OPTIMIZING COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT IN SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract: *English teachers who teach English as second language within a foreign language context such as in Indonesia should realize that the goal of the English teaching is not only 'knowing' the language but the acquisition of that language. In order to allow the acquisition take place in the classroom learning setting, comprehensible input should be provided. As suggested by Krashen, L2 learners gain the comprehensible input through what they read and what they listen. Have English teachers in Indonesia provided their students such comprehensible input ? This paper is inviting English teachers to have a self-reflection towards this question.*

Key words *: acquisition, classroom learning setting, comprehensible input*

LEARNING AND ACQUISITION

One factor which contributes to the success of a second language acquisition is the environment to which L2 learners are exposed in their way of the target language mastery. Thus L2 learners who live in the target language country have greater chance to expose the language through the supportive environment. Those learners have more chances to contact and communicate with native speakers which means they have greater chance to practice and learn than L2 learners who live in a foreign language context.

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Ellis (1989 : 5) defines second language as the language which is acquired after first language as an additional language. Indonesian students who prefer to learn English at an English department happen to put English as their second language although it is learnt within foreign language context. This results in different exposure to the language compared with those who live in English speaking countries. The latter have direct exposure while the latter have less direct exposure to the language.

As English learners who live in English speaking countries have to struggle among the society in their efforts to survive, English learners within foreign language context also have to struggle in their efforts to master and acquire English.

Krashen (1987 : 110) differentiates the concepts of language acquisition and language learning. Language acquisition is defined as a subconscious process in which language acquirers are not aware that they are acquiring the language. This process is in fact similar to the process of first language acquisition by a child. Once the language has been acquired the language acquirers would have a feeling for correctness. They would be able to judge automatically whether a grammatical sentence sounds right or wrong.

On the other hand, language learning is seen as another way to develop language competence. The learners learn about the language and its grammatical system in a conscious way. In other words the learners do realize that they are in a process of learning.

Furthermore, Ellis (1990 : 2) states that the conscious process or the learning process takes place in a formal setting while the subconscious process takes place in non-formal setting. Classroom is then considered as the place to learn a language formally and through all the activities conducted in this classroom L2 learners are exposed to the target language.

Despite the different concept of learning and acquisition proposed by Krashen, we should realize that the goal of L2 learning is the acquisition of that language. While some theorists believe that language acquisition is better achieved in natural setting, it is not impossible to make classroom setting a more conducive place to accelerate language acquisition. Krashen says that the classroom is of benefit when it is the major source of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1987 : 58) In the case of L2 learning in foreign language context such as the English learning in Indonesia, classroom would be the most considerable place to learn English. However, there is a question

Type of classroom setting	Principal characteristics	Comparison with natural setting
1.The foreign language classroom	Focus likely to be on language form, rather than meaning. L2 unlikely to be used for classroom management or for genuine social purposes.	Potentially least like a natural setting-little negotiation of meaning.
2. The second language classroom (e.g. ESL)	Many interactions will still focus on form, rather than meaning. L2 functions as a medium of instruction as well as goal-hence will be used for wider range of discourse functions than in (1)	More like a natural setting - some chance for negotiation of meaning
3. The subject classroom (i.e. learner is placed in a class with native-speaking children)	The focus will be on meaning, rather than form. Input unlikely to be adjusted unless numbers of L2 learners high. IRF exchanges likely to predominate.	Will resemble 'exposure' in natural settings (i.e. input which has not been modified) but very little negotiation of meaning.
4. The bilingual classroom (i.e. where L2 learners receive instruction through both L1 and L2)	Mixed focus-sometimes on form, sometimes on meaning. No need for learners to attend to L2 if the same content is taught in L1 and L2- hence no input. Adjusted input will occur if L2 used to teach different subject content.	Potentially strong resemblance to natural setting - if learners have to attend to L2. Negotiation of meaning likely.
5. The immersion classroom (i.e. where a class of L2 learners are taught through medium of L2)	Focus will be on meaning in L2 subject lessons. Input likely to be simplified. IRF exchanges may still predominate.	Strongest resemblance to natural settings. Plenty of opportunity for negotiation of meaning, particularly if teaching is learner-centered.

Input/interaction characteristics of different types of classroom setting (Ellis, 1989 : 151)

hanging about : has such a classroom setting been conducive enough for language acquisition ? This following table provides a description about types of classroom setting as compared with natural setting.

COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT

Krashen strongly argues that the success of L2 acquisition is dependent on the availability of comprehensible input. Krashen proposes this issue in the form of Input Hypothesis. The input must contain i + 1 which means we acquire by understanding language that contains structure a bit beyond our current level of competence (i + 1). Thus in this hypothesis what makes someone acquires L2 is not the output which is either spoken or written production but listening and reading as the input. The speaking competence is determined by what is read and listened.

When we talk about the informal setting of language acquisition our attention will be focused on teacher's role in providing the optimal input for the L2 learners especially those who are within a foreign language context. Krashen (1987 : 64) characterizes a good teacher as someone who can make input comprehensible to a non-native speaker regardless of his or her level of competence in the target language.

Considering the fact that within a foreign language context there is no other place provides comprehensible input, English teachers in Indonesia should have started to provide comprehensible input for their English students in classroom setting. This responsibility is in fact not the burden of English teachers at university level solely but it involves English teachers from the lowest academic level : junior high school (sometimes secondary school) up to university level. English teachers must have the competence to make the input comprehensible. Then another important task of English teachers is creating the natural setting in the classroom to accelerate acquisition. Despite the fact that the natural setting created in a classroom will not be as natural as it is in the informal setting, the efforts to present the natural classroom setting should be optimized.

