



How May Second Language Acquisition Theories Inform Language Teaching? an Example of Teaching Grammar

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Abstract: *This paper bridges second language acquisition (SLA) theories with the language education field for pedagogical implications, using an example of the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) and the Grammar Translation Method. SLA has become an inevitable component in many Language Teacher Education programs for its principles guiding how a language is acquired or should be taught and what support should be provided to learners to acquire the target language successfully. In addition, given the aim of developing students' communicative competence, challenges may exist as the provision of input may not always result in a development in this competence. To examine how the input is provided in language classes, the paper reports on a case of two English teachers in a rural high school on their practices and perspectives in teaching grammar to students. It was revealed that input was provided in terms of grammar knowledge in a restricted form of teaching, leading to limited understanding on students' acquisition of this input as well as their communicative competence. Learning from the teachers' responses, the study provides pedagogical implications in the case of teaching grammar to support learners' acquisition of the target language and to assist in developing their communication skills using the taught grammar knowledge.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of English as an international language or a lingua franca is evident because it has become the common language of communication in both the global and local senses (Mckay, 2018; Teodorescu, 2010). Crystal (1997) in line with supporting the international status of English claims that “a language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country” (p.2). Globally, English is recognized by international communication among countries or associations such as ASEAN or the European Union. At the local or national level, English may be used as the dominant or nationally recognized language within a country with multilingual communities (Hamid & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

Teaching approaches have been constantly innovated, evaluated, and refined in the discipline of language education so that knowledge can be effectively transmitted to learners. Underlying innovations in teaching approaches are the theories that guide how teaching should be performed. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is known for its contributions of theories regarding how a language could be acquired or learned so that support can be provided to aid this acquisition and learning (Johnson, 2019). This recognition places SLA in an essential position as a compulsory subject in many Language Teacher Education programs (Johnson, 2019). Drawing on these theories, an enormous number of pedagogical implications are suggested. To illustrate, some of these suggestions are related to the language environment, the level and amount of information provided to learners, the necessary interactions when learning a language, the use of tasks to help learners use the target language (Krashen, 1985; Long, 1981; Schmidt, 2010). These examples of how SLA informs language education have resulted in various teaching approaches in language classrooms.

This paper discusses a foundational work on second language acquisition, the Input Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1985). Despite several arguments on its credibility, this hypothesis has been extremely valuable and contributes to our understanding of how to make language acquisition occur. The paper briefly reviews what the Input Hypothesis proposes to support language acquisition and

subsequently provides some pedagogical implications for language teaching so that learners' acquisition of the target language can be aided.

2. INPUT HYPOTHESIS

Being recognized as one of the pioneering theories in Second Language Acquisition, Input Hypothesis has been well-cited thanks to the reminder of the role of input in acquiring a language. Krashen (1985) claims to praise the role of input as the utmost condition in language acquisition, without which the acquisition is impossible. Other researchers also agree on the importance of input. For example, Gass (1997) proposes a framework of the second language acquisition process in which input is placed at the early stage in the process and among the prerequisites for acquisition, or Lightbown (1985) further illustrates the role of input through the non-acquisition of reversion structure as learners are not exposed to the input containing this form.

Other researchers propose arguments to the Input Hypothesis, claiming that input is necessary but is not the only condition or the guarantee of acquisition. Schmidt (2010), with his Noticing Hypothesis, emphasizes the need for learners to be able to notice the language features before the acquisition of this feature possibly occurs. In Schmidt's (2010) study, a participant reported his non-acquisition of some English structures due to his inaccurate production of these forms. It was explained that he failed to notice how English-L1 speakers produced those features as his input. Also, Schmidt reflected on his experience in learning Portuguese through his diaries and realized that acquisition might not be possible even if he was exposed to input without noticing how these forms were used. He concluded that only what had been noticed was acquired and indicated in his output (Schmidt & Frota, 1986).

