

The Role of Input¹ in the EFL Classroom: A Theoretical Survey

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To acquire a particular language, it is essential for learners to be exposed to the language. Even if Chomsky's language acquisition devices (LAD)² work on grammar acquisition in the first language (L1), it does not operate without the particular language input. It is controversial in the second language acquisition whether the LAD is available for the learners who are beyond the so-called critical period. The input of L2 may have to play a more important role for acquisition. Most learners of a foreign language (FL) are limited to the exposure of the target language in the classroom. If input of the FL influences the rate of acquisition, it is absolutely necessary to investigate what kinds of input are effective for learning and how the input should be presented to learners.

This survey is concerned with input in the language classroom, especially for the contribution to the future English education in Japan. Although there will be references to why input is important, where and when input is available, and who gives and accepts input, this paper focuses on the practical consideration of what input is of paramount importance in quality and quantity and how the input can be presented in order to be effectively taken in by learners.

L1 acquirers are exposed mainly to motherese³ or care-taker talk⁴ first. They develop their mother tongue from oral input in the naturalistic environment. Most Japanese learners start learning English in the classroom at the age of approximately twelve. They are exposed only to teacher talk and the sound of tapes recorded by native speakers once in a while auditorily, and to textbooks and printed matters visually. Learners themselves have little opportunity to utter what they mean. A study finds that listening to peer talk facilitates language development. Ellis (1990) maintains that "the learner needs the opportunity for meaningful use of her linguistic resources to achieve native-speaker levels of grammatical accuracy." What have previous studies investigated and found concerning linguistic input for second language acquisition. Based on the current hypotheses of input, we will study the theoretical background particularly in terms of what kind of input and how the input should be provided to learners.

Comprehensible Input

Learners know a particular language through the input of the language. They cannot learn the language if they do not understand it. Therefore, input must be comprehensible for learners. No researchers reject the importance of comprehensible input for language learning.

The Input Hypothesis⁵ does not distinguish between spoken and written language. Perceptually both types of language input play a significant role in overall language development. Krashen (1983, 1985), Long (1985), and Swain (1985), all recognize that comprehensible input is of great importance for language acquisition, although they add one more thing to it—an affective filter, interaction, or comprehensible output respectively. In other words, although comprehensible input is naturally essential for acquisition, it alone is not enough but an additional factor or a method to be provided to learners with is necessary.

The Input Hypothesis states that to acquire a language the input which is provided to the learners must be a little beyond their current level of language competence. There would be nothing instructed from the input that were the same or lower than the learners' level. It is practically difficult, however, to present just finely-tuned input to the learners in the classroom. The input provided by the instructor naturally contains previously acquired structures, that is, roughly-tuned input. As a result, the learners will review old items and acquire new items if there is enough input containing $i + 1$ (Krashen and Terrell 1983).

In order for learners to change their explicit knowledge of the language structures to an implicit knowledge, and to use them without consciousness, they must pay attention to the meaning of what they receive as input. To make the input comprehensible in meaning for individual learners, caretakers consistently use simplified speech in their first language, since caretakers unconsciously think the simplification helps language acquisition. The learners of a second/foreign language can have access to foreigner talk,⁶ teacher talk,⁷ and/or peer talk.⁸ All these types of input have some characteristics in common—(1) the motivation or the desire to communicate, (2) the modified form, roughly tuned to the current level of the learners, and (3) the change made according to the linguistic development of the learners. There is, however, an empirical question with peer talk. The inter-language contains enough comprehensible input but also much of ungrammatical or unacceptable input. It is questionable whether such input facilitates acquisition or contributes to acquisition, although there is one study providing an evidence that peer talk helps acquisition (Nobuyoshi 1992, in Ellis's lecture) when listening to peers receiving clarification requests from their instructors. In an environment where learners are not able to have access to a sufficient amount of input, the quality of input should be taken into consideration. Lightbown (1992) claims the conditions that provide lasting effects of form-focused instruction are as follows: 1) learners are involved in meaningful and interesting activities, 2) they are trying to express themselves and know what they wish to say, and 3) the sentence type comes up frequently in the input they are exposed to and the interaction they engage in (p.494, numbering added.).

