The Role of Input and Interaction in Foreign Language Classrooms

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1. Introduction

There are a number of studies which deal with input and interaction in second language acquisition. This paper reviews some of the main theories in this field, such as Krashen’s input hypothesis and the interaction hypothesis which includes negotiation of meaning introduced by Long (1985). First of all, it is examined to what extent the input hypothesis is applicable under the condition of classroom teaching. Then, we explore the effectiveness of interaction by focusing on negotiation of meaning between learners and their teachers. Some outstanding features of interaction in pair / group activities and whole-class teaching are also compared and analyzed. Lastly, the important role of the output for improving the target language is discussed.

2. Input hypothesis and its limitation

According to Krashen’s (1982) hypothesis, input is very important in the process of acquiring second languages (L2). His “i+1” theory assumes that the acquisition level develops from the current stage [i] to a little more advanced stage [i+1] by picking up parts of the comprehensible input. The learner chiefly focuses on the meaning of the input and not the form of the message. In contrast, the hypothesis presented by Hatch (1978) emphasizes the importance of learning language structures first and then of practicing through communication. Krashen argues that sufficient input may implicitly provide necessary elements of grammar for L2 development and the knowledge can be acquired naturally. Thus, under his hypothesis, grammatical error correction is considered of little value with the following reason:

Error correction has the immediate effect of putting the student on the defensive. It encourages a strategy in which the student will try to avoid mistakes, avoid
difficult constructions, focus less on meaning and more on form. It may disrupt the entire communicative focus on an exchange. (Krashen 1982: 75)

In terms of classroom teaching, it is thought that optimal input modified by foreigner-talks or teacher-talks may facilitate the process of L2 acquisition. The modification is roughly tuned and provided not for the purpose of language teaching, but for the purpose of communication. Krashen claims that only receiving input, although it must be comprehensible, is enough for foreign language acquisition.

However, this hypothesis contradicts Swain’s study (1985) regarding an immersion program conducted in Canada. He found that French immersion students continued to have a number of errors despite seven years of exposure to comprehensible input in the language, although they appeared to acquire sociolinguistic aspects of the language. The result implies that input alone is not sufficient to acquire L2 in the same way that children usually acquire their L1, even if the program provides much more exposure to the language than other ordinary L2 classrooms can do. Thus, limitation of L2 exposure is one of the inevitable constraints on classroom teaching. In fact, it is considered that foreign language classrooms usually have at most 400 hours of input over a period of 5 years. According to the research by the Foreign Service Institute, even European languages such as German, French, and Italian require around 720 hours for the average students to comprehend intermediate level lessons (Krashen 1982). In addition, teaching based on the input hypothesis seems to have great difficulty in drawing learners’ selective attention to notice specific features of the target language.

3. Classroom interaction

3.1 Negotiation of meaning

Krashen mentions that only comprehensible input leads to acquisition, whereas Long (1985) considers that it is more effective to have interaction modified by the negotiation of meaning such as, a) clarification requests, b) confirmation checks / signals, and c) comprehension checks between students or
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with their teachers, in order to make the input information more comprehensible. Here are short examples of “meaning negotiation”:

a) Clarification request: “What do you mean by X?”

b) Confirmation check: Student A “The homemaker woman.”
   Student B “The homemaker?”

c) Comprehension check: “Do you know what I mean?”

(Pica and Doughty 1985: 120)

The study of Pica et al. (1987: 740) supports Long’s view: “as a result of negotiation, learners come to comprehend words and grammatical structures beyond their current level of competence”. In fact, their research found that comprehension scores of the participants who had pre-modified input were lower than those of participants who were encouraged to negotiate without prior modified information. This would suggest that students could learn L2 better through the negotiation of meaning under interactive tasks than by receiving input alone. Anton (1999: 303) also stresses that:

Students interact with others, they are actively engaged in negotiation of meaning, they have an opportunity to express themselves by sharing ideas and opinions, and they are responsible for their own learning.

In order to explore detailed features of “meaning negotiation” in classroom interaction, further discussion is divided into the following three aspects: interaction between learners, interaction with their teachers, and comparison between group and teacher-led activities.

3.1.1 Interaction between learners

Here is an example of modified interaction through negotiation between two students:

Hiroko: A man is uh drinking c-coffee or tea with uh the saucer of the uh uh
coffee set is uh in his uh knee.

Izumi: In him knee.

Hiroko: Uh on his knee.

Izumi: Yeah

Hiroko: On his knee.

Izumi: So sorry. On his knee.

(Gass and Varonis 1994 cited in Ellis 1997: 47)

This dialogue indicates that both learners come to have a correct form of the phrase “on his knee” after exchanging some confirmation checks to understand each other’s utterances. It is evident that learners can acquire some grammatical aspects which are not perfectly mastered through the negotiation in their interaction. Pica and Doughty (1985: 118) provide a theoretical view to support the example:

During communicative exchanges in which addressees had difficulty understanding and addressors sensed this difficulty, addressors could restructure the conversation so as to make their input comprehensible to addressees and thus allow the conversation to continue.

