The Application of Output Hypothesis to College English Teaching

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Abstract—**In recent years, with the development of the research on the Output Hypothesis, many Chinese English teachers begin to apply this hypothesis to English teaching. There are many teaching ways that have been applied in English teaching classes, for example, retelling sentences, retelling a text, describing a picture and expressing ideas indirectly and so on. In these classes, the traditional teaching modes have been changed. Nowadays, college English teachers not only pay attention to the input of language but also the output of language. They try to foster students' skills on the application of knowledge, and excavate their potential in order to promote their language proficiency. And the effect is quite obvious, so we should encourage more teachers to use the Output Hypothesis in different ways and improve students' English abilities.**

Keywords- college English teaching; Output Hypothesis; application

I. INTRODUCTION

In China, students spend a lot of time learning English. However, the students' abilities of handling the language are still very poor. Only a few college students can express themselves smoothly and understand others clearly in an English-only environment. Students master a large number of vocabularies, which can help them to read English materials. But, when they are speaking and writing in English, they always forget the words which stored in their memories. The output of sentence structure which the students are free to use is far less than they can understand. For many years, Chinese students have been noticed to be doing remarkably well in the parts concerning listening and reading skills in some English tests, such as IELTS (GB), TOEFL (USA) and GRE (USA). But in some other English tests which focus more on speaking and writing skills, for example, TSE (Test of Spoken English, USA), BEC (Business English Certificate, GB) and some real communicative situations, they are found to be much less proficient. In the meanwhile, many university graduates, who have already learned English for many years, have to attend various kinds of speaking and writing course again to improve their ability to use the language. In China, many teachers and educators have paid attention to these facts. People begin to realize the weakness of the traditional way of foreign language teaching in China, which often unconnected with any real communication situation and generally concentrate on getting students to learn items of language in isolation. Students are used to and quite good at passively receiving language items that might later be used to communication. But regretfully, they are not well trained with the ability to receive those stored language items in communications, which is quite vital for them. From all of those, we can know that our students' input abilities have been improved to a certain extent, however, their output abilities did not get significant improvement compared with the input abilities. So, it is necessary to introduce output theory

II. SWAIN'S OUTPUT HYPOTHESIS

Ironically, some of the studies that lent support to the notion that a great deal of comprehensible input over time can lead to considerable fluency also suggested that comprehensible input was not enough to lead to completely fluent and accurate use of the target language. In a study conducted with Canadian immersion students, Swain had shown that even though students had received abundant comprehensible input in French and were somewhat fluent in the language they had still not acquired grammatical competence in the language. Immersion student's achievement test scores equivalent to those of students in the Standard English program proved that the input had indeed been comprehensible (the immersion students took the achievement tests in French). Still, immersion students' many syntactical errors in French confirmed that the target language grammatical system had not been fully acquired. This information gave researchers cause to question whether comprehensible input really is the only cause factor in second language acquisition. Swain suggested that output was the missing factor and called the concept comprehensible output, which has come to be called the Output Hypothesis.

It had been proposed by Swain in 1995 that one possible way to account for the lack of grammatical accuracy was that learners were not being pushed to produce language output. Swain theorized that learners in immersion settings were not pushed to a deeper analysis of the target language grammar because they could get their meaning across adequately without doing so. Learners must work harder when producing language. This is at least partially because when loaners are producing comprehensible output, they should have a vested interest in being as accurate as possible. They are stockholders in what they produce, it is their creation. This is contrasted with comprehensible input with which learners rarely, if ever, have a vested interest in what is said to them (they do however have a presumed desire to understand what is being said). And it has been proposed that comprehensible output may offer at least three things that

input could not do. It could 1) Provide the learner with opportunities for contextualized, meaningful use, 2) allow them to test out hypothesis and 3) force them to move from semantic to syntactic processing of the target language.

More recent research has largely provided support for the basic idea of the Output Hypothesis. Many researchers have developed and refined their conception of the output hypothesis. Research developments suggest that collaborative tasks (such as Information Gap activities) may be perhaps one of the best ways to get students to produce comprehensible output. According to Swain, these types of tasks and other kinds of pair and group work may be useful, because whereas individually learners may be novices, working together may have access to their partner's knowledge and can essentially rise above their individual level of competence and become more proficient experts temporarily. Through this way, learners working in a pair can produce comprehensible output beyond their competence level and learn something new.

