Is Comprehensible Input Too Good, Too Simple, to Be True?

Veena Imrose

Language Institute, Thammasat University

ABSTRACT

The Input Hypothesis introduced by Stephen Krashen has been one of a number of hypotheses concerning the causes of the language acquisition. In Krashen's point of view, language acquisition is more powerful and essential than language learning and learners are able to acquire language only by understanding language containing linguistic features one step beyond their present level of knowledge or "comprehensible input". A number of researches and theorists have, however, questioned this hypothesis and expressed their observations about the explanatory value of comprehensible input to language acquisition. From the mentioned concerns, this article therefore aims to present the input hypothesis, describe the pedagogical implications which are drawn from the input hypothesis, and also briefly reflect some of concerns with this hypothesis and its implication.

Keywords: Language learning, Language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

In *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Harmer (1991) called our attention by presenting Stephen Krashen's concept in second language acquisition. More specifically, Krashen indicated that language acquisition is more powerful and essential than language learning and the only one way to acquire language is to be exposed to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982; Harmer, 1991; Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

Krashen (1982) shaped this idea more formally through the Input Hypothesis. This hypothesis is itself grounded in attempting to answer the crucial question of how language is acquired. In his point of view, giving an answer for the question of how

learners acquire language may be, therefore, the solution of many problems in language teaching.
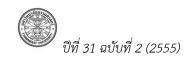
In spite of such advantage, however, the controversy does occur on the explanatory value of comprehensible input to language acquisition i.e. many questions remain to be answered, for instance, "how do learners get the right kind of input?" and "does providing comprehensible input guarantee that learners will learn the language they are exposed to?"(Comprehensible Input and Output: para. 3) In other words, "on second thoughts, is it all too good, too simple, to be true?" (Cullip, 1993, para. 4)

From the above mentioned concerns, this paper therefore aims to 1) present the input hypothesis 2) describe its implication for classroom and 3) explore the reflections on this hypothesis and its implication.

THE INPUT HYPOTHESIS: STATEMENT AND SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

Hatch (1978a, in Krashen, 1982: 21) suggested that, in accordance with the usual pedagogical approach in second and foreign language teaching, learners develop their fluency by first learning structures, then practicing their usage in communication; but in contrast to Hatch, Krashen (1982) posited that learners acquire languages by understanding meaning first, and then acquiring structures. The input hypothesis can be thus restated as follows:

1) The input hypothesis is connected to acquisition and not learning (p.21).

2) Learners acquire by understanding language containing linguistic feature one step beyond their present level of knowledge ($i + 1$). In addition, context or extra-linguistic information will be used to help learners understand such language (p.21).

3) Comprehensible input or the so called $i + 1$ will be automatically provided if the acquirer understands the input and there is sufficient of it (p.22).

4) Speaking fluency cannot be taught directly. It emerges over time, on its own (p.22).

Krashen (1982) further developed his idea by presenting evidence supporting the hypothesis as follows:

Firstly, *first language acquisition in children*: the comprehensible input in second language is similar in some ways to "caretaker speech", the language that adults i.e. parents and others use with children. Its most important characteristic is that caretakers intend to communicate and convey messages to children, not to teach language. Secondly, caretakers do not provide the language exactly modified to the child's present level of linguistic knowledge. In other words, the input is roughly-tuned, not finely-tuned. The third characteristic is stated as the "here and now" principle.

The conversation is mostly about the child's immediate environment, what is happening now (Krashen, 1982; 1988; Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

Secondly, *second language acquisition:* second language learners are also exposed to the kind of modified input characterized as (Krashen, 1982):

a) Foreigner talk, the term defined by Ferguson in 1971 for "the simplified speech used by a native speaker with a non-native speaker who lacked full understanding of the target language" (cited in Wesche, 1994: 222).

b) Teacher talk, described by Henzl (1979 in Wesche, 1994: 222) as foreigner talk in classroom environment.

c) Interlanguage talk, the name given by Selinker (1972) to "learners' developing second language knowledge" (cited in Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 74).

