Week 13 — Answers


1. What is input and what are the forms as well as sources for input?

Discussions in SLA regarding input are often filtered through Krashen’s (1977) input hypothesis, but in our discussion of input we will move beyond that as it is vague (how do we define or quantify i+1?) and also limiting at the same time. Krashen (1998) focuses only on linguistic input for the purposes of building competence. But of course as we are dealing with language people tend to see input as linguistic only. Oh (2001: 69) defines input as, “all types of linguistic data from a target language that learners are exposed to and from which they learn”. It should be clear that input is more, can be much more than just language. Reflecting on claims we have made in this class about the central importance of perception in learning it should be clear that input is that which we perceive. Clearly, input does have a very important role in learning. It should also be clear that input comes in many forms and can be used for a variety purposes within different approaches to language learning. We will, therefore, start from a holistic perspective looking first at types or forms of input and then moving on to more specific discussions of their possible efficacy.

Although we are language teachers, and our overarching goal is to help our students learn language, it should be acknowledged that there are many different ways of doing this and even if we are sold on the idea of an input-based approach, correspondingly there are also different types of input. For our purposes, we can make a large distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic input. And this is based on the following definition of input from The Free Dictionary (n.d.), “Something put into a system or expended in its operation to achieve output or a result.” This is quite different than the definitions that we often get in our field which tend to focus only on linguistic input. Essentially, we use input to try to get some sort of reaction from the students. Input is carefully chosen, even carefully constructed, manipulated, altered, and planned sequentially
by the teacher. It something that teachers and materials/course designers purposefully choose and use in the class as a way of generating reactions that are believed to be useful for language development.

As people in the business of teaching language we tend to focus on linguistic input as a way of providing models for our students. Thus, one of the main purposes of linguistic input is to provide models of language for our students. The reaction we wish to foster by providing this linguistic input is learning and this means learning of the forms present in the input. So really, it is a very simple prospect. Essentially learning from input is appropriating the linguistic forms from the input. The teacher, the materials, etc...provide linguistic input and students are expected to learn that. The big concern regarding this traditional and very basic approach is how can we enhance learning of the aspects of the input that we think the students should learn. This implies an input-based approach to language teaching and language learning.

In this approach, championed by Krashen (still), the idea is that linguistic input (models) are sufficient for achieving high levels of learning — okay but really only for the development of competence. This also implies a disconnect between competence and performance which is not universally agreed upon. In this approach, learners are provided with large amounts of comprehensible input and they deal with this as more or less outsiders to the language. Input used in this way is supposed to develop their competence (knowledge of the target language). This knowledge may be related to forms, as is most often the case, but it may also be related to other aspects of language such as pragmatic concerns related to use. Again, input-based approaches are also flexible as long as we are flexible with the input.

The other main purpose of input, and this includes both linguistic and non-linguistic input, is to provide something that the students can react to. The types of expected reactions can vary. They can involve linguistic reactions or more passive types of reactions. When one watches a movie or even a short Youtube clip, what do we expect them to do in response? In the real world, there may be no expected response. In the language classroom, when using linguistic input as the stimulus we generally expect the learners to use the input in their response to it. When using non-linguistic input this can be input focusing on specific language form use, as in when we ask students to describe a picture, or it can be something that provides or enhances context, as pictures are used in the earlier tasks of the MATE speaking test. Additionally, non-linguistic input can be used to initiate language use as a natural response. For example if I throw water in a student’s face purposefully I am expecting a certain type of response. The water in the face is the input.

Input can come in all sensory modes, but linguistic input is generally limited to spoken and written modes. This means we experience written input by reading and spoken input by listening and for this reason many language programs begin with these two input types. In an input-focused classroom learning the skills of reading and listening are secondary. The mediums are used to present input which we expect the students to learn. The basic idea is that more input is better because more input means more opportunities
Another important issue regarding input is the source of the input. The source of the input can be some outside source, the teacher, fellow students or oneself. The source has an effect on the type and possibly also the amount of input a given learner is exposed to. Interactionist (See Young (1999) for an early review of sociolinguistic approaches to SLA) and usage-based approaches (Ellis, 2011) may lead to more and more diverse types of input.

2. There are many issues regarding the efficacy of input. What are some ways of making input effective for our students?

Discussions regarding the effectiveness of input typically, following Krashen (1982), center around the idea of comprehensibility and, more recently, noticing. The basic idea is one that makes intuitive sense. The basic idea is that for input to be effective, it needs to be comprehensible to the learners. A learner needs to understand, to some degree, what they are being exposed to in order to make that exposure worthwhile. But of course, it should be clear at this point that ignores some of the different ways and mechanisms that people use to learn.