The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1981) also adds another concern, as language acquisition is not always the consequence of exposure to input. Instead, this hypothesis requires learners to be immersed in an environment where the target language is used for communication and interactions. The acquisition of the target language is then claimed as a possible result of this interaction process where learners are able to see how language forms function (Long, 1981). Although these theories emphasize the need to process input for acquisition rather than a mere provision of input to learners, it is undeniable that input is still necessary for further input processing for noticing and intake, as claimed by the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 2010).

3. HOW DOES THE INPUT HYPOTHESIS INFORM LANGUAGE TEACHING?

This section explains what pedagogical implications can be proposed by drawing on Input Hypothesis. In addition to the necessity of input in language acquisition, this section will consider the level, quality, and mode of input and the enhancement of noticing and interactions in language classrooms that are all influential on language acquisition.

For input to be critically important, it is suggested that learners are provided with rich sources of input as a very first condition for their language acquisition. The language environment is one of the topics that SLA research is keen to explore so that learners are immersed in an environment where the target language is used. Chu (2019) recommends the use of L2 as the medium of instruction and interaction in language classrooms as well as contact with materials in L2 so that learners can acquire both the content knowledge and the language. The use of L1 in some English classes in many EFL contexts, such as Vietnam, is still preferred by ELF teachers for clarification (Nguyen & Franken, 2010). Although this use of L1 unquestionably aids the acquisition of L2, it may be used within limits so that oversimplification of input can be avoided, or the use of L1 can be limited to the case of low language learners for the purpose of clarification or elaboration (Leow, 1993; Wesche, 1994). To maximize the use of the target language, Nguyen and Franken (2010) suggest using repetition in speeches or miming, photos, and paraphrases when explaining vocabulary for students so that comprehensible input can be achieved without the need for using L1.

Despite the essence of input, it is required that input obtain a certain level of quality in terms of its accuracy. Nguyen and Franken (2010) remind us to use peer input in language classrooms through collaborative tasks, which may contain inaccurate phonological and grammatical forms. English language learning in many contexts is still largely product-oriented, where accuracy is the primary concern and goal of teaching and learning. Therefore, pedagogical implications for this matter can be proposed in terms of exposing learners to sources of accurate input or the use of corrective feedback in

language teaching so that learners become well-aware of accurate language forms (Kim & Emeliyanova, 2019; Sato & Lyster, 2012). The Interaction Hypothesis values the use of the target language for meaningful communication as a supporting condition of acquisition. Teachers can draw on this theory to create pair or group work to enable learners' interactions with peers. Corrective feedback as peer input can be established from this interaction.

Regarding the matter of noticing features for acquisition and the mode of input, it is suggested that relevant language tasks are designed to support this recognition. One of the actions that direct learners' attention to specific forms for potential acquisition is the use of tasks that can make these forms more salient to learners. The use of tasks in language acquisition has been extensively researched, and the roles of tasks have been confirmed to support language acquisition. Therefore, language teachers are advised to design appropriate tasks that can help learners expose themselves to the input, notice the language features in the input, and be able to process input for acquisition (Mackey, 2006). Nguyen and Franken (2010) also value the use of tasks to stimulate learners' attention to specific language features to potentially acquire those features through numerous language tasks in reading, listening and speaking so that the target language forms are repeated for acquisition of their forms and functions. These kinds of task are useful to help learners produce the target language forms as well as support teachers keeping track of learners' acquisition of the forms. Thereby, learners are used to hearing, seeing, and producing this form, aiding their acquisition.

