Second language acquisition essay sample

Linguistics, Language

According to Swain, … 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)

In Swain's view, learners need not only input, but output: they need to use language in order to learn it. Krashen, however, as recently as 2009, stated 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. (Korea Times, 2009).

" Is it possible to reconcile these two seemingly opposite views as to what constitutes second language acquisition or ' learning', as Swain puts it? Or do these two views represent two extremes of both theory and practice?"

Many theories and research have been done trying to explain the process of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and how languages are learned, but still none of the findings could be considered the best alternative, as each time a new theory appears, it claims that there are other points that have not been considered. Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis and Krashen's Input Hypothesis are the most important and controversial theories in SLA that will be contemplated in this essay. Both theories may agree and differ in certain

points, but they still, reconcile sharing a common ground in theory and practice.

To begin with, both authors are concerned with " input" or the linguistic data the individual is exposed to and has access to. On one hand, Stephen Krashen, an expert in the field of linguistics, specializing in theories of language acquisition and development, proposed what is known as a " Cognitive Theory of Second Language Acquisition , originally called The Monitor Model but recently labeled the Input Hypothesis (Brown, 2000: 277). Krashen actually believes that adult second language learners develop L2 competence through one of two ways which he has referred to as either acquisition or learning. Krashen's input hypothesis consists of five main hypotheses. The first one is The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis. Krashen (1982) has argued that Learning cannot become acquisition and that fluency in a second or foreign language is due to what learners have acquired, not what they have learned´. (Brown, 2000: 278).

Acquisition, according to Krashen, is a subconscious process whereas learning is an active and conscious process involving the memorization of many formal linguistic rules. Krashen asserts that second language learners should attempt to acquire linguistic rules subconsciously and in a natural way like a child acquires his or her L1. The second one is The Monitor Hypothesis: this hypothesis makes a distinction between acquisition and learning. " The learned system acts as a monitor, making minor changes and polishing what the acquired system has produced", (Lightbown and Spada, 1993: 27). Moreover, Krashen emphasizes that there are three conditions

which are necessary for monitor use : sufficient time, focus on form and knowing the rules (Lightbown and Spada, 1993: 27). The third hypothesis is The Natural Order, which holds that " second language learners acquire the rules of a language in a predictable sequence" (Lightbown and Spada, 1993: 27-28).

Nevertheless, though some of the rules in a language are easy for the learner to memorize, these rules are often most difficult for the learner to acquire. Krashen's view regarding the natural acquisition of certain structures has been supported in morpheme studies and it is from these studies that Krashen attempts to reinforce his supports for his Natural Order Hypothesis. The fourth hypothesis is perhaps the most important for our analysis, it is The Input Hypothesis. The thrust of the input hypothesis is that in order for language acquisition to take place, the acquirer must receive comprehensible input through reading or hearing language structures that slightly exceed their current ability (Brown, 2000: 278). However, it is important that the learner does not receive input that exceeds his or her level of competence. It is crucial that the learner receives input that is comprehensible and challenging enough to improve his/her linguistic competence.

Krashen outlines the following argument: " a necessary (but not sufficient) condition to move from stage i + 1 is that the acquirer understand input that contains i+1, where understand means that the acquirer is focused on the meaning and not the form of the message´ (Krashen, 1982- 21). Krashen's scaffolding theory can be exemplified by teacher's talk to student, or

caretaker to child, or even native speakers to foreigners (foreign talk), in which the language is modified as to promote comprehension, and as stated by Krashen, acquisition. This hypothesis then is a strong supporter of giving language students an initial " silent period" where they are building up acquired competence before they begin to produce a language. Krashen does state Output has a contribution to make to language acquisition, but it is indirect. Actual speaking on the part of the language acquirer will thus affect the quantity of input people direct at him, which brings us back to the input hypothesis again.