In applied linguistics (in its narrow sense), much work has been done on the role of input and comprehension. Although the importance of output had drawn attention from some western researchers, no systematic study of it had been conducted until Swain's research of Canadian immersion program. The situation in China is even more unsatisfactory. So far, there is little study that is concerned with the function of output in China's English teaching.

Since the function of output to enhance the fluency has now been widely known and accepted, Swain does not include this in her hypothesis. Instead, she put forward three other functions for the Output Hypothesis: Noticing Function, Hypothesis Testing Function and Meta-linguistic Function. She believes that the improving of our students' output abilities can help them to notice the gap between the English learners and the native speakers by expressing themselves out, test whether they have made some mistakes in the course of communication and recall whether the sentences and language use are consistence with the fixed expression pattern of source language.

III. THE APPLICATION OF THE OUTPUT HYPOTHESIS

In China, there are many studies concerning output theory. For example, Zhao Pei, a professor in Nanjing university of Science and Technology, did a questionnaire survey of 186 students in the university (63 PHD students and 123 graduates). The survey confirmed the facilitating role of output in language learning and revealed some problems in the current English teaching in China. She concluded in the study that the classroom output should be improved. The teachers should encourage students to produce more language output in diversified forms and to increase interaction between students and teachers in the process of producing. There is one empirical study on the impact of Swain's Output Hypothesis may have on the improvement of the college English writing in China. It is written by Zhao Ping from East China Shipbuilding Institute, with the title The Implications of Swain's Output Hypothesis for the Teaching of College English Writing (Shandong Foreign Language Teaching, 2000, No.3). To examine the

three functions of output, Zhao concluded an experiment with 35 sophomores as subjects, for whom Zhao had 4 writing tasks, entitled respectively The Dictionary, Getting Rid of Bad Habits, Today's Higher Education, and An unforgettable Thing. Via the study of all the compositions and the research on the writing process of two of the subjects, Zhao found evidence to support that in the process of learners' second language writing, output does perform its functions of both the noticing and the hypothesis-testing, but no apparent meta-linguistic function. More and more attention has been paid to the Output Hypothesis.

With the development of the Output Hypothesis in China, many English teachers have applied the hypothesis to English teaching and used diversified ways during English teaching. Such as, retelling sentences, expressing an idea indirectly, retelling a text and so on.

A. Retelling Sentences

Retelling requires students to express a similar meaning by using different sentence patterns or synonym and antonym substitutions. Usually first one or two words or the subject of a sentence is designated, teacher may ask students to complete it in different ways. This practice is also available to a single sentence patter or phrase. There are many retelling sentences exercise in college English integrated course. Of course, our final goal is to develop accurate expressions, but in the first place we should encourage students to express themselves fluently and flexibly. During the process, the students can notice the language gap between them and the native speakers.

B. Expressing an Idea Indirectly

Many teachers usually ask their students to express an idea in an indirect way to enhance their output abilities. When students have to express an idea in an indirect way, they are practicing their oral expressions. For example, ask them to express dislike, disagree or reluctance, without directly using these words or negative patterns. To make it more interesting, the teacher sometimes introduce a game, which ask one students to define a word or a thing without consulting a dictionary, and the other one guess the meaning within limited time. This exercise also tells students to try different expressions to achieve the best communicative purpose.

C. Retelling a Text

When a text has been taught, the teachers often ask the students to retell it. Retelling a text rather than reciting it from memory provides oral fluency practice. Sometimes it may be difficult for students to retell the text they have learned without a clear clue. Teachers may offer some key words or expressions to encourage their output. And it is necessary to encourage students to use already input language forms in text rather than flexible expression. In this way, students will pay attention to the accurate language forms and meaning at the same time.

D. Short Play Acting

In language classes, role-playing is commonly used, which may effectively arouse students' interest and creatively perform roles in already learned text. This is a way to motivate students and encourage them to internalize new input language forms. For example, when students learn A Valentine Story (the fifth unit text A in College English integrated course 1 (new edition)), teachers ask students to have a role-play: one student acts as Mr. John Blanchard, one acts as his pen pile---Miss Hollis Maynell, and another acts as the woman well past 40. Usually students' performances in this program are surprisingly outstanding with great enthusiasm. Teachers let students know using full sentences and good punctuation and grammar are appreciated in role-playing.

