Second Language Acquisition, theory review

Abstract

The study of language usage and acquisition has brought in many theories and changes in the traditional learning language process and concept. Author's attitudes towards an account of the acquisition process for an L1 and L2 learner, play a significant role when learning and teaching a language. Specifically, when talking about English as a second language. This article explores and reviews two of the most studied and used theories in second language acquisition (SLA), and how their differences make them diverge from one another. Moreover, this article seeks to explain the how's and whys these two theories do not reconcile as of yet.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, SLA, Input, Output, English as Second Language, ESL, SL; Second Language

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Asecond Language Acquisition, theory review

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Introduction

Throughout the years there have been many studies and a lot of research from professionals in the linguistics and educational fields on how people learn a second language. All of these theories have been tested on different types of learners, from different cultural backgrounds to different learning levels, but as of yet no one has found the perfect theory to describe how a second language is acquired. There is no such a thing as, "one size fits all" in language acquisition. There are too many learner variables to develop such concept.

Many theories have proposed an account for the acquisition of languages, from the first language or mother tongue, to the second language. In the acquisition of the first language we find theories such as the behaviorist where they think children come to the world as blank slates and acquire the language by habits and through imitation from their environment, and the nativist, mentalist and cognitive theories that propose that language knowledge is innate and we are born with a built in device of some kind that allows for language acquisition. On the other hand, there are the functional approaches and developmental or interactionist theories, which have the idea of language as functional, as capable of creating individual meaning.

In regards of second language acquisition (SLA) even though none of the existing theories have been able to provide full account for the language learning process, there are four main model areas that have been identified. The first area of models is the sociolinguistic one, where they give primary importance to the role of environment and the attitudes the learners acquire to the target language community. Good examples of authors in this area are Schuman with his Acculturation theory, Andersen with his Nativisation theory and Giles and Byrne´s with their Accomodation theory.

The second area of models is the Linguistic ones where they focus on the language being learned. Good examples in this area are Hatch with his Discourse theory, Ellis with his Variable Competence Model, Chomsky with the Theory of Universal Grammar and of course Merrill Swain with her very discussed Comprehensible output thesis which will be brought back later on in this article. Finally, the third area of models is the Cognitive one, where it is maintained that learners construct internal representations (mental pictures) of the target language. Great examples of theories in this area are Krashen with the Monitor theory, Lamendella´s Neurofunctional system theory, Pienenann with his Multidimensional system theory, McLaughlin with his Information Processing Scheme theory and Scheme, Rumellhart and McClelland with their Parallel Distributed Processing model.

Comprehensible Output Theory, a review

The Comprehensible Output Theory (CO) by Merrill Swain (1985) is part of the linguistic model areas, where the focus is on the language

being learned.[1] In this theory Swain states that "learning takes place when encountering a "gap" in the linguistic knowledge of the L2." (Swain, 1985, as cited in Hockly, N. and Ball, P. (Eds) (2012) 2012:56). She means that we gain the understanding of a new language when we try to communicate a message, but we don't succeed so we try again until we find the correct way to express what we want to express, and have the other person finally understand us. As a result, we gain new expressions or words that we have solely produced.

Swain relates that by realizing this lack of knowledge students are more aware of it and have the opportunity to modify their output and therefore learn something new about the target language. During the course of this process she argues that with this theory, learners can also engage in meaningful and comprehensible output as part of their learning practice and cultivate cognitive and linguistic development.

Swain also claims that while meaningful output can be solely responsible for the whole process of language acquisition, there have to be some conditions to facilitate second language learning, taking into account the mental processes connected with the production of a language.[2]

In her words, "...producing the target language may be the trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the means of expression needed in order to successfully convey his or her own intended meaning."(Swain 1985: 249) This means that learners need input as well as output. Therefore, language must be used so it can be learned.

The Input Hypothesis (IH), a short review

The Input Hypothesis (IH) by Stephen Krashen (1980s)[3], as part of the cognitive models, maintains that learners construct internal representations or mental pictures of the language being learned. This is one of five main hypotheses about Second Language Acquisition from his Monitor theory (Krashen 1981, 1982, 1985).

