

The Effects of Input and Output on Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract. The process of input and output is an indispensable part of second language acquisition. The reason is that learners need to master relevant linguistic knowledge, such as vocabulary, collocation, grammar rules and pronunciation skills, so as to make comprehensible output in the class and the real world. To be specifically, although input and output are both of vital importance in the process of second language acquisition, input is a prerequisite for output and its role cannot be underestimated. This paper aims to illustrate the positive and negative effects of input and output in speaking and writing classes. In addition, this paper will also provide some in-depth teaching inspiration, so that teachers can be targeted on choosing appropriate teaching methods in their teaching process, to help students absorb knowledge and express their ideas effectively.

1. Introduction

In general, among all the factors related to the process of second language acquisition, input and output should be given priority. Basically, in the form of listening and reading are usually regarded as input, and writing and speaking are often seen as ways of output. Actually, in the classroom practice, teachers' teaching methods of input and output may be different. Therefore, it is quite important for teachers to be clear about whether the methods they choose can effectively increase the learners' language levels.

This paper consists of five parts: part one is a brief introduction of the whole paper; part two presents a brief overview of input and output; part three mainly demonstrates the positive and negative effects of input and output on second language acquisition by analyzing some actual cases in the real speaking and writing classes; part four expounds the teaching implication and suggestions based on different input and output sources; and the last part focus on the importance of input and output in second language acquisition.

2. A brief overview of input and output

How to adopt the correct teaching methods to facilitate the learners' language ability in the class has been a hot issue for a long time. The reason is that different learners have diverse learning abilities, knowledge bases and learning needs, which bring some challenges and difficulties for the language provider to meet the needs of these learners. Consequently, it is necessary to gain a deep insight into the input and output processing processes respectively in order to improve learners' language fluency.

2.1 Input

The input process is a way for teachers to help students transform explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge. According to Ellis (2002)^[1], the process of mastering phonology and phonotactics strategies, reading, spelling, lexis, morphosyntax, formulaic language, language comprehension, grammaticality, sentence production and other language skills is affected by input frequency. In order to familiarize students with linguistic knowledge, teachers need to adopt suitable methods to improve learners' acquiring competence. More specifically, whether learners can achieve language proficiency depends on effective input. However, sometimes due to the differences of learners' language levels, interpretabilities, comprehension abilities and knowledge bases, their intake is not

equal to input. As a result, it is quite hard for all the students in a language class to understand each piece of information.

In addition, according to Vanpatten (1993) & Cadierno (1993)^[2] input processing includes strategies and mechanisms, which improve form-meaning connection in the process of comprehension. Accordingly, how to arrange the time of form-focused instruction and meaning-focused instruction in the language class has become a problem that needs to be paid attention to in language teaching. Especially in the context of speaking class, instructors need to concentrate more on meaning-focused instruction rather than form-focused instruction, primarily because oral English teaching is communicative oriented that learners need to use their linguistic knowledge to interact with their teachers and peers. In the writing class, on the contrary, writing requires more complex sentence structures and word formations than speaking. Consequently, the mode of input hypothesis “i+1”, which was proposed by Krashen (1982)^[3] should be mentioned. In his research, “i” represented the present competence, and “1” was a symbol of the linguistic knowledge slightly higher than the learner's current language level, also known as comprehensible input. However, whether this mode appears automatically in the class actually depends on learners’ target language proficiency. What is more, Johnson (2001)^[4] also pointed out that it is virtually impossible to evaluate the definition of “i”.

2.2 Output

In addition to input, output is another important process for instructors to help second language acquirers make the most of their internalized knowledge to improve accuracy. Output is also a significant process to help learners transfer negative words to active words. Besides, according to Swain & Lapkin (1995)^[5], the output hypothesis means that students may be able to notice the gap between their own language level and the target language, even if the interlocutors do not provide implicit or explicit feedback.

However, output is not the only way to achieve success. According to Krashen (1982)^[3], although output contributes to language acquisition, it is indirect. Put it another way, when you communicate with others, others would also communicate to you, which would affect the input of learners. With respect of output, Vanpatten and Williams (2015)^[6] also points out that another feature of output is automaticity, which means the route of language use. Most instructors may find it difficult to employ this method in class at the beginning because it requires learners’ language proficiency. However, when both teachers and students have a good grasp of the method, they will get used to it.

3. The effect of input and output on SLA

Both input and output have positive and negative effects on the process of second language acquisition. In my real context, such as speaking and writing classes, the input is mainly for communicating and listening and the output is mainly for speaking and writing. However, some forms like spelling, and pronunciation-related skills (intonation, stress, vocal and consonant) would be adopted in the input processing to cater to intermediate and low-level students in particular. Additionally, other forms will be used to train learners at different levels, such as sentence making, translation and answering questions through the L2, or mini presentations. Therefore, in order to be more efficient in class, it is necessary for teachers to know as much as possible about the language level, learning needs and learning goals of different students. In contrast, owing to the individual variables of students in the class, it is difficult to adopt a form suitable for every learner.

3.1 Positive effects

No matter in speaking or writing class, input and output is regarded as the essential parts. Whether the input and output should spend much time depends on learners’ language competence. Besides, it should be noticed that input is always a prerequisite for output in language acquisition. High achievers, intermediate students and low-level students all desire to improve their language accuracy and fluency through input and output processing. However, different second language acquirers have different learning needs. For example, some high level learners often show great initiative in class and they are always hunger for more new words, slang, idioms and collocations to absorb and store knowledge.