Another side to consider is that it is essential not to focus on explicit grammatical structures or learning activities but rather to occupy classroom time with acquisition tasks or activities. Even so, the author points out: " The input hypothesis relates to acquisition, not learning" (Krashen, 1982-21). In this regard, many EFL/ESL instructors can better serve their students SL learning needs by introducing various tasks in the classroom. Another consideration made upon this hypothesis is that a learner must not be forced to speak too early. That is, " a certain amount of comprehensible input must be built up before the learner is required to speak in a classroom", (Brown, 2000: 278). Indeed, Krashen illustrates that many second language learners go through what is referred by some as a silent period when learners gradually receive and build enough comprehensible input so that they can start to produce their own structures.

The fifth hypothesis is The Affective Filter. Comprehensible input will occur during the language acquisition process when that acquirer's affective filter

is down or low. The Affective Filter Hypothesis states that a learner who is tense, angry, anxious, or bored will screen out input, making it unavailable for acquisition. Thus, depending on the learner's state of mind or disposition, the filter limits what is noticed and what is acquired. The filter will be up or operating when the learner is stressed, self-conscious or unmotivated. It will be down when the learner is relaxed or motivated (Lightbown and Spada, 1993- 28). In fact, this hypothesis has found a lot of support from those within the EFL/ESL field as it makes perfectly good practical sense for instructors to try and create a low-stress, anxiety free and relaxing language learning environment for those people attempting to acquire a second language. Many EFL/ESL instructors truly believe that students learn better in environments that are free from stress or where they feel uncomfortable.

On the other hand, Merril Swain developed The Comprehensible Output theory (CO) in 1985. After a research with a French immersion in which the group of students were not proficient in the target language in spite of the amount of input given for a number of years; she arrives to the conclusion that input is necessary but not sufficient for successful L2 learning. She suggests that learners engaged in negotiating meaningful and comprehensible output as part of language learning experiences which foster language learners cognitive and linguistic growth by means of processes of reflective and collaborative producing the target language " triggers cognitive processes, ones in which learners generate linguistic knowledge which is new for them, or which consolidate their current existing knowledge."(Swain and Lapkin, 1995).

The CO hypothesis clearly states that we acquire the language when we try to transmit a message but we fail and have to try again, until we find the correct form of our utterance and finally the receptor understands, in this way we acquire the new form we have produced. Learning takes place when learners realize that there is a " gap" in their linguistic knowledge, so they become aware of it and begin to modify their output in order to learn something new in the target language. The importance of output to learning could be that it pushes learners to make a more deeply mental process to produce utterances than does input; it helps students to control what they are acquiring to meet a communicative goal. In order to produce that language, learners need to move from theory to practice, in this way they know what they can or cannot do; output encourages them to process information needed for students´ meaningful and accurate production of the target language.

One of the most important roles of output is that it promotes " noticing"; this means that learners may realize that they do not know precisely how to express something in the target language; they come aware that there is a " linguistic gap" so they look for the different ways they have to fill that hole and say what they really mean. The fact that " comprehensible input is a necessary mechanism of acquisition independent of the role of comprehensible input" (Swain, 1985, 252), does not mean that output is the only important factor in L2 learning, but is a core that fosters and increases opportunities for learner production in the process of learning the target language. Moreover, Swain has argued that comprehensible output plays an

important part in learning a second language as learners can learn from their own output in some specific ways. For instance, she numbers three specific functions of output.

First, output keeps learners to be aware by helping them to notice gaps in the production of the target language, that is, when they are trying to speak or write in the L2 , they realize that they lack grammatical knowledge of some feature that is important for what they want to say. This function is named The Noticing Function. Second, output helps learners to test hypothesis; they can try out a rule and see if it helps them to construct successful knowledge or if it gives them negative feedback. This is the Hypothesis-Testing Function. Third, output leads learners to talk about their own production of language, identifying problems with it and looking for ways in which they can improve what they have learnt and internalize new linguistic knowledge.

