What do we need to acquire a second language?

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Abstract

The paper is consistent with the hypothesis that second language learners acquire language if they get exposure to input just above the current level of understanding. They acquire the knowledge of grammar, syntax and vocabulary incidentally if they understand messages. The paper further examines the role of output and the limitations of using consciously learned knowledge in second language performance.

Keywords: Conscious learning; Acquired competence; Cognitive structures; Acquired system; Comprehensible input.

1. Introduction

The Comprehension Hypothesis (2002) claims that learners easily acquire language when they understand messages and if they get exposure to input just above their current level of understanding, precisely the input must contain some aspects of language that the acquirer has not acquired, but is ready to acquire (i+1). The idea runs counter to the traditional view that conscious learning is needed for acquiring a second language. Learning consciously the rules of grammar, vocabulary in isolation and doing error correction exercises is a hard way. If there is an easy way to acquire a language without these laborious drills, then why we should support the hard way.

The paper is based on the hypothesis that second language competence is acquired enjoyably by getting exposure to comprehensible input and the acquired competence will have more value in actual performance and on a wide variety of tests.

2. Input for acquisition

A number of studies have supported the claim that second language learners subconsciously acquire grammar, syntax, vocabulary and spelling while they experience input in the language. Students who get considerable exposure to comprehensible input will acquire language structures (Ponniah 2008, Rodrigo 2006). Correlational study on free reading shows that those who read

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more do better on tests of grammar (Stokes, Krashen, and Kartchner 1998). Subjects in Natural Approach classes outperformed the subjects who attended traditional classes on communicative tests and on grammar tests (Krashen 1982, 1994). Krashen (2004) claims that learners' reading ability, the ability to write in an acceptable writing style and the ability to handle complex syntax is the result of reading and not by consciously learning and practicing grammar rules. According to Murphy and Hastings, (2006) learning explicit rules of grammar will take up massive amounts of students' time and mental energy. The natural process of acquiring a language is the only practical way for them to gain proficiency. L2 acquisition is very similar to the process of acquiring L1.

The students who have a pleasure reading habit easily outperformed the students who do not have a reading habit on a grammar test and on a reading/writing test:

The Table presents mean scores for students on Grammar and Reading/Writing Tests

TEST	READERS	NON-READERS
GRAMMAR	24.32	17.6
READING/WRITING	23.73	16.42

From (Ponniah, 2008)

The adult EFL students who received comprehensible input, clearly accompanied by a low affective filter in three extensive reading programs outperformed the comparison subjects on reading comprehension, as well as on measures of writing and reading speed. (Mason & Krashen 1997).

Kweon & Kim (2008) claim that second language learners acquire vocabulary incidentally through extensive reading and the acquired vocabulary knowledge is retained without much attrition. Mason (2004) confirms that listening to stories leads to the subconscious acquisition of vocabulary. The story-only group (Mason and Krashen 2004) acquired the meaning of words more efficiently than the story-plus-study group, which focused on form in the form of

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traditional vocabulary exercises. Smith (2006) experimented that the subjects who devoted their time for free voluntary reading had the greatest gains in vocabulary and reading comprehension than the subjects who spent their time for intensive reading and supplementary activities in addition to reading.

3. The Role of output

Writing makes you smarter. When we write something down, we make a representation of our thoughts, our cognitive structures. If the brain finds it irresistible to come up with better version of our thoughts, we reexamine our old ideas and that becomes the source of new ideas (Krashen & Lee 2002, Krashen, 2003). Speaking and discussion can also indirectly contribute to language development by inviting input (Ponniah & Krashen 2008), and not by focusing on consciously learned knowledge. In (Swain 2005) the expanded output hypothesis, Swain distinguishes the three possible functions of output:

1. The noticing /triggering function
2. The hypothesis testing function
3. The metalinguistic (reflective) function

The claim of the noticing /triggering function is that while producing output learners may notice the gap between what they want to say and what is conveyed and they will use the conscious knowledge to convey the indented meaning. In other words, learners will recognize consciously the limitations of the message conveyed and hence will modify their output to transpire the message.

