Language Input and Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract
The role and the importance of language input in second language acquisition are not questioned. In fact, a pool of researchers in realm second language acquisition agrees on the fact that some sort of language input is necessary for second language acquisition to take place. In other word, second language acquisition cannot take place without considering having exposure to some type of language data. In this relation, pre-modified input, interactionally modified input, and modified output are the three types of language input which have the potential to provide the necessary comprehensible language input for language acquisition/learning. Accordingly, the present paper aims at further investigating the most effective type of language input by considering the amount of contribution that each type of language input has on second language acquisition.
Key words: Language input, Second language acquisition, Role of input

1. Introduction

The role of language input in language learning has been of foremost importance in much SLA research and theory. In fact, the review of the related literature on the role of input in developing
SLA is indicative of the fact that the majority of the studies have been concerned with the role, the importance, and the processing of linguistic input.

However, although the role of language input has been supported by different language learning theories, there has been some degree of disagreement in the field of language acquisition between those theories that attribute a small or no role to language input and those attributing it a more central role. As a matter of fact, theories of SLA attach different importance to the role of input in language acquisition process but they all admit the need for language input. In many approaches to SLA, input is considered as being a highly essential factor while in other approaches it has been neglected to a secondary role (Ellis, 2008). Nevertheless, it has been widely accepted that language input provides the linguistic data necessary for the development of the linguistic system. The concept of language input is one of the essential concepts of SLA. In fact, no individual can learn a second language without language input of some sort (Gass, 1997).

In the same line, one of the essential theories of language learning which plays an important role in SLA research is the input hypothesis established by Krashen (1981). The input hypothesis claims that for SLA to take place, language learners are required to have access to a type of language input which is comprehensible. For Krashen, the only causative variable in SLA is comprehensible input. Some researchers (Long, 1982; Ellis, 1999; Gass & Varonis, 1994) have somehow supported the input hypothesis by suggesting pre-modified input, interactionally modified input, and modified output as three potential types of comprehensible input.

Accordingly, pre-modified input is a type of input which has been modified in some way before the learner sees or hears it, interactionally modified input refers to a type of input which has been modified in interaction with native speakers or more proficient non-native ones for the sake of comprehension, and modified output refers to output modification to make it more comprehensible to the interlocutor. It is necessary to clarify that a learner's modified output can serve as another learner's comprehensible input (Ellis, 1999; Long, 1996).

In this regards, Long (1982) suggested input modification through providing linguistic and extralinguistic context, orienting the communication to the simple form, and modifying the interactional structure of the conversation as three ways to make language input comprehensible. On the basis of this argumentation, Park (2002) also introduced pre-modified input, interactionally modified input, and modified output as three potential sources of comprehensible input for SLA.

In view of the above, the present paper aims at considering these three types of comprehensible input for SLA along with other types of language input for SLA.

2. Pre-modified input

One of the ways to make language input comprehensible is through providing the language learners with pre-modified language input. Any spoken or written language input can be simplified or modified for the sake of comprehension through providing less difficult vocabulary items and complex syntactic structures which are beyond readers' acquired language proficiency. By modifying the syntax and the lexicon of a given oral or written language input, we try to increase text comprehensibility by ways of providing definitions of difficult vocabulary items, paraphrasing sentences containing complex syntactic structures, and enriching semantic details. To this end, elaboration is more preferred because elaborated input retains the material that language learners need for developing their interlanguage and provides with natural discourse model (Kim, 2003). Another advantage of modifying the input through elaboration is that elaborated adjustments have the potential to supply the learners with access to the linguistic items they have not acquired yet (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).

Likewise, Parker and Chaudron (1987) highlighted the point that elaborative modifications have a positive effect on comprehension and acquisition. In this regards, Parker and Chaudron distinguished two types of elaborative modifications; those contributing to redundancy and those making the thematic structure explicit. Similarly, Urano (2002) and Kong (2007) underscored the effects of lexical simplification and elaboration on sentence comprehension and incidental vocabulary acquisition. They claimed that lexical elaboration is more favorable than lexical simplification in terms of both reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Nevertheless, not all forms of input elaboration benefit comprehension. Ellis (1995) highlighted the point that although elaborations might help SLA, over-elaborated language input could be counter-productive.

