The Effects of Interaction: A Diary Study of an Adult Learning a Second Language

Chiu-Yin Wong

Monmouth University, USA

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The Asian Conference on Education 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

The present study investigated what happens during interaction that contributes second language learning. Specifically, the study looked into the role of input and output in the process of second language acquisition (SLA). The participant was the researcher who was learning Korean as a second language and recorded her journey in regards to her language experience daily during her stay in Korea. Data reveled how input was received in various ways in regard to the participant's proficiency levels and how output served as a significant learning tool. The situations in which the participant received comprehensible input and produced pushed output inform language teachers to select and create teaching strategies that may facilitate their students' second language learning process.

Background

Previous studies have shown the importance of comprehensible input and output in second language learning. However, very few studies have looked closely into how input and output affect language learning. Gass and Mackay (2007) bring up a question "how does interaction bring learning" (p.181). In other words, how do learners acquire a target language through interaction? Comprehensible input being an important element in second language acquisition is not new. Krashen & Terrell (1983) emphasize that the only way learners acquire a language is through comprehensible input and that such input alone is adequate for second language learning. However, how does comprehensible input occur to learners? Some researchers began to investigate how comprehensible input is received, mostly during interaction. Long (1983b) states that using interactional modification strategies to avoid communication break down is more vital for learners to acquire a second language than input alone. Similarly, Gass & Varonis (1985) point out that a way for Non-Native Speakers (NNSs) to obtain comprehensible input is through negotiation of meaning which, they suggest is very important in second language acquisition. The more widely strategies used for NNSs to comprehend a new language are repetition, simplification (Tsui, 1985), elaboration, slowing down, and asking questions to the NNSs (Varonis & Gass, 1985).

Swain (1985) argues that comprehensible output is as equally significant as comprehensible input in language development. She supports her argument by stating that immersion students understand the input they receive very well, but they still cannot acquire the target language completely after many years of receiving input. Some scholars (e.g. Doughty & Pica, 1986) also look into output in the second language learning process and conclude that input modifications as a result of interaction are important in SLA.

Some researchers also investigated if these conditions promoted acquisition. Loshky (1994) conducted a study regarding the relationship between comprehensible input and SLA, and found that premodified input was not the best way to provide comprehensible input. In Loshky's study, she investigated different input conditions using Japanese as the target language. In addition to the premodified input and interactional modified input conditions in the study of Pica et al., an unmodified input with interaction was also investigated in this study. The subjects had to perform an information gap task. Their comprehension of the input and the acquisition of the vocabulary and forms were compared. The results showed that the interaction group outperformed the two other groups in comprehension, but there was no difference in the acquisition of vocabulary and forms among these three groups on the pretest and posttest. However, another study conducted by Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki (1994) found that interactional modified input facilitated both comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, Ellis et al. concluded that input modification during interaction promotes SLA.

Although comprehensible input is necessary in the process of language learning, research studies showed that modified input alone is not enough to reach a high level of second language proficiency. Learners may not understand the forms and vocabulary even though meaning of the message is achieved (Long, 1996). Learners not only need to understand the meaning of the messages, but they also need to focus on the grammar from the input they receive in order for acquisition to take place.

Output helps learners go beyond comprehension because they pay attention to different aspects of the target language (Laufer, 2005). Output directing learners to focus of the target language features was confirmed by the study of Toth (2006). Toth compared the effects of processing instruction and output, and concluded that output facilitated SLA because learners switched their attention to the details of the language when producing it. Long (1996) reasserts that the interaction hypothesis enhances SLA because a learner "connects input, internal learner capacities, particular selective attention, and output in productive ways" (p. 451). Based on the interactional hypothesis, Ellis & He (1999) conducted an experimental study to compare the effects of premodified input, interactional modified input, and modified output on the understanding of the input and vocabulary acquisition of 50 intermediate level ESL students. They were all given pictures of an apartment and furniture. The input groups were asked to listen to a direction of where to place the furniture, whereas the output group was to give a direction of where to place the furniture in the apartment. The results showed that the modified output group outperformed both of the input groups on comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Ellis & He explained that the subjects in the modified output condition showed greater acquisition because they had a chance to process and choose the new vocabulary, whereas the input groups' vocabulary was chosen by the teacher. However, there was no significant difference between the two input groups which contradicted the results provided by Ellis et al. (1994) in which the interactional input group outperformed the permodified input group on both comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

Interaction plays an important role in SLA because learners can receive feedback from their output (Mackey, Oliver, & Leeman, 2003). In addition, output provides learners opportunities to test hypotheses about the target language when they receive feedback from the listeners (Gass & Mackey, 2007). Besieds, Gass and Mackey also list two more functions of output. One is forcing learners to produce more native like output, originated from the study of McDonough (2005). Gass & Mackey explain

> "after producing an initially problematic utterance and receiving feedback about its lack of comprehensibility in the form of a clarification request, the NNS…appears to realize that his utterance was not understood. Pushed to reformulate his initial utterance in order to facilitate NS understanding, he modifies his linguistic output by reformulating the utterance in a more target-like way" (p. 179-180).

