognized concept in the field of second language acquisition. Although it is clear that a learner needs input, how input is related to learning is an area of contention. Given the types of the input, current paper provides an overview with regard to the importance of language input from different theories of SLA. In the same line, it gauges Karashen' input hypothesis and its opponents as well as the supporters.

Key words: Language input, Second Language Acquisition, Krashen's input hypothesis

۱.۰ Introduction

The question of the role of language input in SLA has been important in SLA theory and research, especially during the past two decades. There are different definitions regarding input. According to Sharwood Smith (۱۹۹۲) language data which are made available by plan or without plan to the language learner is called input. Carroll (۲۰۰۱) made a distinction between stimuli as a noticeable instantiations of the second language and input as stimuli that enters the brain. Carroll explains that stimuli is not physical information (sounds, visual data) but a mental representation, available for internal processors to use. Not all definitions of input are quite as unbiased as the above. Gregg's definition (۲۰۰۱) of input is 'information that is fed into an input-output device; the output is grammar', (p. ۱۶۷). Gregg took a mentalist view of language learning that sees language as innate and its development as set or 'triggered' by the language data available to the learner. Input here is seen as 'evidence'. Several researchers see the role of input as the main source of information from which language develops.

Krashen (۱۹۸۲, ۱۹۸۵) made a distinction between input in a general sense and comprehensible input, i.e. language data that are understandable to a learner. An importance of the role of the input in second language acquisition made Stephen Krashen, linguist and educator, to propose the Monitor Model in ۱۹۸۲. According to the Monitor Model, five hypotheses account for the acquisition of a second language: Acquisition-learning hypothesis, Natural order hypothesis, Monitor hypothesis, Input hypothesis, Affective filter hypothesis. The fourth hypothesis, the input hypothesis, claimed the importance of comprehensible input in SLA. According to this hypothesis in order for L^۲ acquisition to take place, learners must be exposed to comprehensible input which contains language structures that are beyond their current stage of Interlanguage (IL) development, which he calls "i+۱".

۲.۰ Types of input

Language input is considered as a highly essential factor in the SLA process. In this relation, different theories and types of the input hypothesis continues to make strong claims regarding the role of language input and the necessity of exposure to comprehensible language input in SLA.

۲.۱ Input Enhancement

According to Rutherford (۱۹۸۷) techniques that encourage learners to pay attention to language form in the belief that an *awareness of form* will contribute indirectly to language acquisition is called Consciousness Raising. Because consciousness is a loaded psychological term that cannot be easily defined, Sharwood-Smith (۱۹۸۱) suggested a more verifiable term, input enhancement to refer to *consciousness-raising activities*. From a pedagogic point of view, input enhancement serves the purpose of drawing the learner's explicit attention to grammatical features by such activities as highlighting underlining, rule-giving and so forth. This method makes use of techniques including:

- Avoiding vowel reduction typical of rapid or casual speech
- Slowing down the rate of speech
- Using exaggerated stress and intonation
- Extensive repetition of words and phrases
- Less pre-verbal and more post-verbal modification
- Use of gestures, text enhancement such as boldface
- Underlining and the use of video

Sharwood Smith (۱۹۸۱) distinguished *external input enhancement* from *internal input enhancement* with the former referring primarily to techniques used in the deliberate teaching of a language and the latter employing ordinary events or situations.

۲.۱.۱ Input enhancement through Computerized learning environments

A number of learning tools and environments have been built to enhance input and assist both teachers and students in introductory programming courses. Chapelle (۱۹۹۸) explained how computer technology can enhance input acquisition of language skills. According to him, in computerized learning environment input is enhanced by repeating, sampling through restatements, elaborating through reference materials, and modifying input mode, etc. for example in a computerized reading situation modified interaction happens when the reader cannot comprehend or recall something. In order to get further assist the learner click on glosses for grammatical or semantic clarification or by scrolling back for demanding more input.

۲.۱.۲ Input enhancement through glossing

A necessary factor in acquiring input is learners' attention to input features and the quality of information processing. According to Schmidt's (۱۹۹۰) noticing hypothesis, noticing is "the essential condition for the conversion of input into intake" (p. ۲۰۹). Schmidt (۲۰۰۱) also stated "people learn about the things that they attend to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to" (p. ۳۰). Likewise, Chun and Plass (۱۹۹۶, ۱۹۹۷), Hulstijn, Hollander and Greidanus (۱۹۹۶), Knight (۱۹۹۴), Luppescu and Day (۱۹۹۳), Mondria (۱۹۹۳) have all found that there are many ways to draw learners' attention to the target vocabularies and learning them, such as the use of dictionaries or glosses. Mental effort can be enhanced by making input very visible and allowing for deeper processing, which is likely to result in firmer acquisition and longer retention (De Ridder, ۲۰۰۲).

