Making Input Comprehensible for Foreign Language Acquisition

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Abstract

This paper is based on Krashen's assumption (Krashen, 1982) that comprehensible input is the most important factor for language acquisition. It, therefore, investigates the question of how input can be made comprehensible. This can be done through the simplifications and interactional modifications of the input provided to foreign language learners. Reference is made to extracts taken from five EFL classroom interactions, and implications for foreign language acquisition are drawn.

1. Introduction

The study of comprehensible input in language classrooms has an additional focus on second language acquisition (SLA) research. This type of research was motivated by an attempt to look at the classroom as a setting for classroom language acquisition and learning in terms of the language input provided by the teacher's talk, and the oral output of learners.

Krashen (1981) thinks that speaking the foreign language promotes acquisition, and conversation in which the acquirer has some sort of control over the topic and in which the other participants exert an effort to make themselves understood provide valuable intake. Krashen believes that the best activities for the classroom are those that are natural, interesting and understood. He claims that if the teaching programme can provide these characteristics then the classroom may be the best place for L2 acquisition, up to the intermediate level. Similarly, Littewood (1984) considers "the ideal input for acquiring a second language is similar to the input received by the child, comprehensible, relevant to their immediate interests, not too complex, but not strictly graded either" (p.59).

Krashen (1982) presents a set of requirements that should be met by any activity aiming at subconscious language acquisition. Krashen considers comprehensible input the most important factor for language acquisition, and he regards (naturally enough) incomprehensible input as a factor that hinders L2 acquisition. This, Krashen believes, explains why educational T.V. programmes fail to teach foreign languages unless the acquirer speaks "a very closely related language". These factors have led Krashen to define the good language teacher as "someone who can make input comprehensible to a non-native speaker, regardless of his or her level of competence in the target language" (p.64).

Krashen believes that the best input is so interesting and relevant that the acquirer may even "forget" that the message is encoded in a foreign language. In addition, optimal input is not grammatically

sequenced. When we focus on grammatical considerations, there will be less genuinely interesting input.

Krashen maintains that optimal input must be in sufficient quantity, but he finds it difficult to say how much input is necessary to achieve a given level of proficiency in L2 acquisition due to a lack of data. It seems clear to him, however, that much time should be devoted to supplying comprehensible input, and that would stimulate more rapid second language acquisition in that the acquirer can get more of the target language.

These, then, are the conditions for optimal input proposed by Krashen and are very briefly outlined here. Of these, comprehensible input is given prime importance in L2 acquisition. This leads us to pose the question of how comprehension is to be aided.

This research examines extracts taken from FL classroom interactions in order to show how comprehensible input is provided to promote language acquisition. It investigates how input is made comprehensible through simplification and modification of the on-going interaction.

2. Aims of the research:

The present research aims to give answers to the following questions:

1. **What are the characteristics of optimal input for FL acquisition?**

2. **How is input made comprehensible?**

3. **Which features of input are helpful for FL acquisition?**

4. **What are the interactional features which promote FL acquisition?**

5. **What are the implications of the study for FL acquisition?**

3. Review of Literature

Evidence has been provided that comprehensible input is necessary for language acquisition (Krashen, 1980, 1982; Long, 1985). It has been

found that linguistically modified texts or lectures promote non – native speakers (NNSs) comprehension of information more than those in unmodified versions (Chaudron, 1983; Johnson, 1981; and Long, 1985).

Such studies examined the ways in which the language addressed to NNSs are rendered more comprehensible by syntactic simplicity. They also examined the interactional features that play a part in this comprehensible input. These studies were pioneered by Ferguson (1975) who investigated the structure of "foreigner talk" discourse, and Snow (1972) who considered what she called "caretaker speech" addressed to non-proficient language learners.

Foreigner Talk Discourse: Input Factors

Ferguson (1975) lists some features that characterise English foreigner talk discourse. In phonology, it is characterised by a slow rate of delivery, loudness, clear articulation, pauses, emphatic stress, and exaggerated pronunciation. In lexis, it is characterised by occasional use of words from other languages, substitutions of items by synonyms, or paraphrases. In syntax, modification is presented through omission, expansion and replacement or rearrangement. Omission is exemplified by deletion of articles, copula, inflectional morphology, conjunctions and subject pronouns. Expansion is illustrated by the addition of unanalyzed tags to questions ("OK"?, "Yes?" "No?") and insertion of subject pronoun "You" before imperatives. Replacement and rearrangement include such features as forming negatives without auxiliaries ("no like"), replacing subject with object pronouns ("him go").

