

AN INTERVIEW ON THE ROLE OF INPUT IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

The purpose of the interview was to examine the role of input in the second language learning process of an individual through the lens of the Input Hypothesis, popularized by Stephen Krashen during the late 70s and early 80s. (Brown, 2014, p. 288) In this theory he made five claims about the learning process. The study shows that affective factors are a driving force of learning rather than Krashen's passive condition that is required for a subconscious input process to happen and input is only one of the conditions required for learning.

Key Words : Input Hypothesis , Second language learning , output

1. Introduction

The influence of the American linguist Stephen Krashen on studies and research on the acquisition / learning of second languages is undeniable. His major works were published about twenty years ago and are still widely debated today, both by his followers and by his critics. Its theoretical model, known as the Monitor Model, plays an important role in research into foreign language acquisition.

The Monitor Model (Krashen 1977,1982,1985) is based on five hypotheses: The hypothesis of the distinction between Acquisition and Learning For Krashen, there are two distinct paths in the process of appropriation of a foreign language , first of which is acquisition that is an automatic process which develops at the level of the subconscious, due to the need for communication, similar to the process of assimilation that occurs with the acquisition of the mother tongue. There is no conscious effort on the part of the individual and no emphasis on the formal aspect of the language, but on the communicative act itself. In order for the acquisition to take place, a great interaction between the learner and the target language is required. A typical example of acquisition is the case of immigrants arriving in a country whose spoken language is different from their own and, because of their communicative needs, acquire the local language without having any (or less) formal and explicit knowledge about the language.

The second one is learning and it is a conscious process that results from the formal knowledge "about" the language (Krashen, 1985). Through learning (which depends on intellectual effort to happen), the individual is able to make explicit the rules in the target language. For Krashen, learning will never be transformed into acquisition, and therefore through learning one will never reach a level of communicative competence that can be equated with that of a native, which will only occur if acquired. The learning situation would only contribute to a rather fluid discourse, since students would be more concerned with form than with the message to be conveyed⁴. There is not much criticism of these views. For McLaughlin (1987) the hypothesis is flawed from the outset since Krashen does not clearly define the terms "acquisition," "learning," "conscious," and "subconscious," thus making it impossible to determine exactly what "acquired language" and "learned language". Although Krashen reports some research done with foreign language learners, McLaughlin questions the methodology used in proving that certain structures have been "acquired". For the critic, it is very difficult (or practically impossible) for a foreign-language speaker to recognize whether, in making a sentence, he made use of his grammatical knowledge of the language (rule) or of a feeling. According to this researcher, there are no mechanisms that can detect this subtle difference. Another point that deserves attention is the data collected by Krashen. Most of their research is based only on the production (apprentices of ours) of apprentices of an LE, which causes Romeo (2003) to question: Can a structure be considered "acquired" when there are no errors of understanding? Or should it be considered acquired when there is a certain level of precision in production? ⁵ As Krashen does not present a definition of the term "acquired language," it is not possible to know whether this

term refers to levels of understanding, production, or both. In addition, it comes up against the methodological question that surrounds everything of the Krashen model. McLaughlin points out that there is as yet no empirical evidence to support the existence and functioning of the two mechanisms (acquisition and learning).

Monitor's hypothesis For Krashen, the ability to produce sentences in a foreign language derives from the acquired competence. However, conscious knowledge of grammatical rules (learning) also has a (and only) function: to act in the production of statements as a monitor, a broker, modifying them if they do not conform to the rules learned. That is, the creative production, arising as a result of the acquisition process, is corrected and altered based on the conscious knowledge of the rules of the foreign language in question. For Krashen (1985), the Monitor will only come into action if two basic conditions are present: a) the speaker needs to want to correct himself, that is, the focus must be in the form; b) the speaker must know the rules. For McLaughlin, this hypothesis is incomplete. Krashen describes the performance of the Monitor as a broker who acts before or after the production of a statement by the learner, but omits, once again, regarding the function of the Monitor in the process of understanding statements. That is, we often do not use the knowledge of grammar rules to understand certain phrases in a foreign language? Does not knowledge of certain morphological, syntactic, semantic, phonetic and / or contextual rules make it easier for us to understand unfamiliar words, for example? Krashen's theory does not consider these questions.