۲.۲ Input Modification

Motherese or teacher talk is a type of input modification which is one of the important phenomena in the first as well as second language acquisition area. Some of the features of motherese speech are use of

exaggerated intonation, slow and clear speech, and grammatical sentences by adults to adjust or modify their speech in a way to be comprehended more by children (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, ۲۰۰۷). In the case of second or foreign language learning a native speaker communicate with a beginning language learner by slow rate of speaking, emphasis of key words, common vocabulary (Brewer, ۲۰۰۸). However, as Brewer (۲۰۰۸) stated, for readers in a second language, the written input cannot be negotiated in a similar way as the oral input can be negotiated. Consequently, modifying the written input can be one of the ways by which it can be comprehended more by language learner, generally in the syntactic structure and the lexicon.

Three rich sources of comprehensible input for SLA are modified input, interactionally modified input, and modified output. (Long, ۱۹۸۲; Ellis & He, ۱۹۹۹; Gass & Varonis, ۱۹۹۴) Accordingly, modified input is simplified by repetitions, paraphrase of words or sentences, and reduction of sentence length and complexity. Motherese, foreigner talk and teacher talk are some typical examples of such modified speech. Long (۱۹۸۲, ۱۹۸۳) made an important distinction between modified input as the modified talk directed to the learner, from the modified structure of NS-NNS interactions in which both parties modify and restructure the interaction or output to arrive at mutual understanding.

۲.۲.۱. Lexical Elaboration

As Parker and Chaudron (۱۹۸۷) stated, one type of text modification is elaboration. Elaboration is believed to enhance language learning through paraphrases, synonyms and repetitions; optional syntactic indicators; rhetorical signaling devices; reducing the rate of speech. In the same line, Kim (۲۰۰۶) argued that “text elaboration enriches NS text by providing meanings of unknown words in the form of paraphrases and by making thematic or anaphoric relationships in a text more transparent” (p. ۳۴۴). Brewer (۲۰۰۸) defined elaboration as “adding a short parenthetical definition (composed of high frequency words) after a low frequency word” (p. ۴).

۲.۲.۲. Lexical Simplification

As an alternative to elaborative modification, text simplification is defined as “controlling the text targeted at L₂ learners by removing unfamiliar linguistic items (e.g., unknown grammatical constructions and lexis) in order to reduce syntactical and lexical complexity and to enhance comprehension” (Urano, ۲۰۰۰, p. ۴). In lexical simplification, a low frequency word is replaced by a synonymous more common word (Brewer, ۲۰۰۸). Contrary to text elaboration in which, extra information is added to the text to compensate for the linguistic (whether lexical or syntactic) difficulties of the texts, in the simplification mechanism, lexical or syntactic complexity is removed from the text.

۳.۰ Theoretical Implication

The importance and role of input have been considered by many language theories. One of the pioneers among SLA researchers is Corder (۱۹۶۷) that drew a distinction between input and intake and highlighted the importance of language input for SLA. According to Corder, language input refers to what is available to be utilized by language learners for SLA which should be differentiated from intake which is that part of the input which is comprehended by the language learners.

Chomsky (۱۹۵۹, ۱۹۶۵), most prominently, suggested that humans make use of internal building blocks (‘universal grammar’), and that the input they receive serves as an evidence of what is and what is not possible in the language that is learned. Language is thus to a large extent innate and the input triggers its development.

In second language acquisition research the most vocal subscriber to this view is Krashen who has argued for the importance of comprehensible input as a necessary and sufficient condition for acquisition

to take place (۱۹۸۲, ۱۹۸۵). Krashen continued to make strong claims regarding the role of language input and the necessity of exposure to comprehensible language input in SLA.