This is the Metalinguistic Function. Nonetheless, Swain in 1985 claims that " learners need the opportunity for meaningful use of their linguistic resources to achieve full grammatical competence, and that production may encourage learners to move from semantic (top-down) to syntactic (bottom-up) processing, forcing learners to pay attention to the means of expression". Nowadays, the main purpose of language learning is to significantly use in our daily life, for the purpose of communication. Attention in output arises internally through production processes and it is the learner who decides what they find as a problem in their production and what they should pay attention to the input. This means that English learners should not only

increase the information input, but also efficiently output, that is to say the language they have learned. In addition, CO also emphasizes the idea of " being pushed" to have verbal communication so that learners can acquire a second language faster. Taking this viewpoint to the classroom, it is necessary to consider that there are shy students or teachers who don't give their students enough opportunities or time to communicate and interact with their partners.

Sometimes, students who are learning a second language feel nervous to speak in that second language, spoiling their ability to verbally learn from their output. Up to this point, it must be said that according to what has been exposed about these two theories for second language acquisition, both input and output are necessary and extremely important in the process of learning a second language, because learners need exposure to information in the target language to communicate, being input the information needed to produce utterances and output the result of putting together all what they need for a meaningful and accurate production of what they have already learnt. Learners can know all grammar rules but they still have to put in practice all that knowledge and it is this what ensure that they correctly internalize the information and concepts and that they are prepared to produce whenever it is needed. Sooner or later, they also agree on the use of the language. At any rate , it is widely believed that the more exposure to a broad range of input SL learners have, the better they can increase their communicative competence and produce successful output.

Even if they differ in the use of the terms learning and acquisition, linguists now use them interchangeable, as Sharwood Smiths states " The best term as it focusses on the process itself, i. e. as something that happens inside the learner or acquirer" (1994-11). And yet, studies have gone so far so as to show that learning a second language, is not a result of a single factor, input or output, but of several variables that involves contextual environment, individual or personal characteristic such as age, cognitive style, intelligence, aptitude, attitude and motivation, personality, affective factors, learning opportunities, and type of instruction, feedback, error correction, interaction, collaborative work, among others. And what is more, we can bring about Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. He claims that a higher mental functioning is constructed in a social, cultural, historical and institutional context, and it is in this context in which social interactions help to reconcile a dialectic unity of input and output.

Therefore, according to Vygotsky the interactions between input and output give rise to second language development. He states that during the process of learning, input is often shaped by output. Input may be simplified if mistakes arise, or might be escalated if they seldom occur. In the same way, output is influenced by input. To sum up, is input or output a matter of election among the teachers? Or is it a call to consider what is the good of a SL theory? Language acquisition is a very complex process in which several aspects are involved and teaching is a highly skilled activity . Both Krashen and Swain viewed the language acquisition as an integrated process in which theory and practice go together to have successful communication in the

target language. As teachers we should balance the language input and output activities to fulfill the purpose of interaction per se. We should become researchers of our own theories, learning more from our day-today-teaching, giving formative feedback to our student's errors, and providing activities that really motivates and encourages our students learning .

References:

-Dr Jesus Arzamendi, Dr. Ignacio Palacios, Mr Philip Ball-Second Language Acquisition-Chapter 1 " Applied Linguistics", Chapter 2 " The Acquisition and Role of First language", Chapter 3 " The Learning of a Second language", Chapter 4 " Second language Acquisition Models. Critical Review"-Funiber -Larsen-Freeman, D &long. M (1991). An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research- Longman. London -Lightbow, P. (2006) How Languages are Learned-Oxford University Press -Matt Salusburry (April 1, 2011-Section: EL Teaching Matters-23). The Bilingual Benefits -Richard Skiba-Code switching as a Countenance of language interference – Social Interactions Jos ´e A. Scheinkman-Princeton University and NBER -Scott Thornbury (Issue 55 march 2008)-What good is Second language Acquisition theory? -Skehan, P. (1998). A Cognitive Approach to Language Teaching -T-E editor (26 January, 2006) Make no Mistakes