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Are input and output alone in SLA communications?

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ABSTRACT

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This paper aims to check whether the mere materials of SLA are input and output or there is another practical option. To this aim, some perspectives reviewed and some studies compared in terms of the correct form and meaning production of language (output). Different functions of output and the way it is thought about, produced and revised are discussed in detail. Two compared studies revealed how produces the output correctly in terms of the form and meaning. Finally, the paper concluded that, in respect of the reviewed studies, input and output are not the mere materials to SLA and a more practical one can be dialogue, which at least provides more accurate learning.

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1. Introduction

Krashen (1987) stated that the output is nothing more than a sign of SLA that has taken place previously and output serve no useful role in SLA except possibly as a source of self input to the learner. As it is clear, in previous some researchers do not speculate any considerable role for the output, but it seems that it does play a relatively important role in SLA. It claims that producing language serves SLA in several ways; one function of producing the target language is that it enhances fluency. Obviously, fluency and accuracy are different dimensions of language performance, as Ellis (1999) states, although the practice (language production) may enhance fluency it does not necessarily improve accuracy. On the other hand, second language production affects accuracy as well.

There are three hypotheses in this regard which this paper elaborates on these three.

1. It is hypothesized that output promotes noticing in producing the target language. The learners may notice a gap between what they want to say and what they can say. Therefore, it leads them to recognize what they do not know or know only partially. On the same circumstances, the activity of producing the target language may promote the second language learners to recognize some of their linguistics problems consciously.

2. The second function of producing language is hypothesis testing, in which the production of the output is a way of testing a hypothesis about comprehensibility and linguistics well formedness. Therefore, the erroneous output can often be an indication that a learner has formulated a hypothesis about how the language works, and is testing it out.

3. As, the learners reflect upon their own target language use, their output serves a metalinguistic function which, enabling them to control and internalize linguistics knowledge.

2. Background and discussion

2.1. The Difference between the Production and Comprehension of the Output

The output pushes the learner to process the language more deeply with more mental effort than input does. Focusing on the output means be focusing on the ways in which the learner can play more active and responsible roles in their learning process. In speaking and writing, the learners can stretch their interlanguage to meet the communicative goals. They solve their linguistics problems either by a) using their own internalized knowledge or b) cueing themselves to listen for a solution to future input. It means that sometimes the learners claim to understand their interlocutors, but in fact, they do not.

In producing the language, the learners need to do something they need to create a linguistic form as well as meaning. Therefore, they discover what are their strength and weaknesses. In other words, the process, which involved in producing language, can be quite different than those involve in comprehending language.

Listeners usually know a lot about what a speaker is going to say. They can make shrewd guesses from what said and of the situation being described. Listeners can also be confident that the speaker will make sense, be relevant, and provide given and new information appropriately. Generally, the cooperative listeners almost certainly use this sort of information to select among alternative parts of a sentence to anticipate words and phrases and even circumstance syntactic analyses altogether. In this sense, one can claim that students hardly can learn a language by mere exposure to comprehensible input so they use some certain aspects of the language.

In sum, the output may stimulate the learners to move from the semantic, open ended, non-deterministic strategic processing of the complete grammatical processing, which needed for accurate production. Output thus, seems to have a potentially significant role in development of syntax and morphology, a role that underlies the three functions of the output as follow.

2.2. Three functions of the output

This part discusses about three functions of the output, which hypothesis relate to accuracy rather than fluency.

The noticing or triggering function or what might be referred to as its conscious raising role.

The hypothesis-testing role.

The metalinguistic function or reflective role.

2.3. Noticing role

Noticing or triggering role of the output is a function, which can call it as a conscious raising function. Schmit and Forta (1986) noticed a gap in principles, which states that a second language learner will begin to acquire the target-like form if and only if it is presented in comprehended input and “noticed” in a normal sense of the word that is conscious.

This paper hypothesis that output gives rise to noticing, which means, of producing the target language the learners may encounter a linguistics problem that leading them to notice what they do not know or know only partially. In other words, the activity of producing the target language may prompt the

second language learners to consciously recognize some of their linguistics problems, which makes them being aware of something they need to find out about their L2.

To test this hypothesis, it should be demonstrated that the learners may occasionally notice a problem though there might be an implicit or explicit feedback, which provided from an interlocutor about the problems of the learners' output. However, the learners do notice problems as they speak and try to do something, but what do they do when they notice a problem? Do they focus on morphology and syntax or they become engaged in the cognitive process, which is related to the second language learning?

Swane and Lapkin (1995) attempted to examine directly the cognitive processes that are activated because of noticing a problem. The participants of the study were early French immersion students (and average age of thirteen). The students were individually trained to use think aloud while writing an article for a newspaper about an environmental problem. The students were prompted with "what do you think about your text?" Then, they made some changes in their texts without commenting on it. The students did not have any access to a dictionary or any other aid because the researchers were interested in seeing what students would do without further input from external sources; whether they would try to work out a solution on their own.