3. Interactionally modified input

Another potential type of comprehensible input is interactionally modified input. The notion of interactionally modified input refers to the changes to the target structures or lexicons in a conversation to accommodate potential or actual problems of comprehending a message. In a study conducted by Ellis (1994) three kinds of input conditions and their potential to facilitate comprehension were considered: the unmodified input or baseline input which refers to a type of language input which is not modified for the sake of comprehension, the pre-modified input which refers to a type of input that is modified or simplified before it is given to the language learners to boost comprehension process, and interactionally modified input which is a type of language input that is interactionally modified through negotiation of meaning to make input comprehensible. The results of the study were indicative of the fact that interactionally modified input significantly facilitated comprehension more than other types of input.

Long (1980) was the first researcher who made an important distinction between modified input and interactionally modified input. According to Long, interactionally modified input emerges when the two parts of a conversation negotiate meaning for comprehension. In fact, when language learners face communicative problems and they have the opportunity to negotiate solutions to them, they are able to acquire new language. Long, thus, supported the idea that interactionally modified input through negotiation of meaning is essential for input to become comprehensible. It runs counter to Krashen's Input Hypothesis that restricts SLA to the most extent to simplified input (comprehensible input) along with contextual support.

4. Modified output

Another potential type of comprehensible input for SLA is modified output. It is necessary to clarify that the distinction between the interactionally modified input and the modified output is not apparent because modified output occurs as a response to comprehensible input through interaction rather than in a vacuum (Gass, 1997). Negotiation of meaning induces learners to modify their output, which in turn may stimulate the process of language acquisition. As a result, modified output must occur in an interactional environment (Ellis, 1999). Negotiation and modified output works interactionally since the modified output of one learner often works as another learner's comprehensible input and what constitutes interaction for one learner serves as potential language input for other learners who are involved in the discourse only as

listeners.

5. Other types of language input

Because Krashen's input hypothesis limits SLA to merely exposure to comprehensible input, many criticisms have been directed to it around the nature and the type of language input for SLA. In this regards, other types of language input such as incomprehensible input and comprehensible output are also considered to enhance the process of SLA through providing the necessary input.

One of the potential types of language input is incomprehensible input (White, 1987). In his incomprehensible input hypothesis, White underlined the point that when language learners come across language input that is incomprehensible because their interlanguage rules cannot analyze a particular second language structure, they have to modify those interlanguage rules to understand the structure. This way, the incomprehensible input enhances the process of SLA. According to White, when an aspect of the language input is comprehensible, the acquisition of the missing structures may not take place. As a matter of fact, the incomprehensibility of some aspects of the language input to the language learners draws their attention to specific features to be acquired.

Another type of language input is comprehensible output which is somehow similar to modified output. In her comprehensible output hypothesis, Swain (1985) argued that in addition to comprehensible input, comprehensible output has the potential to boost SLA. Based on comprehensible output hypothesis language learning is reached when the language learner faces a gap in his/her linguistic knowledge of the second language. By noticing this gap, the language learner tries to modify his/her output. This modification of output may enhance acquiring new aspects of the language that have not been acquired yet. In line with Swain, Romeo (2000) advocated the comprehensible output by highlighting t6he point that output of some type is seen as a necessary phase in language acquisition. On the one hand, teachers need students' output in order to be able to judge their progress and adapt future materials to their needs. On the other hand, learners need the opportunity to use the second language because when faced with communication failure, they are forced to make their output more precise.

6. Conclusion

The role and the importance of language input in enhancing SLA have been emphasized more or less by the majority of the researchers. In fact, language input has been considered to provide the initial data for acquiring the language. In this regard, one of the hypotheses which has given life to many studies in relation to the role of language input in SLA is the input hypothesis. The questionable aspect of the input hypothesis is that it considers comprehensible input as the only potential type of data for SLA.

What can be concluded and summarized from Krashen's input hypothesis is that the importance of language input for SLA is not questioned and some type of language input is required for SLA. Accordingly, some researchers have introduced modified input, interactionally modified input, and modified output as three potential types of comprehensible input. The point should be highlighted here that the present paper did not aim to advocate or criticize the input hypothesis. However, other types of language input such as incomprehensible input and comprehensible output can also provide the necessary language input for SLA.

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