

A SYNTHESIS PAPER: THE ROLE OF TEACHER TALK IN SLA

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ABSTRACT

In the era of the world's integration, language teaching teachers take a large role in education in general and language learning in particular. One of the most vital issues for teachers is how to convey L2 acquisition through teacher talk as comprehensible input. In order to dig down this part in language teaching, three researchers namely Krashen (1982), Long (1983) and Schmidt (1990) have their own perspective on how educators can approach language learners effectively. However, it indicates that the teacher-learner interaction provides chances for studying through mutual communication and comprehensible input. Moreover, teacher talk states that awareness and attention have a close relationship with one another, hence the learning process needs to help students involve more in the process without being passive. To make it clear, we would like to analyze each researchers' work and compare as well as evaluate its hypothesis to one another with the purpose of suggesting this understanding as a tool for teacher to enhance their language teaching-learning method.

Keywords: second language acquisition (SLA); comprehensible input; negotiation of meaning; language teaching; teacher talk.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since teacher talk constitutes two-thirds of the communication in the classrooms, it plays an indispensable part in language teaching (Chaudron, 1988; Luu & Nguyen, 2010; Hermanto, 2015). In addition, the success or failure of a class will be largely decided by the language that teachers use in the classrooms. It is essential to completely perceive teacher talk with all its aspects and functions in classroom settings. Teacher talk is really crucial for both classroom management and language acquisition process (Inceçay, 2010). Since it is the principal activity in a foreign language classroom, teacher talk is considered as the major source of input, allowing acquisition

to transpire (Hermanto, 2015). To be more precise, it is thought that learners' obtaining comprehensible input reflects their L2 acquisition, which may be viewed through the observations of adaptations taken place in the speech that teachers address their learners (Hermanto, 2015). Therefore, the topic of the role of teacher talk in SLA should be focused more on different perspectives of input, which are raised by Krashen (1982), Long (1983) and Schmidt (1990). In spite of some criticism against their works, these key scholars have made significant contributions to the understanding of input in general and particularly to the application of teacher talk.

2. SUMMARY OF EACH RESEARCHER'S WORK

2.1. Krashen's (1982) Contribution

In the 1960s and 1970s, Stephen D. Krashen (1982) developed a typical innatism model which is Krashen's input hypothesis. This theoretical work on comprehensible input devoted most attention to teacher talk. According to the theory, a L2 is acquired by understanding (through reading and listening) messages and getting comprehensible input that contains structures "a little beyond" learners' present state of grammatical knowledge (Krashen, 1982). Krashen (1982) explicitly called a learner's current level of competence i and the next stage $i + 1$. This indicates only a necessary (but not sufficient) portion of input ($i + 1$) is relevant and useful in altering a learner's grammar. It is assumed that input of this kind activates an innate mental structure which is capable of dealing with both first language acquisition (FLA) as well as SLA and is known as Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Accordingly, it can be concluded that if input is sufficiently provided and understood (usually with the help of context and extra-linguistic information), acquisition would automatically occur (Krashen, 1982). With regard to the meaning of hypothesis of classroom, the input of teacher's modelling is stated that modifications made in teacher talk are not purposely used for language teaching but it helps lessons be comprehended by L2 learners (Krashen, 1982). In other words, teachers do not need to have concerns about the actual linguistic content of the message but only ensure that the students understand most of it (Frey, 1988). In addition, the ability to speak L2 will "emerge" once the acquirer has received enough exposure to comprehensible input ($i + 1$) (Frey, 1988). Obviously, the value of L2 classes is found not only in the grammar instruction but also in the simpler 'teacher talk', the comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982). In summary, meaningful teacher talk is central to the process of language learning.

