

Carrying Forward and Opening up the Future: the Input-Output Hypothesis and English Teaching in China

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Abstract: In the 1980s, Krashen proposed “the Input Hypothesis”. In 1985, Swain proposed “the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis”. Being introduced to China, the two hypotheses are often combined to guide teaching practice. The research on the application of Input-Output Hypothesis to English teaching in China is mainly based on English teaching in colleges and universities, and there is a certain separation between theory and practice. Wen Qiufang put forward the “Production-Oriented Approach” in order to realize the combination of Input-Output Hypothesis and the actual condition of English teaching in China. With the reform of the National College Entrance Examination, the English writing test has included the continuation writing, which is conducive to the reverse promotion of the change of high school English teaching concepts and the innovation of teaching practice.

Keywords: Input Hypothesis; Output Hypothesis; English teaching in China

Input and output are the two terminals of language activity. Krashen focuses on the input process and proposes “the Input Hypothesis”, while Swain focuses on the output process and proposes “the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis”. The combination of the Input Hypothesis and the Output Hypothesis plays a great role in guiding the practice of English teaching in China.

1. “Input-Output Hypothesis”

1.1 Krashen’s “Input Hypothesis”

In the 1980s, the American linguist Krashen proposed the famous second language acquisition hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis is impressively listed. Krashen stresses that second language acquisition is based on a sufficient amount of input. The input that can achieve the acquisition goal must be: (1) comprehensible input, that is, the input that the learner can comprehend. Krashen believes that learners can promote their language learning, only when they are exposed to input that they can understand. In order to make the input comprehended, Krashen proposed some methods, such as using auxiliary tools such as pictures, gestures, and physical objects to help learners comprehend. In addition, Krashen holds that the comprehensible input in the real context can promote learners to better comprehend and master the language. (2) The input language should be slightly higher than the learner’s current level. Krashen uses “i” to indicate the learner’s current level. He believes that language input at the “i+1” level can promote language learning and acquisition. It is worth noting that the “comprehensibility” in the input at the “i+1” level focuses on form rather than meaning, that is, the input whose structure is slightly higher than learner’s current level, but the content is comprehensible. At the same time, Krashen believes that “i+1” should be achieved in communication, rather than set as a structured teaching goal.

1.2 Swain’s “Comprehensible Output Hypothesis”

Four years after Krashen proposed the input hypothesis, Swain (1985) found that although her students input French in an “immersed” environment (that is, students are exposed to enough comprehensible input), they can still be seen from their language output that they are non-native speakers, and the performance of students’ French acquisition is not consistent. Swain believes that there are two reasons that lead to the results: (1) Students are not provided with enough opportunities to use the target language in the classroom—especially those of senior class; (2) In the process of producing the target language, they are not pushed, because students do not have social or cognitive pressure to produce a more authentic language. Therefore, Swain points out that comprehensible output is equally important for the second language acquisition process, for when the learner tries to create the required meaning accurately and appropriately, the language output will reflect the learner’s language level. Based on this, Swain proposed “the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis”. Swain believes that the generation of language output enables learners to reflect on and correct their language use, thereby improving their language skills. According to the output hypothesis, the behavior of generating language helps learners notice their shortcomings in knowledge and identify areas for improvement. By participating in language output, learners better understand the grammatical structure and other language characteristics of the language they are learning, so as to be able to better develop their oral and written expression skills.

However, the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis itself is not perfect. Krashen (1998) questioned the Output Hypothesis with the statement that the possibility of cultivating learners’ language skills through comprehensible language output is small or impossible. There is evidence that students are not willing to be pushed to use the target language. In addition, it is worth mentioning that the main prerequisite for output is that the learner must have sufficient cognitive resources to distribute the attention to form and meaning of language in that language form and meaning are competing for the learner’s limited attention, but Swain ignores this.

To sum up, both the Input Hypothesis and the Output Hypothesis are important theories in the profession of second language acquisition, but both have certain unfinished business. The Input Hypothesis does not take into account the influence of the learner’s own cognitive and language processing ability. Some learners may need more reflection and interaction to truly understand and master the language. The Output Hypothesis does not take into account the subjective tendency and cognitive ability of learners to correct and feedback the language they output. Therefore, when applying these two theories to teaching practice, special attention should be paid to the actual

teaching and the main status of students.

2. “Input-Output Hypothesis” and English Teaching in China

Since the Input Hypothesis and the Output Hypothesis can not perfectly guide English teaching when used alone, and the input and output are closely linked, in addition, Chinese English learners learn English as a foreign language rather than a second language, so Chinese research often combines the Input Hypothesis with the Output Hypothesis to guide English teaching. With the continuous deepening of theoretical research and teaching practice, the localization of the “Input-Output Hypothesis” is also steadily being realized. The Production-Oriented Approach and the continuation writing of the college entrance examination are the two most shining achievements.

2.1 Relevant Researches on the Input-Output Hypothesis and English teaching in China

Since college and university teachers are researches at the same time, they are the first group in China to come into contact with the Input Hypothesis and the Output Hypothesis. Therefore, most of the early research was based on the practice of English teaching in colleges and universities.

Yu (1990) explained the relationship between comprehensible input, incomprehensible input, comprehensible output, and incomprehensible output from the perspective of university English self-learners. Yu discussed the necessity of applying comprehensible input and comprehensible output to English learning together, and believed that splitting the relationship between the two is wrong. You Qida (2001) based on his university English teaching experience, held that in order to cultivate and improve language application skills, teachers and students should put energy on the links of input, internalization, and output. He stated that second language acquisition mainly depended on the learner’s large amount of input, internalization of language materials and repeated language practice. He believed that the key to improving English application skills was to balance the three.

