Krashen (1981, 1987) took a theory of first language acquisition largely developed by Chomsky and applied it to second language acquisition and development. Krashen assumes learning a second language is not like learning to, for example, ride a bicycle. Based on these beliefs, many researchers label him as a ‘mentalist’ to distinguish him from the ‘cognitivists’.

**Acquisition vs learning: the ‘learnt’ and the ‘acquired’ stores**

For Krashen there are two separate memory stores: the ‘learnt’ store and the ‘acquired’ store. Learnt material is stored separately from acquired knowledge and they never interface. According to Krashen, the ‘monitor’ is what pays attention to the “intake of learnt
information and its subsequent use”, whereas acquisition and the use of acquired knowledge is not monitored. The use of learnt material depends on the time and knowledge of the rule. For Krashen, acquisition follows a “universal order” (‘order of acquisition’), whereas learning can be artificially altered. To his view, human beings have an ‘affective filter’ which filters out new information if they are uncomfortable, tense or worried: acquisition can only occur if the affective filter is ‘low’.

**Comprehensible input**

Krashen also emphasizes the important role that comprehensible input can play in promoting language acquisition. To him, “new language is acquired when the input is comprehensible and includes some new language which the learner is ready for (i+1). In simple words, we can only learn from what we can understand. For Stephen Krashen and his input hypothesis, learners need to be exposed to input (i.e. lexis and grammatical structures) that are ‘input +1’, i.e. one step more advanced than the learners’ knowledge and linguistic development. Michael Long’s interaction hypothesis further emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input but claims that it is most effective through the negotiation of meaning.

Krashen has been widely criticized (McLaughlin, 1987) but the idea of comprehensible input is still widely accepted.

It is widely assumed, and probably rightly, that samples of a SL heard but not understood by a would-be acquirer of that language serve no useful purpose in the SLA process. Only comprehensible input will do. The question is, how does that input become comprehensible to the learner? (Long, 1983)

In our attempts to foster language learning in the foreign language classroom it is important to examine to what degree such modifications of speech assist in interlanguage development. How can we make a more difficult text easier? How would we know that we have succeeded?
Devices for improving comprehension

Long (1983) identifies the following devices:

**Strategies for avoiding trouble**
- Relinquish topic control
- Select salient topics
- Treat topics briefly
- Make new topics salient
- Check NNS’ comprehension

**Tactics for repairing trouble**
- Accept unintentional topic switch
- Request clarification
- Confirm own comprehension
- Tolerate ambiguity

**Strategies and tactics for avoiding and repairing trouble**
- Use slow pace
- Stress key words
- Pause before key words
- Repeat own utterances
- Repeat others’ utterances
Based on our specific language classrooms as well as our students’ level and needs it is important to carefully study these devices and examine the implications they could have on teacher behavior in the language classroom.

- **Input modifications and negotiation of meaning: Do they foster language learning?**

  When examining learner discourse and its role in language acquisition we first of all need to consider its similarities and differences with native speaker talk and whether there are any modifications. Researchers divide this *foreigner talk* into two types: ungrammatical and grammatical. The first one (i.e. the simplification of speech by deleting certain key grammatical structures when talking to foreigners) is likely to be rejected by some learners as it may sound pragmatically inappropriate to them. The grammatical one is the most common one, where input is simplified or delivered at a slower pace, using shorter sentences and having as a primary focus the negotiation of meaning.

- **Learning by discovery (learning to ‘read’ the contextual clues)**

  The importance of *noticing* in successful language learning has been highlighted by many linguists and SLA researchers (Skehan, Long, Harmer, Thornbury). There seems to be a general consensus among them that some form of attention to input is necessary for effective learning to take place. Noticing is considered to be successful when it leads to language acquisition, when our learners’ attention is shifted towards a TL structure, which is then acquired, internalized and eventually becomes part of their TL output.

  The key, therefore, is not just to make our students notice linguistic patterns in the TL. Something that has ‘grasped’ our attention could easily be forgotten after a while. Our goal as teachers is to create the appropriate circumstances in order to raise our learners’ consciousness, to help them successfully acquire this new knowledge and to begin to actively use it by turning input into intake and then into successful TL output. This blog post’s main purpose will be to draw our attention as teachers to the importance of this concept in foreign language learning and in particular to grammar teaching.

  Noticing mainly has to do with our learners being able to understand and grasp the meaning from the input they receive in terms of a newly introduced structure or grammar point. Successful learning will take place when they notice this ‘gap’ between the target language and their interlanguage and will actively try to incorporate the new structures in their TL output.

  For Ellis (2001), noticing occurs mainly due to a ‘communication breakdown’. Before our learners ‘pick up new knowledge’, they have to ‘notice’ the difference between what they
know and what they need to learn in order to effectively communicate meaning in the TL (The noticing hypothesis). In order to negotiate meaning, they need to figure out what they need to learn in order to fill in their linguistic gaps. Teacher interference could be very useful at this point, as long as it is subtle and it simply helps students into a better understanding of their learning gap.

By loading the input we give to our learners with the target forms we want them to notice, we facilitate the learning process and give them the necessary clues they need in order to process and eventually absorb the new knowledge. Variety and authenticity in tasks is also important here as learners have the opportunity to reproduce the grammatical patterns in many different scenarios and for different communicative purposes.

References


