

A DESCRIPTION OF LANGUAGE INPUT, OUTPUT AND INTERACTIONAL MODIFICATIONS: A DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE

**(Phân tích diễn ngôn ngôn ngữ đầu vào, sản phẩm đầu ra
và ngôn ngữ hiệu chỉnh qua tương tác)**

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Bài viết trình bày sơ lược lịch sử phát triển của lý thuyết đặc thù ngôn ngữ thứ hai, giới hạn ở phạm vi ảnh hưởng của quá trình tương tác giữa người học với người bản ngữ, của ngôn ngữ đầu vào và của sản phẩm ngôn ngữ đầu ra đối với quá trình học tiếng nước ngoài. Dựa trên phương pháp nghiên cứu diễn dịch và phân tích các cứ liệu Anh-Việt, bài viết đã làm rõ thêm và chứng minh cho các giả thuyết liên quan đến các nhân tố ảnh hưởng nêu trên. Các kết quả thu được từ bài viết có thể đem lại một cách nhìn mới trong việc tổ chức các hoạt động giao tiếp trong và ngoài lớp học trong quá trình giảng dạy ngoại ngữ.

1. Introduction:

Current theories of second/foreign language acquisition have claimed that language input that has been made available to the learners (Krashen, 1985), interaction that they have been involved in (Long, 1983), and the output that they have been able to produce (Swain, 1995), all may have great impact on the target language acquired.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), for example, maintains that the input which is modified and made comprehensible to the learners and which contains a little beyond the learners' present level of competence is ideal for their second language acquisition (SLA). Thus, according to Krashen, reading and listening skills play a very important role in the learners' second language acquisition.

Many other researchers (e.g. Long, 1983; Pica *et al*, 1987; Ellis, 1995), however, claim that the interaction that the learners are involved in also has an important effect on the comprehension of second language input. The interaction can take place between Native speakers (NS) and Non-native speakers (NNS), between NNS and NNS, and between the teacher and the learner(s). Long (1983) points out that modifications in the interactional structure of conversation are more important than the input itself in making the input comprehensible to the learners.

Closely associated with this work of Long is the revised interaction hypothesis recently put forward by Ellis (1991), who provides a theoretical account of the relationship between interaction and L2 acquisition. Ellis (1991) finds it necessary to make a weaker claim of comprehensible input, and hypothesizes that modified

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interactions will facilitate the process of ‘noticing’, ‘comparing’ and ‘interaction’ (p.198) in L2 acquisition.

Recently there has also been a shift of attention from the study of linguistic features of input to that of the role of output in second language acquisition. Ellis (1991), for example, asserts that output is ‘a mechanism that facilitates the integration of new linguistic knowledge’ (p.202). In a more recent paper, Swain (1995) attempts to outline the output hypothesis and to provide evidence for it. Swain (1995, pp.128-132) argues that in producing the target language, learners can consciously recognize some of their linguistic problems (the ‘noticing’ function of output), can test a hypothesis held by them about how the target language works (the ‘hypothesis-testing’ function), and finally, can control and internalize their own linguistic knowledge as they reflect upon their own output (the ‘reflection’ function).

While these hypotheses still need further empirical evidence to support their claims, it is possible to assume that comprehensible input, output, and interactional modifications are important elements in SLA.

My assumption is that a study of NS-NNS interactions outside formal classrooms can provide useful insights into the nature of input, output, and the interactional modifications that non-native learners are experiencing. A study of NS-NNS conversations, in addition, can result in valuable pedagogical implications for foreign language learning and teaching activities.

In this paper I will analyze the data from the perspective of language input, output, and NS-NNS interactions. The data analysis will then reveal opportunities of potential language development for NNS.

2. Nature of data:

To collect the data for this paper, I recorded a conversation between Randall, a native speaker of English (NS), and Lam, a non-native speaker of English (NNS), who has been studying English for seven years. These two participants performed a pedagogic task that I set for them as follows: The NNS was supposed to do a reading comprehension exercise which focused on new vocabulary items. In order to fulfil the task, the NNS had to negotiate with his interlocutor for more language input. The NS, who had not been given any time for preparation, was supposed to help his partner to complete the task. The reason for not letting the NS prepare the task in advance was that I wanted to minimize the kind of one-way information soliciting conversation. Even though this task was not really an ‘information-exchange’ activity which can ‘promote more interactional restructuring’ (Ellis, 1991, p.182), I still believe that the two participants had a somehow equivalent status to each other, which is seen by Pica (1987) as a determinant of interactional modifications.