Salience of input — attention (some basic forms of input might be salient or preferred over others, e.g. visual or auditory input)

Specific elements of input can be made more salient though a range of different elaboration techniques. There are several ways of doing this. Typical is the practice of bolding, italicizing or underlining certain words or phrases. Another way is by culling out the bits of the input (words, expressions, grammatical structures) and providing things for the students to do with them, before or after the input is encountered. The potential problem in contriving materials to accommodate certain features might render other features less useful.

Comprehensibility — simplification

The idea here is that input should be comprehensible to be effective. In order to make input comprehensible to their students, teachers and materials developers have tended to address the input itself and have taken to simplifying the input. The idea is to make the overall input easier to comprehend so that the intended target points can be better understood and learned. This is often done by talking an authentic text and contriving it. Other teachers write their own materials based on certain features being able to be noticed and learned for the students based on their current level. The possible danger is that through simplification the other features of the text are rendered awkward and strange.

Elaboration

Frequency and patterning of forms

Task repetition

Motivational factors

Motivational factors are something that of course we can use to help our students work harder and learn more from input. There are different types of motivation. We can use extrinsic
motivation as is often the case with older learners. We can also try to intrinsically motivate our students by providing them with input that they find interesting.

More input enhances sensory learning (but this seems to be affected by relevance to tasks (Seitz & Wantanabe, 2005)). This basic idea is addressed below but it bears mentioning quickly here in relation to this important observation. Human behavior is basically goal driven. People do things for certain reasons. Reasons that somehow match by learners internal states are ones that will be more motivating for them. The reason must also be clear and the learner should be on aware of the reason. As teachers we often design tasks around our goals and objectives but these are things that students maybe do not need to be aware. We have certain overriding linguistic concerns when we try to get our students to do something (and in this case this involves interacting or dealing with a piece of input) but students have more real-world types of concerns.

Yes of course they might be interested their language development but they may not be overly interested in linguistic developments and there's a important difference between the two of them new matter how old people get. Most students are not linguists in fact even applied linguist aren't always linguists and as a result may not be interested in specifically meant was the reasons for performing certain tasks.

There are also several aspects inherent in the input itself that makes the input more or less effective. These include variables such as length, complexity (in all its guises), topic, expected outcomes, familiarity, etc...

An important part of this issue of efficacy is not the input alone, but what we ask or expect the students to do with the input. This is an important aspect of how we can expect our students to deal with more authentic types of input. Traditionally people have altered the input but not altered what it was that they expected the students to do with the input. All input was dealt with in similar ways, for example students were expected to comprehend a text and to prove this they answered comprehension questions. But it should be clear that we can alter the types of input that we would like our students to deal with on the basis of what the goals are based on but we expect them to do with the input. We can provide our students, for example a lengthy authentic which is way above their level in some ways but asked them to do something quite simple with it, for example circling all the articles and drawing an arrow to the word that they modify. Teachers need to be more flexible at both ends because really in dealing with tasks we can envision a type of seesaw. A seesaw is no fun when it is constantly just at balance, a state in which the two ends have equal weight. When the input is heavy the task should be lighter, and when the input is light the task should be heavy. And what makes learning; just like what's fun about playing on a seesaw is the variation. People shift their weight so that they get to bounce up and down and that is engaging and motivating and also provides us with the opportunity to develop a wider range of different strategies for our students.
How effective or useful input is seen as being is not measured in an absolute way. The efficacy of input is determined by the goals we have established and how well the input is used to meet those goals.

3. How do we expect students to use input? That is, what are some ways of using input to help our students learn?

Expectations about use of input is an important issue in learning. Simply flooding our students with input for no apparent reason to us, or more critically, to them may not be overly effective. As mentioned above, there are input-based approaches to teaching that forever have the students basically outside the real context of language. They are exposed to input looking into and analyzing usage situations, but are never part of them. It is important to see how this can and does affect our student’s view of themselves and the language (their own identity in relation to the TL) and there are lasting effects of this, but an overreliance on this approach, on any one approach may be less effective.

As we have briefly discussed in this class, the higher order cognitive functions are purpose-driven. People do things for certain reasons. That is, we are motivated to do things to achieve certain goals. This is often something that is left out of the discussion on input, the assumption seemingly being that students are somehow motivated to engage with input. The goal of learning is in and of itself a reward which drives certain types of behavior, i.e., behavior that leads to better learning by paying attention to and analyzing input. Input itself may be part of one’s motivation to do something but it is usually part of a larger driving force. This is something that we can control through not only picking the right type of input (input which is interesting and engaging), but by also picking things that we would like the students to do with the input which is motivating as well.

References


Washington, DC: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.