Thirdly, *the silent period and first language influence*: the silent period, a phenomenon that occurs in the beginning stage of child second language acquisition, is explained by Krashen in term of the input hypothesis that the child's competence in second language is developed by listening and then understanding. Utterance producing ability will come when receiving enough competence in target language. Unlike the child in second language acquisition, adults and children in formal second language instruction are usually pressured to talk very early. However,

the insufficiency of competence i.e. the lack of acquisition of second language rule results in errors (Krashen, 1982). Newmark (1966) also emphasized that such errors is not the result of first language interference (cited in Krashen, 1982: 27).

Fourthly, *Advantages and disadvantages of first language rule use*: use of first language rules allow the learners to produce utterances even though their competence in second language is not adequate for production and this gives them opportunities to engage in conversation that can provide more comprehensible input. Despite the said advantage, it may not be able to encourage real progress in the second language.
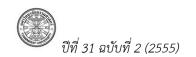
Lastly, *applied linguistics research*: Krashen claimed that studies of the newer methods which focus on meaning and not form such as Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) and Terrell's Natural Approach can confirm that providing comprehensible input methods is better than any of the older approaches.

COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT: THE IMPLICATION FOR CLASSROOM

In *Understanding Language Classroom*, Nunan (1989) stated that whether teacher dominance by doing a lot of talking in the available class time is good or not depends on one's believe in the essence of language input in acquisition. If one believes that teacher talk is an important source for roughly-tuned comprehensible input, one will feel comfortable with teacher-centered role.

It is believed by Krashen (1982) that the good place for second language acquisition for beginning to intermediate level is the classroom. Unlike the outside world, the classroom can be much better to provide comprehensible input to beginners, especially for older acquirers (Wagner-Gough and Hatch, 1975 in Krashen, 1982: 30). Krashen (1982) also suggested that the language teacher is said to be effective when he/she can provide input and assist to make it easier to comprehend in low anxiety situation.

This concept has been explicitly described in 'Just listen … and read' proposal. Based on the input hypothesis, drilling and memorizing form in order to

learn language are rejected. This theory can be thus implemented in classroom by providing comprehensible input via listening and/or reading activities e.g. tapes, books, instructions, commands etc; but virtually not giving opportunities to speak or interact with the teacher or other learners in the classroom, except to encourage others to speak to them (Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

Indeed, many traditional and current teaching methods and approaches reflect this point of view. For example, French immersion programs in Canada (Lightbown & Spada, 1999) and content-based instructional approach (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989) in which the emphasis is on the subject matter instruction and providing the rich comprehensible input in the target language. Total Physical Response (TPR) developed by Asher (1977) is also the method focusing only on listening comprehension in the early stages. Students, who are not required to say anything, will then show their comprehension by responding to the commands with the physical movement. Moreover, Natural Approach proposed by Terrell (1977: 1981) is cited as relevant to Krashen's input hypothesis. Like TPR, it allows the learners having a silent period at the first stage and provides them the rich comprehensible input through a context in classroom while traditional drills on form and specific grammar point are not used (cited in Ovando and Collier, 1987: 76).

As previously mentioned that it is the role of the teacher to help students to move into their next step of the understanding of the new language by providing them the modified input, this is an area that clearly needs further exploration: how to make teacher talk comprehensible to students.

Teachers can make their speech comprehensible to students by speaking slower, adjusting vocabulary, repeating and paraphrasing the unclear content, providing relevant background knowledge, using visual aids and realia, using body language, asking for clarification as well as providing instruction that can be connected to students' past experiences (What is Comprehensible Input?, para. 1 – 4; Language Instructor Manual (LIM) Comprehensible Input, Method, para. 3 – 9).