3. Data analysis and Discussion:

3.1. Nature of Language Input

According to Krashen (1981), the special variety of ‘foreigner talk’ spoken by native speakers to foreigners outside the classroom has similar characteristics to the ‘teacher talk’ addressed to them in the classroom. One of these characteristics is that the

‘foreigner talk’ shows signs of adaptation to the foreigner’s level (Krashen, 1981, p.131). In the data that I collected, there is evidence that the NS tries to adapt to his interlocutor’s linguistic level of competence. For example, in the following text:

28. NNS. I don’t know the tetchy mood \ MEANS
 29. NS. \ / OK + / TETchy mood means + a / \ BAD mood
 30. NNS. a \ BAD mood
 31. NS. \ YEAH
 32. NNS. *uh ((nil)) *
 33. NS. * / \ OR * + + * / \ OR *
 34. NNS. * do not feel \ WELL* or something
 35. NS. yeah + a / BAD mood like not \ HAPpy + * may be * / ANGry

The NS explains the meaning of the word ‘*tetchy*’ by giving several equivalents of this word such as ‘*a bad mood*’ (line 29), or ‘*not happy*’ and ‘*angry*’ (line 35). He also employs short, simple syntactic structures in explaining the word meaning to his non-native friend, thus facilitating a quick comprehension of the word ‘*tetchy*’ on the part of the NNS.

Besides the simplification of input, repetition is another means of input modifications (Long, 1981, quoted in Tsui, 1985). An example of repetition is found in the following text:

40. NNS. person who is + + in a \ TETchy mood + is / NOW + + +
 41. + + \ [IrITEIbl]
 42. NS \ YEAH + irritable + do you know what irritable / MEANS
 43. NNS means \ ANGry

When the NNS has found the correct item (line 41) to fill in the blank, but mispronounced this word, the NS repeats the word (line 42). This repetition serves two purposes. Interactionally, it may help the NNS to ensure that his comprehension is correct. Linguistically, I argue that this repetition reminds the NNS of the correct pronunciation of the word ‘*irritable*’.

Another example of repetition which serves as modified input can be seen in

145. NNS. \ YEAH + I understand + and the / SEven + + among all forms of
 146. NNS. / MIStakes + prophecy is the most [γρατφυτ] + [γρατφυτ↔] + [graτju↔s]
 147. NS. \ graTUitous
 148. NNS. \ graTUitous

where the NNS seems to have much phonological difficulty with the item ‘*gratuitous*’ (line 146). In line 147, the NS’s repetition of the word may be said to help his interlocutor overcome this difficulty.

Such examples of repetition functioning to correct NNS phonological errors are relatively few in my data. This corresponds to one of the findings in Chun *et al* (1982), who report that even though NNS may encounter a great deal of phonological difficulties, the number of NS corrections of NNS phonological errors is very limited.

This finding may be of some value in EFL classroom practice. That native speakers do not often correct NNS errors does not mean a low frequency of errors made by non-native learners. It may simply mean that native speakers only wish to focus on those errors may be an obstacle to the transfer of ‘core information’ (Avery *et al*, 1985) of the discourse. If this is the case, then, it is recommended that ‘remedial teaching’ (Corder, 1981) be given serious consideration in the teaching of pronunciation to EFL students.

3.2. Patterns of Interactional Modifications

Long (1983) has hypothesized a theoretical link between negotiated interaction, comprehensible input and SLA. Although a direct influence of the negotiation of meanings on the SLA has not yet been empirically proved (Ellis, 1994), a number of researchers find it useful to examine the effect of negotiations on the comprehension of language input by NNS (eg. Lightbown, 1985; Larsen & Long, 1991; Tsui, 1991; Allwright *et al*, 1991; Clennell, 1995).

The evidence from the data in this paper also supports the view that the negotiation of meanings may result in better comprehensible input. I will illustrate this by providing examples related to the three most important processes of interactional adjustments. These are ‘comprehension checks’, ‘confirmation checks’, and ‘clarification request’ (Long, 1983).

3.2.1. Comprehension checks

Long (1983) maintains that comprehension checks show an attempt by the NS to anticipate and prevent a break-down in communication. For example, in the following extract

40. NNS. person who is + + in a \TETchy mood + is / NOW + + +

41. + + \ [IρIτeIβλ]

42. NS \ YEAH + irritable + do you know what irritable / MEANS

43. NNS. means \ ANGry

44. NS \ YEAH + so / IRritable + / IRritable is the \ / RIGHT word + because

although the NNS has succeeded in filling the gap with the correct word ‘irritable’ (line 41), the NS still wants to check if his non-native partner understands the word completely. In doing so, the NS uses a comprehension check (line 42). This process of negotiation seems to be beneficial in that the NS can provide instant and constant feedback to the non-native interlocutor.

