Input Matters in SLA

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION
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Edited by

Thorsten Piske and Martha Young-Scholten

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Contributors

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Stephen Krashen is best known for developing the first comprehensive theory of second language acquisition, introducing the concept of sheltered subject matter teaching, and as the co-inventor of the Natural Approach. He has also contributed to theory and application in the areas of bilingual education, and reading. He was the 1977 Incline Bench Press champion of Venice Beach and holds a black belt in Tae Kwon Do. His current books are Summer Reading: Program and Evidence (with Fay Shin, published by Allyn and Bacon), English Learners in American Classrooms (with Jim Crawford, published by Scholastic), and English Fever (Crane Publishing Company, Taipei).

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Henning Wode is a professor emeritus at the English Department of Kiel University, Germany. A large part of his work has been concerned with the psycholinguistics of language acquisition including L1, L2, re-acquisition, and foreign language teaching. Amongst other things, he figures among the pioneers who established L2 acquisition research as a scientific discipline during the early 1970s. Since the 1990s he has been very much engaged in introducing immersion teaching in Germany by adapting Canadian immersion to the German/European scenario.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Considering the Matters of Why and How Input Matters

That INPUT[1] matters comes as no surprise to second language practitioners, but the issue of exactly how input affects SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (SLA) is another matter. Second language acquisition researchers who see the SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER as capable of unconsciously converting what is heard into a linguistic system take it for granted: as long there is input, acquisition will occur. One of the aims of this chapter is to elucidate the place of input in current SLA research. An ancillary aim is to provide to the outside observer a general account of the state of the art with respect to SLA research, in particular its relation to the classroom and the second language teacher.

Let us start with a central issue that remains unresolved in research circles. We know from casual observation as well as systematic research that under normal circumstances the route of development in both first and second language acquisition does not vary nearly as much as rate of development. When we consider the END STATE of second language acquisition, variation is rife, particularly among those individuals who begin to learn a second language after childhood. One learner might end up indistinguishable from a NATIVE SPEAKER, whereas another who has spent just as long in that country might demonstrate only basic oral proficiency. For those researchers who maintain that second language acquisition is driven by innate linguistic mechanisms, mere exposure to input from other speakers is all that is necessary for acquisition to take place. When the focus is on internal linguistic properties, little attention is paid to the possibility that variation in external factors such as input might influence anything, apart perhaps from rate (when there is a meager amount of input, for example). Authors represented in this book both consider whether input matters with respect to route and end state, as well as look at some highly specific matters relating to input.

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Despite decades of research into the cognitive, psycho-social and environmental factors responsible for the variation observed in second language acquisition, surprisingly little can be stated conclusively. When it comes to the specific environmental factor with which this book is concerned, namely INPUT, we cannot easily point to just what in the language the learner hears influences rate, route or end state. It is therefore useful to step back and consider from a variety of perspectives what we do know about input. The next 13 chapters build on the reader's basic knowledge about second language acquisition, converting this knowledge into specific expectations about learners, but always in relation to input. These expectations apply to learners whose exposure to a second language is not predigested through explanation of grammar or error correction or manipulated through form-focused exercises, drills and memorization. Reports by a range of established and up-and-coming researchers about their own work results in a reader's tour through fertile terrain where the guiding thread is second language input the learner receives.

A vast amount of published information on second language acquisition is now widely available; rather than competing for shelf space with the numerous high-quality overviews of second language acquisition that have appeared in textbook, handbook and encyclopedia form, our edited volume is intended to complement such books. Familiarity with any one of these will help in two ways. First, knowledge of SLA research is useful for making sense of much of what will be discussed in the 13 subsequent chapters. Second, knowledge of SLA is the starting point in an exploration of the influence of input. Unless you are an active researcher, you probably struggle to make sense of current reports of studies which treat abstract linguistic issues. If your only contact with SLA research occurred (or is occurring) while fulfilling degree requirements (and you were not drawn into the world of research), you likely find current publications inaccessible, particularly compared to those written three or four decades ago. For reasons we will detail below, many SLA researchers are nowadays far less concerned with pedagogical relevance than was the case 40 years ago, and where information from researchers to non-researchers once flowed freely, there is often now but a trickle. The expansion of research in SLA has also resulted in a parallel increase in specialised terminology. Although such terms will be elaborated on in the text in which they appear in this volume, we nonetheless include a glossary at the back of the book. You may have already noticed the terms and abbreviations that appear in SMALL CAPS. These are made salient in this manner upon first use in the book, and each term is defined in the glossary as understood by the contributors in the context of their chapters.

To make best use of this book, a grasp of the basics of SLA research is essential. We assume the introductory level of knowledge gained from Lightbown and Spada (2006), but as as a send-off on your tour, we provide

you with a brief (re-)orientation in this chapter. We will also make explicit the conceptual underpinnings of those comprehension methods of teaching whose aim is to simply provide the second language learner with everyday, unadulterated input.

Theory and Practice

Those who work on first or second language acquisition would readily agree that these are truly exciting times in research. Humans are intensely curious about what *Homo sapiens* excels at; that is, language. Since the early 1980s there has been a worldwide explosion of formal linguistics-based research which addresses the issue of how the human mind represents and constructs linguistic COMPETENCE. But, as with any line of inquiry into the mind, researchers have not always been in agreement, and if one probes further, one finds that ideas on how humans develop language have differed not only for decades but at least for centuries. In recent history, views on human language began to diverge in the 1950s when Noam Chomsky first challenged prevailing opinion, arguing that rather than the product of interaction with the environment, as claimed by the Behaviorists and Piagetians, human language is the product of an innate faculty for language. On the language side of things, Chomsky went beyond the traditional description and classification of languages where he and his followers adopted the aim of accounting for the native speaker's unconscious linguistic knowledge along with explaining how that knowledge is acquired.

This dual aim is not necessarily the aim of all those who study language acquisition. Several decades ago Lightbown and White (1987: 483) pointed to the situation that has persisted over the last 50 years where 'the relationship between linguistics and acquisition research has at times been very close and at other times practically nonexistent'. The same holds for the relationship between linguistics and pedagogy. In the early 1970s, Diller (1971: 5) expressed his scepticism about pedagogical developments, noting that it was historically not the case that 'the faults of one method were corrected by a new method'. Yet surprisingly, that same decade marks the heyday of the confluence of formal linguistics and second language pedagogy. From the mid-1960s into the 1970s fresh ideas about the latter were developing in relation to new directions in the former. At the time, Chomsky's talk at the 1966 Northeast Language Teachers' Association was only the most recent example of the traditional partnership between linguists and language teachers. In the early 20th century this included such luminaries as Leonard Bloomfield (1942), Dwight Bolinger (1960) and Otto Jespersen (1904), and centuries ago thinkers such as Comenius (1654) who in the 17th century advocated use of aural input and pictures to teach Czech, German, Hungarian and Latin.