

# Quality Input as a Key Factor in Second Language Acquisition:

# **Evidence from Chinese English Learners Aged Under 12**

Wandi Wang

An Eleventh Grader, The High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, Beijing, 100097, P.R. China

\*Corresponding Author. Email: asdf1233@poers.edu.pl

Abstract. In linguistics, a hotly debated question is that why some second language learners are better than others. One practical and applicable theory accounting for the difference in L2 acquisition is "The Input Hypothesis" presented by Krashen. This theory has been evidenced by many experiments carried out in countries like US and UK, and a large amount of data has been collected demonstrating that the comprehensible input is the key factor in every aspect in language learning. However, academics have done fewer experiments in China on "The Input Hypothesis" thus remaining an inadequate under of this issue for Chinese learners. Therefore, this article aims at probing into "The Input Hypothesis" in the context of China from two main aspects---"The effect of comprehensible input" and "Benefits of more comprehensible input". Different research methodologies including a case study, classroom teaching observation, students random tests at school, teacher interviews, teaching research and competence tracking projects have been applied for these two sections and the data that has been collected as a result has verified "The Input Hypothesis". For example, the data from the random tests at school for the first aspect shows a significant benefit for Comprehensible Input and findings from the teaching research and linguistics competence tracking projects in the second part demonstrate more comprehensible input really benefits SLA after 26 weeks of teaching. The solution to this is constantly having students practice what they have learned after Comprehensible Input, which is probably the most efficient way for second language acquisition based on the research findings.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, The Input Hypothesis, Comprehensible Input

## 1 Introduction

As a result of both the acceleration of China's internationalization process and the increasing globalization, the willingness and demand for Chinese students to learn to

master English is growing rapidly. Meanwhile, there is a phenomenon occurring in language acquisition demonstrating some students are more successful and capable of acquiring a second language while others are suffering or struggling both at cramming schools and with parents tutoring at home. Answers to this tantalizing problem are different among diverse theories, "In part, this is because SLA is highly complex in nature, and in part, because scholars studying SLA come from academic disciplines which differ greatly in theory and research methods [1]."

Universal Grammar presented by Noam Chomsky has led to a methodology called Communicative Learning that stresses the importance of communication [2], "Communicative language teaching is based on the view that learning a language is an individual psycholinguistic act. From this perspective, language learners construct a mental model of a language system, based not on habit formation but rather on innate cognitive knowledge in interaction with comprehensible, meaningful language [3]." However, in a second language learning country, students are not able to be exposed or immersed in the language environment at the appropriate age, so this methodology is not that proper for a second language learning environment to be discussed.

Currently, most public schools in China are still applying the Grammar-Translation Method by using "Common Core Standard Work [4]", which directly instructs grammar points, words and phrases to students by translating them into the first language. But this approach has been questioned and doubted by some scholars, "The emphasis on the second language in the classroom was also part of the revolt against the older methods by the late nineteenth-century methodologists, most famously through the direct method and the Berlitz method, with their rejection of translation as a teaching technique" [5]. And in the year of 1990, scholars in different countries suggested that target language should be used when teaching, for example, in England "The natural use of the target language for virtually all communication is a sure sign of a good modern language course [6]". This method is also used in many educational manuals, "The need to have them practice English (rather than their own language) remains paramount" [7]. Since language learning is divided into two components---the input (reading and listening) and the output (speaking and writing), one point carried out by the English curriculum in Cuba stressed the importance on output specially focusing on speaking, insisting spoken language is more dominant than written language "The principle of the primacy of spoken language [8]" by using the audio-lingual and audio-visual methods. How a young child has the ability to output the target language without being input and what theory is more applicable for second language acquisition is becoming more and more a critical issue in second language teaching and learning.