In addition, among the common features of foreigner talk discourse are the following: shorter utterances, syntactically less complex clauses, and less subordination, and also containing less varied vocabulary (Gaies, 1977, Herzl, 1973, Hasan, 1988). For a detailed review of similar studies which investigate the characteristics of foreigner talk discourse, the reader is referred to Long (1980, pp.24-48).

Ellis (1985), for example, also lists the principal input and interactional adjustments which have been identified in a number of studies (e.g. Ferguson and Debose,1977; Hatch, Shapira, and Gough 1978; Long 1983; Hatch, 1980) in two tables. The first includes input

modifications in foreigner talk (pronunciation, lexis, grammar) and the other interactional modifications in foreigner talk (discourse features). Elsewhere Ellis (1995) found that modified oral input (both pre-modified and interactionally modified) play an important role in the acquisition of vocabulary. Ellis found a strong relationship between comprehension and word meaning acquisition. He also found that although more word meanings were learnt from the interactionally modified input than from the pre-modified input, the rate of acquisition (in words per minute) was faster than the pre-modified input.

It should be noted that research has investigated the different variables that influence the input and the interactional adjustments in foreigner talk. Scarcella and Higa (1981) compared the foreigner talk discourse addressed to child non-native speakers with that addressed to adolescents. They found that the former type of speakers received simpler input in a more supportive atmosphere. The input they received was characterised by shorter utterances, simplified vocabulary, and more clarification requests.

The Output Factor

It is now well established that input plays an important role in SL acquisition. Krashen (1982), for instance, suggests that:

... it is hypothesized that we acquire via input what we read and hear, and not via output, actual talking and writing. Output does have an indirect role to play in encouraging acquisition, however. (p.57)

Krashen points out the arguments in favour of the Input Hypothesis which puts much emphasis on the acquisition of spoken fluency by listening and reading and not by practising and talking. Krashen believes that "it is, in fact, theoretically possible to acquire language without ever talking" (p.60). He refers to Lenneberg study to support his claim. Lenneberg (1962) found that a boy with congenital dysarthria, a disorder of the peripheral speech organs, who was never able to speak could understand spoken English perfectly when he was tested. He had acquired "competence" without ever speaking. However, Krashen assumes that the child would have acquired the language somewhat faster if he had been able to speak "due to the indirect contribution speaking

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can make to acquisition" (p.60). Thus Krashen believes that output can contribute to language acquisition in an indirect way: "... the more you talk, the more people will talk to you" (p.60). It will also affect the quality of input directed at the acquirer by receiving a more modified input. Krashen believes that "engaging in conversation is probably much more effective than "eavesdropping" for language acquisition" (p.60-61). To participate in conversation means that there must be some output from the learners and this is where the output plays an indirect role in L2 acquisition.

Krashen illustrates the indirect contribution of the oral output to language acquisition in the following diagram:
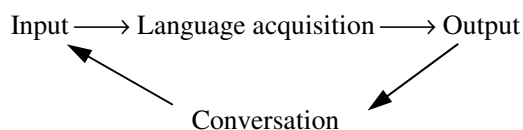
Input ⟶ Language acquisition ⟶ Output

Conversation

Figure 1: How output contributes to language acquisition indirectly

To this figure Krashen adds that:

Comprehensible input is responsible for progress in Language acquisition.

Output is possible as a result of acquired competence.

When performers speak, they encourage input (people speak to them). This is conversation. (Krashen 1982, p.61)

Further evidence of the role of oral output of learners in SLA is expressed by Swain (1985). Swain suggests that the oral output of learners has the function of creating the necessity for them to analyse the target language syntactically. Brock (1986) quotes Swain's argument that producing one's own messages in the target language ''may be the trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the means of expression needed in order to successfully convey his or her intended meaning" (p.249). Thus, Brock (1986), referring to Swain, states that "output may be an important factor in successful SLA." (p.55). Lynch (1997) presents

research evidence which supports the role of modified output in SLA. He discusses extracts from the adult EFL classes in which learners were found to resort to conversational repair in order to clarify faulty expressions used in performing a communication task. Such modified input comes as a results of a process of 'sustained negotiation' (Musumeci 1996) for meaning which plays an important role in making the input more comprehensible.