In this hypothesis, Krashen states that "Acquisition will take place only when the input the learner is exposed to is comprehensible. Comprehensible input is input which is a little beyond the current level of the learner's competence, which is denominated i + 1." (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985, as cited in Hockly, N. and Ball, P. (Eds) (2012) 2012:58).

Krashen suggests that learners acquire a language through one way only and that is by understanding messages or by receiving what he calls comprehensible input and should, in terms of its complexity, be slightly above the student's language level.

Krashen also agrees with studies done over the last few decades by researchers and published articles in scientific journals, on how students do not master languages by memorization, drills and hard studying, neither by producing it. He explains his belief that students acquire the [2] "sometimes, under some conditions, output facilitates second language learning in ways that are different from, or enhance, those of input" (Swain and Lapkin, 1995, p. 371)

[3] By Input we mean the "language information or data the learner is exposed to and has access to" (As cited in Hockly, N. and Ball, P. (Eds) (2012) 2012:38). Or as "the language that is addressed to the L2 learner either by a native speaker or by another L2 learner". (Ellis 1985:127, as cited in Hockly, N. and Ball, P. (Eds) (2012) 2012:38) Taking into account examples such as the teacher, internet, music, books, games or any other source that peeks the learners' interest.

language when they understand what people are telling them and when they understand what they are reading, which is what he calls Comprehensible Meaning. Based on this, it has been argued that content classes provide learners with naturally meaningful input. (Brinton et al., 1989; Crandall, 1993).

It means that as students get comprehensible input through listening and reading, they are absorbing the grammar and vocabulary they need from the second language. This is how Krashen argues a learner progresses in the language acquisition, by receiving input that is one step beyond his/her current level of linguistic competence.

Since the focus is on introducing a little more of the second language usage to what students already have, Krashen considers it needs to be done in a warm and receptive classroom. It is also important to use materials such as realia, props with visuals like magazines or pictures to introduce new vocabulary, and practice the comprehensible input. This supports his claim that language acquisition can be achieved without production. Furthermore, there are numerous studies which confirm that there can be language development and literacy competence without language production. Studies from authors such as (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985), showed how students typically acquire small but significant amounts of new vocabulary from single exposure to a non-familiar word in a comprehensible text; enough to account for expected vocabulary increase, and similar results have been reported for second language development. (Pitts, White, and Krashen, 1989; Day, Omura, and Hiramatsu, 1991; Dupuy and Krashen, 1993).

Krashen (1993) exposes that some cases of history have shown people who have developed high levels of competence from input alone, people such as Malcom X and Richard Wright who credited their development to wide reading alone, or Richard Boydell who suffered from cerebral palsy and developed language through listening and reading. Also, Ellis (1995) gives another example of acquisition without output. The "pre-modified" group, a group that did no speaking at all, made modest but clear development in vocabulary, resulting in more words per minute than the group that interacted with the native speaker.

Differences and reconciliation

As we can see, there are core differences between these two authors' theories. First, Swains' theory refers mainly to output (what students communicate) as a way to learn something new about the language when a gap occurs, and Krashens' refers mainly to input (what the student receives and understands from communicating) slightly above the student's language level as a

way to introduce new knowledge. Second, the focus in the first one is mainly on the language being learned, however, the focus on Krashens' theory is on how the learner constructs representations of the language being learned. In The Korea Times, in 2009, Krashen responds to an article previously published about "Speaking to Get More Weight in English Class". In his statement he reinforces that "Research done over the last three decades has shown that we acquire language by understanding what we hear and read. The ability to produce language is the result of language acquisition, not the cause. Forcing students to speak English will not improve their ability to speak English."[4]

In the Input hypothesis, the learner needs to understand the message that is being expressed. They can do this by hearing and comprehending messages that are slightly above their current second language level. By this way the student is also able to scaffold new information that can increase his/her understanding and comprehension. For this, a teacher has to be able to provide materials that can increase the learners' prior knowledge and make the new language more comprehensible.

