A Critical Perspective at the Role of Input Flooding in the Acquisition of Linguistic Forms by EFL Learners

Majid Mirzapour

Department of English Language and literature, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, Islamic Azad university, Amol, Iran

Corresponding author's email: majidmirzapour63@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper is going to provide a critical perspective toward the role of input flooding as defined by Sharwood-Smith (1991). The theoretical foundations of this technique, namely, Krashen's (1981) Comprehensible Input Hypothesis and Sharwood-Smith's (1985; 1991) conscious raising hypothesis are reviewed. As mentioned in the concluding and discussion section, there is a need to be cautious regarding the generalization of the usefulness of this technique to teaching different aspect of language in EFL context. The mere relying on input is not enough for succeeding in a complex task of language teaching; however, there is a need for taking account of internationally produced output as well.

KEYWORDS: input flooding, input hypothesis, comprehensible input, conscious raising, noticing

INTRODUCTION

Input is a paramount matter in L2 teaching and as Ellis (1998) expressed, acquisition happens when learners go to the new structure in data as opposed to when they deliver it. This implies that the learners must notice and pay attention to the new aspect of language in order to make the information part of their interlanguage. According to Sharwood Smith (1991), one way of dealing with the matter of input is to enhance the noticeability of it through increasing its perceptual salience. Moreover, Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1985) stated that this enhancing of noticeability is termed as *consciousness raising* and later as *input enhancement.*

Gass and Selinker (2008) expressed that if a component happens often in the data, it is liable to be taken note. Input flood, as one of the forms of input enhancement, is a technique in which the learners are provided with huge amount of examples of a certain target form in the input that can take the form of either oral or written. Its assumption is that frequent occurrence of the same target form makes it more noticeable and it draws the learner's attention to the intended form (Fotos & Nassaji, 2011). A number of studies have investigated the role of input enhancement on different areas of language, especially, grammar (Wong, 2012), structure (Abadikhah & Shahriyarpour, 2012), writing (Storch, 1998), and vocabulary (Maftoon & Sharifi, 2012). The role of input flooding, however, has rarely been dealt with in promoting learners' knowledge of English.

This paper is going to probe the theoretical foundations of input flooding and evaluate them in terms of their contribution to language learning in a foreign setting. The paper concludes with discussion of the possible limitations that need to be considered when applying this technique in foreign language learning settings.

THE ROLE OF INPUT

The language input the learners receive is one of the external factors playing a fundamental role in their language acquisition. This fact is originally found to be crucial in first language acquisition and later powerfully inspired the researchers and theorists of the second language teaching field. Corder (1967) draws a distinction between input and intake as he comprehensively covers the role of input. According to Corder (1967), input refers to what is available to be used by language learners for language learning while intake is that part of the input which is comprehended by the learners. He continues that it is the intake rather than the input that helps learners to raise their proficiency.

While the importance and the role of language input are advocated by various language learning theorists, there are theorists who attribute a small or no role to language input as it is highlighted by Ellis (2008). He states that theories of second language learning attach different importance to the role of input but they all acknowledge the need for language input. This may be due to the fact that various theorists have different conceptualizations of how language input is processed by language learners (Doughty & Long, 2003).

Accordingly, Ellis (2008) considers the role of language input in second language learning based on behaviorist, mentalist, and interactionist theories of language learning. The behaviorists view language learning as environmentally controlled by various stimulus and response – using the common terms in behaviorism – that

IJMLTL
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MODERN
LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

International Journal of Modern Language Teaching and Learning
Available online at www.ijmltl.com. *Vol. 1, Issue 5, 2016, pp. 197-201*
ISSN: 2367-9328

language learners are exposed to as "language input". For the behaviorists, language acquisition is controlled by external factors among which language input which consists of stimuli and feedback plays a crucial role (Ellis, 2008).

The mentalist theories also claim that input is needed for second language learning but because the learners' brains are equipped to learn any language with innate knowledge, language input is merely considered as a trigger that activates the internal mechanism (Ellis, 2008). Compared with the view put forward by the behaviorists, mentalists give a marginal role to input. The interactionist theories of second language learning seem to go between these two positions and highlight the importance of both input and internal language learning processing. To them, language acquisition is the result of an interaction at the discourse level between the learners' mental abilities and the linguistic environment. In other words, input plays the role of affecting or being affected by the nature of internal mechanisms (Ellis, 2008).

