

Input for the Second Language Classroom: Some Innovations and Insights

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The importance of target language (TL) data in the learning environment has been increasingly recognized by instructional practitioners. One contributing factor is the surge of instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) research since the 1980s, which has resulted in a variety of input-based insights and approaches. Conceptually, Krashen's (1982, 1985) Input Hypothesis alludes to the essentialness of making input "comprehensible" enough ($i+1$). That is, learners' exposure to input must occur at a level just beyond their current capabilities in order for it to be beneficial for acquisition. Pedagogically, focus on form (FonF) (Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998) techniques such as textual enhancement, input flood, and processing instruction (VanPatten, 1996, 2002, 2004) offer practical means for language instructors to make certain physical or formal features of input more salient to classroom learners within a communicative, meaning-focused context. Such meaning-oriented contexts include, for example, processing input for comprehension as part of a larger pedagogic task. That being the case, the past decade of ISLA research has gradually moved beyond the abovementioned focus on the surface, formal features of input to probe into the more intrinsic attributes of L2 input at the phonological, lexical, grammatical and discourse levels.

Not surprisingly, teacher-talk, authentic documents, and textbooks remain by and large the main sources of native-like classroom input to date (Meunier, 2012). Traditionally, *teacher-talk* is classified as a sub-variety of "foreigner talk"—and a defining feature of many L2 classrooms. It is also regarded as a key source of "modified input." Research has shown, for example, that teacher talking time comprises of as much as 70 percent of total class time on average (e.g., Meunier, 2012). While error correction or corrective feedback (CF) (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) is generally considered to be the predominant kind of modified input that makes up the bulk of classroom discourse, teacher-talk entails more than CF. Teacher questions, teachers' use of meta-language and of the learners' first language (L1) in the L2 classroom also fall within the domain of L2 teacher-talk research—and have been empirically studied at least to some extent (Ellis, 2012). One probable reason why these other types of teacher-talk have been less researched than CF is that teacher-talk has been perceived as only indirectly related to L2 acquisition and the corresponding learning outcomes.

Nevertheless, recent findings on the effectiveness of teacher-talk as an input source for incidental vocabulary acquisition (e.g., Horst, 2010) and formulaic language teaching (e.g., Meunier, 2012) apparently bear important pedagogical implications. Overall, teacher speech alone was found to be inefficient and insufficient for promoting the acquisition of essential vocabulary knowledge. For example, vocabulary acquisition requires repetition and recycling of previously encountered words, but many studies have shown that extremely low frequencies of recycled vocabulary occur in teacher-talk. This in turn renders teacher-talk a somewhat undependable source for building up the critical mass required for successful vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, teacher-talk is insufficient from a depth-of-processing perspective, which posits that the level of processing involved has direct implications for the acquisitional outcomes concerned. Establishing and/or mapping form-meaning links for vocabulary heard in teacher speech involve only receptive processing at best. Learners are not required to take up any greater

processing load which taps into their active production capabilities at all. Intuitive though all this might sound, language instructors might want to take time to reflect upon how their own use of the target language might impact the learning outcomes—whether directly or indirectly.

As to the use of authentic texts as an input source in the L2 classroom, input-based tasks developed following the principles of task-based language teaching (TBLT) might be worth considering. Input-based tasks emphasize the role of comprehensible input in acquisition, and are essentially non-reciprocal in nature (Ellis, 2012). Learners are provided with oral or written TL data in the form of instructions or descriptions, and are required to demonstrate their understanding non-verbally. One example would be to ask learners to complete a train schedule upon listening to a short announcement recorded at the train station. Because the emphasis is on comprehension and no overt L2 production is immediately required of the learners, input-based tasks are especially well-suited for beginning adult learners whose L2 proficiency in active production does not quite reflect their true cognitive capabilities just yet. Input-based tasks also offer plenty of room for language instructors to incorporate authentic target language materials into the L2 classroom to simulate L2 use in the real world.

Other authentic language resources available to instructors and students include the freely accessible corpora (e.g., the Corpus of Contemporary American English, or COCA; the British National Corpus, or BNC), and open source concordance tools (e.g., AntConc) (Romer, 2012). COCA and BNC are large databases comprising language samples of American English and British English, respectively, whereas concordancers like AntConc serve to automate the extraction of vocabulary and language patterns from such databases. Combined, learners are empowered to become “language detectives” or “linguistic researchers” (Johns, 2002, p. 108) to autonomously uncover TL patterning and the behavior of words and phrases. Such data-driven learning (DDL) has attracted the attention of an increasing number of ISLA researchers, who have in turn come up with various versions of its applications (see Romer, 2012 for a summary of direct pedagogical corpus applications). DDL can be used complementarily with the FonF technique of grammar consciousness-raising (GCR), given that both involve inductive reasoning and learning on the part of the learner. Instead of just randomly selecting authentic texts for use in GCR activities, language instructors can, with some thoughtful planning in advance, consistently draw on rich TL resource pools such as COCA for inspiration and materials development. The possibilities and applications are endless here—all that is needed is some outside-the-box thinking on the part of the language instructor.

The input-based approaches growing out of recent ISLA research findings introduced above are but a few prime examples of how language instructors might take advantage of empirical innovations and apply them in the L2 classroom. In the long run, it would be beneficial for teacher education and professional development programs to cover the working principles underlying some of the latest ISLA research advances on a regular basis. The mix-and-match combinations of these latest applications together with the more conventional instructional practices will certainly broaden the repertoire of a great many instructional practitioners as they seek to cater to all sorts of language learning needs in the 21st century.

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