3.2.2. Confirmation checks

A confirmation+ check is the speaker's query as to whether his or her understanding of the other interlocutor's meaning is correct (Long, 1983). Long assumes that confirmation checks are always formed by rising intonation questions. Here are some examples from the data.

16. NS. / QUELL means + uh + / QUELL means to \ STOP

17. NNS. / to STOP + \ YEAH

or

88. NS. abomination is something \ BAD

89. NNS. something / BAD

However, although Long (1983) defines confirmation checks as any expressions made by native speakers, it is not always the case. Negotiations of meanings can take place between interlocutors and therefore, each interlocutor has an equal role in modifying the interactions. The examples above have shown that in my data it is the NNS who initiates all the confirmation checks.

3.2.3. Clarification Requests

It is my view that clarification requests play a more important role in the interactional modifications than the other processes previously discussed. They can show an active participation of the NNS in the modifications of meanings and thus, give NNS more opportunities to get richer comprehensible input.

My data shows that the NNS has actively made a number of clarification requests to fulfil his task. For example, when he meets difficulty with the item '*quell*', he initiates an intentional 'topic switch' (Long, 1983) and requests for clarification (line 14-15) :

13. NNS. \ inforMAtion minister \ is TRYing to + + / FEARS OF a looming

14. oil \ CRIsis + + so I have to \ CHOOSE + + what does the +

15. the \ QUELL + / QUELL mean + I am \ SOrry

16. NS. / QUELL means + uh + / QUELL means to \ STOP

17. NNS. / to STOP + \ YEAH

The fact that the NNS is using many clarification requests in the conversation may suggest that he is not under any constraints in negotiating with his native partner. It is then possible to postulate that EFL students may have more opportunities to modify the interactions in classrooms if they are provided with an environment in which they share an equivalent status to their interlocutors. Students should be made to believe more in themselves "with regard to meeting their needs and fulfilling their obligations as conversational participants" (Pica, 1987, p.4).

3.3. Analysis of NNS Language Output:

At the beginning of this paper I have mentioned the three major functions of output hypothesized by Swain (1995). What I have collected from the data can illustrate these functions.

In his negotiation for meanings, the NNS notices that as he speaks, there are problems with the target language that he is trying to produce. For example, when he comes across the word ‘*gratuitous*’ (line 146), the NNS may notice a gap between his internal linguistic knowledge of the English pronunciation of words ending in —*tuitous* and his present pronunciation of the word in context :

146. NS /MIStakes + prophecy is the most [grætput] + [grætput↔] + [grætput↔s]

147. NS. \graTUITous

148. NNS. \graTUITous

The NNS’s repetition of the word for three times (line 146) shows that he may be testing his previous hypothesis of the pronunciation of similar words that he has met before. When the NS provides a corrective feedback of the pronunciation (line 147), the NNS repeats it (line 148). At this stage we can assume that his new hypothesis of the pronunciation of the word is now being ‘internalized’ (Swain, 1995).

Although it is hard to make any generalization about the role of output in the acquisition of new items such as the word ‘*gratuitous*’ in the previous example, I would comment that firstly, the output that the NNS has produced in this context is valuable in the maintenance of his interaction with the native interlocutor. Thanks to this output, the NS can adjust his communicative strategies and provide his non-native interlocutor with more comprehensible input. Secondly, I would agree with Swain (1995) that the produced output may not only enhance fluency but accuracy as well. Take phonology for example. The more output the NNS produces in the pronunciation of a word, the nearer he or she can get to the target-like production of this word. Thus it is possible to suggest that class activities should provide EFL students with sufficient opportunities to practice speaking and writing, ie. to produce more output.

4. Conclusion:

In this paper I have presented some current SLA theories on comprehensible input, learner interaction and the effect of second language output. These theories have been illustrated with the data collected from a pedagogic task set out to a pair of NNS and NS. No generalizations can be made from the analysis of such a small amount of data; however, EFL researchers and lecturers may draw out useful insights into these areas of the SLA, which in turn may hopefully assist them in creating more effective teaching strategies in foreign language classroom practice.

APPENDIX : Transcription symbols with prosodic information

.....	:	Overlapping
+	:	A short pause to indicate a tone unit or breath division
++	:	A longer pause to indicate hesitation or strategic purpose
()	:	Contextual information accompanying text
(())	:	Uncertain transcription
((?))	:	Indecipherable item
BAbY	:	The capital letters indicate a tonic syllable

\, /, \/, \^	:	Pitch direction on the tonic syllable
1,2,3	:	Numbers showing lines
[]	:	Non-native variation from standard pronunciation

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