The Case Study of Comprehension Input in English Acquisition

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Abstract. This paper is a case study of three children. Through the Comprehension Input in non-English speaking countries before go to elementary school, two Chinese kids develop their English from very beginning to moderate level far more outstanding than most Chinese peers or even better than average American kids born in United States. The results confirm that improving second language competence through Comprehension Input is feasible.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an emphasis on controlled experimental studies, such as Strategy Based Instruction that strengthens the study strategy guiding (Shi, 2017). It is consistent with the Skill-Building Hypothesis that stresses conscious knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. The opposite direction of all skills-related hypotheses is Comprehension Input (Krashen, 2017.7), such as the Natural Approach or TPRS which borrow directly from the baby’s first language acquisition process, that contain compelling reading comprehension input, low filter and silent period (Mason & Krashen, 2017).

It is clear that case histories can be very helpful, but they need to be considered as a group, and case histories can be valid forms of scientific research (Krashen, 2014). In this paper, three main cases are presented and analyzed. If a hypothesis is valid, then it must be consistent with all cases.

The Hypotheses to Be Considered Are These

The Comprehension Hypothesis means that we acquire language when we understand what we hear and read. Our mastery of the individual components of language is the result of getting comprehensible input. (Krashen, 2017.7). The input should not only be interesting but also compelling. Compelling means that the input is so interesting that you forget that it is in another language (Krashen, 2011).

The Affective Filter Hypothesis means that affective variables do not impact language acquisition directly but prevent input from reaching the part of brain responsible for language acquisition (Krashen, 2004). The tighter inside, the worse the acquisition will be; the more relaxing, the better the result turns out to be.

The Silent Period Hypothesis suggests that before a child can speak to communicate; he needs time to build up competence via listening enough. (Krashen, 1987; Ariza, 2012 ).

Cases Study

Case 1 George, born in Rochester, NY, US in 2010 and was brought back to China only 100 days old. Since he was just a three-month fetus in his mother’s belly, his mum began to tell him stories in
English and Chinese respectively consciously and attentively and this habit continues as a routine schedule, fixed on 15-60 minutes before go to bed, even on their vocation. In daily life, Mandarin is used only at home. But George is exposed to multiple English cartoons or news or songs while George is playing at home. He spends at least 3 years in listening silently without speaking English except for singing some English songs along the video now and then, when you ask him in Chinese, he might answer in English directly, such as Yes or No, every time when he sees English cartoon, he laughs loudly and singing and dancing along. Obviously, he understands some part. When he comes across some easy English story books, such as Where is my mum? At the age of nearly three years old, George said “It is too easy.” He could translate into Chinese directly. When George was 3 years old, he had an American tutor Diane who agrees with his mother’s principles. They meet once an hour every Saturday. When George was 4 years 8 months old, he returns back to US, he listens more and speaks less at first, but from very easy answer to some easy sentences full of mistakes to retell the teacher’s story, and he spends half a year in silent period in US then to open his mouth. Then he graduated from preschool and entered into Kindergarten in a public Elementary school in his community at age of 5. He catches up with other around quickly and reaches the standard to upgrade. His teacher Ms Erato even nominates him to be a gifted student. During all these process, George keeps on reading as usual, one hour before go to bed, half day on Saturday in public library.

Case 2 Tiantian was born in Beijing in 2003, her mother is a Chinese professor in Peking University (one of top universities in China). Mum only spoke in English with her before Tiantian was three years old at home. And Tiantian spent a lot of time in seeing the English videos and playing games in English. Her mum taught her with self-made cards and read her different kinds of English story books. When Tiantian was three years old, she was brought to Japan, and she began to study Japanese, and listen to English videos as before, she could understand the film Alice in Wonderland only through listening. When Tiantian was four years old, she could speak one whole difficult sentence with “while” to express her meaning. Her Japanese developed quickly, when Tiantian was 6 years old, she can read novels in Japanese directly and understand by listening to The Old man and the Sea in English also. (http://www.blog.sina.cn/futianxintian)

Case 3 Michal was born in Florida, Boca Raton, Meadow Reach Apartment, in 2011. His father is the only person who can speak English a little bit, the rest of all his family members, including all the relations nearby can only speak Spanish. They came from Dominican Republic. He is taken care of by his grandma at home; they speak Spanish only at home. His mum is a cleaning worker and his father is a busy architecture worker, most of his relations do the same job. But he is exposed to English if they go out to public places, and even at home, their television is on the channel of cartoons all day long. Michal can understand English a bit but never speak English except yes or no, up or down. In 2015, Michal goes to preschool, half a year later, he plays with George again, he can speak long English sentences, “I don’t like to play this toy, and I want to play that one.”

