

Second Language Acquisition in Japan: Interaction through Input & Output

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Summary

This paper investigates how students acquire a target language through interaction. To learn languages such as English, Japanese students need to be motivated to develop their communicative competence. One way to achieve this goal is to use intelligible input and output through interactive tasks. The relationship between language acquisition theory and methods has changed for the better as a result of recent, in-depth research in applied linguistics and related fields. It is urgent that we apply the tools and findings of this research. In my view, integrated skills should be learned – inside and outside the classroom – through interaction so that Japanese students of English will be better able to master receptive and productive language skills.

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1. Introduction

It gives me tremendous pleasure and it is an enormous honor to present the results of my research in this subject – from input to output through interaction in second language acquisition – in the academic journal of Yokohama College of Commerce, as we celebrate our 40th anniversary. I am deeply indebted to our college for allowing me to do extensive research and to teach English as a foreign or second language full time. I am also most grateful for the practical, thought-provoking comments and valuable advice about this paper from Dr. David Beglar, Associate Professor, Graduate College of Education, Temple University Japan, Tokyo.

In this subject area, what interests me most greatly is the use and development of input and output processes through interaction. This is one of the most significant factors in foreign language acquisition (FLA) or second language acquisition (SLA). These linguistic approaches focus on how FLA or SLA learners share their conversational interactions among themselves – and with teachers – to build up knowledge of the target language, as well as to speed up language comprehension and production through spoken interactions in real situations.

Comprehensible input is necessary for second or foreign language acquisition. Input and output processes are closely connected. However, productive performance is different from receptive comprehension. Gass and Selinker (2001) stated that learners produce different linguistic forms – with varying amounts of accuracy – depending on the context and the task performed. In SLA or FLA, the output component through interaction is more than the product of language knowledge; it is an active, dynamic part of the all-inclusive learning process.

In this paper, after the introduction (1), I discuss comprehensible input (2); insufficiency of input processes only for productive skills acquisition (3); the benefits of interaction for FLA/SLA learners (4); teaching language as interaction (5); active/inactive participants in conversational interaction (6); as well, there is a conclusion (7).

2. Comprehensible input

Krashen suggests that not all the target language to which second language (L2) learners are exposed is understandable; only some of the language that they hear can be understood easily and clearly. Krashen hypothesized (1977, 1982, 1985) that target language facts and information which were understandable – but with effort – and were slightly more advanced than the L2 learner's current level of confident understanding would promote learning. Put another way, in cases of "i + 1," comprehensible input is possible, with effort. (For "i + 1" in Krashen's theory of second language acquisition, the "i" represents a learner's current level of competence, and "i + 1" is the stage just beyond it, according to the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics by Jack C. Richards & Richard Schmidt, third edition, 2002.)

Corder (1978) pointed out that while L2 learners, in particular those living in the target culture, may be exposed to a great deal of language, not all of it can be utilized by their developing internal grammatical systems. Only a portion of the input which L2 learners are able to notice and take in can become part of long-term memory and can be used. Through input processes alone – and during the rapid speech that learners cannot easily understand – learners would find very few contextual clues to help them interpret the spoken text. Because they do not have face-to-face contact, they miss the opportunity to ask questions, to indicate their confusion, or to seek clarification or repetition. These learners do not interact correctly because input is in only one direction. Input and output are quite different; receiving input applies only to comprehension, and comprehension often demands little syntactic arrangement. Therefore, face-to-face talking should be done in order to acquire the target language, inside or outside the classroom.

3. Insufficiency of input processes only for productive skills acquisition

It is true that comprehensible input (Krashen) is a necessary condition for FLA and SLA. Input and output processes are closely connected. Richer input in spoken interaction enables learners to extract and represent regularities that can guide the development of both language comprehension and production without the unconscious need for symbolic rules. Input in spoken interaction can be made comprehensible through simplification, with the help of speaking partners, or by negotiating non- and mis-understanding. However, the input process alone is not sufficient for effective production because it is independent of receptive comprehension.