E. Describing a Picture

The Teacher design an English class with some interesting pictures and ask students to describe the contents of these pictures as accurately as possible. Later let them show their description versions in class. For example, the teacher show the picture named we have only one earth and ask students to describe it and give their opinions about the phenomenon conveyed in the picture. In the end the teacher provides a native description and makes positive comments on students' good expressions. This is a good approach to practicing student's oral ability and also an effective approach to making students realize their language problems.

F. Lexical Practice

The lexical approach focuses on developing learners' proficiency with lexis, or words and word combinations. It is based on the idea that an important part of language acquisition is the ability to comprehend and produce lexical phrases as unanalyzed wholes, or chunks.

In every unit of integrated course, teachers have explained a lot of lexical items, including key words, expressions and structures. When doing exercises, if teachers continue repeating these language points and students keep passively accepting input information, it is not conducive to the internalization of new language forms. Teachers often use these lexical items as source material to carry out the practice: students are asked to make a sentence with the given lexical item.

G. Combining Listening with Speaking

Since listening can provide much of the input and data that learners receive in language learning, so listening and speaking become indivisible. By watching short plays or movies, students will receive large amount of input materials. And the following output-oriented practice will help students to focus on accurate expression they have heard. For example, collaborative story-retelling: A pair of students forms a group. They are required to retell a story after listening to it twice. They are allowed to write down any information that they suppose is useful for their later retelling. A pair of students collaboratively makes their story as accurate as possible and if necessary they may discuss

grammatical problems or contents in Chinese. Later they will show their story in class.

These are just some of the methods that have been used by the English teachers in China. But the results of these methods are quite good. The use of these methods reveal that language output can help increase the awareness of learners' correct use of the target language, can develop a sense of learning autonomy and can transmit language knowledge to language skills more effectively. All of those encourage our teachers to apply the Output Hypothesis to English teaching in more and more diversified ways.

IV. CONCLUSION

Swain's Output Hypothesis is very useful to the college English teaching. In this paper, we have discussed the Output Hypothesis, the application of it and the implications of the Output Hypothesis to College English teaching.

The Output Hypothesis proposes that in order to increase learners' English proficiency, they need to generate output, to be specific, produce language via speech or writing and receive feedback on the comprehensibility of their output. Input is necessary, but not sufficient for language learning. Output is seen to be another essential as it promotes fluency, pushes students to engage in syntactic processing of language (rather than only attending to meaning), gives students opportunities to test their hypotheses about what works and is acceptable in a particular language and affords students opportunities to receive feedback from others. Output can promote learners' language proficiency, based on which a few suggestions were given in this paper to promote college students' English level. In order to improve students' English abilities, college teachers should give students more chance to output, to communicate with other students. What's more, types and patterns of teaching should be variable to raise students' motivation, interest, as well as the practical applicability of students' English ability.

In English teaching practice, we can make the students notice their language problems by output, and notice the difference between the inter language and the target language. Use certain method, teachers could let students pay attention to language characteristics of the material, and test the hypothesis about the form and structure by English thinking model. To master the structure of English accurately and fluently, students should practice the oral and written expression again and again and eventually they can improve their English language ability. In diversified English teaching, teachers should intensify students' oral and written output skills, encourage them to speak English constantly and increase the English speaking time step by step according to their English level. This process is the procedure of language input-absorb-output, and the course to increase language abilities. And in the English class, teachers should change their traditional role, controllers, into facilitators. Students should be the center of the class rather than the teacher. Teachers' feedbacks are another important factors for improving students' abilities, thus they should be clear, appropriate and sufficient. Combining the output hypothesis with practical college English teaching, teachers will find it is a useful way to motivate students, to push them to contract

their output with relevant input and to develop their English proficiency.

By applying more and more Output Hypothesis to college English teaching and using useful ways, the English level of our college students will be improved. So our college English teachers should pay attention to the teaching methods during their teaching process and try their best to encourage students to output and help them improve their English level by diversified ways. For example, college English teachers can arrange in-class output activities, give positive and in-time feedback on learners' production and serve as facilitators in the class and so on. So that，our college students can be given more opportunities to output. So, their English abilities will be improved step by step.

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