In short, it can be said that studies of foreigner talk discourse have emphasised the simplicity of native speakers (NSs) speech as an important factor in rendering the input more comprehensible to non – native – speakers (NNSs). Reference is also made to the oral output as another important factor in FL acquisition.

The Interactional factor

Recent research on native speaker / non-native speaker (NS-NNS) conversation suggests that while understanding may indeed be facilitated by encoding in shorter, less complex utterances, speech simplifications alone are not necessarily sufficient for comprehension. As pointed out by Long (1983b) referring to Meisel (1977) and Larsen-Freeman (1979), "what may be easier to produce from the speaker's perspectives may become difficult to decode from the perspective of the hearer." (p.211)

Therefore, the modification of the syntactic structure alone serves the immediate needs of communication but not the future development of the learners. Modification of the interaction in conversation is also necessary for providing better access to the language acquired. Thus, Tsui (1985) reports (using Krashen's terminology) that "it has been hypothesized that input which is comprehensible and interaction which has been modified best facilitate second language acquisition" (p.8). Moreover, Long (1983a) considers modification in the interactional structure of conversation more important than linguistic simplification in making input more comprehensible to NNSs. Elsewhere, he puts forward the following hypothesis: participation in conversation with NS, made possible through the modification of interaction, is the necessary and sufficient condition for SLA" (Long, 1981, p.275). Although the hypothesis still awaits further research, it can be concluded that modified

interaction is an important factor in L_2 acquisition. Input and interaction are two "distinguishable phenomena" (Long, 1981). However, an examination of the one can hardly be made without an examination of the other. Long considers them "often related".

It is worth reminding ourselves from the outset that modified interaction takes various forms. Jarvis and Robinson (1997) pointed out the importance of the focus, build and summarize pattern of classroom discourse in identifying the shared meaning in the classroom which makes classroom input more comprehensible. Chaudron (1983) points out (a fact that Tsui (1985) also mentions) that no single form of modification is an appropriate method of presentation. Modification can be more effective through constant interaction and negotiation between the teacher and the pupils.

4. Method:

The material used for the analysis consists of extracts taken from tape and video recordings of five EFL classroom interactions of general English for the intermediate level at the ESP center, Damascus University. Transcripts of these extracts are displayed and analysed in order to show how comprehensible input play an important role in FL acquisition.

5. Analysis of Data:

If the comprehensibility of input is essential for L_2 acquisition the question of how input is made comprehensible becomes crucial. This can be done by simplifying and modifying the input provided to foreign language learners.

5.1. Simplification of Input

By simplifying the input, we mean the ways in which the language addressed to FL learners is rendered more comprehensible. Research in this area shows that the input the learners receive is characterised by shorter utterances, simplified vocabulary, and more clarification requests. This sort of input is known in the literature as "foreigner talk discourse".

The simplicity of teacher's input to FL learners can be seen in the following examples taken more or less at random from the various settings to give the reader a flavour of the type of language use contained in the data:

- What did you do this morning?

- Do you like travelling?

- Let's move to something else. Will you please read the sentence?

- What's the title of the lecture?

- Here are some other questions.

Modification of input can again be illustrated by the following example:

T. Any problems with your waterworks?

S. No, they're all right.

The example shows that the exchange is typical of observational studies of foreigner talk in which the input is made simple. The teacher uses an uninverted question lacking the auxiliary verb "are".

It is through simplified input that language learning becomes most beneficial. It is under such conditions that the classroom can be of a great benefit for L2 learners. It should be noted that the value of the L2 classroom does not lie in the grammar instruction, but in the simpler "teacher talk". Also, for the informal environment to be of any use, the language addressed to foreign language learners should be simple and comprehensible.