Within Krashen's "Comprehensible Input Hypothesis" (1981) which is the first and most comprehensible contribution regarding the role of input in second language learning, acquisition – using his own term – takes place merely by means of comprehensible input which the language learners receive. That is, only the language input that is a little beyond the learners' language competence is useful for second language learning and in Corder's (1981) term may be considered as equal to intake. The information processing model in which the learner must first notice that there is something to learn extends the role of input into a deeper cognitive layer. That is, not only a is comprehensible input necessary but the learner's attention also should be drawn to those parts of the input which do not coincide with the internalized competence (Gass, 1997).

INPUT ENHANCEMENT

It has been argued that drawing L2 learners' attention to certain target language forms helps learners to "notice the gap" between their current knowledge of L2 and the target language. As suggested by Schmidt's (1994) Noticing Hypothesis, noticing L2 features in the written or spoken input to which L2 learners are exposed, is "the necessary and sufficient condition for the conversion of input into intake for learning to take place" (p. 17). Various techniques have been designed that are used to draw learners' attention to formal features in L2 input. These techniques have been called "consciousness raising" (Sharwood Smith, 1985) or "input enhancement" (Sharwood Smith, 1993) in SLA literature. Visual input enhancement has been defined as an implicit method of drawing the learners' attention to particular forms of the incoming written input (Doughty & Williams, 1998). The most common way of input enhancement is simply increasing what has been termed as "the perceptual salience" of the target form through different techniques of modifying the format of a text (e.g., bolding, capitalizing, or underlining), sometimes followed by an explicit mention to the learners to attend to the enhanced forms (Izumi, 2000).

Sharwood-Smith (1993) introduced the concept of input enhancement for the first time with reference to role of grammar in L2 instruction, but later the targets of enhancement have been extended to other linguistic forms including lexical items. One important technique of input enhancement is "textual enhancement". Textual enhancement is known by using one or more typographical cues (e.g., boldfacing, italicizing, underlining, coloring, enlarging the font size, changing the font type) to draw learners' attention to particular forms in a text (Wong, 2005). The purpose of textual enhancement is to make certain forms of the incoming input more noticeable to the learners; forms that may otherwise go unnoticed by learners. This increased salience to input is said to improve form-meaning connections for the target language. Moreover, textual enhancement is believed to have the potentials to direct learners' attention to the target forms while encouraging them to process target language features for meaning.

Though some studies suggested that input enhancement is effective in learning language features, the results are not consistent. It appears that simply increasing the salience of linguistic forms through typographical enhancement is not enough to make a difference in encouraging greater learning of language features. It might be that L2 learners need something more than mere enhancement of the input in order to foster their learning and retention of linguistic features. In line with this argument, more insights come from a group of studies that have suggested linguistic modifications of original texts can lead to better learning of linguistic features by L2 learners (Kim, 2003).

INPUT FLOODING

Input flooding is defined by Sharwood Smith (1993) as the enrichment of input by supplying numerous examples of the target form without overtly drawing attention to it. It provides the learners with ample exposure to the target form. Because of the avoidance in manipulation of any kind of intervention in this technique, it is considered as an implicit method of focus on form. An example of the flooded input via texts which is intended for the use of past tense will follow:

Scott and De La Fuente (2008) led a qualitative study to research the part of first language (L1) in awareness raising and structure centered linguistic use assignments. For this reason, moderate level school learners of French and Spanish learners were occupied with the study. The utilization of students' L1 and L2 to solve grammar problems were explored using conversation analysis audio-taped interactions and stimulated recall sessions. The ones who were permitted to utilize L1, worked synergistically as a part of an adjusted and rational way while the ones in gathering two were obliged to utilize the L2 and showed divided cooperation and little proof of coordinated effort. Discoveries from animated review sessions proposed that perusing, thinking and talking gave off an impression of being synchronous and incorporated methods for the understudies in group one; nonetheless, these methodologies seemed, by all accounts, to be consecutive and looking at for the members of group two. These discoveries likewise welcome the educators to adapt to the issue of the L1 in the outside language classroom.