Discussion

From the three cases, after analysis, it is easy to end up with some conclusion. Stories means a lot in Comprehension Hypothesis. When we get compelling comprehension input, the message is the only focus that we pay attention to. We are in the “din”, in the “flow” of meaningful and interesting meaning, in which we forget time and even our sense of self is diminished, that is called the pure and true happiness in our life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, Krashen, 1983, 2011)
The To begin with, the multiple input makes difference in the second language acquisition. To George, his total reading and listening to interesting English stories reaches about 400 hours a year; to Tiantian, more than 300 hours per year. To Michal, although his television is almost all day long, while he is playing aside, but the result shows clearly that reading interesting stories books mean a lot more. Other part of input is a great supplement, such as games, videos. Stories are interesting and vivid, that could let kids easily be absorbed in the messages and forget they are in another language.

This result confirms that improving language competence through free voluntary reading and self-selected stories is “feasible” (Nation, 2014, P14). As long as learners have access to a wide range of reading material, this will allow them to follow the kind of pathway McQuillan (2016). It complies with Krashen (2017.7p2) that story-listening and pleasure reading are more efficient than “study”, as more language is acquired per unit time. The amount of free reading was strongly related to gains in literacy and language development. As Nation estimated that it could move readers from elementary levels of vocabulary in second language(knowledge of 2000 word families) to a very high level (Knowledge of 9000 word families) after a total of 1,223 hours of reading (Nation, 2014). It provides a clear and pleasant path to improved proficiency. The Comprehension Hypothesis also helps explains success in second language acquisition in a wide variety of case histories (Krashen, 2014; Mason and Krashen, 2017; Shi & Eileen, 2017).

**Affective Filter Hypothesis is the Comfortable Psychological Condition**

Affective filter really plays an important role. Low-anxiety will lead to more successful acquisition. In Case 1, 2 and 3, all kids are exposed to English videos or songs while they are playing naturally. They are never forced to listen or to speak. All of them never felt compelled or under big stress to absorb consciously.

In China, Skill-Building Hypothesis has been implemented for nearly 40 years. Grammar and vocabulary practice and mistake-correction has been buried in most English learners blood. Even the parents couldn’t help correcting their kids’ mistakes. Whenever you begin to speak, mostly you are ready to be picked at instead of being praised or appreciated. Together with the inborn powerful Chinese culture of avoiding “losing face (suffering shame)”. That leads to high anxiety. That could account for why China is full of “dumb English speakers” who could not speak well although after many years of English study.

**Silent Period Do Exist in Second Language Acquisition**

All kids in 3 cases have silent period. They might accumulate very good sense of language listening before they open their mouth to speak out. The silence period is really 3 or 4 years to second language English here. Even with enough multiple Comprehension Input consistently in Case 1,2, the kids George and Tiantian have 4 years long dark silence period.

In China, with the rapid development of economy, most parents are unrest utilitarian, who wants their kids learn and show quickly. To some parents, it is easy to afford the kids study English at earlier age, but it is torturing to stick to reading and keep patient waiting without pushing during the silent period. “Forcing” speech when the acquirer is not ready will not help acquisition, and often only results in tension (Krashen, 2007).

**First Language Only at Home**

In Case 1 George: Mandarin is only at home; Case 3, Spanish only. Only in Case 2, Tiantian’s mum speaks English only to Tiantian before Tiantian is 3 years old, but Tiantian’s father and
grandparents at home speak mandarin only. It suggests that it doesn’t matter whether the second language is spoken at home or not, comparing with the multiple comprehensions input. No language can be paralleled with first language to a person, for it is part of our blood and bones. Parents should use the first language at home, read stories in the first language. It means better parent-child communication, better emotional development, and a huge amount of knowledge of the world.

**Language Parents and Immersion**

Language parents means somebody who will “engage you in conversation in the language you are acquiring but who will not try to be your teacher, will try to understand what you say (Krashen, 2017. 12, p. 3)” even though “you are miles away from what a native speaker would usually be able to understand (Lonsdale, 2006, p. 178)”

In my understanding, the “language parents” refer to play pals, friends, etc. often with whom they hang out together so frequently that they form comparatively strong and fixed relationship bonds for pretty long time in free and relaxing atmosphere. To case 1 George attends After School Care and Summer Camp and Taekwondo Club for one and half years in America. All persons around communicate in English so these activities definitely enhance good opportunities to acquire English subconsciously and consciously. With enough “language parents”, the longer kids immerse inside, the better the second language acquisition will become.

It complies with the conclusion of Lomb Kato: one can normally achieve the same result while staying at home, if there are enough “language parents” around in his own non-English spoken country. Because “when you are abroad—especially as a tourist—it is difficult to make the acquaintance of someone patient, intelligent, and available enough to help you practice your foreign language skills.” (p. 111)

It also complies with Krashen that “one can do quite well in second language acquisition without living I the country in which the language is spoken and without formal instruction. The crucial variables appear to be comprehensible input.” (Krashen, 2014, p. 14).

**Conclusion**

In fact, the long-term voluntary reading habit ensures continuing progress in literacy development, as well as increasing knowledge of the world (Song and Sardegna, 2014). As Krashen summarized “compelling input is not just optimal: it may be only way we truly acquire.” (Krashen, 2011, p. 2), when we are frustrated with the slow progress in oral English fluency, keep listening and reading and “trust the process” (Krashen, 2017.12, Kaufman, 2003; Shi & Krashen, 2018).

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