5.2. Interactional Modifications

It is important for any study of interaction to look at the integral issues which play a major and a fundamental role in the modification of the interactional structure of classroom discourse. In what follows the

researcher will deal with the following major issues: echoic questions which play a part in the modification of the interactional structure; repetitions by the teacher of learners' utterances which make sure that the discourse is proceeding appropriately; expansions by the teacher of learners' utterances which modify learners' utterances and are considered to be a factor in SLA; and conversational frames which signal the boundary of exchanges and organise the discourse. An examination of each of these issues is in order.

5.2.1. Echoic Questions

The direction and negotiation of information conveyed by utterances is made through acts whose functions are made obvious by means of the modification of the interactional structure which renders the input more comprehensible to learners. These acts or echoic questions are referred to as comprehension checks, clarification requests and confirmation checks. Long (1980, pp.81-83) defines those terms as follows:

Comprehension checks are:

any expression by a native speaker (NS) designed to establish whether that speaker's preceding utterance(s) had been understood by the interlocutor. These are typically formed by tag questions, by repetition of all or part of the same speaker's preceding utterance(s) uttered with rising intonation, or by utterances like <u>Do you understand</u>? which explicitly checks comprehension by the interlocutor.

Clarification requests are:

any expression by a NS designed to elicit clarification of the interlocutor's preceding utterance(s). Clarification requests are mostly formed by questions but may consist of wh or yes-no questions (unlike confirmation checks) as well as uninverted (rising intonation) and tag questions, for they require that the interlocutor either furnish new information or recode information previously given.

Confirmation checks are:

any expression by the NS immediately following an utterance by the interlocutor which was designed to elicit confirmation that the utterance

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had been correctly understood or correctly heard by the speaker **...** confirmation checks are always formed by rising intonation questions with or without a tag. (<u>The man</u>? or <u>the man, right?</u>) They always involve repetition of all or part of the interlocutor's preceding utterance. They are answerable by a simple confirmation (yes, Mmhm) in the event that the preceding utterance was correctly understood or heard, and require no new information from the interlocutor. (p.81-82)

The following examples illustrate these types of echoic questions:

<u>Comprehension Checks</u>

Where do we put the comma?

How do we begin the letter?

What other things are we going to do?

<u>Clarification Requests</u>

What do we mean by convention?

What do we mean by prediction?

Yes, Bassam. You wanted to say something.

Abdulkader, can you say it again?

How do we say this?

How do we read this number?

<u>Confirmation Checks</u>

T. Steel is harder than pure iron

S. Harder

T. What do we call "harder"

S. Comparative

T. Yes, we call it comparative

These examples clearly show that the teacher explicitly checks the comprehension of the learners, asks them to clarify their utterances, and

elicits confirmation that their utterances are clearly heard and understood. It should be noted that these sorts of questions are helpful devices for SLA. As Foster (1998) puts it 'checking and clarifying problem utterances (negotiating for meaning) ensures that task participants receive comprehensible input and generate comprehensible output, both of which have been claimed as crucial to second language acquisition (SLA)'. In addition, Noubuyoshi and Ellis (1993) found that clarification requests enabled some learners to do self correction and to avoid making the same errors on a similar task a week later.

Both comprehension checks and clarification requests are good interactional devices to avoid breakdown of communication and to repair the discourse when communication breaks down. This finding is consistent with Long (1980). Consider the following example of a comprehension check strategy:

T. Read the introduction silently.

Have you read the introduction? What is it about?

S. It is about writing letters, the beginning, the body and the conclusion.

This example illustrates how the teacher explicitly checks the comprehension of the students after reading the introduction of the lesson. This sort of checking serves to give the teacher the green light to proceed with the steps of the lesson. The teacher, in Turn (1) wants to make sure that the students have understood the introduction of the lesson before proceeding further on the premise that any misunderstanding might otherwise lead to a breakdown in communication. Here the comprehension check device serves a metalinguistic function where the focus is on the meaning of the language rather than on its forms.

Once the communication has broken down the teacher uses the clarification request strategy to repair the discourse. Consider the whole extract:

1. T. Read the introduction silently.

   Have you read the introduction? What is it about?

2. S. It is about writing letters, the beginning, the body and the conclusion.

3. T. Is it only about correspondence and writing letters? There's......

   There's something specifically about it. What is it?