2.2. Long's (1983) Contributions

Comprehensible input in SLA is not only important but also the matter lies not in what the learner hears but how they are interacted with (Long, 1983; Luu & Nguyen, 2010, p. 40). Therefore, comprehensible input is regarded as the result of modified interaction, and negotiation of meaning as being crucial to SLA. Learning takes place when a communicative failure induces the speaker's meaning being co-constructed through a number of negotiation moves such as clarification requests, comprehension checks, and confirmation checks (Long, 1983). To be more precise, the learner is meant to receive $i + 1$ by dint of collaborative efforts to restructure conversation and maximize comprehension. The emergence of more competent interlocutors in making input comprehensible and enhancing learners' attention, thereby placing a strong emphasis on the interaction between the teacher and learners. Teacher talk as one of the registers pertaining to interactional adjustments that proficient speakers make when conversing with less proficient speakers. Teacher-learner interaction is expected to provide opportunities for learning the target language, optimal comprehensible input, and negotiation of meaning in many classroom situations (Luu & Nguyen, 2010; Hermanto, 2015). Accordingly, the interaction approach to teaching motivated teachers to interact with students in the classroom and to employ activities that require mutual communicative interaction (Hermanto, 2015).

2.3. Schmidt's (1990) Contribution

Pertinent to the roles of attention and awareness in second or foreign language learning, in the formal classroom setting in particular is Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis, a psycholinguistic theory which ultimately draws inspiration from Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis. Schmidt (1990) claimed that learning cannot occur without learners being able to "notice", or rather, attend consciously to linguistic features in the input. This hypothesis is elucidated that attention takes responsibility for both awareness and noticing. Schmidt (1990, p. 129) considered this process as a necessity and sufficiency for completely acquiring new input. To be more precise, noticing indicates the process in which learners first perceive some kind of linguistic feature and let working memory handle it until there is a change in long-term memory, subsequently enabling them to compare what they have attended to and spotlighted with their prior knowledge and 'notice a gap'. Additionally, noticing can occur intentionally or accidentally; for example, when engaging

in a conversation, learners may be mostly focused on the message content, but may also direct peripheral attention to remarkable linguistic features in the input. This suggests that negotiation of meaning during interaction promotes noticing (Luu & Nguyen, 2010, p. 41). Increasing interest has been the investigation of the roles that special types of teacher talk assume in the raising of students' consciousness about the syntactic aspects of the target language and their ensuring acquisition of these forms. Schmidt (1990) reached the conclusion that such teacher talk supports learners in noticing the syntactic forms in questions, and thus promotes their development of knowledge and use of these forms in the L2.

3. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE RESEARCHERS' WORKS

It is obvious from the above section that, regardless of the theoretical foundation, three researchers arrived at a common consensus on the importance of input, or particularly teacher talk, in SLA. Nevertheless, as expected from the hypotheses built from contrasting perspectives, there are a number of differences in relation to the characteristic of input, the role of learner, the degree of consciousness, and the focus of instructional talk.

First, in the above-mentioned hypotheses, SLA research aimed to explore a certain kind of input that is supposed to be most effective for L2 acquisition, with the notion of comprehensible input being interpreted as simplified input to being characterized as interactionally modified input followed by enhanced input (Maleki & Pazhakh, 2012). In other words, Krashen (1982) supposed that input is inclined to become comprehensible as a result of simplifications and with the aid of contextual and extra-linguistic clues. While happening simultaneously that simplified input and context can be responsible for making input comprehensible, Long (1983) placed emphasis on the importance of conversational modifications during the negotiation of meaning which suggests that another potential source of comprehensible input for L2 learning is the interactionally modified input that is provided when the speakers have to modify and reconstruct the interaction in order to reach a mutual understanding (Maleki & Pazhakh, 2012, p. 129). In other words, interactive input plays a more decisive role than non-interactive input as the former focuses on its meaning rather than its form, hence its values connect to attention better when listeners (learners) fail to notice a specific structure (Long, 1983; Izumi, 2002, p. 543). Attention is necessary for learning (Schmidt, 1990; Tomlin & Villa, 1994; Robinson,

1995) because “people learn things that they attend to and they do not learn much things that they do not attend to” (Schmidt, 2001, p. 30).