2. The Input Hypothesis

The Input Hypothesis is the heart of Krashen's whole theory. For him, acquiring a second language will only occur if the learner is exposed to target language samples (input) that are slightly beyond their current level of language competence. The new structures, unknown vocabulary and grammatical rules would be acquired through the context in which they were presented, extra-linguistic information, world knowledge and the linguistic knowledge acquired by the learner previously. The fact that hardly two students are equal in *i* does not seem to be a problem for Krashen. According to him (1985), the teacher need not strive to offer the next structures (Natural Order hypothesis) to his students: this will occur automatically if they receive sufficient amount of understandable input. According to Krashen (1985) the input hypothesis generates two important statements: a) speech is a result of acquisition and not its cause and therefore can not be taught directly, but it "emerges" as a result of constructed competence via an understandable input; b) if the input is understood and sufficient, the necessary grammar is automatically provided. For Krashen, the input hypothesis is supported by ten evidences:

a) The Mother Talk (caretaker): the commonly simplified speech that is directed to children when acquiring their mother tongue works, according to the author, as a facilitator in the acquisition process.. In a transposition to the acquisition of a foreign language, in order to obtain satisfactory results, the speech used by the teacher must follow the same path, that is, starting from less complex structures and progressing gradually according to the linguistic stage of the students.

b) The Period Of Silence: it is a phenomenon that occurs mainly (but not only) with children who learn a foreign language in immersion and who spend a long period of time in silence, producing only a small number of sentences. This period can last for months until the child is able to communicate properly in the new language. For Krashen, this silence is the result of the process of building competence, through the understanding of input. With adults learning a foreign language the same thing would happen: there is an initial period in which the learner, based on the comprehensible input that is offered to him at every moment, builds the bases of his communicative competence in the target language

c) Age differences : According to Krashen, data show that children are generally superior to adults in LE learning in the long run; however, adults learn it more quickly. This is due to the fact that older learners get more amount of understandable input, while younger learners are better in the long run because they have a low affective filter.

d) The Effect of Formal Education: Do students who learn the foreign language in formal contexts have better or poorer results than learners living in an environment of total immersion in the language? For Krashen, this question can be answered based on the input hypothesis: LE classes would be more efficient for beginners, who often have a lot of difficulty understanding when exposed to an immersive environment. On the other hand, formal education would bring less benefits to advanced students who would already be able to understand more complex input.

e) The Effect of Exposure: for Krashen, exposure to the foreign language will only bring benefits to the learner if it contains an understandable input. Therefore, not always large amounts of input or large time of exposure to input guarantee good results

f) Comprehensive Input Insufficiency: For Krashen, the fact that a learner is not exposed to sufficient understandable input compromises acquisition. The author cites research done with female children of deaf parents and who, therefore, did not receive enough amount of input that would allow them to learn. These

children presented a great delay in the acquisition of the language, later healed when living with other children.

g) Method Comparison Research: According to Krashen (1985: 14), some research (although not specified by the author) was carried out comparing the efficacy of grammatical base methods and audio-oral based methods. The results revealed that there was little difference between them. For the author, this is due to the fact that neither of the two methodologies is able to offer enough understandable input to the learners. More recent research has pointed out that other methods, such as Total Physical Response (Asher 1982), Natural Method (Krashen; Terrell 1983) and Sugestopedia (Lozanov 1978) are more efficient because they present two essential characteristics for acquisition.

k) Immersion Programs: For Krashen, the success of Canadian immersion programs in second language evidences the input hypothesis. Through these programs, students from public schools whose LM is English begin to study, during a certain period of time, the curricular subjects in the LE, in this case, in French. At the end of the period, students have excellent second language proficiency levels. For Krashen this fact is explained by: - the students had access to a large amount of input; - the input was understandable because it was always presented in context; - as the students were evaluated only by their knowledge in the disciplines, and not by their linguistic knowledge, the focus was always in the message and not in the form, propitiating the acquisition.

l) The Success Of Bilingual Programs: for Krashen, the input hypothesis would also explain the success of certain bilingual education programs and the failure of others. Bilingual programs would be effective in developing learner knowledge in his LM, which would allow him to use the language (either mother tongue or second language) to learn and discuss abstract ideas, which would facilitate the understanding of the input. On the other hand, programs that use translation as the main resource in their classrooms would be inefficient, since there is no "meaning negotiation" and the apprentice does not bother to understand messages in second language since they will be translated quickly into his mother tongue.

m) The Hypothesis of Reading: According to Krashen, studies prove that the students of second language , who present better performances in the written language are those who exercise reading for self-interest. The author postulates, therefore, that written competence is derived from self-motivated readings, which would serve as input, in the same way that oral competence is constructed through the exposition to understandable input.

In this theory Krashen made five claims about the learning process All the components will not be discussed here, but some of the important claims should be highlighted. One argument is that learning is based on a subconscious acquisition process rather than an active learning process, therefore volumes of input are important because they facilitate learning rather than cognizant instruction. A second argument is that input needs to be comprehensible, that is to say that the input should be just above the current level of comprehension of the learner in order to meaningfully contribute to the learning process. Finally, Krashen also mentioned that the *affective filter* needs to be low so that nothing restricts the above-mentioned processes. (Brown, 2014, p. 288).

