

# On the Relationship between Language Output and Second Language Acquisition

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**Abstract**—Many researchers have been discussing the importance of language input in second language acquisition. The author holds that the bigger problem lies in how to activate language learners' language knowledge and raise their language output consciousness and competence. Analyzing the importance of language output based on theory and reality, this paper mainly explores the essence of language output and its revelation for second language acquisition in order to make second language learners really raise their communicative competence.

**Keywords**—Language output, second language acquisition, communicative competence.

## I. INTRODUCTION

AMERICAN linguist Krashen [1] raised the theory of "Input Hypothesis" in the early 80's which linked linguistic theory and language teaching practice and had great influence on foreign language teaching. This theory claims that language is achieved by understanding information, namely by receiving comprehensible input. However, "Input Hypothesis" will completely attribute language acquisition to language input and to the understanding of language system, thus it neglects and eliminates the output, which is too one-sided. In the late 80's, many researchers perfected and supplemented the theory by beginning to pay close attention to and study the role of output in second language acquisition and formed other related theories. Swain's [2] "output hypothesis" is one of them. "Output Hypothesis" clearly illustrates that language output can help language learners use the language fluently and accurately.

For a long time, there has been such a phenomenon in the second language acquisition in China: learners have mastered a lot of words, be able to read English materials and get high marks in TOEFL, but they cannot apply them in communication or writing, namely the learners' ability of language output is far below the level. How to help foreign language learners to activate their input of language knowledge and improve their consciousness and ability of output is a big problem in front of us.

From the introduction of foreign counterparts in the output hypothesis research, the author lays emphasis on the essence of output and its importance for second language acquisition with the aim of raising second language learners' communicative competence.

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## II. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL BASIS OF OUTPUT IMPORTANCE

### A. Theoretical Basis

So far, researches on second language acquisition at home and abroad have made continuous achievements in various aspects. For native English linguists, second language acquisition is a particular genre in linguistic studies, in which they apply various theories to analyze linguistic features in this special field. Such studies are usually part of the publications on language. Meanwhile some language researchers are transferring a part of their attention from the practice of speaking to writing. Owing to the unique role of language acquisition, both linguists and language researchers have attached great importance to them by putting their efforts into this field aiming for theoretical and practical advancement respectively.

As regards the function of language output in the process of second language acquisition, Krashen [3] advocates that output can only show learners have obtained some knowledge of the second language without any other function except offering learners themselves some language input. We cannot deny the primacy of input which is a foundation; otherwise, the study becomes water without source. On the other hand, we cannot underestimate the role of the output, which can produce a number of positive effects for second language acquisition. Swain [4] pointed out three functions of output in her "Output Hypothesis":

#### 1. The Noticing /Triggering Function

The claim of the noticing/triggering function is present when producing output learners "may notice that they do not know how to say (or write) precisely the meaning they wish to convey ... the act of producing ... may prompt second language learners to recognize consciously some of their linguistic problems" (pp. 474). Because "they cannot say what they want to say" (pp. 474), learners make guesses based on their previous knowledge, pay more attention to input, or get help. What's more, after noticing problems, learners will pay more attention to the subsequent input to find the language characteristics so as to output the revised output, continuing to improve the accuracy of language output. Output, therefore, not only makes learners notice their interlanguage defects, but also activate the internal cognitive process of second language acquisition, so as to promote language acquisition.

#### 2. The Hypothesis Testing Function

The claim of the hypothesis testing function is that "output may sometimes be ... a trial run" reflecting their hypothesis of

how to say (or write) their intent" (pp. 476).

Second language acquisition is regarded as the process of hypothesizing the target language and modifying the hypothesis continuously. Output is the means of testing the potential hypothesis of the target language. Learners' expanding their interlanguage is trying new form of language structure by output, forming new hypothesis and testing which one is feasible and which one is not.

### 3. The Metalinguistic (Reflective) Function

The metalinguistic function claims that reflecting on the language produced either by one or by others is helpful for language development. It is, Swain notes, a means of "building knowledge about language" (pp. 478). When learners reflect their usage of target language, output takes metalinguistic function and makes them control and internalize language knowledge.

#### *B. Practical Basis*

In real life, these elements like listening and speaking, reading and writing, namely the input and output are inseparable. Input is the necessary preparation and output is the purpose of input. In turn, output can help learners digest, absorb and stimulate input. The level of learners not only depends on the degree of input but depends on the output frequency. The higher the frequency of the output is, the stronger the ability of using language.

From the current situation of second language acquisition in China, students have higher examination ability but poor communication ability. "Dumb English" phenomenon still exists. The proportion of the students' positive vocabulary and negative vocabulary is seriously imbalanced. With tens of thousands of vocabulary, students are even hard to use one thousand words in speaking. In the easy face of complex sentences in TOEFL, students can only use simple sentences in speaking. "Input", therefore, in the second language acquisition is not to be sneezed at, but the phenomenon of one-sided input can only make the students become the memorizer and without enough attention, it's hard to improve students' communicative ability [5].

### III. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE OUTPUT AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

From the above theoretical basis, it can be seen that output is really important for second language learners. But one point is also very crucial: language output hypothesis claims that the opportunity of speaking is not enough. Only when learners are "forced", the output is helpful for acquisition.