The CO theory, states that learners just need opportunities to practice the new language being learned at their level of competency, not beyond or above. Here, teachers and classmates just modify or adapt the message to the listener's needs, but within the same level of competency. There is negotiation of meaning but the student

talk is mainly centered on the task at hand to be completed. It mainly requires drill exercises which can become monotonous as the student is not being motivated to learn something more or above his/her level; and it becomes more concerned with the form than the understanding of the message they are conveying.

Swains´ theory has been supported through other authors who take an interactionist position acknowledging the role of two way communication. To mention a few: Pica (1994), Long´(1985) and Lightbrown, and Spada (1999), who think that conversational interaction can facilitate SLA under certain conditions. To quote Lightbrown and Spada (1999): "When learners are given the opportunity to engage in meaningful activities they are compelled to 'negotiate for meaning,' that is, to express and clarify their intentions, thoughts, opinions, etc., in a way which permits them to arrive at a mutual understanding. This is especially true when the learners are working together to accomplish a particular goal…".

[4] Krashen, S (2009, February 6). Better way of improving English. The Korean Times. Retrieved from http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinon/2009/02/137_39073.html

Another hypothesis that could support Swains claim that output is necessary as well as input, is that of the Interaction hypothesis by Long and Robinson (1998), they suggest that conversational interaction is also an important source of comprehensible input, because said interactions between the learners (specially between learners and proficient speakers) is crucial and beneficial for language development to occur. As stated by Van Patten (1996), the sole presence of comprehensible input does not mean that all input will be processed by the learner. Other studies that support the role of negotiation and interaction in L2 learning mentioned in Swains´ CO theory include Lyster and Ranta (1997), Mackey (1999), and Mackey, Oliver, and Leeman (2003), among others.

Although it is not said that there is no value to output it is also important to realize that for second language students to provide output often rests on their ability to comprehend input, so for certain students in particular, such as beginners, creating only output could result in a high level or anxiety because of the pressure created by having to perform verbally. Such is the case of the Input Hypothesis, where it is suggested that the best method relies on supplying comprehensible input, in low anxiety situations, with messages that students want to hear, where early production is not forced in the second language but is allowed when students feel ready. It recognizes that improvement can come from giving a more communicative and comprehensible input instead of forcing and correcting production[5].

Krashen has also declared through his learning hypothesis that the "acquisition process occurs subconsciously as a result of participating in natural communication where the focus is on meaning. In contrast, learning occurs as a result of the conscious study of the formal properties of the language." (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985, as cited in Hockly, N. and Ball, P. (Eds) (2012) 2012:57) which is why he also states that language is acquired by understanding what we hear and read. This means that when learners internalize all the material they get according to their level of competency they start developing their skills and by those means, start developing new words and expressions in the second language.

Swain´s theory (1985) clearly rejects that of Krashens´, as she states three different functions of output (closely related to the "Noticing Hypothesis" from Schmidt 1990). First, the noticing function from which her whole CO theory is based, where the learners find gaps between what

[5] (Krashen, S. D. (1982). Principles and practice in second language acquisition. Oxford: Pergamon. Page 7)

they want to say and what they are able to say. As a result they end up learning something

new about the language in terms of creating negotiation of meaning by noticing what they don´t know and generating new knowledge as well as consolidating the one already existing. Then comes the Hypothesis-testing function, explaining that when learners say something in a second language there is always a hypothesis underlying in the meaning. And finally, the metalinguistic function where she states that learners reflect on the language they learn and therefore output enables them to control and internalize linguistic knowledge. In other words, using one of her most famous quotes where she claims that "Receiving comprehensible input is effective but not sufficient for developing native-like grammatical competence ….. producing the target language may be the trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the means of expression needed in order to successfully convey his or her own intended meaning". (Swain, 1985)

