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Haiyun TCI Practice Series (1): From Input to Output: Introduction to Teaching with Comprehensible Input

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From Input to Output: Introduction to Teaching with Comprehensible Input

Haiyun Lu

Stephen Krashen's work in the second language acquisition has been influencing how language is taught in classrooms for the last 40 years. Comprehension-based instruction, including Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS), Movie Talk (MT), Embedded Reading and Story Listening to Total Physical Response (TPR) and Natural Approach, has fundamentally challenged the traditional grammar-driven language class' status quo, and has impacted what takes place in thousands the classrooms.

Part 1. Theoretical Foundations

In order to truly understand comprehension-based instruction, it is necessary to learn about Krashen's fundamentals of language acquisition. Krashen's work in second-language acquisition (e.g. Krashen, 1977) centers around five hypotheses: the acquisition – learning hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the comprehension hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis.

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis states that acquisition is subconscious. Acquisition is “picking up” a language. We are not aware we are acquiring while it is happening. In addition, everybody can acquire a language, and it is pleasant and effortless. It can happen at any age: The language acquisition device never shuts off.

Unlike acquisition, which is subconscious, learning is conscious. It involves being awareness of grammatical rules, and memorization. It is hard work.

The brain is much better at acquisition than at learning.

Hence, students in a TCI (Teaching with Comprehensible Input) program are often not even aware what they have acquired, and are surprised when they realize that they have acquired more than they know on a conscious level.

The Natural Order Hypothesis states that we acquire (not learn) aspects of language in a predictable order. Some language features are acquired earlier, and some later. This order is not based on language simplicity or complexity, nor can it be changed by instruction. However, this predictable order should not be used as a syllabus guide: In fact, no grammatical syllabus is necessary – Krashen has hypothesized that if students are provided with large quantities of comprehensible input, the result will be acquisition along the predicted order.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis: Negative emotions, such as anxiety (e.g. being afraid of being called on), self-doubt, and even boredom interfere with the process of acquiring a second language. These blocks prevent input from reaching the Language Acquisition Device. Thus, when the affective filter is high, acquisition is low. These blockages can be reduced by providing a lower-anxiety environment, and providing very interesting or “compelling” comprehensible input.

The Input Hypothesis: This is the centerpiece of the theory. According to the Input or Comprehension Hypothesis, we acquire language when we hear or read messages that we understand.

There are two important corollaries of the Input Hypothesis: (1) If students receive enough “comprehensible input,” they will be provided with just what they need: language that they are ready to acquire. (2) The ability to produce language is the result of getting comprehensible input. We do not learn to speak by speaking; speaking is the result of acquisition, not the cause.

Methods

Since the 1970s, when Krashen first proposed his hypotheses, several language teaching methods have emerged that are based on his work. Four of them that need to be mentioned are Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) by Blaine Ray (Ray & Seely, 2004), Focal Skills (FS) by Ashley Hastings (1995), Embedded Reading (ER) by Laurie Clarcq and Michelle Whaley (Clarcq, 2012), and Story Listening by Beniko Mason (Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch, & Krashen, 2009).

TPRS taps into the power of story and captures the nature of a collaborative story-asking process. Teachers guide the stories and students provide details to propel the story forward. This “collaborative story-asking” is centered around students’ interests. In one study (Watson, 2009), TPRS students outperformed traditional students on both written and oral tests.

Focal Skills Movie Talk (MT) was brought to the TCI world by Hastings (1995). It has become part of the core of TCI. MT utilizes either long authentic action-packed films or short, animated clips. A teacher describes what is happening on the screen, providing comprehensible input for his or her students. Utilizing an authentic film can be a culturally and linguistically rich experience for students. Paraphrasing an authentic film to bring down the language barrier and provide comprehensible input creates a win-win situation. Because the purpose of MT is to provide a flood of input in a comprehensible way, silent, short animations have been well received in the TCI world.

In any given language class, each teacher needs to deal with a variety of student levels in reading. Embedded Readings are designed to bridge the gap, and offer differentiated instruction to better meet each student’s needs. Typically, an Embedded Reading has four levels of reading difficulty. The base story contains the general plot and information. Then, each level has about a 25% increase in vocabulary and length. New information is often interjected into a sentence used in a previous level. Embedded Reading (ER) has become a cornerstone in the TCI world to build students’ reading ability and overall competence.

Story Listening was invented by Beniko Mason. The teacher selects an appropriate story for the students’ age, language level and interests, and tells the story to the class with the support of illustrations, and occasionally pantomime and translation. The teacher tells the story using familiar words and structures and includes new ones while telling the story. The goal of this support is to help students understand the story. Students are not expected to master new items: This policy is consistent with research showing that acquisition is gradual: we acquire a small

part of the meaning of new items each time we encounter them in a comprehensible context. Story Listening results in impressive acquisition of vocabulary. Mason and Krashen (2004) reported that vocabulary acquisition from Story Listening was more efficient than direct study, in terms of words acquired per minute of instruction/exposure.

Krashen suggests that the language class should be filled with comprehensible and interesting input. Methods such as TPR, TPRS, Movie Talk and Story Listening are effective because they are consistent with how our brains acquire language.

(In the next few issues, these methods will be discussed with detailed class designs and examples.)

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