Interactional Input

Interaction when learners are exposed to a language in the classroom has been identified as a most critical variable for the acquisition of the language by many researchers

(Hatch 1983, Pica and Doughty 1985, Ellis 1985). Ellis (1985) mentions that "the two-sided nature of interactions leads to comprehensible input." He analyzes the interaction between two children, a brother and sister, and their teacher in order to investigate the change of the nature of the teacher-pupil interaction as their ability to use English grew in the 9-month period. From the result, he maintains that the characteristics of interaction cannot necessarily be determined because they can be the result of personality. He concluded as follows, however;

comprehensible input is ... the product of interaction involving both the native speaker and the learner. In this interaction the native speaker makes certain formal and discourse adjustments to ensure understanding, while the learner employs certain communication strategies to overcome problems and to maximize existing resources (pp.81-2).

Pica and Doughty (1985) compared the input and interactional features of communication activities between small groups and teacher-fronted classrooms. The result was shown in Table 1. In spite of the result as below, they felt that two-way communicative activities in small groups will be effective in ESL because of "far more target language practice time" to foster negotiation of meaning.

Table 1 Comparison of Input in Two Different Activities

	teacher-fronted	small group
grammaticality of input	more from teacher ungrammatical input	less from teacher from the learners
negotiation of input	more in kind few in number	less in kind few in number
amount of input/production	less	more

Hatch (1983) maintains that "its creation (the creation of an overall complete and autonomous grammar) must rely ... on input, interaction, and inference" (p.187) and "social interaction may give the learner the 'best' data to work with (p.186)." Although the use of inference helps second language learners with their comprehension of input, interactional input seems crucial for language acquisition. However, in fact, it is very difficult for Japanese adolescents and adults in the classroom. The pedagogical environment provided by nonnative speaking teachers does not create the necessity of negotiation and the unnatural situation does not encourage the learners to endeavor to interact for negotiation. In this respect, if the teacher is a native speaker, there is some possibility of negotiated adjustment ready to Japanese learners, that may be effective if the simplification is not far more than is necessary.

Scarcella and Higa (1981) examined the age differences of input and negotiation in second language acquisition. They found that native English speaking instructors did

more negotiation work in conversational activities with younger learners than with older learners. Nevertheless, older learners achieved better acquisition than younger learners in the early stage. They referred to Krashen's description of "optimal input" as follows: Good input is

- (1) sufficient in quantity,
- (2) given in a nonthreatening atmosphere,
- (3) both attended to and understood by the language learner, and
- (4) at an appropriate level (just a little beyond the learner's current linguistic competence) (p.429).

Their findings can be explained by Krashen's optimal input. The factors used so much modification with younger learners that the learners did not need to negotiate meanings. The active involvement in the conversational exchange facilitates language acquisition. Too much simplified input gives no causes for the learner to negotiate meanings. The older learners may have been exposed to large amount of comprehensible input through negotiation of meaning. Besides, they may have had a number of opportunities to create their own utterances—output. There is an advocator who proposed that the learner's output itself contributes to language acquisition.

Comprehensible Output

Swain (1985) paid attention to the input-output relationships since it was thought that merely the comprehensible input was "not enough to ensure that the outcome [would] be nativelike performance" (p.236). Three components of communicative competence—grammatical, discourse, and sociolinguistic—were investigated from the data of the performance test administrated to the immersion students. The finding was that although the students had received comprehensible input for seven years, their grammatical performance did not achieve the level of native speakers (p. 251). It was explained that the result came from the limited opportunities of generating comprehensible output, and the following conclusion was proposed on the role of comprehensible output;

- 1) to provide opportunities for contextualized, meaningful use,
- 2) to test out hypothesis about the target language, and
- 3) to move the learner from a purely semantic analysis of the language to a syntactic analysis of it (numbering added) (p.252).

Pushing the learner to produce output may result in forcing him or her "to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing" (p.249). Much pushed input triggered by much negative input is necessary for the development of communicative competence in the classroom (Schachter 1984). Mere naturalistic approaches to language learning may develop proficiency, but cannot enhance the learner's accuracy in the L2.