Second, while the innates and psycholinguistic positions focus on the learners to a significant extent, the social constructivist perspective gives emphasis to the dynamic nature of the interplay between learners and those with whom they interact. To be more precise, maintaining the magnitude of an innate system (i.e. LAD) to which input is delivered or an ability to notice grammatical features in input (Krashen, 1982; Schmidt, 1990). It is described as a common fixation which makes learners pay attention to and ignore other closely related social factors (Firth & Wagner, 2007, p. 760). On the contrary, Long’s work (1983) matches high value with the interpersonal context in which a learner operates since modifications of the interactional structure of conversation are supposed to be more extensive and more consistently detected than input modifications. See the following 2 dialogue fragments between a native speaker (NS) and a non-native speaker (NNS) in Long’s paper (Long, 1983):

Dialogue fragment 1

NS: What time you finish?

NNS: Ten o’clock

Dialogue fragment 2

NS: When did you finish?

NNS: Um?

NS: When did you finish?

NNS: Ten clock

NS: Ten o’clock?

NNS: Yeah

Third, the input hypothesis has placed little emphasis on the role of consciousness in SLA, which is a very antithesis of the noticing hypothesis, and somewhat of the new version of the interaction hypothesis. At a point, Krashen (1982) mentioned the concept of “noticing a gap” in an effort to clarify how input becomes intake. However, the fundamental proposition in Krashen’s work is that acquisition can take place incidentally or without awareness. In contrast, it can be inferred from Schmidt’s (1990) hypothesis that nothing can be learnt without it being noticed first, at least to some degree. In other words, attention isomorphic with awareness and rejected the idea of learning without awareness (Schmidt, 1990). With regard to Long’s 1996 version of the interaction hypothesis, the presence of consciousness is highlighted because of the introduction of “selective

attention” which supposedly mediates environmental contributions to acquisition during the negotiation of meaning.

Last, meaning-focused instructional talk is instrumental in the input hypothesis and the interaction hypothesis while form-focused instructional talk seems to be closely related to the noticing hypothesis. As summarized in the above section, teachers would only have to provide students with comprehensible input by ensuring that they understand the message instead of attending to its linguistic code (Krashen, 1982; Frey, 1988). This shows a sole focus on message or meaning rather than form in language teaching. A similar view can be assumed from the interaction hypothesis which posits that negotiation for meaning can increase comprehension then result in the learner’s comprehensible input in SLA. As negotiation for meaning is naturally employed in conversation when participants linguistically attempt to make both parties to understand (Foster & Ohta, 2005). On the contrary, the dependence of L2 acquisition on learners which is able to notice grammatical features of the input reflects a need to consider form-focused instructional talk (Schmidt, 1990). In addition, it should be noticed that Long’s (1983) reformulation of the interaction hypothesis can be attached to the understanding of form-focused teaching since the assumption is that learners’ attention can be temporarily directed to the code of message during meaning-centered, communicative activities (Boers, 2013).

4. CRITIQUE OF EACH RESEARCHER’S WORK

Similar to any theoretical framework in SLA, the three aforementioned hypotheses have been treated with thorough examination by other researchers. In addition, on account of the contradictory viewpoints they hold, as examined earlier, these theories can be employed to discredit one another.