In Vietnam, English is a compulsory subject across levels (Phan, 2004; Nunan, 2003). It is claimed that the aim of teaching and learning English in Vietnam is to develop the communicative competence by integrating four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Ministry of Education and Training, 2008). However, in the reality of teaching, problems occur as grammar and vocabulary for reading and writing skills receive more attention (Nunan, 2003; Pham, 2005). In practice, Vietnamese teachers of English have to prepare students for grammar-based examinations within an assigned amount of time, which opposes their attempt in broadening the opportunities for communicative practices (Pham, 2005). The preferred method used to be the Grammar-Translation which happens widely in English classes where "L2 was taught through grammar illustration, bilingual vocabulary lists, and translation exercises... to help learners be able to read literature written in L2, not to provide them with the ability to communicate verbally in L2" (Kieu, 2010, p. 119). The consequence is that learners in this context experience an educational situation where English communicative competence is not strongly acknowledged in practice. Furthermore, those learners also have to face the problem of existing in a community where Vietnamese is the dominant language; the chance to use English is quite limited, especially in daily life (Kieu, 2010; Nunan, 2003; Pham, 2005). Consequently, learners need such a supportive English language environment to develop their English proficiency. The following section of the paper will be devoted to maximizing English language use inside and outside classrooms as a medium of instruction and daily communication.

4. A CASE OF A RURAL HIGH SCHOOL IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

Recently, the focus in EFL education has shifted to communicative competence, so Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) are praised for thriving learners' authentic and flexible use of the target language for meaningful communication (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Ellis, 2003; Richards, 2006). While appreciating innovative teaching approaches, the traditional Grammar- Translation method (GTM) receives some criticism for having its primary focus on grammatical rules and accuracy, and there are very few opportunities for students to use the target language for communication (Benati, 2018; Kim, 2008).

Despite some criticism, GTM helps students acquire grammatical rules well, which is evident through higher level of accuracy in students' performance and is preferred when accuracy is the primary focus of assessment (Chang, 2011; Elmayantie, 2015). This study employed semi-structured interview with two high school English teachers in a mountainous area in Southern Vietnam. The teachers had 15 years of teaching experience and participated several training workshops on EFL teaching methods organised by the Provincial Department of Education. The focus of the interview was the current practices in teaching and learning grammar. To complement the interview, I also utilised the diagnosis test to explore how students' grammar was tested as the starting point to explore the teachers' perspectives on teaching grammar.

The analysis of the exam showed that the questions mainly asked students to transform sentences such as from *passive voice* into *active voice*, *so...that...* into *such...that...*, or *although...* into *despite....*. Thus, EFL teachers need to train students to deal with those question types because those affect their learning outcomes. To get an idea of how English is taught, I spread out the question “What does a typical English lesson look like?” to the Teacher 1. She reported that

I explicitly taught grammatical points and vocabulary, which is mainly done in the native language, undergo numerous grammar practice exercises of sentence transformation or writing short sentences, and memorise the forms for high marks in the exams. Speaking rarely or does not occur since it is not required in the exams.

The local EFL teacher education program consequently makes GTM an indispensable part of teaching methodology courses because of its long-lasting influence on students’ performance in EFL education. Further explanations were provided, referring to the time limit that EFL teachers have for each lesson and the students’ language proficiency and motivation. As reported by Teacher 2,

I understand the need to let students speak and write in English more. However, in this area, we have many students who belong to ethnic minority groups, and they are not proficient in English. To help them pass the exams, I just focus on what is tested and teach those knowledge points to my students.

What was interesting was the differences in their teaching practices when being observed by colleagues and the head of the English department at their high school.

Honestly, I only provide speaking activities when there are observations. To make sure that the students are well-prepared, I pre-teach the grammar and provide students with some guidance in advanced. They know that they will be observed and will prepare well for it. I will also call the students who are most proficient to speak in class. (Teacher 1)

While pre-teaching seems to be effective in Teacher 1’s classes, for Teacher 2, it is still considered as memorisation when the students are given questions in advance and instructions on how to answer those questions. However, the teacher also admitted that this can be the most possible option for them to ensure a successful lesson.

I give my students some exercises and questions to prepare at home and some suggested answers. However, I do not give them full answers but only some keywords as guidelines. I think this can be seen as their homework too. I am not worried if they make mistakes in the observed period because we all know their language proficiency levels. There is nothing to hide. (Teacher 2)

When being asked about the curriculum, both teachers admitted that the lessons required productive skills such as speaking and writing, mainly after teaching the main grammar points. However, depending on the students’ proficiency, they might make some adjustments to make it suitable for them.

