The Effects of Linguistic Environment on Second Language Acquisition

Yan Yu

University of Canterbury, Christchurch 8140, New Zealand.

Abstract: This paper focuses on the effects of the linguistic environment on second language acquisition (SLA). For SLA, language input is essential, especially authentic language input. The informal linguistic environment also plays a vital role in SLA. This study suggests that students need extensive exposure to the informal environment of second language (L2). We should create a positive linguistic environment in the foreign language classroom.

Keywords: Acquisition; Linguistic Environment; Language Input

1. Introduction

In the process of SLA, there are various factors that can have an effect on it. These include not only internal factors, such as individual characteristics of learners like age and motivation, but also many external factors, for instance the linguistic environment, cross-linguistic transfer, language policy (Ortega, 2009).

Although all of these aspects may influence the degree of L2 development, the linguistic environment has always been considered to be one of the essential factors. Since L2 acquisition is a deliberate or unintentional process of learning a new language in a naturally or purposefully instructed environment, the linguistic environment is particularly important for L2 learners. It can provide not only a rich corpus, but also a place for language expression (Ellis, 1999). Therefore, this paper will critically discuss the effects of linguistic environment on SLA.

To explore this issue in depth, firstly, this essay will discuss language input in the linguistic environment. Secondly, the formal and the informal linguistic environment will be examined. Based on it, it will critically argue the theoretical perspectives combined with previous teaching contexts. It will also apply theory knowledge to real-life language teaching practice.

2. Language Input In the Linguistic Environment

The linguistic environment is facilitated by a combination of five factors: cultural attitudes, language input, consensual interaction, language output, and natural or developed competence. A very important aspect of these is language input (Ortega, 2009). Language input is regarded as the main resource of data for L2 acquisition. For the learners, input is the only resource which can be used to build language skills. Without considering language input, second language acquisition cannot occur in a vacuum at all (Gass, 1997).

2.1 Krashen's Input Hypothesis

The importance of language input has been stressed by many linguists. One of the most widely known theories is the input hypothesis, which was developed by Krashen in the 1980s. This hypothesis emphasises the central role of input in second language learning. In accordance with Krashen (1985), the only significant resource for L2 learning is comprehensible input. Learners can acquire comprehensible input by listening to conversational messages, reading written words and so on. In many cases, they are even able to analyse and process linguistic information that is marginally higher than their existing level, achieving an i+1 language competence.

2.2 Long's Interaction Hypothesis

Long (1996) argues that acquisition occurs through understanding. More understanding will lead to more learning. However, he suggests that the best understandable form of input is interactional modification. Interactional modification refers to the fact that, on the one hand, information has been revised or simplified for processing before learners are exposed to it; on the other hand, learners strive to modify their outputs so that they are more easily understood by the receiver. This bidirectional process not only improves the comprehensibility of the information, but also enhances the saliency of the L2. Therefore, such an input method would be more profitable than other types.

2.3 Criticism Of Input Hypothesis

Although the input hypothesis stresses the crucial role of input in L2 acquisition, it has also been strongly criticised in this field. Mclaughlin stated that it was hard to explain the notion of learner level accurately. This is because individual variations should be taken into account when measuring the existing level of learners. In the actual classroom, identifying the level of each student and supplying the i+1 level of language input to every one of them individually is challenging, if not an impossible task (Mclaughlin, 1987).

In addition, many researchers have indicated that incomprehensible input and comprehensible output are also thought to be effective in improving L2 learning. White emphasises that when learners are faced with incomprehensible language input, they will give attention to unmastered features of language content. Thus, incomprehensible input reinforces SLA (White, 1987).

Swain (1985) proposed the comprehensibility output hypothesis, stating that learners tend to make attempts to amend the outputs when they are confronted with gaps in their L2 knowledge. This might lead to the learning of unacquired parts of the language. Thus, comprehensible output can promote the development of L2. Furthermore, the results of the immersion programme provided by Swain contrast with Krashen's input hypothesis, demonstrating that comprehensible input by itself does not contribute to L2 acquisition (Ortega, 2009).