From the think aloud protocol point of view, they abstracted what they have been termed in a language related to the episodes. This related language to episodes can be any segment of the protocol in which the students talk about a language problem encountered during the writing, and solve it either correctly or incorrectly without having explicitly identified it as a problem. These episodes were categorized according to the mental processes, which reflected in the changes that students made on their output. Overall, in about 40% of these episodes the students paid attention to grammatical form. The results demonstrate quite clearly that even second language learners indeed notice the gaps in their L2 knowledge output as they produce it that led them to noticing further more when encounter difficulties in producing the target language. They engaged in thought processes, which may play a role in second language learning. The cognitive processes identified represent the hypothesized processes, which involved in second language learning: extending first language knowledge to new target language context, formulating and testing hypothesis about linguistics forms and functions.

Now, it can be concluded that these evidences support the hypothesis that the output can stimulate noticing and it raises the learners' awareness about the gaps of their knowledge, which play a consciousness-raising role. Furthermore, noticing can trigger cognitive processes that implicated in second language learning; these cognitive processes generate linguistics knowledge, which is new for the learners or that consolidates their existing knowledge.

2.4. Hypothesis testing

The second function of the output is its hypothesis-testing role. It argued that some errors, which in the learners' written and spoken production reveal their hypothesis about how the target language works. To test a hypothesis, one way is to say or write something. If the learners do not test a hypothesis, then the changes in their output would not be expected following by feedback. However, during the process of negotiating the meaning, the learners will modify their output in response to such conversational moves as clarification request or confirmation checks. For example, Pica et al (1996) stated that over one-third of the learner utterances were modified either semantically or morphosyntactically.

If the output as hypothesis testing were just the matter of gaining more input, then we might expect some changes after each instance of feedback. However, why some inputs taken up and others not? This is just because of the comprehensibility and learners' internal factors, although this is not the whole story. The fact that the learners modify their utterances in one-third (but not in all) cases, suggest that they only testing out some things and not the others. Therefore, it means that the output is indeed a test of a learner-generated hypothesis and the output is a selector for what will be attended to. Although a few studies shown directly that the modified or processed utterances are maintained in the learners' interlanguage, the assumption is that the process of modification contributes to second language acquisition. The learners modifying their output or test their hypothesis in their second language new structures and forms, then expand and explicit their interlanguage resources in creative ways. However, it

seems that similar to those, which reflected in think aloud study above, it might be that the modified or processed output can be considered to represent the leading edge of a learner interlanguage.

To sum, the learners may use their output as a way of trying out new language forms and structures as they stretch their interlanguage to meet communicative needs. The output may just check what works and what does not. The immediate feedback may not be facilitating or forthcoming as well as it does not negate the value of having experimented with the language resources.

2.5. Conscious reflection

The third function of the output is its metalinguistic function. When it is argued that one function of output is to test a hypothesis, it may assume that the output itself is the hypothesis, but it means that the output represents the learners' best guess about how something should be said or written. The learners are rarely asked about what their hypothesis are, but rather infer them from the output itself. However, under certain task conditions, the learners will not only reveal their hypothesis, but also reflect how they use the language to do so. The output level represents its metalinguistic function in language use, which allows the learners to control and internalize it. Thus, the output is not the hypothesis itself, but does explicit hypothesizing play a role in second language learning?

In order to investigate what the learners make explicitly and how contribute it in language development, some tasks are needed that would reflect in language form as well as considering the meaning. Most of the tasks, which used in the studies about interaction did not pay attention to reflective process, instead they focused on communication where attention is principally on the meaning rather than the form. In fact, as Ellis (1999) says there must be a focus on the meaning instead of the form.

However, it is certainly feasible for a communicative task to be one in which the learners communicate about language in context by trying to produce something that they want to say in the target language. The learners negotiate the meaning, but its content is expressed in language form and its relation to the meaning they are trying to express. In other words, they produce negotiation through the form.

Here is an example; a group of 30 students is engaged in a task like dictogloss. In this task, the teacher prepares a short text which dealt with a topic that the students encountered in the class and included grammatical features that reviewed by the teacher recently. The text read aloud twice at normal speed, while it was being read the students jotted down the familiar words and phrases. Then, they work in pairs to reconstruct the text as accurately as possible, with respect to both the content and grammar. If the students observed a problem in the output of their partner, they try to correct it and express the related grammatical rule and the domain of its application explicitly. As a result, one of the each pair students provides a context sensitive knowledge of general grammatical rules, considering that the function of the form and the meaning has a close link together in this way.

Considering Vygotsky's perspective on the importance of Dialogic interaction, cognitive processes arise from the interaction of two people. In other words, it is a cognitive development, including presumably language development and it originates in the internal psychological plan to processing the appropriateness. What originated in the social sphere comes to be presented intra psychologically, that is within the learner. Considering this, as a general process of inter or intra mental development, two important principles may come as follow: first, as Ellis (1999) argues, the focus in SLA should be on the construction process, which result in linguistics changes among and within the learners during the activities. This process has become particularly observable in language development, when the task that the students are engaged in having reflection on their own language production as well as negotiation about the form.