Among those theories, "The Input Hypothesis [9]" presented by Krashen bridges the gap in the importance of "input" field, and it's more relevant and practical in second language learning country. The Comprehensible Input known as CI that language students have the access to and have perceived as top priority according to the hypotheses can be broken down into three main categories. First, language output is not thought to have any decisive influence on a learner's capacity; rather, it is believed that interpreting spoken and written words input is the primary basis that leads to a rise in intrinsic language ability. Moreover, Krashen argued that conscious learning cannot serve as a source of spontaneous language creation and that language proficiency can only be enhanced when it is subconsciously mastered. For example, reading compelling books when students forget they are using a second language is when language being acquired. Lastly, the student's attitude is believed to be a major factor in learning; If the learner is stressed out or doesn't have the willingness to grasp the language knowledge, they are more likely to perform with diminished language skills in every aspect in linguistic. Krashen and his colleagues carried out many researches in different countries including US, UK, Japan, Ireland, South Africa, Sri Lanka, etc and collected a huge amount of data showing Comprehensible Input is the key factor in every aspect in language learning, including vocabulary learning, spelling, grammar, writing and oral tests. "In-school free reading studies and 'out of school' self reported voluntary reading show that more reading results in better reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical development. Read and test studies confirm that reading develops vocabulary and spelling [10]."

However, few experiments on "The Input Hypothesis" have been done in China. Additionally, the way the Chinese students learn to master a second language is different from that in other countries to some extent. Therefore, this essay will critically look at "The Input Hypothesis" and verify this theory by looking at two main issues---"What is the effect of Comprehensible Input?" and "Is more comprehensible input really beneficial to SLA?" The findings obtained from the first-hand teaching research and tracking projects will enable me to put forward my personal critical thoughts about "The Input Hypothesis". For this reason, this essay has involved language learning and teaching tracking research focusing on Chinese students aged under 12 to examine whether "The Input Hypothesis" can be applied effectively and efficiently as it may thereby play a guiding role in future English teaching and learning in China.

## 2 Research Methodology

There have been 5 research methods applied for the writing up of the article including a case study, classroom teaching observation, students random tests at school, teacher interviews, teaching research and competence tracking projects. For the case study, one class with 12 students aged from 4 to 6 at Scholastic English Training Center participated in this part. Five students were randomly chosen for students random tests at school, aged from 4 to 6, taking 3 different tests---Vocabulary, Speaking and Reading. For teaching research and competence tracking projects, two classes in Scholastic were chosen to observe the control effect.

# **3** The Analysis of Quality Input as a Key Factor in Second Language Acquisition

#### 3.1 The Effect of Comprehensible Input

Following the theory learning about the Input Hypothesis which was presented and developed by Krashen, I would like to critically look at the effect of Comprehensible

Input and whether it is well practiced in reality based on interviews and case studies that I have done at Scholastic Cangzhou, Hebei Province, China.

Scholastic, founded in 1920, is a New York-based brand and it has been recognized as a trusted name in learning globally for 102 years by teachers, parents and students. Scholastic continues this successful history by remaining focused on encouraging children to learn to read and love to learn, helping teachers carry out their important jobs and supporting parents in their role as their child's first teacher while providing scientific and systematic programs for children aged between 3 and 18 years around the world helping them to learn to master English as a second language.

A case study has been done for students aged between 4 and 6 at Scholastic English Training Center to probe Krashen's theory in terms of the effect of Comprehensible Input to young-aged students when acquiring a second language. As can be seen from Table 1 following, these young-aged students have zero foundation in English before getting enrolled for the language learning program. However, after 24 weeks of learning at Scholastic with a teaching duration of 1.5 hours of two sessions every week covering five language skill areas: vocabulary, speaking, alphabet awareness, reading and writing, the linguistic competence of the Nursery Level students aged between 4 and 6 at Scholastic English Training Center is amazing. There is a striking contrast between what they know before and after.

COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT TO YOUNG-AGED STUDENTS WHEN ACQUIRING A SECOND LANGUAGE					
Language S Areas	Skill	Before	After		
Vocabulary		Zero	<ul> <li>Understanding classroom instructions</li> <li>Following the teacher in class</li> <li>Recognizing 130 vocabulary words</li> </ul>		
Speaking		Zero	<ul> <li>Knowing how to greet and respond</li> <li>Conduct conversations about shapes, colors, and numbers</li> <li>Talking about personal likes and dislikes</li> <li>Talking about family members</li> </ul>		
Phonics		Zero	<ul><li>Being aware of the 26 letters</li><li>Singing the alphabet song</li></ul>		
Reading		Zero	<ul> <li>Knowing how to hold and read a book</li> <li>Knowing what the print means in context</li> <li>Being able to point and read</li> </ul>		
Writing		Zero	<ul><li>Learning how to hold a pencil</li><li>Starting to trace &amp;color both words and puzzles</li></ul>		

Table 1. Effects of Comprehensible Input to young-aged students when acquiring a second
language (Self-designed)

#### 3.2 The Effect of Comprehensible Input

To check their mastery condition, I have luckily had the opportunity to conduct random tests on the Nursery Level students with the permission granted from the school office. Here are the random tests that I did with the students at school. Five students were randomly chosen for the test of comprehensible input as well as checking the students' learning outcomes. I did check the learning objectives of the course and the students actual ability to apply the language skills based on what they had learned.

#### **Example 1 of the 3 Additional Questions**

Wandy: Hi, my name is Wandy, what is your name? S1: My name is Michael. Wandy: What color is the table? S1: It is red. Wandy: What color is your T-shirt? S1: It is red and white. Wandy: Are you happy here? S1: Yes! Example 2 of the 3 Additional Questions Wandy: Hi, my name is Wandy, what is your name? S2: My name is Eric. Wandy (Holding a book): Eric, what can you see? S2: I can see a book. Wandy: What color is the book? S2: It is blue. Wandy: What is the shape of the book? S2: It is a rectangle. **Example 3 of the 3 Additional Questions** Wandy: Hi, my name is Wandy, what is your name? S3: My name is Max. Wandy (Pointing to the teacher): Who is this? S3: She is my teacher. Wandy: Do you like your teacher? S3: Yes. I do. Wandy: Is she a nice teacher?

S3: Yes. She is nice and we like her.

EVALUATION OF THE RANDOM TEST DATA					
Sections	Criteria	Average Score			
Vocabulary	Total Number of Words	8			
	Accuracy Rate	87.5%			
Speaking	Total Number of Questions	8			
	Accuracy Rate	85%			
	Additional Questions	3			
	Accuracy Rate	86.6%			
Reading	Total Number of Story Texts	8			
	Accuracy Rate	85%			

#### **Table 2.** Evaluation of the Random Test Data (Self-designed)

There were 5 students who had participated in the random tests. As can be seen from Table 2 above, each section covers both language skill areas and accuracy rate, 3 additional questions were added to the speaking test whether students were able to independently apply what they had learned for the speaking skills. For the vocabulary section, each student were tested 8 vocabulary words and 40 words were tested in total. The total sum of students' errors was 5. Therefore, the accuracy rate was 87.5%, which shows an excellent knowledge mastery condition. The date collected suggests that almost all students were able to recognize and say words they had learned one week before with correct pronunciation with few students getting stuck or misspelling the tested words. The speaking test account for 8 points for each student and timed by 5, there were 40 points in total. 6 errors were recorded during the tests. The accuracy rate was 85%. What is much more a fascinating result is the additional questions added to examine whether students would be able to apply what they have learned in real communication. Three questions were designed for each student and timed by five and there were 15 questions totally. Among all the participants, only 2 questions were answered with errors and the accuracy rate was 86.6%. When the students were asked questions in totally new situations, they only made few errors for 3 different questions out of 15. This shows a significant benefit for Comprehensible Input thus their being able to use the target language in real-life communications---therefore meeting the purpose of learning a language. The reading test also demonstrates similar results as the other two sections. 40 story texts with 25 words each were chosen and prepared for the five students to read for both accuracy and fluency and they achieved an accuracy rate of 85% getting stuck or being mistaken only when encountering with some of the words they might have forgotten.