Another function point out by Gass and Mackey is promoting automaticity for which they explained "[t]he first time may require more effort and more concentration…continued use of language moves learners to more fluent automatic production." (p. 181). Thus, output promotes learners' second language learning process by allowing them to pay attention to the target forms which they may not notice from the input alone. Also, it provides learners opportunities to concentrate on their own language because they have to speak it in an appropriate way to achieve understanding by the listeners. Repeating this process assists learners in gaining fluency in the language.

However, when explaining the role of output, VanPatten and Williams (2007) state in one of their SLA observations that there is not a significant relationship between output and second language acquisition. "Although it may seem like common sense that 'practice makes perfect,' this adage is not entirely true when it comes to

SLA…whatever role learner production plays in acquisition, there are constraints on the role" (p. 12). They stress that input is necessary for language learning, and it leads to a large amount of learning, especially when learners' focus is on meaning. However, Gass & Mackey explain that learners' pay attention to their language that they may have problems with, and they may learn new language items during interaction.

Research on how meaningful interaction contributes to language acquisition is limited and that it is rather difficult to obtain data that record all input and negotiation learners obtain and encounter (Gass, 1997). As such, the purpose of this study was to look into details of how input was received and how output affected and contributed to an adult learner's learning process during interaction through diary writing. Two questions guided the present study:

Research Questions:

1) How is comprehensible input received?
2) How does pushed output serve as an evidence of the learner's language development?

Method

Subject

The subject of this study is the researcher herself. She referred to as "SUE" throughout the paper. SUE had training in language teaching for seven years prior to going to Korea. She also has experience in teaching English as a second language, and Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language in both formal and informal situations. SUE's first language is Cantonese and her second languages are English and Mandarin. SUE also knows approximately 100 Japanese words and 30 Korean words before her trip to Korea.

Data Collection

Data was collected through the use of diary writing. Diary was chosen to be the data collection method because one of the advantages of diary studies related to the field of second language teaching and learning is that a diary study is data of first-hand experiences recorded by the diarist; such experiences and processes are, otherwise, unobservable by others (Bailey & Ochsner, 1983; McDonough & McDonough; 1997). SUE recorded her language experience daily for two months in Korea based on the research questions. The diary was written in English.

Procedure

The diary was written based on four pre-specified categories which were developed according to the research questions. For the purpose of this study, two categories were analyzed. The categories were 1) how did input become understandable? 2) how did output facilitate the learning process?

Finding and Discussion

Results provided evidence to suggest that comprehensible input occurred to SUE in a series of steps. In the beginning stage of learning, SUE relied heavily on direct translation. She also tried to comprehend the language through different contextual cues, but she could barely understand what was said to her. Contextual cues only helped her understand a few vocabulary words. Thus, SUE had to reply on translation,

but the people around her did not speak English or Chinese, and her knowledge in Korean was limited. SUE also wrote that she was afraid to communicate with Korean speakers because she did not understand anything that was said to her.

> *"She kept saying 'dda la hae yo', 'dda la hae yo' but I still couldn't figure out what she was asking me to do. She started to feel frustrated and said 'dda la hae yo' one more time. Then she just walked away and went back to her room."*

It is important to note that translation became crucial in SUE's SLA journey; especially it served as a main tool to drive her motivation in learning the language again. For example, she wrote,

> *"I later became motivated again when someone finally translated things to me in English!"*
> *"Today, I learned a lot more Korean than the first few days because I met a lady who spoke fluent Mandarin. Because of this, I asked her to say words that I had wanted to say!"*

SUE's experience suggests that translation plays an important role in SLA process, especially in the beginning stage. Thus, using learners' first language can facilitate their learning (Brown, 2007).