Trahey and White (1993) analyzed whether input flood was enough to empower the French learners of English as a L2 to discover that English allows the insertion of a modifier between the subject and the verb (French does not) yet does not allow to position it between the verb and the article (French does). The learners were presented to the data one hour a day for 10 days. The target structure was not over emphasized amid the process. The learners succeeded in taking in the subject-intensifier-verb (SAV) position yet neglected to "unlearn" the ungrammatical subject-verb-modifier-object (SVAO) position which was allowed in their first language. In a deferred post-test managed one year after the treatment, nonetheless, Trahey (1996) found that the helpful impacts of input flood on the procurement of SAV had vanished. Along these lines, this study proposed that the impacts of enriched input on procurement are constrained and it is not enough by itself.

Later, Loewen, Erlam, and Ellis (2009) had grown-up ESL learners to be exposed to a stream of input containing third person –s in grammar lessons while intended to show them an alternate grammatical feature. The intention was to investigate incidental achievement of third persons. All of the learners participating in the study were exposed to 51 illustrations of third persons which were the written data and 23 in oral form in two sessions enduring one hour in two days. Explicit and implicit knowledge tests were administered and demonstrated no procurement in either the short or long.

However, this is unique in that it focuses on two tenses in a comparative perspective and aims at teaching the EFL learners' use of these tenses at their accurate position according to the intended meaning.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A few researchers (Ellis, 2008; Abadikhah & Shahryarpour, 2012) present practical procedures for producing comprehensible input by suggesting modified input, interactionally modified input, and modified output as three rich sources of comprehensible input for language learning. Accordingly, modified input refers to a type of language input which has been modified or simplified in some ways before the language learners are exposed to it. Interactionally modified input originates from input modification that occurs when language learners experience difficulty comprehending a message in interaction with their peers or teachers, and modified output refers to language learners' efforts to modify their output to make it more comprehensible to the interlocutor (Ellis, 2008).

Regardless of the significant effect that the input hypothesis has had on the researches about the role of language input in second language acquisition, it is criticized in some ways. For example, others claimed that it is very difficult to define the concept of a learner's level, that is, (i) as introduced by Krashen because individual differences should be taken into consideration when determining the learners' current levels. Determining the current level of each language learner and providing i+1 language input for each of them separately in the classroom seems to be very difficult to fulfill since the ultimate level of a teacher's contribution may be to present a language which is practically a little beyond the average level of the learners in a classroom (Ellis, 2008).

In addition, the input hypothesis is criticized because it has made a large number of claims about the type and the qualitative aspect of the necessary language input for language learning without providing solid empirical evidence.

In fact, although second language researchers and the critics of Krashen's input hypothesis highlight the important role of input in second language learning and agree on the fact that language input is necessary, they claim that second language learning is not achieved merely through comprehensible input as it is highlighted in his relatively extreme position regarding the role of input.

Gass (1997) also emphasized that priority should be attached to the concept of comprehended input rather than comprehensible input. That is, only that part of the language input which is comprehended – previously introduced as intake – is involved in the SLA process. In other words, the primary language input which is necessary for SLA may be beyond the scope of comprehensible input.

According to the theoretical models, language input which is perceived by the language learners and then is turned into comprehended input and intake is not limited merely to language data (input) which should necessarily be comprehensible. Indeed, language learners are exposed to a body of language input which may or may not be within the range of i+1. Out of this initial body of language input, some of the input is noticed by the language learners because of frequency, affect, prior knowledge, and attention; that is, a learner's intake is not merely dependent on the external factors but a number of internal factors (Ellis, 2008).

In addition to incomprehensible input and comprehended input, others also argued that besides comprehensible input, comprehensible output can also provide the necessary data for second language learning. The comprehensible output hypothesis put forth states that language learning occurs when the language learner faces a gap in his/her linguistic knowledge of the second language. By noticing this gap, the language learner tries to modify his/her output. This modification of output may end in learning a new aspect of the language which has not been acquired yet (Ellis, 1998).

