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COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

In Krashen's terms, optimal input has to be comprehensible to the learner if we want acquisition to take place. An overview of the literature on input indicates two ways of making input comprehensible: the first one is to premodify input before it is offered to the learner, (premodified input), and the second one is to negotiate the input through interaction (interactionally modified input).

The aim of the present paper is twofold: on the one hand, we shall discuss the two types of input mentioned above; on the other hand, the major findings that both premodified input and interactionally modified input have on second language acquisition will be reported.

Further research is suggested to establish the direct or indirect relationship between comprehensible input and the acquisition of an L2.

INTRODUCTION

It was in 1985 when Krashen advanced the Input Hypothesis which aimed to describe the development of learner's interlanguages as a result of comprehending input that contained linguistic features one step beyond their current level of competence. The author defined it as "i+1"; *i* standing for the current knowledge of a learner and *1* for the next level.

In the Input Hypothesis, two ways are discussed by means of which comprehension of input containing new linguistic material is achieved: the use of context and extra-linguistic information. According to Krashen, both help the learner to comprehend the roughly-tuned input he/she is exposed to. By roughly-tuned input he meant input which is not exactly related to the learner's developmental level.

Taking that hypothesis as a guide, many researchers conducted studies which tried to show learner's comprehension when they faced two types of input: firstly, we shall discuss input which has been linguistically modified before it is offered to the learner, and secondly, we shall deal with input which is made comprehensible due to the interactional modifications the participants in the conversation engage in.

PREMODIFIED INPUT AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

In order to analyse the effects of premodified input on second language acquisition (SLA), we are going to focus our attention on three studies which carried out research on premodified input, among other issues. These studies are (1) T. Pica, C. Doughty and R. Young (1986); (2) L. Loschky (1994); and (3) R. Ellis (1995).

In their study, Pica, Doughty and Young asked nine low-intermediate learners of English to carry out an assembly task under the directions of a native speaker (NS). One of their hypotheses predicted that the non-native speaker's (NNS) comprehension would be lower in the premodified input directions than in the unmodified input directions with interaction allowed.

The premodified input was characterized by greater semantic redundancy and less complex syntax, which was achieved by means of repetition or paraphrase. Despite these modifications, the results of their study

confirmed the hypothesis above, since the comprehension on the part of the NNSs was lower in the premodified directions than in the unmodified input with interaction.

In Loschky's (1994) article, the second hypothesis stated that premodification of input facilitated comprehension relative to non-modification of input and interaction. To test the validity of that hypothesis, the researcher took 41 beginning-level learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language. The subjects had to perform three sets of listening tasks and they also had to identify and number the target object which was being described.

The outcomes of the study disconfirmed the above mentioned hypothesis. That is to say, premodification of input did not facilitate comprehension relative to nonmodification on input and interaction.

Ellis (1995) examined the relationship between properties of premodified input and vocabulary learning. Specifically, he aimed to describe the effectiveness of premodified oral input in promoting the acquisition of word meanings. To this end, the author selected 51 low-proficiency learners of English and divided them into two groups: one group would receive premodified input and the other would get interactionally modified input.

The task the subjects had to perform consisted in identifying a particular kitchen object and placing it correctly in a picture of a kitchen. The task was preceded by a pre-test and followed by two post-tests and a follow-up test.

The outcomes of the research showed that comprehension scores in the premodified directions were positive but low. As far as the vocabulary gains are concerned, acquisition scores did not favoured the premodified input group but the interactionally modified input group.

Input research has centred on the belief that availability on the target language is not a sufficient condition for SLA. What seems essential is that the learner understands it. As the Input Hypothesis states, input must be comprehensible if it is to assist the acquisition process. The above mentioned studies made input comprehensible by means of its premodification in the form of quantity, redundancy and complexity. However, all of them provide evidence against a one-to-one linear relationship between L2 comprehension and acquisition.

The only exception is Ellis' article: here, we can find positive evidence for premodified input. This evidence comes in the form of the factor of range (i.e. the number of different contexts in which a new item occurs). The researcher found significant correlations with vocabulary acquisition by the premodified input group -although the same finding occurred in the interactionally modified input group. It follows that hearing the same word repeated in a set of different contexts aids acquisition.

Taken as a whole, these studies demonstrate that while the role of comprehension in acquisition appears to be quite strong, it also seems more complex than suggested by the Input Hypothesis, and in particular, premodified input achieves the lowest scores when compared to interactionally modified input.

Furthermore, Loschky (1994) indicates that premodified input sometimes fails to improve learner's comprehension. A possible reason explaining this fact is that elaboration or simplification of input may not be helpful but detrimental in some occasions.

INTERACTIONALLY MODIFIED INPUT AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

We turn now to analyse a kind of input which is modified by the interaction of the participants in the conversation (interactionally modified input).

It was Long (1980) who made an important distinction between modified input and modified interaction. This interaction had special features which helped the participants negotiate meaning (namely, comprehension checks, confirmation checks and clarification requests).