The following figure, originated by Sato, shows the proportion of the conditions for language acquisition concerning input.

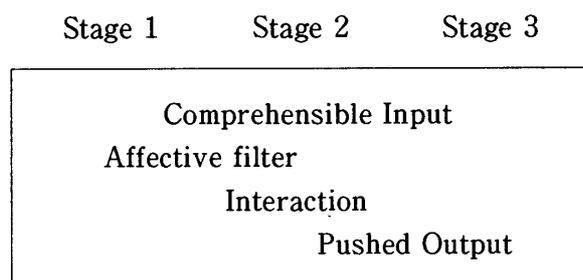


Figure 1 Language Acquisition Condition of Input

There are some studies that have attempted to obtain the evidence of the Interactional Hypothesis⁹ and the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis¹⁰ (Yamazaki; Tanaka; Nobuyoshi, from Ellis's lecture). While none of them does support both hypotheses directly, they suggest that interaction leads to comprehension, but does not necessarily lead to acquisition, and that pushed output is not beneficial to every learner. A definite conclusion may not be expected so far. More investigation in the EFL setting is desired for improving EFL classrooms in Japan to be far more effective.

Input and Intake¹¹

This is the time to consider the relationship between input and output. Zobl (1985) regards input to the learner as a minute slice of the data universe mediating between the whole data universe and the developing grammar of the learner (p.329). The study conducted an experiment that attempted to prove the existence of markedness¹² conditions in his projection model by investigating the process of acquisition of marked possessive determiner rule for the third person singular forms ('his' and 'her'). The assumption was that attributes not in input to the learner would be projected from one marked data, and would become a part of acquired knowledge. In fact, the acquisition of 'his' promoted the acquisition of 'her'. Zobl summarizes this fact as follows:

Thus intake of marked data from one markedness parameter promotes intake of marked data from another, related markedness parameter (p.343).

Markedness conditions in the input compensate for the limited input data for language acquisition. This finding will provide the pedagogical implication concerning the way to present items to be learned.

Since intake is "what takes place inside the learner's head" (Boulouffe 1986, p.245), we only can hypothesize the process from input to intake. Intake can be defined as "linguistic knowledge obtained from interaction and (maybe) incorporated into learners interlanguage" (Houck in her lecture). Boulouffe (1986), however, regards intake as "the intermediary stage between input and output" (p. 245), with intake as process and intake as product. For her, "intake is the locus of the learner's active search for inner consistency" (p.246). Her aim of proposing a model for intake as a process and as the locus of

equilibration is to present an important bridge of inward-oriented and outward-oriented equilibration between input and intake as product (p.259). Based on her model, the learner's process of language learning concerning input, intake, and output is shown in Figure 2, although the definition of intake is taken from Houck's.