I understand that speaking and writing are required, but again it is not easy to do these in class. For speaking, I only asked my students to repeat the sentences that we have learned. They are not producing new sentences. Sometimes I may cut off some words in that sentence for them to fill in, but it is still the sentence that they have seen. (Teacher 1)

Writing is hard to teach as students usually complain that they have no vocabulary, grammar, and ideas to write. I provide them with sentences or paragraphs with missing words and ask them to fill in those. At least, they have some thoughts about it and write somethin. The most I can do is to ask them to write full sentences from some suggested words, but this requires lots of time and efforts for both the students and me. (Teacher 2)

For both teachers, having some activities related to speaking and writing was necessary, but with the students’ limited proficiency, they could only provide simple activities in which the students only needed to speak or write a few words or only repeat what they had learned in the lessons. The effort of having the students to produce new sentences existed with challenges due to their language levels, therefore commonly being left out.

When being asked about organising group activities for students, the teachers only considered this necessary for observed periods when they were evaluated on their teaching skills. *I hardly organised group work. If I do, it is only about students sharing their answers with peers. For example, when I give*

them writing exercises where they fill in the missing words, they will compare their filled words with those of their peers. (Teacher 2)

Focusing more on speaking, Teacher 1 also shared the same thought on group work. For her, speaking activities were easier to organise as group tasks. However, she witnessed the hesitation and awkwardness in her students when asking them to speak to their peers.

I used to organise some speaking tasks for the students, but they did not seem to enjoy those. They usually spoke a few words and use Vietnamese language and talked about other topics. Sometimes, they made fun of their peer's speaking and just laughed. I had to control them. (Teacher 1)

However, the Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam (MOET, 2008) aims to develop EFL high school students' communicative competence up to level 3 of the Common European Framework of References. This requires the students' capacity to understand and conduct communication on familiar daily topics and on topics of personal interests (Council of Europe, n.d.). Hence, there is a big challenge for EFL teachers because they need to ensure that students can pass the exam and still develop communicative competence.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAKING GRAMMAR LESSONS MORE COMMUNICATIVE

The reported case of two EFL teachers confirm the necessity to provide input to students. In this case, the input could be regarded as the grammar points in the lessons. However, while students may be able to understand how the grammar could be used, their communicative competence was questioned due to several challenges. Reported by the teachers, time limit and students' low proficiency were the primary causes of avoiding communicative activities for both the teachers and the students. While this avoidance misalign with the imposition on developing students' communicative competence, initiated by the Ministry of Education and Training, the teachers to some extent felt assured as the assessment did not focus on communicative competence, raising the chance to pass the exams for their students when strict GTM was applied.

I propose making GTM more communicative so that it is possible for students to develop both accuracy and some extent of communicative competence. Since GTM teaches students grammatical structures in pre- and while- stages of a grammar lesson, EFL teachers may shift to oral communicative practice by having students speak simple sentences using the taught grammatical structures. Pekoz (2008) provides an example of teaching Simple past tense and has students, after learning the rules, orally produce stories of their past events through individual storytelling and role-plays known as the Post-Grammar stage. Another example of Ur (1988) about If-clause lessons, teachers can have students orally practice the structures in pairs where one student speaks out the if-clause, and another student proposes the main clauses. To prevent students from writing the clauses in advance and reading from those, the teacher can orally provide subordinate clauses and have students speak out the main clauses for complete sentences with both clauses. In this way, students are not prepared of what to say since they are dependent on the clauses given by the teacher. Fazal et al. (2016) agree that generating GTM more communicatively can lead to better language development, but this generation largely depends on teaching content and teachers' activity design. As a result, teachers can still help their students develop communicative competence by providing more space for communicative activities.