For this hypothesis, Krashen has strictly rejected it by explaining that output is surprisingly rare (Krashen, 1994). In one of his articles in 2002, he concludes that in that case, instances of comprehensible output can be very infrequent. At the same time, goes further to explain that CO requires for learners to be "pushed", to use other means to get across the message, in a precise, coherent and appropriate manner (Swain, 1985 pp 248-249) and that there is evidence that pushing students to speak a foreign language when it´s yet to be learned by them is very unpleasant. There are also studies that show that after asking students what aspects of foreign language classes are the ones that provoke the most anxiety, they put talking at the top of their list. (Krashen, 2002). To this he concludes that "given the consistent evidence found for comprehensible input, and failure of other means of developing language competence, providing more comprehensible input seems to be a more reasonable strategy than increasing output."[6]

Conclusion

Based on the review of literature, research, and other theories, we can see a clear and defined difference between Swains´ and Krashens´ theories that have yet to be reconciled. In general, it can be perceived that they both deserve credit for attempting to offer comprehensive theories of Second Language Acquisition that have, in turn, generated wide-ranging discussions and research. But as mentioned before, as of yet no one has found the perfect theory to describe how learning a second language is acquired.

I believe that there needs to be some Input as well as Output in order for a learner to get a good

[6] Krashen, S. (2002). The comprehension hypothesis and its rivals. Selected papers from the Eleventh International Symposium on English Teaching/Fourth Pan Asian Conference. pp. 395-404. Taipei: Crane

grasp of the second language. In essence, I consider that students want to start producing in the second language as soon as they can find it possible since they want to be able to communicate. It is just that they are unable to because they do not have the communicative competence this requires. It can for sure raise anxiety like Krashen states but I think it is up to the teacher to learn to "read" his/her class and give out opportunities for L2 students to respond at different times according to their particular development. Students need opportunities and time to test the structures they have learned and the hypothesis they are making, as Swain says it, about language and the target culture.

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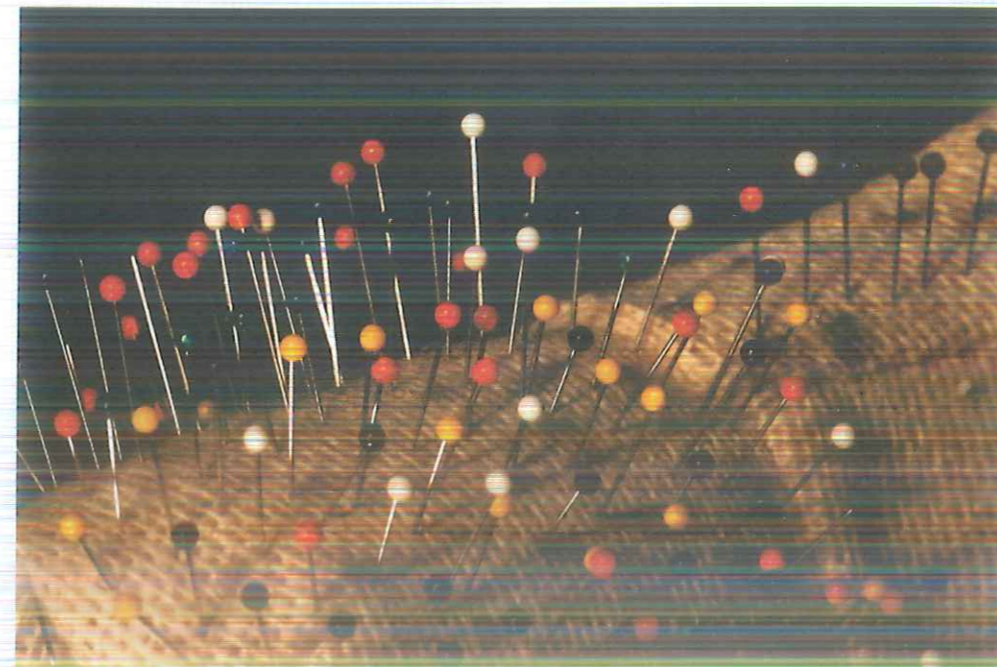
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