Despite offering a new role for linguistic output, others acknowledged that without comprehensible input language learners are not able to make connections between forms and meanings for second language learning. In line with this fact, she provides evidence of the immersion programs in which comprehensible input alone did not lead to second language learning. This view sharply contrasts with Krashen's input hypothesis where the role of comprehensible output is neglected or minimized.

The limitations discussed above regarding the contributing role of input in language learning may also be generalized to the issue of input flooding in that this technique is mainly based on the role of input in triggering hypothesis testing procedure in language learner as well as the contributing role of comprehensible input as proposed by Krashen (1981). As mentioned in the concluding paragraphs, there is a need to devise this technique cautiously and skillfully in combination with output-oriented tasks as mentioned in order to make up for the possible deficiencies on this technique in terms of its total dependency on input.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

Abadikhah, S., & Shahriyarpour, A. (2012). The role of output, input enhancement and collaborative output in the acquisition of English passive forms. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 3*(4), 667–676.

Doughty, C., & Long, M. (2003). Pedagogical choices in focus on form. In C. Doughty & J. Williams (Eds.), *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (pp. 197–261). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ellis, R. (1998). Teaching and research: Options in grammar teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, *32*(1), 39-60.

Ellis, R. (2008). The study of second language acquisition. Oxford: OUP.

Fotos, H., & Nassaji, S. (2011). *Teaching grammar in second language classrooms: Integrating form-focused instruction in communicative context*.New York: Routledge.

Gass, S. M. (1997). Integrating research areas: A framework for second language studies. *Applied Linguistics, 9*(2),198-217.

Gass, S., & Selinker, L. (2008). *Second language acquisition: An introductory course* (3rd ed.). New York: Taylor & Fransis.

Izumi, S. (2000). Output, input enhancement, and the noticing hypothesis: an experimental study on ESL relativization. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 24*(4), 451–577.

Kim YJ. (2003). The Role of Task-Induced Involvement and Learner Proficiency in L2 Vocabulary Acquisition. Language Learning, 61(1), 100-140.

Krashen SD, (1981). The input hypothesis: Issues and implications (Vol. 1, p. 985). London: Longman.

Loewen, S., Erlam, R., & Ellis, R. (2009). Incidental acquisition of 3rd person -s as implicit and explicit knowledge. In R. Ellis, S. Loewen, C. Elder, et al., (Eds.), *Implicit and Explicit Knowledge in Second Language Learning, Testing and Teaching* (pp. 262-280). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Maftoon, P., & Sharifi, S. (2012). The relative effectiveness of input and output-oriented tasks with different involvement loads on the receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge of Iranian EFL learners. *The Journal of Teaching Language Skills, 4*(2), 27–52.

Schmidt, R. (1994). Deconstructing consciousness in search for useful definitions for applied linguistics. *AILA Review, 11*, 11-26.

Scott, V. M., & De La Fuente, M. J. (2008). What's the problem? L2 learners' use of the L1 during consciousness-raising, form-focused tasks. *Modern Language Journal*, *92*(1), 100-113.

Sharwood Smith, M. (1985). From input to intake: On argumentation in second language acquisition. In S. Gass, & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 394-403). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Sharwood Smith, M. (1991). Speaking to many minds: On the relevance of different types of language information on the L2 learner. *Second Language Research*, *7*(2), 118-132.

Sharwood Smith, M. (1993). Input enhancement in instructed SLA. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *15*(2), 165-179.

Storch, N. (1998). Comparing second language learners' attention to form across tasks. *Language Awareness, 7*(4), 176-191.

Trahey, M. (1996). Positive evidence in second language acquisition: Some long term effects. *Second language research*, *12*(2), 111-139.

Trahey, M., & White, L. (1993). Positive evidence and preemption in the second language classroom. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *15*(2), 181-204.

Wong, W. (2005). Textual enhancement and simplified input effects on L2 comprehension and acquisition of non-meaningful grammatical form. *Applied Language Learning, 13*, 109-132.

Wong, W. (2012). *Second language education: Does text enhancement have an effect on teaching and learning Chinese classifiers?* Paper presented at The Asian Conference on Education, Monmouth University.