They also go on to stress that interaction in peer-group activity is effective in order to enhance learners’ L2 development, because it is considered that there will be more opportunity to use and practice the target language in groups than in teacher-led activities. However, what we have to be careful is that fluent students are often apt to take turns and less confident students might continue to receive incomprehensible input without having any negotiation. Wu (1998: 531) points out the negative effects of this anxiety:

In classroom settings, some learners tend to keep silent when part of the input is not comprehensible. Only when the input is comprehensible to them do they participate in the ongoing interaction, that is, the reverse process of comprehensible input leading to further interaction also exists.
In addition, when there is no surveillance by teachers, students tend to leave the intended track in their conversation easily and thus lose the point of the activity. Therefore, teachers have important roles in providing valuable interaction which enables learners to employ effective “meaning negotiation”.

### 3.1.2 Interaction with their teachers

Wu (1998) points out that classroom interaction has multi-faceted aspects in a hierarchical framework and also has a mutual influence between students and their teachers. In fact, teachers can employ various methods, approaches and procedures such as PPP (Presentation Practice Production) and IRF (Initiation Response Feedback). Furthermore, they need to consider how to allocate turn-taking opportunities effectively, so as to promote learners’ negotiation, by dealing with several types of questions (e.g. open / closed questions, display / referential questions).

Vandergrift (1997) points out that it is also necessary for teachers to pay attention to nonverbal messages from learners’ signals, such as uptaking (sending signals which tell the speaker to continue: e.g. nods), faking (sending uptaking signals without clear understanding) or kinesics (body languages to request a clarification: e.g. confused look / shaking head). Even if they are nonverbal, each signal has a particular message that students intend to convey. It is one of the important roles for teachers not to overlook these signals especially from learners who appear to be unconfident and shy. Sometimes it might be appropriate that teachers allocate turn-taking opportunities to such students. Furthermore, he also mentions that students in different proficiency levels tend to use different interactive strategies for meaning negotiation. For instance, elementary-level learners often ask for repetition or rephrasing for simplification, while intermediate students start having more specific questions by focusing on the words / phrases that are not understood. It is necessary for teachers to take into consideration that learners’ reaction and the ways of negotiation are very complex and different depending on proficiency levels or personality of learners.
3.1.3 Pair / group activities and whole-class teaching

Activities in pairs or groups are likely to offer plenty of opportunities for individual learners to use the target languages (Pica and Doughty 1985, Harmer 2009). It is also possible to improve learners’ skills of cooperation and negotiation since these activities help the classroom to be a more relaxed and friendly place (Harmer 2009). In contrast, whole-class teaching is good for providing instructions, feedbacks, or explanations such as input of grammatical features. If the teacher is a native speaker of the target language, it might be beneficial to have longer teacher-led activities.

Native speaker utterances from the ESL teacher, which were not available in the group activity, would, of course, increase the amount of grammatical input available in the teacher-fronted decision. (Pica and Doughty 1985: 123)

Under the whole-class teaching, however, students tend not to take responsibility for their own learning and they may not participate actively in front of the class due to the risk of public failure (Harmer 2009). The classroom is a limited environment to master foreign languages thoroughly. Therefore, it is important to balance pair / group-works and teacher-led activities with an appropriate mixture by making use of their advantages.

3.2 Roles of output

According to Swain (1985), interactional exchanges in the classroom strongly depend on comprehensible output and comprehensible input. It is natural to assume that output is also an inevitable factor for the process of language development, since children usually acquire their L1 through a lot of output. A cognitive viewpoint supports this assumption.

It is true for every participant that the input from verbal exchanges leads the operation of mental processing. On the other hand, the mental operation results in utterances as output. (Wu 1998: 526)
Swain (1995) believes that students can also learn from their own output because they may notice the gap between what they want to say and what they can say in the target language. That is, they come to realize the lack of their knowledge when trying to speak or write something important for their communication. In fact, the research of Ellis and He (1999) comes to conclude that producing new words enables learners to retain them longer in their memory through deep processing. Thus it may be effective for teachers to provide some practical activities such as task-based or problem-solving exercises especially for intermediate / advanced-level learners, in order to encourage them to produce the target language.

4. Conclusion

Social interaction is one of the main purposes of learning languages. It is rather unnatural to assume that only having input is sufficient to acquire target languages. Interacting with others and being engaged in negotiation enable learners to “express themselves by sharing ideas and opinions” (Anton 1999). This is an important and natural process for language learning. Therefore, teachers need to create an appropriate classroom environment to promote and activate learners’ interaction.

References