Secondly, as Donato and Lantaoaf (1994) point out, since developmental processes are dialogically derived and constituted, they can be observed directly in the linguistics interactions that arise among the speakers as they participate in a problem-solving tasks. In the previous example, it means that what occurring in the students' output when they try to explain their understanding is a part of the process of second language learning. Through the examination of what the learners do or say to reflect on the language, which they attempt to produce, one can get access to the learning processes at work. The output brings about the collaborative dialogue and may provide the necessary support to the output makers to form and develop their interlanguage.

Some studies discussed about the value of this sort of negotiation and form for the second language learning. One is a study by Donato (1994) on collective scaffolding, the second is a study conducted by Lapierre (1994) on the role of the output and conscious reflection on the output in second language learning. Although, in the Donato's study, the students spontaneously focused on form, on Lapierre's study they were thought to do so. In both studies, the students produced language and then talked about what they produced. The question to be considered here is whether there is any evidence of a demonstration of some consequences for language learning as students try out language and made an explicit hypothesis that underlie their language use. As a part of a much larger study of collective planning among the learners, Donato analyzed the selected protocols of three students who had worked in her class over a period of ten weeks. The students involved in the study were in the third semester of French language in an American university. The data consists of one-hour session in which the students planned for an oral activity that would take place next week. It was intended that during the planning session the students should decide on what would happen between a couple. The students were not allowed to use notes in their presentations or memorized the whole scenario, but they just allowed to make notes while preparing if they wished.

Donato examined the transcript of their planning session, for example about scaffolding a situation where in social interaction a knowledgeable participant can create by the means of speech supportive conditions in which the novice can participate in and extend current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence. In all, 32 cases of scaffolding help 75% of all the used forms being correct in the next week. Donato points out it is not surprising finding in the light of Vygotskian theory which argued that individual knowledge is socially and dialogically derived from the genesis which can be observed directly in the interactions among the speakers during problem solving tasks.

In the second study, Lapierre hypothesized that because pair work necessitated the output, there is a greater possibility that language learning would be evidenced among those who working in pairs rather than the individuals. Additionally, it was hypothesized that when the learners reflected the produced language, then the learning would be the result. Regarding the first hypothesis, no difference was found between those who completing the task individually and those in pairs. In the regard with the second hypothesis, the researcher used the tailor mode, dyad specific posttest. These tests are pivotal features of this study, which developed from the transcripts of the students' speech as they reconstructed the passage. From these transcripts, the episodes that the students made some notes about their language were isolated. Based on these episodes, questions were constructed thus, every pair of the students had a set of questions that reflected what they specifically had said in reconstructing the passage. The expectation was that when students reflected on language form and function and achieve a correct solution, then, they would respond correctly to the relevant dyad specific question. Similarly, when they discussed about the language form and function the result was an incorrect solution, but they responded correctly to the relevant dyad specific question. Therefore, the students learned the language, but not correctly in terms of the form.

Thus, each episode was classified into some categories, one category involved episodes that the negotiation led to a solution, which is correct. The second category involved episodes that the negotiation led to a solution, which is incorrect. Then, what are the consequences of negotiation about language form and achieving the solution? In general, the results show that when a solution achieved it is the correspondence to the students' a week later response. The results also make perfectly clear that if the language learning was tested in negotiation turns, it is important to measure what occurs there.

The general test of comprehension could not capture this learning as well as a general test of the linguistics features, which thought before. This is because as what was in the students' negotiation examined, the researcher's goal was undetermined considerable extent in the sense that the students set their own agenda about what they would discuss according to their linguistics needs in expressing their intended meaning as accurately as they could.

3. Conclusions

The three functions of the output, which outlined in this paper was the potential of promoting accuracy, an issue of concern for many second language learners especially in terms of the form. It can be

concluded that a communicative oriented input and a rich environment do not provide all necessary conditions for second language acquisition and a focus on form within these communicative setting can significantly enhance the performance. Therefore, it is possible to focus on form in a manner that still profit from the value of a focus on the meaning.

This paper also provides some important evidences for the usefulness of collaborative tasks that would lead the learners to reflect them on their own language production as they attempt to create the meaning. It seems that the most direct source of the cognitive process of data may occur in the dialogues themselves that the learners engage in with other learners and the teacher. In one aspect of Vygotskian perspective a part of learning is an activity that its development occurs first in the inter psychological plan through socially constructed knowledge and processes; then it must be a close examination of dialogues as the learners engaged in problem solving activity, which directly reveal the mental processes. The unit of analysis the language learning and its associated processes may thus more practically be the dialogue rather than the input or the output.

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