Others, however, have argued that such comprehensible input alone is not sufficient for learning to take place (e.g. Faerch & Kasper, ۱۹۸۰) 'Paradoxically, comprehensible input may actually inhibit learning on occasion, because it is often possible to understand a message without understanding all the structures and lexical items in the language encoding it, and without being aware of not understanding them at all' (Long, ۱۹۹۶, p. ۴۲۵). Chomskyan researchers have proposed that in addition to universal rules, learners are also faced with a set of language constraints, limiting the number of grammatical possibilities; therefore, learning is not just limited to comprehensible input. This fact explains the reason learners make mistakes that they themselves have never encountered before.

Gass (۱۹۹۷) restated the role of negative evidence (direct and indirect), which Krashen's model does not acknowledge. Krashen's proposed comprehensible input from view of the interlocutors and Gass's stated comprehended input from the perspective of the learner. Like Krashen's input hypothesis, the Gass also stated that comprehensible input is vital for language learning specially when learners have to negotiate for meaning. For compensating the shortcoming of Krashen's input hypothesis, Gass (۱۹۹۷) mentioned interaction hypothesis. Accordingly, interactions are not always successful and sometimes result in receiving negative evidence by learners. Gass added that communication in the real context is different from classroom in which learners become aware of differences between their knowledge of the target language and the reality of what they are hearing. If learners say something that their interlocutors do not comprehend, interlocutors will ask for more explanation and as a result learners can receive feedback on their production and on grammar that they have not yet mastered. Besides, if learners fail to explain unclear points, interlocutors become force to spend more time and reflect more to process the input they receive. This can cause better understanding and possibly learning new language forms.

Ellis (۲۰۰۸) considered the role of language input in SLA based on behaviorist, mentalist, and interactionist theories of language learning. While mentalist theories tend to believe that language learning is internal processing of the mind and language input is considered as a trigger to activate internal mechanism, the behaviorists consider environmental stimuli and feedback which learners are exposed to as a dominant factor for language acquisition. The interactionist theories of SLA consider language acquisition as the result of an interaction between learners' mental abilities and linguistic environment and input as the role of affecting or being affected by the nature of internal mechanisms. They insist on the significance of both input and internal language learning processing.

۴.۱. Practical Implication

There are some researches on the effects of comprehensible input on English language learning. For example, Zhang (۲۰۰۹) conducted a study with the focus on the role of input, interaction and output, in the development of oral fluency in the EFL context. The findings show that nonnative oral fluency could be obtained through efficient and effective input, interaction and output in EFL. While on the other hand, they suggested answers to the question why most Chinese English learners failed to speak English fluently, namely lacking effective input and output.

Furthermore, Xiaohui (۲۰۱۰) provided the learners with different types of input and immediately after receiving them, took a posttest of vocabulary recognition. The result of the study confirmed the positive effects of premodified input, interactionally modified input and modified output play significantly facilitated rolled in the short-term memory of English learners and further result in better instant word recognition.

A number of empirical studies conducted to find out the effects of input modification on reading comprehension (e.g., Lee, ۲۰۰۷, Overstreet, ۱۹۹۸), notification of target forms (Shook, ۱۹۹۹; Izumi, ۲۰۰۲) and also acquisition of L۲ knowledge (Allanen, ۱۹۹۵; Jourdandenaïs, ota, Stauffer, Boyson & Doughty ۱۹۹۵; Lee, ۲۰۰۷; Simard, ۲۰۰۹). On the contrary of some of the researchers that found no

significant effect for textual enhancement (e.g., Allanen; Overstreet, ۱۹۹۸), there are others who provided evidence that textual enhancement has the favorable effect on L^۲ learning process (e.g., Lee, ۲۰۰۷; Jourdandenis et al., ۱۹۹۵; Simard, ۲۰۰۹; Shook, ۱۹۹۹). Furthermore, several studies even reported negative effects of textual enhancement on learners' reading comprehension scores (e.g., Lee, ۲۰۰۷, Overstreet, ۱۹۹۸).

A number of other studies also examined the effects of enriched input on L^۲ development (e.g., Trahery & White, ۱۹۹۳; Ellis, Loweven, & Erlam, ۲۰۰۶; Reinders & Ellis, ۲۰۰۹). The results of these studies are also mixed and debatable. For example, while Reinders and Ellis (۲۰۰۹) reported beneficial effects of input enrichment on the intake and acquisition of English negative adverbs by adult ESL learners of English (exposed to ۳۶ tokens of target form), Ellis et al., (۲۰۰۶) study indicated no evidence for the acquisition of English third person -s by adult ESL learners (exposed to ۵۱ tokens of this target form in written input and ۲۳ instances in aural input). Trahery (۱۹۹۶) also found that the effects of input enrichment on the acquisition of L^۲ English are limited.