Several researchers (e.g., Swain 1985) have indicated the shortfall of acquiring productive skills through input alone. I have chosen three instances (below) to illustrate this point from Dr. Beglar's Module Outline (pages 64-65: Research in Canadian French Immersion Programs, Lexical Processing and Asymmetrical Language Skill Development); and from several other researchers (e.g., Allwright, Bailey).

(i) Research in Canadian French immersion programs

Research (Swain 1981, 1991) on L2 achievement in these programs has shown that students perform comparably with native speakers on tests of listening and reading comprehension, but not on productive measures such as cloze tests (Hart and Lapkin 1989). Moreover, they make a wide range of grammatical errors in domains such as verb tenses, prepositional usage, and gender markings on articles. They lack some basic vocabulary items. As a result, productive skills generally, "remain far from native-like" (Swain 1991).

Swain (1985) insisted that "comprehensible output" is needed in order to gain grammatical competence. Language learners must try hard to produce output which is understandable to others, if they are to master the grammatical markers of the language. Such mastery would be acquired as a result of negotiations in the course of interacting. Input only is not sufficient for SLA or FLA. Mackey

and Abbuhl (2005) also claim that simple exposure to the target language rarely produces the same desired outcome for L2 learners.

(ii) Lexical processing

Support in the form of comprehensible input is necessary for language learning, but it is insufficient for acquiring enough of the target forms and may inhibit acquisition on occasion because learners come to rely too much on lexical processing, in which they do not understand all of the structures in the message.

Although many learners may fossilize early because of a lack of comprehensible input, it is clear that even those who receive vast quantities of input (e.g., Canadian French Immersion students) do not acquire native-like productive abilities. In this way, environment alone does not determine success and failure in language acquisition. The other side of the problem/situation lies with the learner and their attention, awareness, and cognitive processing of the language.

(iii) Asymmetrical language skill development

Many cognitive psychologists (e.g., Anderson) have found that there is an asymmetry in the use of knowledge and that the transfer of knowledge is indirect and partial from one domain (listening) to another (speaking). The limited amount of transfer suggests that when learners are interested in developing both receptive and productive skills, they need to practice both comprehending and producing.

DeKeyser and Sokalski (1996) found that *input* practice produced learners that were stronger at comprehension tasks, and that *output* practice produced learners who were significantly better at production. Input only, in relation to the target language, does not provide learners with intelligible output for real-time communication in daily life. These two skills should be acquired equally by second or foreign language learners.

(iv) Allwright's and Bailey's argument against Krashen's hypothesis

Allwright and Bailey (1991) argued that Krashen's hypothesis of comprehensible input is controversial in several ways. First, it is not at all obvious that *incomprehensible* input is of no value to the language learner, since there is much to be learned beyond linguistic forms and their meanings (for example, typical intonational forms and their meanings). Second, it is not easy to see how more exposure to input, even if comprehensible, actually guarantees language development. One possibility is that the effort made by the learner to comprehend the input lays the foundations for development. Allwright and Bailey (1991) suggest that face-to-face interaction should lead in productive development.

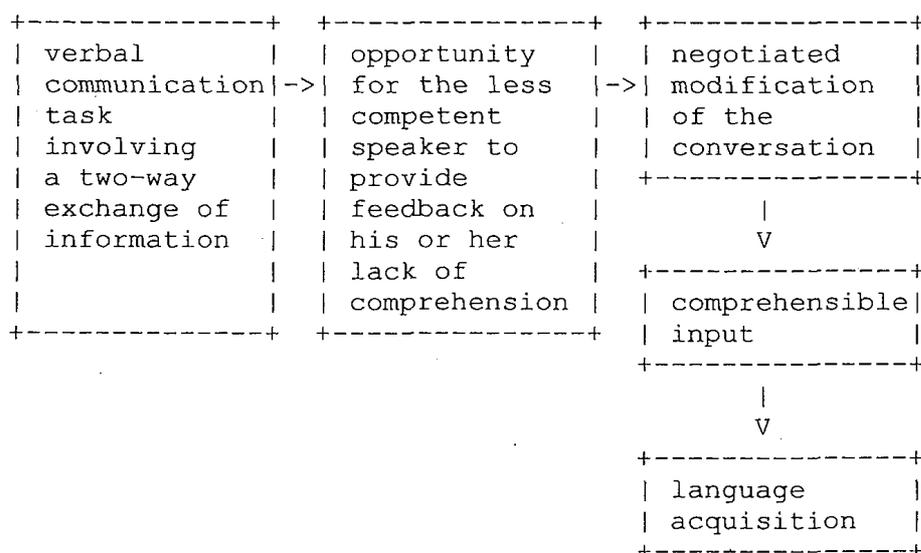
I feel that comprehensible input is a valuable introduction into language production through spoken interactions in natural settings.