In view of the above, this paper argues that in L2 acquisition, non-comprehensible input and comprehensible output also make significant contributions. For L2 learners, listening and speaking are both excellent ways to develop language learning. When students encounter L2 that exceeds their language ability, if they are good at thinking and exploring and focus on language output in everyday contexts, they are more likely to be successful in learning the target language. Conversely, if learners are simply passive input, then they often do not end up acquiring real L2 skills.

In China, as school exams place more emphasis on students' reading and writing skills, students usually focus more on vocabulary and grammar. They have little opportunity to communicate with non-native speakers. Due to the large number of students in a Chinese school class, it is difficult for teachers to assess the current L2 level of each student.

3. Formal and Informal Linguistic Environments

The exploration of the linguistic environment made significant progress in 1981. The linguist Krashen divided linguistic environments into two types: formal and informal linguistic environment. The formal linguistic environment is where learners gain proficiency in the language in a school setting. In contrast, the informal linguistic environment refers to the setting in which learners acquire language in an efficient manner apart from the classroom context (Krashen, 1981).

For these two terms, Lightbown and Spada also provided explanations. They considered the formal environment to be the setting in which the L2 learner was taught a second language. The informal environment was the context in which students were exposed to the L2 at home or in social contacts (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). Furthermore, Rogers (2004) argued that there was no fixed structural form for the informal linguistic environment, but it was the most contained facet of all the studying that one did on a daily basis.

Since their introduction, formal and informal linguistic environments have generated various discussions in society. Many people believe that the formal linguistic environment is an important factor in SLA. For example, Marsick and Watkins (1990) argue that formal linguistic environment is more desirable. Because it is based in the classroom and highly structural. Furthermore, Schmidt (1983) shows through Wes's story that despite adequate time and satisfactory conditions in

the informal linguistic environment, only basic life tasks can be sustained, while grammar remain inaccessible (Ortega, 2009).

However, many linguists hold the opposite view. Lightbown and Spada indicated that SLA can happen accidentally out of the classroom, for example, through forms of learner interaction (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Moreover, in order to show the influence of informal linguistic environments, Mourtega made a detailed division of them. He listed many scenarios in which informal linguistic environments occur. For instance, when reading L2 magazines; when watching L2 messages (Mourtega, 2011). Furthermore, Bahrani acknowledged in her research that informal environments are essential in the acquisition of linguistic skills (Bahrani et al., 2014).

This paper argues that the informal linguistic environment makes a significant contribution to SLA. If language learners focus only on the formal linguistic environment, they tend to have low actual language proficiency. On the contrary, if students show an active emphasis on the informal linguistic environment, the SLA is usually more successful. For language educators, the effects of the informal linguistic environment are even more important. This is because they can influence not only the methods of language teaching, but even the effectiveness of it.

These phenomena are often seen in Chinese classrooms. Many Chinese students do well in written examinations in English, but their practical application skills are relatively poor. And there is also the common fact that most Chinese students are shy about speaking English in public, they feel nervous and even scared. This is mainly due to the fact that they are used to reading carefully choreographed conversations in textbooks, but are rarely engaged in real-language interaction.

There are also some students in my class whose parents have a good level of English. These parents often speak to their children in English at home, and these students generally have a high level of English proficiency. There are also some students who are particularly fond of watching American blockbusters. This group of students is significantly better at expressing themselves orally.

4. The Future Classroom

Based on it, as an English teacher, it is important to try out different strategies to create a learner-friendly linguistic environment. In the actual classroom, teachers can introduce informal linguistic contexts as appropriate to increase beneficial language input for the students. For example, when explaining new words, introduce word formation so that students can develop memory associations for words of the same type. When reading the text, present some relevant slang and allusions, together with some multimedia pictures and videos. Show students more about the relevant culture and customs to make them more interested in L2. Finally, language teachers should also try to create a friendly learning environment to ensure that students are not under any pressure. Enable learners to be brave enough to make mistakes, be willing to participate in classroom tasks.