Personally, I was very much surprised by how the students presented and responded during the random tests. Not only could they understand the teaching of the lessons, they could also apply the five language skills as featured in the program outline in a situation for the random tests. This can only be achieved with Comprehensible Input not by reciting mechanically and that is how the effect of Comprehensible Input works obviously in reality. In addition to this, I was actually more interested how the students learned to understand and answer the questions and how the teachers helped and ensured the children's understanding and comprehension of what was taught in class. After having had the interview with teachers of Scholastic Cangzhou, I was then aware of the 6 unique teaching methodologies that had been applied at Scholastic including:

1. DM-Direct Immersion

- 2. TPR-Total Physical Response
- 3. IL-Interactive Learning
- 4. ST-Spiral Teaching
- 5. NA-Natural Approach
- 6. SLT-Situational Language Teaching

As I was trying to figure out the connections between the 6 unique teaching methodologies that had been applied at Scholastic and the Comprehensible Input involved in The Input Hypothesis by Krashen, I therefore asked a series of questions and what is followed by are my questions and answers given by the teachers of Scholastic Cangzhou (hereinafter referred to as Scholastic CZ).

Q1: What is the significance of applying Scholastic's 6 unique teaching methodologies when it comes to teaching and learning the English language?

Scholastic CZ: "When it comes to teaching and learning the English language in class, Scholastic's 6 unique teaching methodologies play a key role in helping and ensuring the children's understanding and comprehension of what is taught in class as we put primary importance on the comprehensible input that language learners are exposed to at Scholastic."

Q2: Could you give some examples to elaborate on between how the comprehensible input that language learners are exposed to at Scholastic and the 6 teaching methodologies?

Scholastic CZ: "Yes! This can be exemplified by two of the teaching methodologies, the first of which is TPR-Total Physical Response and the second of which is the SLT-Situational Language Teaching. If you look at our teaching system for the kids aged between 4-7, it is composed of the five language skill areas: vocabulary, speaking, phonics, reading and writing. For each session of teaching, we start with the vocabulary teaching on which the speaking section is based on. However, the teaching language applied in class is English ONLY. How could we make sure the learners will understand the vocabulary teaching and follow the teachers in class? The teachers will apply TPR-total physical response to teach the vocabulary mainly using the body language including gestures, facial expressions, changes of voices and tones excluding the movements of the cartoon characters, pictures and flash videos as comprehensible inputs to help students understand the content in the class. Additionally each level of program is organized by units based on the context of the topic thus being a comprehensible input."

Q3: How would you evaluate the linguistic competence of Scholastic learners?

Scholastic CZ: "Generally speaking, Scholastic learners are among the top 3 or top 5 students of their own classes as they are from various public schools. Every time they take the middle or final exams, they will achieve scores like 96 to 99 out of 100 or full marks. Once there is competition organized by their school, they will win the top prizes with little preparation whether it be the reading competition or the writing competition or the talent show. They will probably be chosen to be the host hosting the competition in English thanks to their language competence. "

"Another typical evidence to demonstrate their linguistic competence is that five students representing Scholastic Cangzhou, who attended the 20th Star of Outlook English Competition that was held in 2020. They went through from the City Preliminary then to the Semifinal and finally to the Final and they were eventually successfully qualified for the Provincial Finalists out of 2,000 competitors. What is more convincing is that three students out of the five won the gold medals out of 4,000 competitors at the 20th Star of Outlook English Competition at the provincial level. For the competition, they had to demonstrate linguistic competence covering the four different attributes: linguistic accuracy, linguistic fluency, speech manner, debate skills, time management as shown in the Table."

"Color Me" 20 <sup>th</sup> Star of Outlook English Competition Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, PR. China						
Linguistic Accu-	Linguistic	Speech Man-	Debate Skills	Time Manage-		
racy	Fluency	ner		ment		
1-2-3-4- <u>5</u>	1-2-3-4- <u>5</u>	1-2-3-4- <u>5</u>	1-2-3- <u>4</u> -5	1-2-3- <u>4</u> -5		
low to high	low to high	low to high	low to high	low to high		
score	score	score	score	score		

Table 3. Criteria of Students' Linguistic Competence (Self-designed)

The findings from the Case Study, the Random Tests and the Interviews that have been conducted demonstrate how Scholastic consistently helps the learners to acquire the second language systematically, while putting primary importance on the Comprehensible Input that language learners are exposed to at Scholastic thus demonstrating how "The Input Hypothesis" of the effect of Comprehensible Input to second language acquisition is practiced in real teaching.