4. Benefits of interaction for FLA/SLA learners

Speaking does not come “for free” simply through listening to comprehensible input (Skehan 2001). Spoken interaction takes in producing and negotiating language rather differently from the way it is used in writing. Learners (speakers and listeners) are required to simultaneously produce and process spoken interactions. In other words, interaction provides learners with opportunities to encounter input and practice the L2 in natural settings.

Face-to-face interaction should be enthusiastically promoted in Japanese teaching programs, judging from the fact that in many current educational institutions, language learning is still mostly restricted to the translation of texts and grammar, and to the explanation of sentence structure. No special emphasis is given to real communication or interaction. Speech, sounds and tones are deliberately ignored.

Long (1983) has proposed the following model for the relationships involved in negotiated interactions, comprehensible input, and language acquisition.



Long’s model of the relationship between type of conversational task and language acquisition, 1983.

This model is dissimilar to Krashen’s position on language acquisition, as discussed earlier, where 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). According to Krashen (1982), this is conversation.

Allwright and Bailey (1991) stated that Long’s model points up the greater importance of conversation (spoken interaction) and its role in getting comprehensible input. However, they also indicated that Long’s model does not clearly explain this in detail. To them, language acquisition can perhaps best be considered, not as the

outcome of an encounter with comprehensible input *per se*, but as the direct outcome of the work involved in the negotiation process. Interaction has many functions that promote fluency and automatic processing (or automaticity), pushing learners to recognize differences in their L2 knowledge and tones, and helping them to process syntactically and to communicate intelligibly.

(5) Teaching language as interaction

Rivers (1987) has stated that language learning and teaching can be an exciting and refreshing interval in the day for students and teachers. There are many possible ways to stimulate communicative interaction. Yet, all over the world, language learning is a tedious, dry-as-dust process, devoid of contact with the real world, where language use is as natural as breathing. Teachers and students need to use and practice four primary language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) plus related skills such as “knowledge of vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, syntax, meaning and usage” (Oxford 2001). Both teachers and students should learn the target language with an integrated skills approach by means of interaction. In my view, teachers should take to heart River’s wise and perceptive insight.

Classroom discourse is often quite different from naturally occurring discourse because it contains relatively little negotiation of meaning (Pica and Long 1986), has too many response activities for students (Politzer, Ramirez and Lewis 1981), and has too much teacher control over the discourse (Gremmo, Holec and Riley 1977).

I would like to suggest that in Japan we teach language as interaction. This approach is a synthesis of Long’s (1983) model of relationships between negotiated interactions, comprehensible input, and language acquisition and Stevick’s (1976) model of the relationship between negotiated interaction and language acquisition. In this approach, classroom interaction would have six components: (i) reduction in teacher-oriented talking time, (ii) sensitive understanding of the unique attitude/psychology of individual learners, (iii) opportunities to negotiate meaning with each other and the teacher, (iv) free choice of what learners say and how they say it, (v) negative evidence, and (vi) fluency.

(i) Reduced teacher-oriented talking time

In Japan, teachers tend to dominate classroom discourse by giving long explanations and lectures, asking a lot of questions, conducting drills repeatedly, and making judgments about the learners’ answers. For learners to enjoy some freedom of interaction among themselves and with the teacher, the teaching staff should place a high value on getting learners to somehow interact in the target language, minimizing Japanese-style grammar explanations.