They also long for more opportunities to practice their speaking and writing so that teachers can point out their mistakes and errors. To be more precise, they prefer the meaning-focused instruction rather than the form-focused instruction. Another reason would be that they are able to grasp linguistic knowledge faster. That is to say, they are quick thinkers sometimes. When the instructor mentioned the collocation grab students' attention in the speaking class, some high achievers are skilled in thinking of other related collocation, such as grab a drink, grab my phone, grab a taxi and so on. When they do some exercises, such as translating Chinese sentences into English sentences, they can usually work out different sentence structures to translate, like attributive clauses, appositive clauses, adverbial clause and so forth. Accordingly, it is quite easy for those students to extract the stored language knowledge to some extent. And this would sometimes stimulate teachers' internalized knowledge as well. In terms of some average students and poor students, they are more likely to be great listeners, thus listening and reading are good choices for them. During the speaking class, teachers need to speak more because students do not have enough L2 knowledge to convey message, sometimes, they are required to respond together in order to practice. And these would not only help them gain and consolidate more knowledge, but also protect their self-confidence and self-esteem.

With regard to the comprehensible input, not all second language acquirers can be instructed by this method, especially for students with low proficiency. Sometimes, "i+1" mode may cause anxiety, nervous, and low study efficiency if the methods or materials wander too far away from students' current language level. Most poor students simply need to figure out what they have learned before and output them successfully. Instead, most intermediate and high-level learners are willing to acquire knowledge beyond their levels since they consider it as an effective way to level up their language proficiency. Sometimes input frequency has a great influence on all students in the teaching of speaking and writing. However, how much time should teachers highlight depends on learners' language levels, memories, and comprehensibility. In most cases, students are able to successfully build an understanding of the knowledge in the end as long as the teacher tries to repeat. What is more, when they are exposed to authentic English frequently and reach a certain level, they may notice the gap between themselves and the target language.

3.2 Negative effects

Input and output sometimes bring adverse effects to learners for various reasons. Take speaking class as an example, if teacher tends to adopt a single output process, like answering questions freely through their L2, then high achievers may occupy most of the opportunities and time to interact with teachers, which is not conducive for other students. And this would reduce the learning motivation and study efficiency of other students. On top of that, teachers pay more attention to form-focused instruction in the input processing may also lead to some problems. Learners are taught grammar rules, sentence structure or even the word formations in class; however, in the output processing, students still find it difficult to use language knowledge flexibly. The reason is that the lack of L2 context prevents them from using the language properly. In this case, learning would become inefficient, incomprehensible and illegible. For example, students are confused about the use of effective and efficiency; tuition and intuition; transport and traffic; learn and study; choose and choice etc. Incorrect collocations are common. Sometimes, they also misuse certain word formats when expressing something. For instance, convenient our life and traffic purity airs live habits; urban cities; modern technical. Although they have a good command of S+V, S+V+O, S+V+P, S+V+O+OC, S+V+IO+DO and other basic sentence patterns, and know which word-formation form each sentence should use, they are not sensitive to the affix and root. Some of them cannot clearly point out that words ending in ce, cy, ty, ment, ship are symbols of nouns, while words like live cannot be used as adjectives. Furthermore, some pronunciation problems may also occur, such as present, digest, dessert, and record. The reason is that the pronunciation of these words varies from meaning to meaning. Chinglish is also a common problem in L2 class. For instance, they tend to say as far as I'm concerned, I think, use only life and self life to express own life, use details people to express detail-orientated people.

Similarly, too much reliance on meaning-oriented teaching can also bring negative impact on students' learning outcomes. Without adequate input frequency and a good knowledge base, second language acquirers are more likely to commit errors and mistakes when speaking or writing. To illustrate, some common errors like single and plural form (e.g. choose two point to express, the government are), third person singular, position of the adverbial modifier (e.g. in the city, on a daily basis), and absence of preposition (e.g. need be punished) and the misuse of preposition (e.g. in home), and double predicate (e.g. may be will).

4. Reflection

In a language classroom, input and output are normally closely related; teachers need to seek a balance between the two. Without sufficient input, learners are unable to produce appropriate output. Similarly, without adequate output, students fail to transform sketchy understanding into accurate expression. Accordingly, what teachers should do in class is to help students master language skills and forms. Adopting feasible and appropriate teaching methods is a great challenge for almost all instructors.

What is more, getting to know students' language levels is of great importance. This would help teachers determine the ratio of input and output in the classroom. For high-achieving students, teachers can pay more attention to output processing so as to internalize knowledge as much as possible. By doing this, they are able to be fully aware of their fading zone which is also convenient for teachers to give them some useful suggestions to improve their accuracy. As for students who are less skilled in acquiring language, teachers should patiently encourage them to express themselves properly and modify their language, so as to cultivate their communicative enthusiasm. Those students should have the belief that they can succeed as long as they study hard and practice properly.

Most importantly, "i+1" mode is more suitable for students with knowledge base and curiosity to know more because they are able to connect with their internal knowledge when exposed to new knowledge. For other students, teachers can instruct affix, root, or sentences to help them gradually accept the comprehensible input. Helping learners master native speakers' thinking patterns is crucial, especially in speaking and writing classes. Teachers sometimes can show students how to speak like native speakers which can effectively resist the interference of their L1.

5. Conclusion

The status quo of input and output has indeed been highly valued by all teachers. Acquiring language in a natural way as much as possible is playing a vital role in expression-related classes. Consequently, in the process of acquiring, both instructors and learners should cooperate with each other, not only to find effective teaching and learning methods, but also to stimulate student' motivation for further learning.

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