•• Critics of input hypothesis

Thus, despite the influence of the Monitor Model in the field of second language learning and acquisition, the input hypothesis, the fourth hypothesis of the theory, has not been without criticism as evidenced by the critiques offered by other linguists and educators in the field. The first critique of the input hypothesis surrounds the lack of a clear definition of comprehensible input; Krashen never adequately explains the values of i or $i+1$. As Gass (۱۹۹۷) argued, the ambiguity of the term means that $i+1$ could equal any token; in other words, adequate comprehensible input could embody any quantity.

Furthermore, the point that Krashen's input hypothesis limits SLA to merely exposure to comprehensible input, causes it to be challenged by many researchers. By accepting the role of input hypothesis as an important, although not sufficient, factor in SLA (Salaberry, ۲۰۰۳), researchers claimed that SLA is not achieved merely through comprehensible input and other types of language input such as incomprehensible input, comprehended input, and comprehensible output are also proposed to facilitate the process of second language acquisition.

Merrill Swain proposed the output hypothesis and stated that language acquisition and learning may also occur through the production of language. The output hypothesis seeks to compensate the assumed inadequacies of the input hypothesis and without reducing the importance of input, highlights the importance of the production of language for second language acquisition.

Swain also tried to clarify a relationship between input and output and stated that output provides an opportunity for second language learners to recognize their weaknesses in their linguistic knowledge and subsequently pay attention to relevant input.

White (۱۹۸۷) underscored the role of comprehension difficulties or input incomprehensibility in providing important negative feedback to the learner which like comprehensible input can enhance the process of SLA. Encountering incomprehensible language input which cannot be analyzed by learners' inter-language rules forces them to reflect more on those inter-language rules to understand the structure and this leads to constitution of SLA.

Gass (۱۹۹۷) asserted that not all types of input but only that part of the language input which is comprehended is involved in the SLA process. Gass gave the priority to the concept of comprehended input rather than comprehensible input and stated that SLA may be beyond the boundaries of comprehensible input.

Swain (۱۹۸۵) put forth another factor which provides the necessary data for SLA which is comprehensible output. According to Swain while learning a language learner may face a gap in his/her linguistic knowledge of the second language and for rectifying this gap learner tries to modify his/her output which may end in finding out and learning a new aspect of the language which has not been

acquired yet. Swain (۱۹۸۵) provided evidence of the immersion programs in which showed that comprehensible input alone did not lead to SLA. This view sharply contrasts with Krashen's input hypothesis where the role of comprehensible output is neglected or minimized. She highlighted the point that under some conditions, comprehensible output enables SLA in ways that it can provide the required input. Swain accepted the fact that without comprehensible input language learners are not able to link forms and meanings for SLA development, but she also criticize input hypothesis for underscoring the point that increased comprehensible input leads more language acquisition not the increased output. Yet, no evidence has been provided for this claim.

Consequently Romeo (۲۰۰۰) as an advocator of Swain's comprehensible output hypothesis, indicated that output of some kind is considered as a necessary phase in SLA. Romeo pointed out the fact that learners' output whether it is communication failure or successful dialog provide precious information for both the teachers and learners to judge their improvement and adapt future materials to their needs. Moreover, language learners need the opportunity to use whatever they have acquired and in order to make their output more precise. These arguments suggest that both comprehensible input and comprehensible output are important to be utilized as a source of input in SLA process. This view one more time goes against Krashen's input hypothesis.

۶.۰ Conclusion

Given the importance of input comprehension in language acquisition and types of it, the present paper provided a short review regarding the role and the importance of language input in second language acquisition. Although there were great differences in the various positions researchers have taken in relation to the roles of input in second language acquisition, there is certainly also considerable consensus that language learning cannot take place without input. Moreover, there appears to be a reasonable degree of agreement that input at the very least has to be comprehensible. One of the strong claims regarding the role of language input and the necessity of exposure to comprehensible language input in SLA is Krashen's input hypothesis.

Despite the effect of the input hypothesis in the field of second language learning and acquisition, this theory has not been without criticism. There has been claimed that other sorts of language input such as incomprehensible input, comprehended input, and comprehensible output and interaction to some extent facilitate learning, either through the provision of more comprehensible input, or by drawing attention to certain aspects of the input, or the learner's own output.

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