There are also a considerable number of empirical studies focusing on college students and college English teaching classrooms which prove the promotion effect of the Input-Output Hypothesis on English learners in colleges and universities. Liang Jie and Tao Xin (2006) found that the English listening and speaking classes guided by the Input-Output Hypothesis greatly mobilized students’ classroom participation rate and achieved satisfactory teaching results. Liang and Tao firmly believe that only by taking into account both input and output can good teaching results be achieved. Wang Shurui (2014) took 148 non-English-majored freshman students from a certain university as the research object and conducted a 14-week experiment on them. The results proved that the teaching model combining language input, interactive output and teaching evaluation can effectively enable students to obtain a large number of optimized understandable input and a large number of language output opportunities, thereby significantly improving students’ language communication skills.

The research on the Input-Output Hypothesis in elementary education mainly began after 2010. Wang Dandan (2013) pointed out that the theoretical basis of task-based recitation is the Input-Output Hypothesis. The use of task-based recitation in the basic education stage can enable students to combine the input and output of the English language to obtain the ability to output the English language. However, the empirical researches on the application of the Input-Output Hypothesis to English teaching in elementary education are mainly conducted in the form of postgraduate thesis. These empirical studies have studied different types of lessons such as listening, speaking, reading and writing for students in different school stages, but they have verified the positive effects of applying the input-output hypothesis to English teaching from different perspectives.

2.2 Carrying the Forward and Opening up the Future: “ the Production-Oriented Approach” and Continuation Writing

2.2.1 “ The Production-Oriented Approach”

In order to realize the localization of the Input-Output Hypothesis theory and solve the problem of separation of theory and practice in English teaching research in China, Wen Qiufang proposed the Production-Oriented Approach (hereinafter referred to as the POA), as a new foreign language teaching approach.

The POA mainly includes three elements: task design, feedback mechanism, and language output.

Task design is the core of the POA. Teachers need to design tasks related to students’ real life and learning, so that students can continuously use language to communicate and express in the tasks. These tasks can be oral dialogue, writing exercises, listening comprehension, etc.. The tasks are designed to encourage students to actively use language to communicate.

The feedback mechanism is an important part of the POA. Teachers need to evaluate and give feedback on students’ performance in a timely manner so that students can adjust their language output strategies in time. At the same time, teachers also need to provide positive encouragement and constructive guidance to help students continuously improve their language output ability.

Language output is the ultimate goal of the POA. Through continuous task design and feedback mechanism, students can gradually master language skills, and continue to use and output language in real life and learning. This kind of output can not only help students better master language skills, but also improve students’ self-confidence and expression skills.

The POA is a English teaching approach that focuses on practice and feedback. It aims to help students master language skills and improve language output ability in a deeper extension. This approach has been widely used and has achieved satisfactory results in practice. However, due to its own implementations and actual restrictions on teaching in primary and secondary schools, the main target of accepting the POA is college students. Whether it can be applied to primary and secondary schools is an issue that remains to be considered .

2.2.2 Continuation Writing

In the field of elementary education, Professor Wang Chuming and others have explored and finally promoted the application of continuation writing in the college entrance examination. Continuation writing, as the name suggests, requires students to write an ending

for a text whose ending has been deleted after reading the former part of the text. In the continuation writing task of the National College Entrance Examination, candidates need to read a text of about 350 words and write two consecutive paragraphs with a total of 150 words. The first sentence of the two paragraphs has been given to provide candidates with clues and indicate the direction of passage.

The test item of continuation writing is guided by the Input-Output Hypothesis. Wang Chuming and Qi Luxia (2013) regard continuation writing as a test issue that closely links input and output, which is conducive to students learning language in context, imitating style, exercising discourse coherence, and releasing the creativity and imagination of teachers and students. When completing a continuation writing task, students need to obtain language input by reading the passage first, and then perform language output when continuing to write the passage. Such an input-output interaction process can help students master language knowledge and improve language expression skills. In addition, the Input-Output Hypothesis also emphasizes the importance of language output. Through output, students can firmly consolidate and appropriately apply the language knowledge they have learned, thereby improving their language output ability. Therefore, in continuation writing, students not only need to input, but also output, so as to better achieve the goal of language learning.

The POA and continuation writing are the products of the Input-Output Hypothesis highly combined with the actual English teaching conditions in China. The former aims at English teaching, especially English teaching in higher education; the latter is the application of the Input-Output Hypothesis in testing in elementary education. Both of these products have a role in English teaching in China of carrying the past and opening up the future: They are guided by existing theories, integrate the advantages of existing theories, and at the same time adapt to the actual practice condition of English teaching in China, which leads to more suitable approaches to Chinese English teaching in China.

3. Conclusion

The introduction of the Input-Output Hypothesis has made English teachers pay attention not only to the role of input, but also to the importance of output. A series of speculative and empirical studies have proved the promotion effect of the combination of input and output on English teaching. In particular, the POA proposed by Professor Wen Qiufang provides a new way for foreign language teaching. The examination method of continuation writing in the National College Entrance Examination also reflects the important role of language input in output, and it has an important role in promoting the change of high school English teaching concepts and the innovation of teaching practice.

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