When L2 learners face communicative problems and they have the opportunity to negotiate solutions to them, they are able to acquire new language. This claim has been referred to as the *Interaction Hypothesis* (Ellis, 1990). Long, thus, supported the idea that negotiated interaction is essential for input to become comprehensible. It runs counter to Krashen's *Input Hypothesis*, for whom simplified input along with contextual support is the key for comprehensible input.

Two studies which investigated the relationship between interaction and acquisition will be discussed to give evidence of recent work in this area of SLA. Those studies are the following ones:

1. S. M. Gass and E. M. Varonis (1994)
2. R. Ellis, Y. Tanaka and A. Yamazaki (1994)

In Gass and Varonis' (1994) study, one of their six hypotheses suggested is of special relevance to us. Hypothesis 2 predicts as follows: "Interaction yields better NNS comprehension."

Sixteen native-nonnative dyads performed the task. The NNSs were at the high intermediate level and they had to describe where to place objects on two different scenes.

According to their results, Hypothesis 2 was confirmed. When NNSs were allowed to negotiate meanings, they made fewer errors in placing the objects. Similarly, the researchers got more accurate results when the description of the scene was interactive.

As far as the learning outcomes are concerned, their study suggests the potential effects of interaction on the incorporation of forms, but both authors claim that they are not yet in a position to talk about actual acquisition of new forms.

Ellis, Tanaka and Yamazaki's article reports two studies which investigated the effects of modified interaction on comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. The subjects they chose were 79 third-year students at a public high school for the first study, and 127 first-year high school students for the second one.

The participants were administered a pretest to establish a set of lexical items unknown to them. In the treatment, they had to listen to the directions which told them what object to place in a specific place.

The treatment was followed by two posttests and a follow-up test which took place one month after the second posttest. The researchers then pointed out five hypotheses out of which numbers 2 and 3 dealt with negotiation, comprehension and acquisition.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that learners receiving input through interaction would achieve higher levels of L2 comprehension than those exposed to other types of input. The outcomes of their study supported the prediction. In this sense, the students who were given the chance to negotiate their problems in comprehension were more successful in carrying out the directions.

Hypothesis 3 suggested that learners in interactive situations would learn and retain more L2 words than those learners who received other kinds of input. This turned out to be the case, as the learners who negotiated the input achieved higher vocabulary acquisition scores in the immediate posttest and, what is more important, they maintained this advantage over time.

Finally, and in the light of their results, the authors support a causative relationship between negotiated interaction and acquisition. However, they also acknowledge the fact that different aspects of language may not be acquired in the same way. Therefore, it is still a research question whether interaction can promote the acquisition of other aspects of the L2.

Research on negotiation has focused on two issues: (1) Negotiation as an aid to L2 comprehension, and (2) Negotiation and SLA.

Input modified through negotiation leads towards successful communication in a situation of interaction, as learners are provided with comprehension of meaning. Moreover, comprehension of meaning draws learner's attention to L2 form.

As T. Pica (1994) reports, participants' negotiation does not always lead to their immediate comprehension of meaning but it makes them manipulate the form. Negotiation, thus, has two potential outcomes: it assists L2 comprehension, and it draws attention to L2 form. This means that negotiation has a more powerful role in L2 learning than had been claimed so far.

As we have just said, participants in a conversation find ways to communicate messages through negotiation, which, in turn, contributes to comprehensibility. However, most of the data on negotiation deal with lexical items and little is known about, say, negotiation over grammatical morphology. It follows that although negotiation provides learners with opportunities to access L2 form and meaning, there is a need of greater insight into how negotiation is connected to learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the process of making input comprehensible, this paper described two ways to do so: by premodification and by interaction. In view of the three studies (Pica, Doughty and Young 1986; Loschky 1994; Ellis 1995) reporting findings on premodified input, none of them found either positive or significant evidence for considering the premodification of input as a key factor on comprehension and on acquisition when compared to interactionally modified input.

In contrast, the article by Gass and Varonis demonstrated that negotiation was a facilitating factor on input comprehensibility. Similarly, Ellis, Tanaka and Yamazaki found that through interaction, learners achieved higher levels of L2 comprehension. Furthermore, their results showed that by negotiating the input, their learners had reached higher vocabulary acquisition scores.

Despite those encouraging findings, the effect of interaction on acquisition remains controversial. Ellis (1991) has suggested that comprehension does not necessarily lead to acquisition. His claim has been corroborated by several authors: Loschky believes that "positing a simple linear relationship between comprehension and intake is not warranted" (1994:320)

Likewise, Pica (1994) considers it difficult to find a *direct* relationship between comprehension of L2 input and the internalization of L2 forms. We can, however, find an *indirect* relationship between negotiation and acquisition: through interaction learners can detect differences between their interlanguages and the target language, and this awareness of the differences may make them modify their output. This claim is in line with Long (1980), who suggested that negotiated interaction indirectly promoted SLA.

As we can see, there seems to be links between comprehensible input and acquisition, being the degree of such links still uncertain. Further research should be conducted to shed light on the following questions:

- 1.- If range, as Ellis (1995) showed, is an important factor for vocabulary acquisition, can we establish the optimal number of contexts for a word to be learnt in a situation of interaction?
- 2.- What are the long-term effects of both premodified and interactionally modified input?

Much work lies still ahead to investigate these and other questions in the field of SLA.

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