

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND THE ROLE OF INPUT IN THE CLASSROOM

Zuzana Straková

Learning a foreign language is a complex process, which must not necessarily be connected with a classroom and a teacher. Most definitions of learning describe it as a conscious process of internalisation of new facts, retention of information or skill, gained mostly through formal instruction. It stands in contrast to acquisition, which is frequently defined as a process in which learners internalise facts, rules or skills subconsciously, unaware of the reception process and without the connection to formal instruction. This distinction, proposed by Stephen Krashen (1982), has had a considerable influence on teaching foreign languages. The importance of the acquisition is especially important in the early age although Krashen suggests that even adults may benefit from it to certain extent. Ellis (1997, p.3) defines the second language acquisition as "the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside of a classroom". In this context he uses the term 'second' not to contrast with the term foreign but to express that whether people learn languages through the direct experience – living in the country, or as the result of the classroom instruction, "it is customary to speak generically of second language acquisition" (ibid.).

There are many factors which influence the second language acquisition. The internal factors include the mental disposition of a learner, the aptitude, the ability to handle communication process and others. The external factors, such as the conditions in which the learner operates might include the time and the frequency available for the exposure to the target language, the quality of the samples of the target language which the learners are exposed to, in other words the input.

Input that learners receive in the learning process plays a very important role in the language acquisition. Learners need to be given the opportunity to make sense of what they hear or see, to notice the contexts in which the samples of the language are used, to interact with them as well as to compensate for the insufficiency. The importance of the input has been advocated by a variety of learning theories. In the second half of the 20th century psychologists, biologists, linguists and other researchers proposed that the acquisition process (represented by the language acquisition device) the same way as any other biological function, works successfully only when stimulated at the right time – the time they called the Critical Period (Lightbown, Spada, 1999, p.19). They supported this hypothesis by several case studies (e.g. a well-known story of Victor or Gennie), although it was difficult to support it by numerous experiments since this research was based on the study of the first language. As Lightbown and Spada (ibid., p.60) claim the "developmental changes in the brain affect the nature of language acquisition. ... Language learning which occurs after the end of the critical period may not be based on the innate biological structures believed to contribute to first language acquisition or second language acquisition in early childhood." In the natural setting learners are exposed to a variety of language samples while they themselves do not necessarily have to contribute. The "passive" phase in which the child processes the language, reacts or does not react to it, observes the linguistic or extra linguistic messages coming through, lasts for much longer in the natural setting than we can afford in the formal instruction. That, however, does not mean that we should resign to the meaningfulness of this process. If children have a chance to be imbued with the target language, with the options of whether and how to react to it we simulate the natural conditions for the language acquisition.

The innatist theory, mainly represented by Krashen, assumed that the success in the acquisition process requires a "comprehensible input", i.e. the input slightly beyond the level of the learner's comprehensibility. This input should be meaningful and interesting to the children although it does not necessarily have to be grammatically sequenced. That means that children might be exposed when necessary to such grammar structures which in language courses occur only in later stages, for instance the past tense. If the story or the situation requires that it should be used the same way as it is used in the natural context. There is, of course, the condition that learners should be able to understand or to guess what is happening from the context or from the interaction. In agreement with this viewpoint the interactionist theorists value the comprehensible input which should be directed to the learner through interactional modifications. This does not have to involve linguistic modification but can rely on the repetition, slower speed of talk, the use of gestures or on some other contextual cues. Michael Long (1983) also supports the meaningfulness of the interaction between the learner and the message and underlines the importance of preparing children from the early stages to express non-comprehension through the simplest possible ways. However, the tendency of the school teachers is to opt for the "finely-tuned" input, which is exactly at the learner's current level. All that goes beyond is tended to be translated into the mother tongue.

To adjust the school environment and to benefit the most from the child's disposition to acquire language at the early age we should carefully consider the quality of the input we offer. Several researches that we conducted at the primary level demonstrated extremely high reliance of the teachers upon the mother tongue and the minimal use of extensive listening practice in the target language. Some teachers use the story-telling, however, the number of the teachers is too low to be satisfied. What seems to be the crucial problem is still prevailing strong behaviourist belief that learners learn what they hear and repeat. That is why most teachers say clearly isolated sentences and ask children to repeat after them. Many teachers admit they do not use stories because they think there are too many new words in them and children would need to learn those words before they could listen to the story. They also pay meticulous attention to the accuracy although this is typical exclusively for the instructional situation and only seldom occurs in the natural setting. Parents only rarely comment on children's mistakes. Some mistakes are even treasured by parents and recorded. However, the frequent exposure allows the child to notice the correct and appropriate use of the words and structures. If this is not case of the classroom the teachers have to cater for this lack. When the teacher notices a mistake it is more effective to provide numerous language samples containing the problematic item rather than offer the correct version. As Foster-Cohen (1999, p.116) claims "children generally respond poorly to direct correction except on small straightforward points such as particular morphological forms (e.g. irregular past tenses), and even then, correction rarely leads to immediate acquisition." The shift from the behaviourist approaches to the principles of the cognitive psychology can be expressed in several points, as summarised by Glover and Bruning (c.f. Curtain, Pesola, 1988, p.65):