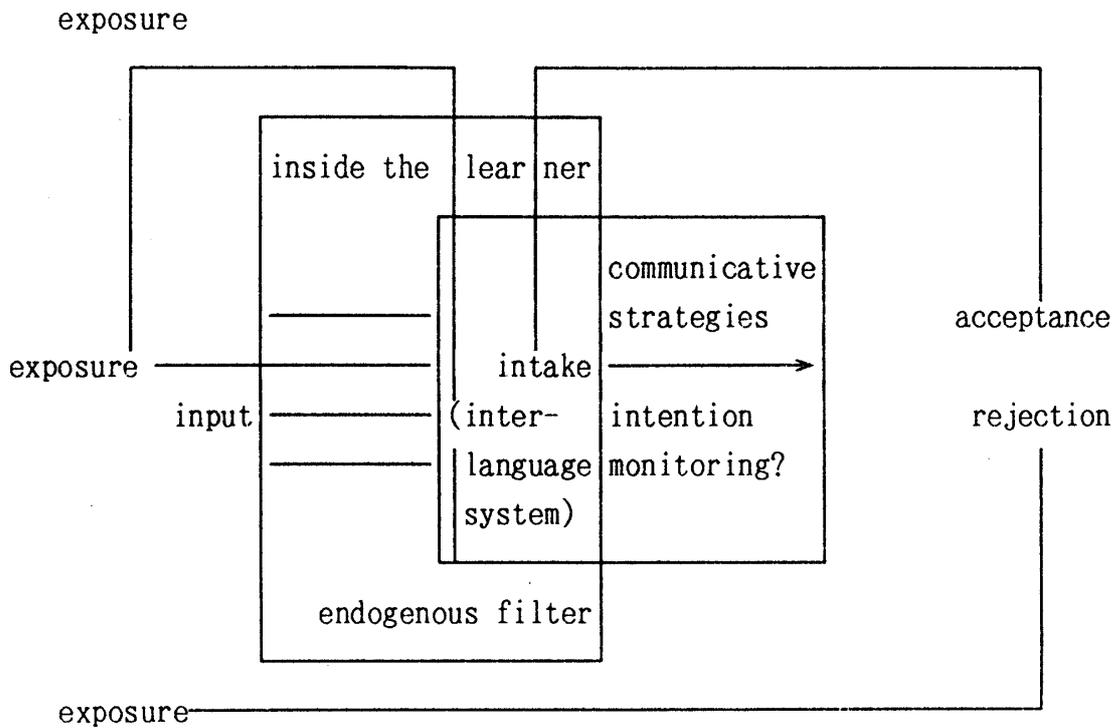


Figure 2 The learner's process of language learning concerning input, intake, and output. (based on Boulouffee 1986)

There will be no room for throwing doubt on input being a mediator between input and output as its status. Then what is the role of intake for determining the learner's competence? What factors will affect the course that part of input is taken into part of the learner's interlanguage system, from which output, whether acceptable or not, is derived? Liceras (1985) emphasizes the necessity of a theoretical framework which can account for variability reflecting a learner's output. This study attempts to prove that her model of nonnative grammar can specify a nonnative speaker's L2 knowledge, based on the idea that the learner's interlanguage system is variable and permeable, by analyzing two kinds of tasks of English-speaking learners of French – L1-to-L2 translation and grammaticality judgments in relativization. The analysis finds that "permeability will be visible at the production level" in the use of preposition stranding and obligatory use of nonoblique relative pronoun. I will show the picture indicating the influences of various factors on the process from input to output with intake playing its role in the determination of the learner's competence from Liceras's (1985, p. 371) explanation.

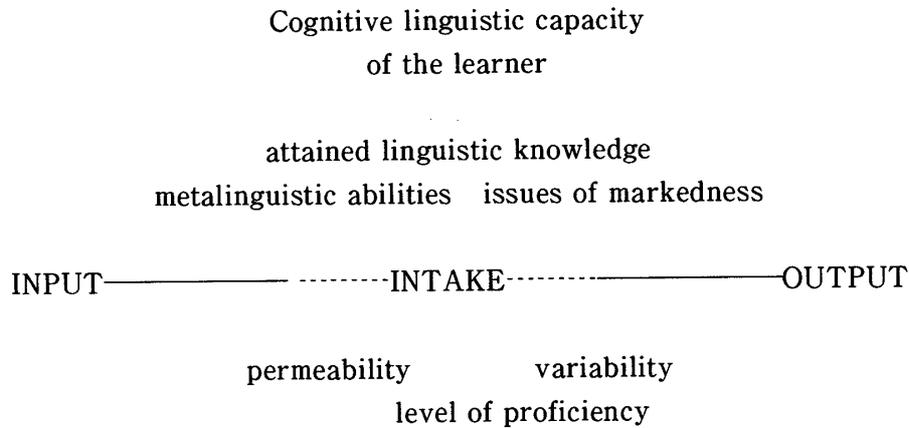


Figure 3 Factors influencing the process between input and output in nonnative grammar

Summary and Pedagogical Implication

We have seen some previous studies concerning input in SLA/FLA, focusing on the theoretical background. Comprehensible input is believed to be crucial in SLA/FLA, an idea which gained attention from the Input Hypothesis in Krashen's monitor model. This is the issue of what input is necessary for the learner to be exposed to. There is no objection to the idea that comprehensible input is essential for language acquisition. Recently, however, evidence has been given that just providing learners with comprehensible input is not a sufficient condition. Interaction and comprehensible output are proposed as additional conditions (Long 1981a, [referred to in various articles on interaction but is difficult to find] and Swain 1985, respectively.) This is the issue of how comprehensible input should be provided a utilized as an effective source for acquiring a language. The definite proof whether either of the additional conditions above is indispensable has not been made directly. Nevertheless, many researchers support the three hypotheses – the Input Hypothesis, the Interaction Hypothesis, and the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis. Input itself, needless to say, plays a vital role in language acquisition. Also, not all input will not become intake. We have seen some studies that propose a model of the process starting from input through intake to output. There seems to exist the influence of variables in the course of this process, which results in extreme complexity. These process models are next to impossible to prove.