3. Methodology

A structured research interview was used to explore the views, experiences, beliefs and motivations of an english learner to see if input is as fundamental as Krashen. The interview includes 12 different questions verbally administered, and the answers were recorded. The interview was conducted on November 17th, 2017.

3.1 The Participant

SK grew up in a village in one of the most eastern regions of Turkey. This region is very underdeveloped in comparison to the rest of the country and to this day remains very poor. Despite what one might guess about SK's future, today he is a professor of English at the Faculty of Education at Yüzüncü Yıl University in Van, Turkey. As his doctoral work was on language attrition, he was able to more specifically reflect on his own learning in light of second language acquisition theory. Despite having been abroad in English speaking countries for a mere total of one month, he has a CEFR C2 proficiency level. All of these surprising achievements from someone who started in a poor, remote village seemed to merit a case study of his educational journey.

4. Results and Discussion

SK's first exposure to English began at a boarding high school. The school had a year of preparation just in English before students were admitted, however the education was limited to primarily reading and writing, and even the passages of reading were brief. The majority of the methodology was grammar-translation. Sometimes the teacher would read passages aloud, but even this was very sporadic. Most instruction occurred in Turkish, the national language of education. At 18 he went to university but was concerned because he knew more would be expected of him in the university program than what had been offered at boarding school. The

professors only used English during the classes.

SK recalled some of the efforts he started making during this period to boost his quantity of input sources. He decided to take an extra TEFOL class that was taught by a native speaker. He bought a new dictionary that had example sentences (context) for each of the new words as well as other native-source books, preferably those with CD audio tracks. Also, he started using chat rooms, but mostly interacted with non-native speakers. Eventually he moved into teaching roles that supplemented his input exposure. During the last year of university, he began teaching at a private language school. After graduation he returned to his native Van and began teaching at a local high school using English sources. All doctoral work was done in English as well as lessons he offers at his own private language school with other EFL teachers.

All this increased exposure during university in a certain sense meets Krashen's requirements for sufficient input. SK's answers seemed to be dismissive of his high school experience because of the grammar-translation model used, but also because there were few native-source materials. He mentioned it was a pity that at the very least, the audio lab available was not even used. He highlights access to native speakers in university as well as source materials (books/CDs) as instrumental in his learning process. The BBC videos, "Look Ahead," were also a prominent input feature. These aspects fit well with Krashen's theory, but despite the questions being centered around input, his comments drift back to production.

Despite the interview questions being primarily about input, SK places production as central in his learning narrative. During the TESOL class he kept a diary of his thoughts. He would often paraphrase stories that he read. The chat rooms came up as an input source, but by their very nature chat rooms are interactive and require interpretation and production. Perhaps most importantly, he attributed his speaking development to come from it being required to teach (production) rather than happening as a result of sufficient exposure (input). Teaching at the private school, teaching at high school, and mimicking the BBC videos were the self-described reason for learning to speak. Although his professors used English as the medium of instruction, and therefore providing four years of input, no students were asked to speak until their senior year for a presentation! All of this seems to contradict Krashen's theory and matches well with the criticisms listed around the need for output and interaction found in Brown and Larson-Hall. (2012, p. 48-54)

On the issue of comprehensible input, SK's experience does not seem to point to a definitive stance. He mentioned that his self-attained sources were not always at the right level, but he would attempt to work through them despite their difficulty. Perhaps this reflects his earlier understanding of learning as grammar-translation as a means of learning. Theoretically, if one has been sufficiently trained in grammar and then armed with a dictionary, everything is able to be solved. Grammar was seen as helpful if you "knew what was happening." This phrase seems to indicate a preference for comprehensible input, but not an outright statement on the theory. We cannot definitively conclude from the content of this interview alone anything about role of comprehensible input. (i+1)

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of SK's story is on the issue of *affective* factors. Krashen sees affective factors as a filter, but this interview seems to suggest that they are more of an active encouraging or restricting force than a passive instrument of sifting. We can make few conclusions about Krashen's theory from SK's While at the remote boarding school because there is a lack of input despite a positive status for the affective filter. However, despite university being a far richer source of input than high school, SK cites informal, out-of-class pursuits as being responsible for 70% of his learning. Also, he told a story about interacting with a professor and gaining self-confidence. It was this confidence, not input, that he self-identified as being one of the largest factors in learning English. These stories point to how affective factors are a driving force of learning rather than Krashen's passive condition that is required for a subconscious input process to happen. Perhaps it is more akin to Brown's (2014) descriptions of the importance of motivation. (158-162)

5. Conclusion

Input that the participant gained in the learning process played an inevitable role in English language learning and the participant generally created his own opportunities to make sense of what he heard and read in English. The participant's learning was certainly conditional on gaining access to input in the form of English speakers, source materials, etc., but his story seems to indicate that input is only one of the conditions required for learning. However, the study also concludes that affective factors are a driving force of learning rather than Krashen's passive condition that is required for a subconscious input process to happen and input is only one of the conditions required for learning.