4. S. xxxx ah...

5. T. The convention?

6. S. Yes, the convention. Many of the conventions used in writing letters.

7. T. From your point of view, what do we mean by convention?

8. S. Where do we put the comma, where do you write the address?

9. T. Yes, how you begin the letter, how you write the letter..

10. T. Do you write the letter as you like or there's a special way?

11. S. There's a special way.

12. T. Yes, right. There must be a form.

The extract above illustrates the use of the clarification strategy in Turn (7). On the student's part it is used as an attempt to clarify and repeat the word "convention", and on the teacher's part it is used as an attempt to hear more clearly what is being addressed to him. The emphasis here is on the channel of communication or in Hymes's (1962) words on the "contact" function of the language. In this sense, the clarification request is used as a strategy for the negotiation of meaning which occurs in an environment of linguistic trouble. The solution in such a case is not achieved separately by the teacher or by the learner. It is achieved by the joint effort of both the teacher and the learner to

maintain communication. What is important therefore is the negotiation of meaning. The communication between the teacher and the learners could have gone on without the use of a clarification request strategy, albeit an attempt on the teacher's part was made to hear again what the student has said "convention?" in order not to ignore his contribution to the discourse. Moreover, the teacher expands and reshapes the learner's response into a more acceptable form (Turn 12). In this sense expansion is a form of repair work used as a pseudo-negotiation strategy.

In this sort of negotiation, the conversation moves into the development stage stimulated by the teacher. Further development occurs when the learner requests clarification in a case of mishearing or misunderstanding (e.g. "What?", "Huh?" or echoing part of the teacher's question in order to establish the field of reference. The learner's utterance has a "contact" function to maintain the channel of communication:

T. What was the question that the doctor asked?

S. About the stomach and the bowels?

T. Yes, about the stomach and the bowels.

After the teacher's initial question fails to receive an immediate response he uses an exact repetition of the student's question to elicit a response from the learner.

It must be made clear that this sort of negotiation is of great benefit for foreign language development. As Wells (1981) argues in this respect:

The sort of interaction that will be beneficial for his (i.e. the child's) development ... is that which gives due weight to the contribution of both parties, and emphasises mutuality and reciprocity in the meanings that are constructed and negotiated through talk. (p.115)

It is by this sort of negotiation that the learner gets information about the target language that enables him to think over his interlanguage system.

In short, understanding can be reached when both the learners and their interlocutors modify and restructure their interaction by their requests for clarification or confirmation of each others' input and check on the comprehensibility of their own productions.

5.2.2. Repetitions of Learners' Utterances

One of the interesting communicative strategies employed by NSs in their verbal interaction with NNSs is the repetition of NNSs utterances. It has been argued that this strategy is believed to have a potential impact on language learning. Gaies (1977) states that repetition is ''a recurrent technique thought to have potential accelerating effects on language acquisition'' (p.206). Long (1980) has found that repetitions either by the native speaker himself or by someone else are "interactional resources available to the NSs and NNSs to repair the discourse when a breakdown occurs." (p.152). At other points, learners request additional reassurance and they want an expansion or repetition of the previous utterance. Repetition requests accounted for 13 percent of the compliment responses in Nelson et al's study (Nelson et al 1996).

In the data, the teacher generally repeats learners' utterances as a form of evaluation of their responses:

1. T. Well, let's move to something else.

   Will you please read the sentence.

2. S. Shall I carry something for you?

3. T. Do we have "carry something" in the conversation?

4. S. No.

5. T. Ok. Give me the sentence.

6. S. Can you help me?

7.T. Yes, can you help me, please. Good.

This extract shows that the repetition of learners' utterances is intended to show the teacher's satisfaction of learners' responses. It is, therefore, in the third part of the Initiation – Response – Feedback (IRF)

structure of classroom interaction observed by Sinclair and Coulthard that repetitions occur. Repetition, in this sense, reinforces learning and makes the input more comprehensible.

5.2.3. Expansions of Learners' Utterances

Another communicative strategy employed by the teacher to render the input more comprehensible to FL learners is the use of expansions of learners' utterances. This strategy is believed to have the potential for language acquisition. Hamayan and Tucker (1980), referring to the suggestion of Nelson et al. (1973), indicate that "expansions which restate a child's sentences may enhance syntactic development by providing new or alternate syntactic and lexical structures" (p.454). They also point out, reporting on the findings of the research of Brown et al. (1969), that "expansions somehow facilitate language acquisition in young children" (p.465).