How does "pushed output" come about? When second language learners communicate with native speakers, native speakers will signal difficult understanding from time to time and require understandable expression from learners. Accepting negative input, second language learners are forced to present more accurate, consistent way of expressing ideas, making correction to the output. Research shows that the modification language learners are forced to do is often about morphology and syntax rather than semantics. Therefore, the

real role of the forced output is to encourage learners to use the variants which are more close to the target language in the interlanguage system. In the process, the learners' grammar ability is improved naturally. Swain [2] concludes, "to me, the concept of 'forced output' and 'comprehensible input' are equivalent."

Swain & Lapkin also found that attention to language problems can often active learners' inner cognitive process related to the second language acquisition. Therefore, output can not only make the learners notice their interlanguage (IL) defects but also activate the internal cognitive process of second language acquisition so as to promote language acquisition [6].

### IV. IMPROVING LANGUAGE OUTPUT SKILLS AND STRENGTHENING THE ABILITY OF STUDENTS' LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

#### *A. Changing Concept and Attaching Importance to Output*

In English teaching outline, teaching plan, curriculum setting and evaluation design, we should change the idea of noticing input but neglecting output and attach importance to output project. What students need to master is not only declarative knowledge, namely mastering the facts but also proceduralized knowledge, namely how to do it. Only paying attention to the former without noticing the latter will waste effort. Learners eventually want to communicate with the obtained knowledge, therefore it is necessary to state the importance of speaking and writing (language output) in the teaching outline, teaching plan, curriculum setting and testing. Among various kinds of English teaching, attaching great importance to the output, strengthening the oral and written output practice (especially the oral output practice) is an effective way to solve the problem of "high score but low ability, mute English, time consuming but low efficiency".

Secondly, teachers' ideas should be changed strengthening their consciousness of output. Nowadays, many foreign language teachers have weak consciousness in English communication, so they don't or seldom organize students to communicate in English. Foreign language teachers should enhance their consciousness of output and their own output ability so as to guide students to strengthen the consciousness of output, attach great importance to the output and improve output ability.

#### *B. Strengthening the Motivation of Second Language Learners' Language Output*

Learning motivation has long been regarded as the key factor to second language acquisition. One of the important reasons of high success rate of children's acquisition of mother tongue is that the motivation for children's acquisition of mother tongue is strong, because the master and use of mother tongue is the basic survival need for children and mother tongue is the only language for children to communicate with others. But most second language learners in China are "instrumental motivation" and according to Gardner's distinction, most learners with "instrumental motivation" treat target language as

a tool, hoping to benefit a lot from mastering the target language such as improving their social status and economic income, etc. The main purpose of the majority of college students for learning a foreign language is to pass college English test band four and band six in order to get a degree or find a good job. This attitude of learning a foreign language leads to their low ability of language output. While learners with "integrated motivation" like and appreciate the language that they are learning and culture associated with the language. They want to become one member of the target language society and want to be accepted by them.

Compared with the "instrumental motivation", "integrated motivation" is apparently more conducive to the improvement of learners' communicative competence. Therefore, in foreign language teaching, we should strengthen the cultivation of students' "integrated motivation", helping them to identify the current situation and future of external exchange, strengthening their output motivation and consciousness so as to radically reduce the large gap between their language input and output and eliminate "mute English" phenomenon.

### *C. Paying Attention to Pragmatic and Cultural Factors and Increasing the Environment of Language Output*

Pragmatics is not only the subject for understanding and applying the language, but also the subject for proper and appropriate language. Language level is reflected by the degree of language listening, speaking, reading and writing, which depends on the learners' vocabulary, syntax and their mastering of culture, history and so on. The development of language proficiency is a continuous process from zero to the level which is close to native speakers infinitely. There are two stages in this process:

#### 1. Primary Stage

In the teaching of pronunciation and oral English in the primary stage, the most basic pronunciation, words and sentences should be heard and talked about. Behaviorism theory claims that acquired behavior is an oft-repeated result of stimulus and response. Although this theory has limitations, it is suitable for the repeating and imitating at the early stage of language learning. At this stage, the language input includes "stimulus" and "response". The input material provides a "stimulus" for learners and learners give their "response". By imitating and strengthening, learners gradually master the relationship between the "stimulus" and "response". When there is consistent, regular connection between some form of input and output, the stimulation reaction, from input to output, becomes automatic.

#### 2. Advanced Stage

Because the student has strengthened the knowledge in all aspects of language acquisition and been aware of the cultural differences between two languages, teachers should focus on training the student to understand the culture, history, customs and habits of the background knowledge of the second language. On the basis of listening and imitating, students began to apply what they have learned, such as dialogues, role performance, question and answer, talking about pictures,

retelling and panel discussion etc so as to improve the students' ability of thinking by using the second language, expressing intention, thus the success of second language use is ensured. At the same time, writing practice should be increased suitably, because writing is the activity of applying comprehensive abilities. Not only are certain vocabulary and grammar rules needed for writing, but cultural and pragmatic knowledge should be combined. Thus certain amount of writing practice should be increased appropriately, such as insisting on writing diaries, essay, etc. to improve language output skills entirely.

### V. CONCLUSION

Language output provides chances of expressing and getting feedback for foreign language learners. The process of output and assessing interlanguage is actually the process of acquisition. Based on this, language output should be paid attention to in the process of second language acquisition in order to make second language learners be infinitely close to native speakers and really improve their language communicative ability.

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