1. Students are active processors of information.
2. Learning is most likely to occur when information is made meaningful to students.
3. How students learn may be more important than what they learn.
4. Cognitive processes become automatic with repeated use.
5. Metacognitive skills can be developed through instruction.
6. The most enduring motivation for learning is internal motivation.
7. There are vast differences in students' information-processing abilities.

It is also important to emphasize another type of input that seems to be lacking in the classrooms. The teacher's genuine reactions to what is happening in the class. Although this

type of input does not necessarily develop the language structures as Foster-Cohen (1999, p. 98) claims “being active as a communicator builds functional (pragmatic) skills of message design, and gives practice in fluency”. Children at that age notice very well the behaviour of adults and copy the reactions, spoken utterances without being urged to do so. If the teachers use the target language to express agreement, disagreement, surprise, request and so forth there is a great chance that the child-learner will do the same. It is, however, important to focus the input on the immediate situations since the children operate in the “here and now” for their early years and it will, therefore, be easier for them to read the context.

To benefit the most from the acquisition phase potential it is necessary to immerse children in the environment full of samples and messages in the target language. These should be meaningful and understandable to children. An example of such an immersion could be using stories, dramatising them, using posters with the most repeated phrase, repeatedly playing songs, dialogues, or short stories in English while children are primarily focused on something else, e.g. colouring, or cutting out pictures.

When we consider the national syllabus these aspects are slightly implied in the introductory part but not fully supported in the description of individual years especially in the first years of schooling. The teacher cannot anticipate from the syllabus whether the individual vocabulary or grammar structures are there to be mastered actively – within the productive language skills – or within the reception through the listening. This difference seems to be crucial and not all teachers are able to recognise the importance of sufficient immersion into the foreign language within the reception in making the production phase fully efficient.

As it has been mentioned the second language acquisition is influenced by many factors – internal as well as external. However, it is important to note that the external and internal factors should be in harmony since even a huge exposure to the language might not guarantee the progress and the success if the child is not disposed to learn. To offer the conditions to allow the maximum benefits of the second language acquisition should be the aim of the early language courses at our schools.

Bibliography

CAMERON, L. 2003. *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0-521-77434-9

CURTAIN, H. A., PESOLA, C. A. 1988. *Languages and Children – Making the Match*. USA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc. ISBN 0-201-12290-1

ELLIS, R. 1997. *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-437212-X

FOSTER-COHEN, S. 1999. *An Introduction to Child Language Development*. Essex: Addison Wesley Longman Limited. ISBN 0-582-08729-5

GARMAN, M. 1991. *Psycholinguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0-521-27641-1

HOMOLOVÁ, E. 2003. *Autentický materiál ako prostriedok rozvoja jazykových a komunikatívnych kompetencií žiakov*. Banská Bystrica: Univerzita Mateja Bela. ISBN 80-8055-788-8

LIGHTBOWN, P., SPADA, N. 1999. *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-437000-3

OSVOJOVANIE CUDZIEHO JAZYKA A VÝZNAM KONTAKTU S CUDZÍM JAZYKOM VO VYUČOVANÍ

Resumé

Autorka článku sa zamerala na osvojovanie cudzieho jazyka a na kvalitu jazyka, ktorému sú vystavení učiaci sa v mladšom školskom veku. Táto kvalita má zásadný význam pre ich ďalšie smerovanie v učebnom procese. Dôležitosť a význam obdobia, ktoré umožňuje osvojovací proces, sa často v pedagogickej praxi podceňujú, a je preto potrebné prehodnotiť prístupy k vyučovaciemu procesu v oblasti cudzích jazykov.

The article was written in the frame of VEGA project 1/4509/07: Kvalitatívna transformácia obsahu vyučovania anglického jazyka v mladšom školskom veku.