OPTIMIZING COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT IN L2 CLASSROOM

Now let us have a brief account on the comprehensible input which takes forms as reading and listening activities. The basic questions regarding these two issues are : have L2 learners been provided with comprehensible

reading input ? have English teachers provided comprehensible listening materials for the learners ?

What teachers need to do to optimize the input through reading class is preparing materials which at least fulfill the criteria below :

1 Reading materials which are brought to the classroom setting should be graded according to learners' level of proficiency. It is a good idea to provide passages which are accompanied by pictures or illustration for beginners

2 The reading materials should also offer a chance for L2 learners to learn new vocabulary and to know the semantic values of the words and syntactic association among the sentences

3 Considering the fact that reading is a psycholinguistics process, reading exercises should involve the combination of the use of reasoning and language clues (Robinett in Croft, 1980 : 364)

4 Reading materials should cover learner's interest. Optimal input focuses on the message therefore when the topics of the reading materials are interesting and relevant the learners may even forget that the message is encoded in a foreign language.

Although we do realize that teaching reading is very complex and sometimes problematic , English teachers should be very careful and pay attention to the basic ideas above when preparing and presenting the materials for reading class. When the reading materials and activities have been well prepared then we can expect that reading activities will accelerate acquisition. Through what they read, L2 learners are expected to gain a lot of information both about the language and facts dealing with the topics .

Another way to provide comprehensible input for learners is by creating such a creative classroom atmosphere. Classroom can be decorated with posters, slogans or notice which will be read by learners everyday. Students may be encouraged to do these activities under teacher's supervision. Hopefully through this activity students will have fun while they are learning. Thus under this condition, students are expected to learn and get the input better.

Meanwhile, regarding the listening materials, the major source of comprehensible input in classroom is *teacher talk*. Thus teacher should produce good output as listening input for learners. Teacher's output should be able to serve as a good model for learners.

There are several ways offered by Ellis (1989) to accelerate acquisition. Those ways are as follows :

1 *Formulaic speech*

One way in which input and interaction can aid L2 acquisition is by providing the learner with ready-made chunks of speech which can be memorized as 'unanalysed wholes' (Ellis, 1989:155). This can be done when students are involved in routinized interactions.

For instance, teachers can use some chunks such as : - "take off your shoes before you enter the lab"

- "put on your headphone"
- speak a bit louder"
- get a partner and do this practice"

2. *Vertical structures*

Vertical structures are learner utterances which are constructed by borrowing chunks from the preceding discourse (Ellis, 1989: 155).

Example :
Teacher : What is your hobby ?
Student : Sing
Teacher : Singing
Student : Yes, singing songs

In the above example it seems that student's utterance consists of a repetition of the teacher's preceding utterances.

3 *Frequency*

Ellis states (1989:156) that the first structures the learner acquires are those to which he is exposed most frequently. For example if teacher use WH questions frequently students are expected to acquire those structures. For instance the use of these following questions :

- Do you have any question ?"
- "Is there any comment ?"
- "Do you understand ?"

Furthermore, Ellis suggests that the following features are likely to facilitate rapid development in L2 acquisition :

1 A high quantity of input directed at the learners.
2 The learner's perceived need to communicate in the L2
3 Independent control of the prepositional content by the learner (e.g. control over topic-choice)
4 Adherence to the 'here and now' principle, at least initially
5 The performance of a range of speech acts by both native speaker/ teacher and the learner (i.e. the learner needs the opportunity to listen to and to produce language used to perform different language functions)
6 Exposure to a high quantity of directives
7 Exposure to a high quantity of 'extending' utterances (e.g. requests for clarification and confirmation, paraphrases and expansions)
8 Opportunities for uninhibited 'practice' (which may provide opportunities to experiment using 'new' forms)

(Ellis, 1989 : 161)

NATURAL SETTING

Regarding the natural setting, Krashen suggests that the use of L2 in classroom should be dominant over L1 use to optimize the comprehensible input. Relating to this issue, there have been some researches conducted either in Indonesia or other countries such as the one done by Baharuddin Pasaribu (The use of Bahasa Indonesia in the ELT Classroom, TEFLIN 2001) and Jinlan Tang (Using L1 in the English Classroom, Forum January 2002). The research results indicate that the use of L1 in English class is quite effective and useful for L2 learners. The results are then contradictory to Krashen's hypothesis that the use of L1 will reduce the comprehensible input. Although one of the two researches mentioned above was conducted in non-English department classes, the results have given us an idea that comprehensible input could be viewed from different perspectives. Furthermore, this issue still opens a chance to conduct such a research in English department classes (within a foreign language context) where English is used as second language by the students.

Krashen himself does not define clearly what is meant by comprehensible input. He only says that input is comprehensible when it is meaningful to and understood by the hearer (McLaughlin, 1989 : 39).

Therefore the comprehensible input itself still offers some opportunities to be viewed through various perspectives. Consequently, how to optimize comprehensible input will also depend on the way comprehensible input is viewed. Anyhow, what is important for English teachers is teacher's awareness to put acquisition as the goal of L2 learning. The target of a language learning is not just 'knowing' about the language but the acquisition of that language. Have English teachers in Indonesia started to think about this idea ? It seems that we need to have a self-reflection to answer this question.

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