Referring to the notion of input in second language learning, the problem with GTM is the entire focus on providing the input to students via teaching concrete grammar points through formulas and examples, followed by writing practices or grammar exercises. While this practice can partly construct (written) communicative skills for students, oral competence seems to be left out. Language is believed to have initially appeared in its spoken form, with spoken language acquisition typically occurring before the acquisition of written language (Ghasemi & Jahromi, 2014). Ghasemi and Jahromi (2014) also argue that due to the prevalence of spoken communication, people may be able to speak a language more readily than they can write it. Therefore, the importance and widespread use of spoken language across various contexts should not be overlooked. Many researchers agree that while both spoken and written discourses are commonly utilised, they exhibit distinct characteristics that lead to different uses of linguistic tools to convey the same message (Ghasemi & Jahromi, 2014). Written discourse is often considered to be more carefully planned, organized, and precise, whereas spoken discourse is viewed as more interactive, allowing for immediate and spontaneous exchange of information between speakers and listeners.

Following GTM teaching stages, the post-grammar stage can be employed as a space where both spoken and written language is practised. GTM teachers can start with either speaking or writing activities and let the students complete the others. Chi (2017) when teaching simple past tense required the students to start with drafting a story of their past events. Then, students would draw on the writing to tell the stories to their peers orally. In this case, GTM was practiced in both oral and written forms. This example can be done reversely when students start with orally telling their stories to a peer and then drafting the written works. Another suggestion to maximise student interaction is to let students complete storytelling tasks based on a set of pictures. Students will interact with peers and tell the stories then write them down for further feedback from the teachers (Dao et al., 2020). Furthermore, one student may orally tell the story and the peer will take notes and draft the stories to share with the storytellers for feedback on the content and the language use. From these suggestions, it can be seen that GTM may be heavy in teaching rigid grammatical structures to students with limited opportunities for authentic communication. However, depending on the teachers' creativity and flexibility, there are stages in the grammar lessons that can be turned into communicative events in which students are able to practice the taught grammar points in both oral and written forms.

Furthermore, in EFL classes, the input provided to students mainly come from the material and teacher talk, including their instructions. Therefore, it is necessary that teachers make use of their talks as a source of input for student learning. This means that teachers need to demonstrate how the taught grammar point is used in their speeches as models for the students to follow and use English as the medium of instructions to maximise students' exposure to the target language. In Vietnam, the use of Vietnamese language in EFL classes and lessons has been common because it helps the lessons flow smoothly, especially in grammar lessons (Kieu, 2010). However, students need to be ready for responses in the target language, so getting them used to it is necessary. Language development strongly depends on the language environment, so using English more can expose students to the rich English environment and create the habit of listening to and responding in English (Pang, 2012). However, teachers need to be thoughtful of their instructions and the students' levels because wordy instructions can make students unable to understand and do the activities (Sowell, 2017). For example, using imperatives can help reduce the length of instructions such as "Please say the main clause" instead of "Now I want you to say the main clause for a complete sentence".

As a result, the teaching activities in a grammar lesson that predominantly follows GTM have become an integration of several SLA theories. Firstly, the input hypothesis was followed to provide grammar knowledge to students and expose students to the target grammar points and English through teacher talk. Furthermore, the Interaction Hypothesis is used when teachers let students interact with peers to produce the outputs, which is informed by the Output Hypothesis. Through this interaction, students can produce output and gain further input from teachers and peers in the form of feedback. Noticing Hypothesis is another SLA theory that may appear in this process when students notice how the grammar points are used by their teachers and peers as a model for their compliance. Hence, although under several top-down policies, an EFL classroom can still be greatly informed by SLA theories for effective pedagogies.

6. CONCLUSION

Within its limit, this paper takes the Input Hypothesis as its primary base to bridge the fields of Second Language Acquisition and Language Education. Through the principles of Input Hypothesis, this paper explains how language educators may create a rich source of high-quality input for effective acquisition of the target language. Practical pedagogical implications have also been provided regarding the use of the target language as the means of instruction, the use of tasks for noticing and interactions, and corrective feedback to support the acquisition of accurate language forms. Further research is recommended to discuss a wide range of SLA theories so that further implications are suggested for language teaching and learning.

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