Beebe (1985) attempts to demonstrate "input preferences" by citing a number of examples. According to her study, input preferences consist of "marked or unmarked choices." Learners prefer to use a model of language in the systematic pattern—peers over teachers, peers over parents, own social group over other social group, etc.—in the unmarked choice. This is a "solidarity-oriented" pattern. On the other hand, the opposite "status-oriented" pattern can be seen as the marked choice (p.413). Both preferences are governed by "the feelings or motivations behind preference for or rejection of various

target models and the social and situational factors that shape preferences" (p.411).

The phenomena of choices of an input model will happen in a naturalistic environment. However, in the limited-input environment like Japan, learners cannot be choosers of input types. The actual situation in Japan is that an extremely limited amount of exposure of native or native-like input is provided to learners by the intensive reading method. What we must consider is the way in which this limited input should be utilized effectively in the formal instructional setting. To make the classroom context an acquisition-rich environment (Ellis 1992), more practical consideration is needed for getting quality input (Lightbown 1992) and using it effectively. This survey has focused on the theoretical background concerning input. Further studies on the practical, pedagogical sources of input and the concrete methods and activities to be used in instruction remain to be done.

NOTES

(Mainly cited from Ellis (1985) for the explanation of specific terms, with only page numbers. The other sources are fully shown.)

1. The input constitutes the language to which the learner is exposed to. It can be spoken or written. Input serves as the data which the learner must use to determine the rules of the target language. (p. 298)
2. In the 1960s and 1970s Chomsky and others claimed that every normal human being was born with an LAD. The LAD included basic knowledge about the nature and structure of human language. It was offered as an explanation of why children developed competence in their first language in a relatively short time, merely by being exposed to it.
3. When mothers speak to their children they typically simplify their speech and make efforts to sustain communication. The formal and interactional characteristics of this kind of speech are referred to as 'motherese'. They may help the child to learn the language. (p. 300)
4. This term refers to the register addressed to children by people who are taking care of them, including mothers, fathers, and other care-takers.
5. Krashen (1981, 1982) argues that for SLA to take place, the learner needs input that contains examples of the language forms which according to the natural order are due to be acquired next. Input must consist of 'i+1'. (p. 157)
6. Foreigner talk refers to the register used by native speakers when they address non-native speakers. It is likely to be influenced by a whole host of variables such as the topic of conversation, the age of the participants, and, in particular, the proficiency of the learners. (pp. 132-3)
7. Teachers address classroom language learners differently from the way they address other kinds of classroom learners. They make adjustments to both language function in order to facilitate communication. These adjustments are referred to as 'teacher talk'. (p. 304)
8. Members of the same class use their target language at the similar stage. Their speech varies depending on their individual stage of interlanguage, but is never perfect.
9. Modification of the interactional structure of conversation ... is a better candidate for a necessary condition for language acquisition. (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, p. 144)

10. The 'output' is the language produced by the learner. This can be comprehensible or incomprehensible. The efforts that learners make to be comprehensible may also play a part in acquisition, as they may force them to revise their internalized rule systems. (p. 295)
11. Comprehensible input is not a sufficient condition for SLA. It is only when input becomes intake that SLA takes place. Input is the L2 data which the learner hears; intake is that portion of the L2 which is assimilated and fed into the interlanguage systems. (p. 159)
12. Linguists working in the Chomskyan school suggests that linguistic rules can either be part of the core grammar or be part of the periphery. Core rules are considered to be unmarked and therefore easily acquired. Periphery rules are considered to be marked and therefore difficult to learn. (p. 298)

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