The hypothesis testing function is a 'trial run' of how to communicate. It claims that if a conversational partner fails to understand the transmitted message, then learners assume that they made a mistake and form what they think is a grammatically correct sentence in order to help the interlocutor understand the message. Here, learners edit the output immediately after the production of output.

The metalinguistic function claims that using language to reflect on the language produced either by the self or by others is helpful for language development. Reflecting on the language will help

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learners to control the conscious knowledge in order to deepen their awareness of forms. It is, Swain notes, a means of "building knowledge about language" (P 478).

The three functions of the expanded output hypothesis are related to conscious learning, and not subconscious language acquisition. Each function claims that conscious learning is necessary to develop second language competence. The hypothesis boils down the output production to error correction and conscious learning (Ponniah & Krashen 2008). In fact, there are several limits in using consciously learned knowledge (Truscott, 1998; Ponniah, 2008, 2008a). Monitor hypothesis (Krashen 1982) clearly explains the limitations of using consciously learned knowledge. The claim of the hypothesis is that second language acquirers must:

1. Know the rule. This is a formidable constraint because rules are very complex and are often misstated in grammar books (Murphy & Hastings, 2006).
2. Be thinking about correctness, or focus on form.
3. Have time to retrieve and apply the rules.

In spite of the difficulties in using consciously learned knowledge, how can we 'push' learners to focus on form? The output hypothesis forces learners to consciously recognize linguistic problems in order to acquire sentence structures. This indicates that subjects appealing to conscious knowledge more while producing output will acquire more language and will display high levels of language competence. But in fact, the 'readers' who appealed to conscious rules less easily outperformed 'non-readers' who engaged more with consciously learned knowledge on a test of grammar and on a reading and writing test (Ponniah 2008). This confirms that appealing to conscious knowledge while producing output does not affect acquisition, comprehensible input that facilitates acquisition. Therefore, learners should not be 'pushed' to use conscious knowledge. It will certainly discourage them from learning a second language.

4. The Role of Consciously learned knowledge

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Second language acquirers learn a lot of conscious rules of grammar and they do a great deal of exercises but the application of rules during the production of language is conspicuously missing. There are several limitations to the application of consciously learned grammar rules. Students have to learn all the rules and they need to think about the application while speaking and writing. Learners, generally, engage more with grammar rules only when they are doing grammar exercises, and not in actual language use:

Subjects' use of grammar rules when taking a reading/writing test (actual language use)

Students' response	always	often	rarely	Do not apply
No. of students	0	3	5	22
Students' response in percentage	0%	10%	16.67%	73.33%

Subjects' use of grammar rules while taking a grammar test

Students' response	always	often	rarely	Do not apply
No. of students	12	8	7	3
Students' response in percentage	40%	26.67%	23.33%	10%

From: Ponniah (2007)

It is obvious that the subjects engage less with conscious rules of grammar in actual language use.

In order to overcome these limitations, instruction needs to be given to develop proficiency through active communication. This will enable learners to acquire the knowledge of grammar without learning explicit rules. Learning explicit rules of grammar will help learners to monitor and edit the output of the acquired language. Krashen (1981, P.2) claims, "Utterances are

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initiated by the acquired system. Our fluency in production is based on what we have 'picked up' through active communication. Our 'formal' knowledge of the second language, our conscious learning, may be used to alter the output of the acquired system, sometimes before and sometimes after the utterance is produced". Therefore, teaching grammar to learners who have not acquired the language will not give fruitful results. If the beginners and the intermediate learners are taught grammar rules, then they will not be able to apply them while writing and speaking. If the rules are taught to the advanced learners who have already acquired enough language, they can use them during the production of language for editing the output.

5. Intuitive Knowledge of Rules

Language users have intuitive knowledge of rules of grammar that governs the L1 and they will apply them without concentrating on them. They pick up grammar by getting exposure to input and through active communication and not by learning explicit rules of a language. If second language acquires learn to grasp intuitively the structures that govern the language, then they will use them in actual performance without paying attention to form.

6. Conclusion

In brief, rich-acquisition is possible to learners, if they get exposure to input and if they involve themselves in active communication without concentrating more on the consciously learned knowledge.   Second language competence is acquired through input and the acquired competence will have more value in actual performance and on a wide variety of tests.

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