Outside the classroom, language teachers should encourage students to be actively involved in their social and family linguistic environments. For example, when assigning homework, set more open-ended tasks such as social surveys in English, visiting family members or neighbours, etc. This will facilitate L2 being used authentically after school so that real language acquisition occurs. In addition, when it comes to extra-curricular practical activities, arrange activities that enable students to engage in language communication and exploration. Examples include improvised speaking and debating, role-playing, etc.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, through the above arguments and explanations, it can be demonstrated that the linguistic environment has an important effect on SLA. In addition, the characteristics of the linguistic environment also have a significant influence on L2 teaching.

Language input in the linguistic environment began in 1985. Krashen introduced the language input model, arguing that comprehensible input was uniquely vital to the acquisition of L2. Long agreed with Krashen's model and built on it to develop the Interaction Hypothesis. He believed that the interactive modification of input in a contingent way was very beneficial for language learning. However, Mclaughlin believed that measuring the level of learners was difficult to achieve

in the classroom, and it was even more impossible to deliver accurate language input for each individual student. White and Swain presented different perspectives on comprehensible input theory, emphasising the importance of unintelligible input and comprehensible output respectively.

In 1981, Krashen developed the concepts of formal and informal linguistic environments. He divided the language settings into distinct categories, which were based on whether they were in the school classroom or not. Lightbown and Spada also offered a related explanation. They argued that the formal linguistic environment was taught purposefully, while the informal linguistic environment was unconscious exposure. And Rogers believed that the informal linguistic environment was integrated into everyday life. This group of notions has given rise to much critical discussion over the past few decades.

Learning any language is a complex process and will inevitably be influenced by the linguistic environment. Therefore, this paper suggests that teachers should focus on how to really improve students' language skills. This is because in conventional classrooms, the educational objectives of content learning and skill learning are of equivalent significance (Mohan et al., 2001). Furthermore, language teachers should continuously reflect on their pedagogy, turning the tedious language learning process into stimulating activities.

References

[1] Bahrani T, Sim T, & Nekoueizadeh M. (2014). Second Language Acquisition in Informal Setting. Theory And Practice In Language Studies, 4(8).

[2] Ellis R. (1999). Understanding Second Language Acquisition. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

[3] Gass SM. (1997). Input, interaction, and the second language learner. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

[4] Krashen S. (1981). Language acquisition and language education. Alemany Press.

[5] Krashen S. (1985) The input hypothesis. London: Longman.

[6] Lightbown PM, & Spada N. (2013). How languages are learned (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

[7] Long M. (1996). The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition. Handbook of second language acquisition.

[8] Marsick VJ, & Watkins K, (1990). Informal and Incidental Learning in the Workplace. London and New York: Routledge.

[9] Mclaughlin B. (1987). Theories of Second Language Learing. London:Edward Arnold.

[10] Mohan B, Leung C, and Davison C. (2001) English as a second language in the mainstream. New York: Longman/Pearson.

[11] Mourtega K. (2011). Insufficient language exposure and learning difficulties: A case of the Palestinian Learners in the Gaza strip. Online Research Educational Journal.

[12] Ortega L. (2009). Understanding second language acquisition. Routledge.

[13] Rogers A. (2004). Looking again at non-formal and informal education - towards a new paradigm, the encyclopedia of informal education.

[14] Schmidt R. (1983) Interaction, acculturation, and the acquisition of communicative competence. In N. Wolfson and E. Judd (eds), Sociolinguistics and language acquisition. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

[15] Swain M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. Input in second language acquisition, 15, 165-179.

[16] White L. (1987). Against comprehensible input: The input hypothesis and the development of second-language Competence1. Applied linguistics, 8(2), 95-110.