4.1. Evaluation of Krashen’s (1982) Input Hypothesis

Many critics have argued that the input hypothesis as originally constructed by Krashen (1982) received little espousal from experimental proof, and is not easy to test. Input is also indicated as an essential factor but not sufficient enough to explain the entire process of L2 learning. In other words, comprehensible input cannot be the only stimulus for grammatical development (Braidı, 1995). Even though, a reference to extra-linguistic information is stated, a problematic question that how actual acquisition or

internalization of a syntactic rule be assisted can be posed; furthermore, context cannot show which structure is missing (Braidí, 1995). Criticism has also been demolished in the vagueness in defining or characterizing the learner's current state of knowledge (*i*). With such vague linguistic scope, determining whether the *i + 1* formula is appropriate for all levels of L2 forms (i.e. syntactic to lexical) proves controversial (Chaudron, 1985; Fang, 2010). In terms of classroom situations, Frey (1988) hotly disputed the ignoring for the actual linguistic content of what students listen to in Krashen's (1982) hypothesis. Furthermore, listening comprehension practice is not thoroughly delivered in the classroom condition, thus being uneconomical without the teacher's constant and deliberate attempt to include diverse grammatical and lexical items (Frey, 1988, p. 682). In a related direction, there appears the issue of how to realize whether the quantity of the appropriate input is enough or not. In the end, Krashen's (1982) failure to realize that 'incidental' acquisition might still relate to some amount of conscious 'attention' to input. It appears that speech will arise in the context of comprehensible input for some learners, especially those who are intelligent, highly motivated and outgoing; nonetheless, no considerable information is available from the hypothesis on how to cope with the other half (or more) of language students whose speech does not arise or whose 'silent period' might last forever.

4.2. Evaluation of Long's (1983) Interaction Hypothesis

There appears to be limited experimental evidence for the statement that negotiated interaction gives improvement to acquisition, especially the acquisition of new grammatical features. Braidí (1995) stated that the focus of Long's (1983) paradigm on interactional structure hides various grammatical details from interaction that are relevant to L2 grammatical development (p. 145). Undoubtedly, interaction paves the way for some aspects of L2 learning, but how vital this may be compared to all other elements in the complicated L2 learning situation remains vague. It is illogical to pursue the idea of an acquisition-rich environment with the identifications of such a narrow set of interactional features (i.e. clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, self-repetitions, and other-repetitions). Furthermore, when negotiated meaning is examined in actual L2 classrooms, a different picture appears with many students communicating merely at word level, by repeating utterances, by keeping silent, or by avoiding negotiation through the act of pretending comprehension. In general, the presence of interactional modifications does

not ensure the happening of comprehension. Many researchers share the same interest in the incorporation of elements such as noticing, consciousness-raising, attention in order to build stronger theoretical models explaining the claimed link between interaction and acquisition (Luu & Nguyen, 2010; Maleki & Pazhakh, 2012; Hermanto, 2015).

4.3. Evaluation of Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis

In opposition to Schmidt's (1990) belief, Tomlin and Villa (1994), and Schachter (1998) claimed that despite being closely interrelated, awareness and attention are two clearly different constructs. In addition, the classroom immersion studies can be utilized as proof against Schmidt's statement that there is no learning of language without attention to form (Schachter, 1998, p. 579). Sharper criticism came from Truscott's (1998) work with the conclusions that the noticing hypothesis is too unclear to be of much value since it is not developed from any coherent notion of what language is, and that study on form-focused instruction and feedback discloses that awareness of form is needless and useless. Generally, it would be impossible to notice (in the way that the hypothesis proposes) everything about an L2; more importantly, some learning must happen without deliberate attempt.

5. CONCLUSION

In general, the works of three scholars converge on the implication that teacher talk plays a vital role in SLA classrooms. Each theoretical viewpoint, although frankly criticized, has made valuable contributions to the understanding of teacher talk, with its nature being mainly understood as comprehension, interaction, and patterns in Krashen's (1982), Long's (1983), and Schmidt's (1990) work respectively. This understanding is useful to the analysis of classroom discourse which has been suggested as a tool for language teacher development, particularly in respect to research themes such as "how teachers modify their speech to make it understandable", "how communication breakdown is fixed", and "the cognitive demands of teacher questions". Besides, teachers would be authorized to facilitate, monitor, and assess students' contributions, while paying more attention to the ways in which teacher's language contributes to the language learning process.

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