(ii) Sensitive understanding of the attitude/psychology of individual learners

Gebhard (1996) has stated that genuine communicative interaction is enhanced if there is an appreciation for the uniqueness of individuals in the classroom. Each

student brings language-learning and life experiences (both successful and unsuccessful), as well as feelings about these experiences (including joy, anxiety, and fear). Teachers need to deal in class with learners' attitudes and experiences.

Generally, Japanese learners are very shy and nervous in front of teachers about speaking English; they try to hard to speak correctly and often hesitate. Occasionally, some students cannot speak at all. This "quietness" is often misunderstood by Westerners. Some Japanese learners require considerable patience and understanding.

- (iii) Opportunities to negotiate meaning with each other and the teacher
- Stevick's model holds that it is the work essential for negotiated interaction that speeds up language acquisition, rather than the intended outcome of the work, or comprehensible input. Further research would help us better understand this possibility. Long (1983) described three of the most important processes that would be required:
- (a) A comprehension check or the speaker's query of the L2 learners to see if they have understood what was said: "Do you understand?" and "Do you get what I'm saying?"
 - (b) A confirmation check or the speaker's (the teacher, native speaker or more competent speaker) query as to whether or not the speaker's meaning is correct: "Oh, so are you saying you did live in London?"
 - (c) A clarification check or request for further information in understanding something the interlocutor has previously said: "I don't understand exactly. What do you mean?"

Using these three techniques would yield the spoken interactions necessary to focus on contextualized input for L2 learners, at their level of understanding. In the course of interacting, SLA or FLA learners have excellent opportunities to negotiate meaning by seeking further input. Richer input is the lead-in to being able to predict from comprehensible input and to produce language on the basis of sentence patterns identified by the learners.

From my experiences on the campus of Temple University, Graduate College of Education, Tokyo, most native or fluent speakers of English are kind and attentive enough to adjust their speech rate or to rephrase difficult words and phrases for the benefit of L2 learners. I believe that this face-to-face talking in classrooms could bring real benefits to Japanese learners of English. Therefore, interaction serves as a part of language acquisition for expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning.

- (iv) Free choices of what learners say and how they say it
- To make an interactive classroom more communicative, open-ended topics and questions should be used. This approach provides learners with equal and suitable opportunities to express themselves in meaningful ways and it creates a favorable atmosphere for interaction with the teacher. Conversely, fixed

questions and abstract topics are hard to respond to. If learners fail to answer these correctly, they might lose confidence and motivation to learn. Open-ended questions and topics are much better and easier for creating interaction among non-native speakers of English.

According to the learners' levels of communicative competence, teachers need to move from free choices of questions and topics to "limited choice" (for example, choose any country in Africa ...) as well as "choose two" (one country learners know and one they've never heard of.) from Kip Cates, Tottori University, at the British Council's Seminar on Developing Intercultural Competencies, April 2, 2006 in Tokyo.

(v) Negative evidence

If interaction is to have an effect, learners must notice when their fluent conversation partners or teachers are making a correction, either through negotiation or a recast. Correct information about forms (e.g., lexis and phonology) should be provided for learners. Recently it has been widely accepted that learners' attention is focused on a specific part of the language, particularly on mismatches between target-language forms and learner-language forms (Gass and Selinker 2001). Learners should perceive a difference between their knowledge of the learner-language forms and the target language. Learners will produce English in native language forms, but their English must be intelligible to English speakers.

(vi) Fluency

Fluency in both language comprehension and production is absolutely necessary for input and output in interaction. Fluency includes the ability to easily, effectively and unconsciously understand spoken language and the ability to communicate ideas and produce continuous speech without causing comprehension difficulties or a breakdown in communication.

The speech rate in spoken English is very important for FLA or SLA comprehension. Griffiths (1990) investigated the effects of varying speech rates: the speeds varied from 94/107 wpm (slow) to 143/154 (medium) and 190/206 (fast). Native speakers usually express English at the rate of 180/190 wpm. L2 learners need to follow this natural speed. Otherwise, native speakers need to reduce the speed or rephrase the sentences missed by the learners. When the learners can understand English, teachers should help them to achieve an acceptable speed, along with other attributes of fluency.