In the data, expansion of learners' utterances takes the form of paraphrasing or adding some information to their utterances. Here we find the teacher is trying to shape the learners' utterances in the appropriate form. In other words, the teacher cites the model utterance and formulates it into its appropriate form. In this sense Gaies (1977) considers expansion as "a more complex modeling".

Thus expansion in the data is coded as any utterance by a teacher designed to paraphrase and/or add new information to the learners' preceding utterances. Consider the following example:

1. T. Where do you get knowledge?

2. S. From life..

3. T. Good. You get it from experience, from life, from the world.

These examples show how the teacher expands on the learners' utterance. The expansion occurs in the third part of the IRF structure. Here, we find the teacher recognises the truth value of the learners' utterance and at the same time demonstrates to them how their utterances are encoded by

native speakers of English. In other words, the teacher reshapes or paraphrases learners' responses into a more acceptable form. Expansion is used to modify and evaluate the learners' responses and, in consequence, to make the interaction more comprehensible. In this sense expansion can be considered as some sort of a repair strategy of incomplete responses. This sort of reformulation is usually used for the negotiation of meaning, and it helps in the development of learners' utterances.

5.2.4. Conversational Frames

The use of conversational frames is another strategy in the classroom to make the input more comprehensible. The teacher usually uses boundary markers such as "well", "so", "OK", "now" which signal the end of a previous exchange or the beginning of a new one. These boundary markers are referred to as frames. They consist of two moves: framing and focusing. Their function is "designed to signal the beginning or the end of what the teacher considers to be a stage in the lesson" (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975, p.49).

The introduction of new topics or exchanges is largely determined by the teacher who is in sole control of the process of interaction:

Now, I want you to underline the important word in each of these questions then listen again.

Now, what subjects do you study in this course?

So, you study many subjects in this course.

Right, Newton discovered gravity.

Ok, today's lecture will be on customs.

These examples illustrate the teacher's control of the classroom discourse. Every now and then, the teacher tries to introduce a new activity and make his introduction clear by using conversational frames like: "OK", "right". Clearly, conversational frames, thus used, help

learners focus on the stages or ideas of the lesson and provide them with another means of making the input more comprehensible.

In short, we have presented the possible ways and means in which the teacher makes his input more comprehensible to FL learners. These include the use of questions, repetitions, expansions of students utterances and conversational frames. In addition, implicit in the findings is that language learning results from learning how to communicate in the FL and communicative opportunities are afforded by types of interaction that place emphasis on an exchange of information and negotiation of meaning.

6. Implications for FL Acquisition

The significance of simplified input and modified interaction reported in this study lies in the implications for FL acquisition. In a sense, these implications are very obvious and in line with much current theory, if not practice. For language acquisition to be promoted, teaching should provide comprehensible input and involve the use of modified language.

Let us start, then, from the belief that learners can better acquire the L2 through Krashen's "comprehensible input". This puts a high demand on the English language teacher who must present significant information and knowledge but in a way comprehensible to learners who lack fundamental competence in the target language. Teachers' awareness of these factors would promote their better understanding of effective instructional methods.

Examination of the oral output of the EFL learners revealed that emphasis was placed on accuracy rather than fluency. Emphasis has been placed on the form of utterances rather than on the meaningful exchange of information. If acquisition of language has to take place, emphasis on fluency rather than accuracy should be the main concern of participants

in the EFL classroom discourse. As for the significance of interactional and discourse features for FL acquisition, the present study emphasises the importance of meaningful interaction and participation in discourse as an important factor in language acquisition.

These factors seem to suggest that if we are to advocate the teaching of spoken discourse which promotes FL acquisition, access to comprehensible input and meaningful interaction must be provided.

When the teacher modifies the questions, and helps the learners provide the answers, repeats and expands on learners utterances, he is providing comprehensible input. On the other hand, when learners ask questions, or request clarifications they provide the feedback for the teacher to tune his input to the appropriate level for FL acquisition.

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