As SUE understood more of the language, she did not have to rely solely on translation. Comprehensible input was also received through context. Later, she could understand the language through context and familiar words. Towards the end of her journey, SUE exchanged conversations with native speakers through context and negotiation of meaning in Korean. In other words, the amount of direct translation reduced as her Korean proficiency level increased. She wrote,

> *"I was looking at a shirt and checking to see if the shirt was see through. Then the salesperson said 'an pi chon yo'. I knew that she was telling me 'it isn't see through'. I didn't need any translation because of the situation and the word 'an' which means 'not'".*

However, context by itself may not be always helpful. Students need more guidance to achieve higher level of learning (Egbert & Ernst-Slavit, 2010; Herrera, Cabral, & Murry, 2010; Horwitz, 2013; Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). It is worth noting that using drills was effective in helping SUE understand language items that were very difficult for SUE to acquire. For instance, conjugation was very difficult for SUE because it does not exist in the languages that she is fluent in. As such, examples and drills that her friend provided helped her a great deal in knowing how to conjugate verbs. In one occasion, she wrote,

> *"My friend's husband didn't speak English well. He wanted to tell me that I could go to their home anytime. I understood 'on jae' (when) but didn't know what he was saying after that. My friend then said "on jae deun ji" meant (anytime). Then she said "wh + deun ji" means something ever. Then she gave me an example "mo+deun ji" means whatever; "odi deun ji" means whenever."*

Output played a significant role in SUE's SLA process. SUE felt that she could receive feedback, such as if she was right or wrong from the people she talked to when she produced the language. Thus, she was more motivated to try using the language. Her knowledge of syntax in Korean also increased as a result of producing

the language because other people would tell her how to say things correctly. For example, she wrote,

> *"I wanted to see if I understood how 'chop chog sa go' (accident) was used in a sentence, so I tried to say 'chop chog sa go yo', but my host family said 'chop chog sa go na so yo' (an accident happened)"*.

Besides learning new language items from feedback as a result of producing the language, learners can confirm if the existing knowledge of the target language is correct or what linguistic areas, such as vocabulary, grammar items, and pronunciation to work on if output is not comprehensible. For example,

> *"After I learned 'cho gi da' (it's there), I wanted to see if 'da' was the informal form of 'iso yo' (here/there). When I talked to the children of my host family, I wanted to ask 'where is your mom', so I said 'on ma odi da' instead of 'on ma iso yo?' They pointed at their mom to me immediately, so I could confirm that my guess was correct.*

In addition, SUE reported that producing the language during interaction allowed her to learn more Korean. She explained in the diary that she wanted to use the restroom. She said to the little girl of her host family "*huajan sil, huajan si*" (restroom, restroom). Then after a few minutes, the girl went to her room and said "*ma li ryeo wo yo*?" while pointing at the restroom and looking at her with an urgent expression. Later on, she wanted to inform the host mother that she had to run to the restroom and said "*ma li ryeo wo yo.*" But the host mother laughed and said the phrase was for children and it was shameful to say that in public. She told SUE to say '*huajan sil geu pae yo*' instead.

Conclusion

The analysis of SUE's learning experience of Korean provides evidence to suggest that interaction plays an important part in SLA. The data indicated that most of the comprehensible input occurred through direct translation. Other comprehensible input included gestures and contexts. As far as how output facilitated the participant's learning, it not only helped her learn more new words through conversing with other people, but also how to say things in a correct way. Because some people that she encountered with would repeat what she said in a correct way or simply tell her how to say things right. The participant also produced output to confirm her knowledge of the language.

Implications

The findings of the study are important because they assist second/foreign language teachers and curriculum designers in lesson plans and program development. The situations in which the participant received comprehensible input and produced pushed output provide teachers with teaching ideas of how to facilitate their students' second language learning process.

Also, the results of the study can assist classroom teachers in developing teaching strategies that will provide learners with opportunities to receive comprehensible input and produce output similar to those that they would encounter in the target language environment.

Limitations

There are three limitations of the present study. First, this study only looked at one learner's learning experience. The observations may not be applicable to other

learners due to different learning styles and levels of proficiency. Second, the subject stayed in the target language environment for only two months without having a great deal of knowledge in the target language prior to going there. Therefore, the implications of this study focuses more on beginning learners rather than those in the higher levels. Third, the subject was the researcher who had formal training and experience in language teaching. Thus, she might have recorded her experience with her beliefs in how languages are learned and taught, albeit she tried to record the fact only. For future research suggestions, more subjects need to be researched in order to provide more data in regards to how comprehensible input occurs and how output facilitates the learning process. Also, more learners of different levels of proficiency need to be investigated to find out how input and output facilitate their learning.

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