

4. THE INPUT HYPOTHESIS

We will take much more time with this hypothesis than we did with the others for two reasons. First, much of this material is relatively new, while the other hypotheses have been described and discussed already in several published books and articles. The second reason is its importance, both theoretical and practical. The input hypothesis attempts to answer what is perhaps the most important question in our field, and gives an answer that has a potential impact on all areas of language teaching.

The important question is: How do we acquire language? If the Monitor hypothesis is correct, that acquisition is central and learning more peripheral, then the goal of our pedagogy should be to encourage acquisition. The question of how we acquire then becomes crucial.

This section is organized as follows: I will first present the input hypothesis before giving any supporting evidence. Following this is a description of the evidence from research in first and second language acquisition. We will then briefly cover evidence from applied linguistics research, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter V.

(a) Statement of the hypothesis

Let us first restate the question of how we acquire: given the correctness of the natural order hypothesis, how do we move from one stage to another? If an acquirer is at "stage 4", how can he progress to "stage 5"? More generally, how do we move from stage i , where i represents current competence, to $i + 1$, the next level? The input hypothesis makes the following claim: a necessary (but not sufficient) condition to move from stage i to stage $i + 1$ is that the acquirer understand input that contains $i + 1$, where "understand" means that the acquirer is focused on the meaning and not the form of the message.

We acquire, in other words, only when we understand language that contains structure that is "a little beyond" where we are now. How is this possible? How can we understand language that contains structures that we have not yet acquired? The answer to this apparent paradox is that we use more than our linguistic competence to help us understand. We also use context, our knowledge of the world, our extra-linguistic information to help us understand language directed at us.

The input hypothesis runs counter to our usual pedagogical approach in second and foreign language teaching. As Hatch (1978a) has pointed out, our assumption has been that we first learn structures, then practice using them in communication, and this is how fluency develops. The input hypothesis says the opposite. It says we acquire by "going for meaning" first, and as a result, we acquire structure!

We may thus state parts (1) and (2) of the input hypothesis as follows:

- (1) The input hypothesis relates to acquisition, not learning.
- (2) We acquire by understanding language that contains structure a little beyond our current level of competence ($i + 1$). This is done with the help of context or extra-linguistic information.

A third part of the input hypothesis says that input must contain $i + 1$ to be useful for language acquisition, but it need not contain only $i + 1$. It says that if the acquirer understands the input, and there is enough of it, $i + 1$ will automatically be provided. In other words, if communication is successful, $i + 1$ is provided. As we will discuss later, this implies that the best input should not even attempt to deliberately aim at $i + 1$. We are all familiar with syllabi that try to deliberately cover $i + 1$. There is a "structure of the day", and usually both teacher and student feel that the aim of the lesson is to teach or practice a specific grammatical item or structure. Once this structure is "mastered", the syllabus proceeds to the next one. This part of the input hypothesis implies that such a deliberate attempt to provide $i + 1$ is not necessary. As we shall see later, there are reasons to suspect that it may even be harmful.

Thus, part (3) of the input hypothesis is:

(3) When communication is successful, when the input is understood and there is enough of it, $i + 1$ will be provided automatically.

The final part of the input hypothesis states that speaking fluency cannot be taught directly. Rather, it "emerges" over time, on its own.⁴ The best way, and perhaps the only way, to teach speaking, according to this view, is simply to provide comprehensible input. Early speech will come when the acquirer feels "ready"; this state of readiness arrives at somewhat different times for different people, however. Early speech, moreover, is typically not grammatically accurate. Accuracy develops over time as the acquirer hears and understands more input. Part (4) of the input hypothesis is thus:

(4) Production ability emerges. It is not taught directly.

Source: Krashen, Stephen D. (1982) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Press. Excerpt from (2009) First Internet edition, pp. 27-29.