#### 3.3 Benefits of More Comprehensible Input

"Does more comprehensible input really benefit SLA?" will be the second issue for the essay to research and evaluate critically.

For this aspect, I conducted a teaching research and tracking project with a teacher choosing two classes at Scholastic, the first of which is only taught regular SWOE class while the other is taught both SWOE class and Guided Reading Program. This is designed to compare and contrast between the two classes to examine whether more comprehensible input really benefits SLA. Meanwhile IELTS evaluation criteria to examine whether more comprehensible input really benefits for students have been adopted. As can be seen from the Table, an evaluation form has been prepared and the full score for each section will be 10. The details of band criteria are as following.

#### Band 10

Expert User - Possesses thorough grasp and suitable, accurate, and operational command of the language.

#### Band 9

Very Good User - Fully functional mastery of the language, with just sporadic unsystematic errors and grammatical inconsistencies. In situations that are unfamiliar, misunderstandings might happen. Manages intricate, thorough reasoning and explanation well.

#### Band 8

Good User - Has operational fluency in the language, even if occasionally there are inaccuracies, mistakes and misunderstandings. Normally manages complex language and comprehends elaborate ratiocination.

#### Band 7

Competent User - Has generally language proficiency in spite of certain inaccuracies and misunderstandings. Capable of using and interpreting relatively complex language, particularly in conversant environments.

#### Band 6

Modest User - In a partial mastery of the language, dealing with the sense in most situations, but is likely to make a certain degree of mistakes. Should be capable of managing baseline communication in their own domains.

#### Band 5

Limited User - The core competence is restrictive to colloquial scenarios. Has frequent comprehension and expressive problems. Couldn't use sophisticated words\phrases\sentences or discourse.

#### Band 4

Extremely Limited User - Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.

#### Band 3

Intermittent User - No real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs. Has great difficulty understanding spoken and written English.

#### Band 2

Non User - Essentially has no ability to use the language beyond possibly a few isolated words.

#### Band 1

Did not attempt the test - No accessible information provided.

TEACHER'S EVALUATION		SCORE		
Section	Criteria	Students of the Regular SWOE Class	Students of the SWOE Class +Guided Reading Program	
Speaking	Lexical Resource	Band 6	Band 8	
	Grammatical Range &Accuracy	Band 5	Band 8	
	Pronunciation and Tones	Band 6	Band 8	
	Fluency & Coherence	Band 5	Band 8	
Writing	Ideas	Band 5	Band 7	
	Organization	Band 5	Band 7	
	Voice	Band 5	Band 7	
	Word Choice	Band 5	Band 7	
	Sentence Fluency	Band 5	Band 7	
	Conventions	Band 5	Band 7	
	Presentation	Band 4	Band 7	
Listening	Understanding Key Infor- mation	Band 6	Band 8	
	Accuracy	Band 5	Band 7	
	Responsive	Band 5	Band 8	
Reading	Accuracy	Band 5	Band 8	
	Fluency	Band 5	Band 8	
	Comprehension	Band 5	Band 8	

Table 4. Teacher's Evaluation with Scores (Self-designed)

As can be seen from Table 4 above, findings from the teaching research and tracking project with the appointed teacher at Scholastic obviously show more comprehensible input benefits SLA after 26 weeks of teaching. The students of the regular SWOE class are assessed in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing and they achieve an overall score of Band 5 (Limited User-The basic linguistic skills are limited to oral and ordinary situations. They have frequent comprehension and expressive problems. They couldn't use complex language.) and Band 6 (Modest User-They have a partial mastery of the language, coping with the sense in most situations, but is likely to make many misunderstandings and misuses.). But for the Students of the SWOE class plus the Guided Reading Program, they are assessed and they achieve an overall score of Band 7 (Competent User- They have general language ability in spite of certain inaccuracies being able to use and interpret moderately difficult language, particularly in familiar environments.) and even Band 8 (Good User-They have operational proficiency in the language, although there are inaccuracies, mistakes and misunderstandings. They normally manages complex language and comprehends detailed reasoning.).