Fluent speech is not word by word, but rather phrasal; it consists of tone units (also called "chunks"). Teachers need to help learners organize their output cognitively and physically (in breath groups/motion of mouth muscles) through clustering, reduced forms, stress, rhythm and intonation. Japanese learners of English ought to pay special attention to the features of the stress-timed rhythm and high sound waves of spoken English and its intonation patterns. These characteristics are vital to convey and understand the message. Japanese learners tend to introduce their own speech habits (e.g., syllable-timed tones) into spoken

English and to not accept or assimilate high sound waves into the parts of the brain which are responsible for thoughts, meaning, emotions and sounds.

Skehan (1998) stressed that it is necessary for FLA or SLA learners to use the target language with some ease and speed. They need to go beyond carefully constructed utterances to achieve some level of natural speed and rhythm, in accord with productive rules of grammar. Moreover, learners can practice controlled processing with conscious effort in short-term memory, as well, they carry out automatic processing without too much effort and attention in long-term memory. Only through frequent use, will the fluency of speech be improved (Skehan 1998).

6. Active/inactive participants in conversational interaction

Mackey (1999) divided participation in spoken interaction into two types: active and inactive. Mackey suggested that eager learners actively participating in interaction would receive the most benefit, while lazy or inactive learners just passively listening would gain less advantage. Interaction without active participation may be better than nothing at all – just as watching interaction without talking had some limited effect – but it did not guarantee development. Some researchers stated that observing interaction had some limited effects on development because observers also had the opportunity to hear the output of active learners (Swain 1995). Although listening comprehension might be improved to some extent by silent observation, I think that this process is nearly useless for developing productive skills.

When learners lack receptive comprehension or productive performance, they tend to either not react to any responses to some topics or they fall silent. The first case arises as a result of not following the gist at natural speed, or from having a limited vocabulary. The second case commonly occurs with upper-middle learners when they get the rough idea, but do not come out spontaneously with a quick and appropriate response. In that case, teachers should ask learners to summarize in plain English what active learners or teachers have said, then give them some clues to help them move on to speaking. Teachers should then reinforce the learner's level of linguistic ability by writing key words or phrases on the board.

7. Conclusion

Interaction enables SLA or FLA learners to increase comprehension. It also lets input remain complex, allows for rich semantic content and it promotes more accurate production. Learner-controlled “natural discourse” may help the learners develop oral language skills (McDonal, Stone and Yeats 1977). Pushing learners to formulate their utterances to make them more target-like may lead to greater grammatical accuracy in the long term (Nobuyoshi and Ellis 1993).

Interaction – with opportunities for negotiation of meaning – can provide comprehensible input, “pushed out” (Swain 1985, 1995), and opportunities for

noticing the gap (Schmidt and Frota 1986) because these are important aspects of the language learning process. Interaction is a part of the entire learning process and should be carried out in conjunction with other of SLA or FLA approaches. Seliger (1983) concluded that learners who initiate more interaction out of class with native speakers are better able to turn input into intake. I think that this is an ideal way to encourage interaction. Gass (2003) stated that conversational interaction in a second language forms the basis for the development of language, rather than being only a forum for practice of specific language features. This has been most recently expressed by Long (1996, pp 451-2) in Interaction Hypothesis.

Dr. David Beglar wrote that “Interaction is one of the main factors in first and second language acquisition for very fundamental reasons. As language developed in humans over the past several million years, interaction was central ... However, interaction is so complex that researchers have only just begun to determine how it affects SLA. Hopefully, the coming years of research will clarify how teachers can increase students’ probability of acquiring language via interaction.” For this reason, I am determined to continue my studies in this field. I intend to learn the best ways for teachers to help Japanese learners master English through interaction. In time, I hope that Japanese learners will be better able to communicate in English – with confidence – in academic and real-life situations.

I conclude that the ability to develop language comprehension and production is dramatically improved by interaction in real situations. And interaction should be gradually cultivated inside and outside the classroom (if possible) under the practical guidance of qualified teachers. Hopefully, the educational effectiveness of SLA will also be maximized through interaction as a part of the entire learning process. Interaction, under the conditions mentioned here, can have a powerful effect on SLA/FLA.

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