

Input and Second Language Acquisition

Jigsaw Reading A2

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Have you ever taken a foreign language class in high school or college? Did you spend a lot of time learning about the grammar of the language? Did the teacher speak to you exclusively in the foreign language? Were you able to speak the language fluently by the end of the class? Can you understand when a native speaker speaks to you now?

What about your experience with children in your school or neighborhood who have come to this country without being able to speak English? Have you watched them closely? How long did it take them to become fluent speakers of English? What approaches were used to teach them English? What helped them the most to learn?

When we think of the ideal conditions for learning a new language, we often think of living in a country where that language is spoken. Intuitively, we feel that hearing the language every day and having the opportunity to practice speaking will help us to learn to speak fluently. Maybe you know someone who has had that kind of experience. Research studies confirm the fact that hearing the language spoken frequently and interacting with speakers of the language are two of the most important causes of language acquisition. But it is a little more complicated than that.

Krashen's Model of Second Language Acquisition

In the early 1980s Stephen Krashen articulated a model of second language acquisition called the '*monitor model*.' In it, he outlined five hypotheses which he claimed explain the process of second language acquisition. The first of these, the '*acquisition-learning hypothesis*,' claims that there are basically two ways for adult second language (L2) learners to obtain knowledge of a language, through consciously focusing on the 'rules' of the language (learning) or through intuitively acquiring knowledge of the language, much in the way children learn their first language (acquisition). According to Krashen, only the second way leads to real fluency in the L2.

The second hypothesis, the '*monitor hypothesis*,' argues that when a learner speaks the L2 spontaneously, it is impossible to think of all the rules of language fast enough to sustain the interaction. Rather learners generate utterances from the intuitively acquired system, and then use their conscious knowledge of rules, the learned system, to monitor or edit aspects of the utterance for correctness.

The '*natural order hypothesis*' is the third part of Krashen's monitor theory. It is based on numerous studies that show that many aspects of the L2 are acquired in a predictable order, independent of the order in which they may have been taught in the language classroom. More information will be given on this later in this course.

The fourth part of the model is the '*input hypothesis*.' In it, Krashen claims that real acquisition

happens only as a result of exposure to comprehensible input. That is, L2 learners acquire intuitive spontaneous use of language when exposed to meaningful input which is only slightly beyond their current level of competence (i+1).

In order to explain why two learners exposed to the same input might not acquire the L2 at the same rate, Krashen created the '*affective filter hypothesis*.' In it, he claims that information available in the input may not be acquired by a given learner because of his emotional state. If he is bored, or upset, or anxious, for example, the input may be blocked from entering the acquired system.

Over the years, each of these hypotheses has been the subject of careful scrutiny and often vicious attack. While none has been fully confirmed by empirical evidence, the Monitor Model itself has been a catalyst to spur research into the role of input in L2 acquisition. In what follows, we will discuss issues and refinements to the notion of input that informs current theory and practice in second language acquisition.

Almost all current models of L2 acquisition acknowledge that input, i.e., language heard in a meaningful context, is a necessary condition for second language learning. Virtually all agree that input must be comprehended in order to be useful in the acquisition process. Therefore one of the central issues in language teaching and learning is how to provide learners with comprehensible input.

Strategies for Providing Comprehensible Input

One potential strategy for accomplishing this is for the speaker to *simplify* the language directed at L2 learners by speaking in shorter sentences with simplified vocabulary and syntax. As a matter of fact, studies of foreigner talk, a special register used by native speakers (NSs) in addressing L2 learners, show that NSs naturally simplify their speech when talking to non-native speakers (NNSs) much as caregivers do in addressing young children. Many features of this simplified register have been shown to increase the comprehensibility of speech, but simplification requires balance. We must be careful not to over-simplify and deny learners the opportunity of having more complex models of language and of learning the vocabulary of the discipline.

A second strategy is to use *elaboration*. That is, instead of simplifying utterances in the ways mentioned above, the speaker uses repetition, topic fronting, paraphrasing, decomposition, and other forms of redundancy to clarify meaning. Many researchers and teachers prefer this strategy because it does not get the learner accustomed to hearing only simplified language. Rather provides means for the learner to comprehend texts with native-like complexity. Instead of bringing the text down to the learner's level, this strategy attempts to bring the learner up to the level of the text. This avoids over-simplification.

A third strategy for increasing the comprehensibility of input, especially in classroom instruction, is to *enrich the context* in which the communication is taking place by using graphic organizers, visual aids, hands-on learning activities, body language, and other multi-sensory techniques. This strategy is particularly useful when one speaker is communicating with many listeners. This can also involve contextualization. The teacher embeds schoolwork in students' lives requiring them to use family and community funds of knowledge to complete schoolwork.

A final way, touted by many as being among the most effective, is *negotiated input*. This involves both speakers and listeners taking responsibility for assuring that what is said is comprehended. When

listeners fail to understand, they move to clarify; when speakers suspect that there may be some misunderstanding, they perform comprehension checks. When misunderstanding is detected speakers and listeners interact until meaning is clarified. In cooperative learning situations where students are interacting with students, this type of negotiation takes place naturally. In adult-child interaction, as in teacher-fronted activities, the adult will need to assume a great deal of the burden of checking for comprehension and clarifying meaning.

One final aspect of input that many believe to be important is that of *noticing*. Many linguists believe based on evidence, that in order for learners to expand their language system, they must notice aspects of the input that differ from their current knowledge of the language. That is, if they are producing language with certain inaccuracies, they must somehow notice the difference between what they are saying and what native speakers are saying. Linguists call it noticed input when learners recognize the shortcomings of their present linguistic system and attempt to modify it. Teachers can play an important role in this part of language acquisition by calling learners' attention to new vocabulary and new linguistic features that the learners may not have noticed on their own. This may be especially important in helping learners develop aspects of formal language such as written discourse features.

The oral language and written text that second language learners are exposed to supports their development in the second language. When the language is comprehensible, language learning is supported. Both teachers and students play a role in making input more comprehensible.

Examples of Additional Strategies:

Decomposition

NS: You are a student. What classes are you taking?

NNS: What?

NS: Do you take English classes? Do you take math classes?

NNS: English. English classes.

NS: You take English classes.

Redundancy

NS: Is this your first time?

NS: Is this the first time you have been at this store?

NNS: Yes, it uh first time.

NS: First time.

NNS: It is my first time at store.

NS: How are things?

NNS:

NS: How are you doing?

NNS: I am fine.

NS: Good! Good!

Simplification

NS: What time are you leaving?

NNS: (Looks confused.)

NS: Are you going in ten minutes?

NNS: No fifteen. Fifteen.

Topic Fronting

NS: Have you been to Chicago?

NNS: (No response.)

NS: Chicago. Have you been to Chicago?

Adapted with permission from:

Teemant, A. & Pinnegar, S. (2007). *Understanding Language Acquisition Instructional Guide*. Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership.



Principles of Language Acquisition

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