#### 4 A Discussion of the Research Findings

Based on the findings from the Random Tests and the Classroom Teaching Observation that have been done at Scholastic, the interviews with teachers of Scholastic CZ as well as the Case Study and the teaching research and tracking project, there has been a striking contrast between Scholastic learners and the students from the public schools thus presenting a clear evidence of stronger linguistic competency. And all this is resulted from how Scholastic consistently helps the learners to acquire the second language systematically, while putting primary importance on the Comprehensible Input that language learners are exposed to at Scholastic while demonstrating how "The Input Hypothesis" of the effect of Comprehensible Input to second language acquisition is practiced in reality. Additionally more comprehensible input does benefit SLA based on the teacher evaluation of the two classes.

However, Krashen's theory cannot be applied directly in a second language learning environment and reasons for this are as follows. Firstly, in a second language learning environment, students will not be able to read on independently if they do not have basic skills of the language. On the contrary, the fundamental language skills including vocabulary, phonics, reading, writing and speaking skills should be taught in advance or at the same time. Secondly, younger students are not mentally mature and therefore less self-disciplined to keep on reading without the guidance, support or supervision from the teacher. However, students aged under 12 are at a special language learning period----"Children of eight to ten year olds are relatively mature children with an adult side and a childish side." This is a magic age as "they have sort of language awareness and readiness which they bring with them into the language classroom and things seem to fall into places and they start to make sense of the adult world as we see it."[11] At this age, children's brains are in high degree of deformability, which enable them to acquire a second language at an effective rate. As children are at a young age, they tend to be more active in interaction and communication, imitate others' pronunciation and actions through the immersive second language environment, physical gestures and other methods that schools have provided to them for learning that language. This is where the importance of output comes out and the point will be explained in the following discussion.

Thirdly, whether the level of the difficulty of the course book matches the student's ability needs to be assessed and guided by the teacher. Last but not least, having students read directly without the essential foundational skills does not guarantee that they will understand the books that they read and their reading with accuracy or fluency. In this case, it is hard to achieve the students' learning outcomes. The proper teaching methodologies as well as the course books are also essential to SLA ensuring Comprehensible Input, not just reading.

Furthermore, Krashen missed out one more aspect of the follow-up of the Comprehensible Input. As many experiments that Krashen and his colleagues have carried out focusing on native language environment indicate, students can be easily engaged in target language, which means children are constantly exposed to and use target language. There is no need for children to spend extra time practicing language. But children in second language learning environment will not be exposed to target language once they stop the Comprehensible Input. "We need to ensure that these English language learners have maximum opportunity to interact with the teacher and other students orally. They will listen and learn, but they will learn even more as they begin to produce a new language. Their growth will be scaffolded by the English speakers who talk with them.[11]" Therefore, one methodology to resolve the problem maybe is to practice or output as long as students receive Comprehensible Input. Constantly having students practice what they have learned after Comprehensible Input is probably the most efficient way to get students to remember what they have learned and to reinforce their memory, which has been verified from the studies that I have done particularly.

#### 5 Conclusion

"The Input Hypothesis" gives a new insight and makes a big contribution to the methodology for learners to acquire a second language and is proved effective, but some of the aspects in the theory that are not consistent for second language learning countries need to be modified and improved. Proper instructions from teachers for students to help them gain language knowledge and practice with Comprehensible Input are essential for second language learning environment.

The research finds that Scholastic teaching model has made a big difference and will thereby shape the future for the future SLA in China. Meanwhile, I will still critically look at Krashen's "The Input Hypothesis" for the future challenges facing the young-aged students. The experiments carried out in the article mainly focused on students aged from 4 to 12, specially in Cangzhou, Hebei Province. Further studies could make an eye on students from diverse age groups and different regions in China to verify Krashen's theory in large areas of China and to examine whether different

problems could occur in real-life second language teaching and learning. Also, for the third point of Krashen's theory stating that the good mood is an important factor when acquiring a second language may possibly need to be refined from both personal learning experience and students' learning results. The future researches could focus on these areas to come up with more thoughts for the learners of SLA in China.

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