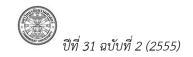## REFLECTIONS ON THE HYPOTHESIS AND ITS TEACHING IMPLICATION

Comprehensible input is conceptually very fruitful for second-language development. Harmer (1991), however, argued that superficially it might seem that comprehensible input can undoubtedly help students to acquire the language that they are hearing or reading if they can more or less understand it. In fact, it is not easy to say that acquisition is more plausible than learning. Ellis (1990) and Lightbown and Spada (1999) also pointed to the lack of direct empirical studies that can support the effectiveness of input hypothesis.

According to studies of the role of meaning-focused instruction, it appears that not only comprehensible input but also negotiation of meaning is crucial for the acquisition of new linguistic competence. Krashen acknowledged that both one-way and two-way interaction can be a source of modified input and two-way interaction i.e. conversation is a good way of providing comprehensible input. However, he insisted that two-way interaction is not certainly necessary for comprehensible input and learner is also not required to be active participant to understand the input (Ellis, 1990).

There are others who reject one-way interaction which learners are just passive recipients of comprehensible input and do not need to speak at all. One example provided by Pisa, Young and Doughty (1987) showed that the modified interaction is more powerful than modified input in order to lead much more comprehension (cited in Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 126). According to the interaction hypothesis, Long (1983a; 1983b; 1996) declared that negotiation of meaning is very helpful when difficulty in communication occurs and learners need to obtain input and feedback that can serve as linguistic data through conversational repair e.g. asking clarification questions, checking their comprehension, clarifying vocabulary, and verifying meaning (Comprehensible Input and Output, para. 5).

In addition, Swain (1985) advocates the output hypothesis which claims that learners need opportunities to practice language with native speakers to develop language competence (Ellis, 1990).

CONCLUSION

It has long been believed that providing comprehensible input can play an important role in second language acquisition. Many researchers, however, argue that it is valuable but incomplete for learners' continued language development. Unlike Krashen, some support the form-focused instruction whereas some insist on the power of interaction. It all, in fact, reflects individuals' believe in different approaches. This paper, thus, does not aim to give an answer of this debatable issue. On the other hand, it urges careful consideration for benefit and concern of those approaches.

REFERENCES

[1]   Brinton, D. M., Snow, M. A. and Wesche, M. B. (1989). *Content-based second language instruction* (p.2-3). New York: Newbury House.

[2]   Cullip: (1993). The acquisition of language according to Krashen. *The English Teacher, 22*. Retrieved January 23, 2007, from http://www.melta.org.my/ET/1993/main9.html

[3]   Ellis, R. (1990). *Instructed second language acquisition: learning in the classroom* (pp.16, 95-103). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

[4]   Harmer, J. (1991). *The practice of English language teaching* (3rd impression). China: Longman.

[5]   Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition* (pp. 9-32). Oxford: Pergamon.

[6]   Krashen, S. D. (1988). *Second language acquisition and second language learning* (pp.102-103). UK: Prentice Hall International.

[7]   Lightbown: M. and Spada, N. (1999). *How languages are learned* (2nd ed.). China: Oxford University Press.

[8]   Nunan, D. (1989). *Understanding language classrooms: a guide for teacher-initiated action* (pp. 26). UK: Prentice Hall International.

[9]   Ovando, C. J. and Collier, V. P. (1987). *Bilingual and ESL classrooms* (pp.76-77).

Singapore: McGraw-Hill.

[10]   Wesche, M. B. (1994). Input and interaction in second language acquisition. In
         Gallaway, C. and Richards, B. J. (Ed.), *Input and interaction in language
         acquisition* (pp. 221-222). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[11]   *Comprehensible input and output*. (n.d.) Retrieved December 25, 2006, from
         http://www.iei.uiuc.edu/TESOLOnline/topics/comprinput.html

[12]   *Language instructor manual (LIM) comprehensible input*. (n.d.) Retrieved
         December 25, 2006, from
         http://ling.ucsd.edu/language/lim/thmet/input.html

[13]   *What is comprehensible input*. (n.d.) Retrieved December 25, 2006, from
         http://www.teachervision.fen.com/learning-disabilities/bilingual-
         education/10260.html?detoured=1.