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Appendix A:

Interview Questions and Answers

1. **When did you first start getting English input in your life?** High School. He went to a boarding school. There was a preparation year of only English education before starting high school (Anadolu Lisesi). This exposure was only reading, writing, and grammar. Sometimes students would speak for fun among themselves, but it was not a part of the preparatory year. Sometimes the teacher would read a passage aloud. There was an English lab for listening activities, but nobody used it. Turkish, the national language, was used during instruction with the grammar translation method.
2. **Which of those sources do you most easily or fondly recall?** He went to Istanbul University, and it was the first exposure to spoken English. Because he knew he was deficient in speaking, he went to a private TEFOL course with native speakers. The teacher recommended he keep a diary in English, which he continued after that point. The teacher also recommended speaking to himself. He started buying authentic materials (books) so that he could see words in context. He also got a dictionary that had sentences in context. Before that his dictionary only had a definition, but the new dictionary was specifically for learning language, so it used words in context.
3. **What varieties of written input did you use?** High school did have some books, but they were just reading segments (test preparation materials). The dictionary in university as well as native-source books were important. He started reading story books, and then started paraphrasing the stories to himself.
4. **What audio/visual input sources did you have?** In high school he was exposed to only the non-native teacher's voice when he would read passages. At university he met the native-speaker TEFOL teacher and got CDs for listening. At the university the professors would use English in class, but the students would generally not speak English among themselves.
5. **How much of your input was from formal settings (classroom, programs) and how much was informal (self-organized)?** %30 from formal instruction and 70% from his own pursuits. Started with the TEFOL course, then started buying books and audio books listening at home and talking at home. Kept writing and paraphrasing the things that he had read to himself and to the diary.
6. **How did you pursue input sources?** He started talking with foreigners he would meet. He would use chat programs to talk online with young people his age around the globe. He started with English nationals, but they got tired of his non-native speech so he switched to other people from other countries.
7. **At what ages and in what circumstances do you think most of your learning happened?** Mostly in university and after 18 years old.
8. **What did you do with input that was too simple or complex for your level at the time?** He tried hard even when things were above his level. He did try to get sources that were appropriate for his level, but often he could not find the right level so he tried to just plough through things that were too hard.
9. **Do you think listening to non-native speakers is helpful or not?** It can be helpful. His university profs were useful. But talking with non-natives can also be harmful because you can copy their mistakes yourself.
10. **How many hours a day did you seek input and are you still working on it now?** During the high school prep years, it was 4 hours per day. At university it was 2 hours a day at school plus 3 hours independent study.
11. **Did you find lessons about grammar useful input? In what ways? Can you point to examples?** Sometimes translation was helpful. It showed if you knew what was happening. The production was helpful. Filling in the blanks was good, but multiple choice was the least helpful.
12. **Did you get chances to write and speak as well?** High school had a little writing on tests, but not very extensive. University required writing papers in English. All reading and assignments were in English. TEFOL class started my writing. The teacher would give feedback. The university writing assignments never got any feedback! The professors would just give the score with no feedback. Speaking was never graded. There was only one presentation in English during his senior year, but otherwise that program also had no speaking.
 - a. **Was this always in combination with input?** Because there was little speaking it can't be said that they were really combined.
 - b. **Was your output always formal or were their informal settings as well?** Almost all output was in informal settings (TEFOL, chatting online). Speaking was at the TEFOL course. He also started teaching English his senior year at university at a private language school. Most of the speaking happened when he started teaching high school after graduation. He used "Look

Ahead” books from BBC that had videos. He used it so much with his students that it was also helpful for himself. He would prepare himself for lessons and got repeated exposure to the videos. He would talk about the video topics repeatedly with all his students, so it provided him excellent practice.

Side story that came up not relating directly to the Interview, although it seemed an important affective factor: During the second year in university he had a confrontation with a literature teacher who thought one of his answers on a test about poetry was nonsense. She confronted him on the issue and he defended himself referring to his other poems. Later he showed the teacher all his poems that he had written and she was taken by them, and appreciated them. After that he had a lot more self-confidence and that confidence helped with his English Language learning in general.