

An exploration of Krashen's input hypothesis

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Abstract: In the 1970s and 1980s, American linguist Krashen and Spanish educator Terrell formulated five acquisition hypotheses, with the "i+1" input hypothesis being particularly influential. Krashen's theory emphasizes the significant role of input in second language acquisition and has inspired foreign language education. This paper analyzes the input hypothesis and reviews research on its application in teaching, followed by a discussion of its limitations and use in China's language education.

Key words: input hypothesis; i+1; foreign language teaching

1 Introduction

With the development of China's English curriculum, educators focus on enhancing language proficiency and optimizing skill development. However, English teaching still faces challenges, notably insufficient and inefficient language input. Students are treated as homogeneous with individual differences ignored. Opportunities for language output are limited, and classrooms lack interactivity. Input is essential for language acquisition, and Krashen's input hypothesis emphasizes its importance, guiding new theories. This paper aims to analyze the input hypothesis and address its limitations.

2 An overview of input hypothesis

Proposed by Krashen in the 1980s, the input hypothesis is the core of his second language acquisition theory, which has greatly influenced foreign language teaching. It includes five hypotheses: acquisition learning, monitoring, natural order, input, and affective filter hypotheses [1]. The input hypothesis asserts that language acquisition occurs through comprehensible input slightly above the learner's current proficiency ("i+1") [2]. Effective input must be engaging, relevant, and adequately exposed both in and out of class.

3 Relevant studies at home and abroad

3.1 The research on input hypothesis abroad

Krashen's input hypothesis has inspired many scholars to expand the theory in second language acquisition. Input enhancement, proposed by Shardwood Smith, further develops Krashen's ideas [3]. Since the 1990s, the theory has emphasized the importance of "input" in language acquisition, with many linguists elaborating on it.

Michael Long argues that dialogic interaction is key for second language acquisition [4]. Ellis's model emphasizes integrating declarative knowledge into learning, which becomes procedural through practice. Gass distinguishes between noticed and understood input [5]. Swain, based on immersion teaching, suggests comprehensible input facilitates authentic language communication and contextual learning.

3.2 The research on input hypothesis at home

Since Krashen's input hypothesis was introduced to China, many scholars, especially frontline teachers, have studied it. Most of them affirm its positive impact on second language acquisition and foreign language teaching, though some offer differing views.

Zou Weicheng emphasizes two points to maximize language input: providing comprehensible input at the right time and using teaching aids to improve listening settings [6]. Luo Lisheng suggests offering diverse input materials, including supplementary ones, and using Krashen's "i+1" formula to select appropriate challenging materials [7]. Zhou Ning supports Krashen's "ideal input" theory, recommending input materials that match students' levels and ensuring sufficient input for proficiency improvement [8]. Weng Yanheng argues that Krashen's theory doesn't address output and struggles to distinguish input types, noting that too much input does not necessarily improve proficiency [9].

In conclusion, despite some controversies, Krashen's input hypothesis has significantly influenced foreign language teaching in China.

4 Deficiencies of Krashen's input theory

4.1 Aspects of the acquisition learning hypothesis

Krashen distinguishes between language acquisition, an unconscious process, and language learning, a conscious process involving grammar rules. He argues that these two do not interfere, but acquisition and learning are closely related. As learners apply learned knowledge, it can become internalized. If separated, how can we explain increased competence in a second language? Krashen acknowledged that learned knowledge can transform into acquired knowledge. However, his theory lacks clear definitions of the learner's scope, including age, gender, and personality [10].

4.2 Aspects of input hypothesis

Krashen's input hypothesis has faced criticism. His definition of "input" is narrow, focusing only on natural input and neglecting non-natural input like formal learning, which benefits older learners. He claims that more comprehensible input leads to better proficiency, but doesn't account for other factors. Additionally, the concept of comprehensible input remains unclear due to individual differences. Krashen simplifies language learning by equating input with grammar, and his emphasis on "caretaker speech" can lower language quality while also teaching language knowledge.

4.3 Aspects of the monitoring hypothesis

First of all, Krashen's monitoring hypothesis focuses only on the monitoring role of grammatical elements on learners' language output, ignoring the role of other factors. In fact, acquired knowledge can also play a monitoring role. Secondly, Krashen claims that "learning" can only be used for output but not for language comprehension. Krashen does not provide any evidence for this. This is a point that many scholars have criticized. There have been studies confirming that "learning" can indeed be used for comprehension. Furthermore, Krashen does not explain the kernel of the monitoring theory, but simply states that "monitoring" is a brain mechanism or an intrinsic language acquisition mechanism. At the same time, Krashen does not propose criteria for measuring when monitoring occurs, when it does not, and so on.

4.4 Aspects of the affective filter hypothesis

According to Krashen, the ability of affective filtering largely influences learners' comprehensible linguistic input. However, there are large differences between individual learners and thus the affect is different for each learner. The hypothesis does not explain to what extent affective factors affect learners' language acquisition, nor does it explain why certain learners with high self-confidence, low anxiety, and high motivation do not learn well [11]. In addition, Krashen did not explain whether the affective filter develops with age and why the "affective filter" is developed only in adolescence.

4.5 Aspects of the natural order hypothesis

Krashen believes that learners acquire language in a certain natural order. However, due to the complexity of the grammatical system of the language, it is difficult for researchers to study all the grammatical elements one by one, and it is impossible to draw a general conclusion about who is acquired first and who is acquired later. However, Krashen deduces the conclusion of localized lexical elements study to the overall language acquisition order study, which is not scientific and reliable [12].

5 Suggestions/implication/self-reflection for possible research or application in schools

Despite the limitations of Krashen's i+1 input hypothesis, it remains vital for guiding foreign language teaching in China, especially in creating a supportive learning environment. Teachers should provide ample opportunities for comprehensible input and encourage student to participate in extracurricular activities. The quality and quantity of input are key, but large class sizes and limited classroom time require a more flexible teaching approach.

Teachers should integrate graded instruction, balancing group diversity for effective learning. Using authentic situational models and multimedia helps learners progress from "i" to "i+1". Learners' attitudes and motivation significantly influence their proficiency, and exploring cultural knowledge enhances their understanding and participation in language.

6 Conclusion

In the vast field of theoretical construction, there are few, if any, systems that are entirely free of flaws. Despite the limitations of the i+1 input hypothesis as outlined by Krashen, its insights into the processes of language acquisition continue to offer invaluable resources for learning and inspiration. In the context of English education in China, it is crucial for language teachers to engage in a process of critical reflection when integrating the insights of the i+1 input hypothesis into their pedagogical practice. This integration should be subjected to ongoing evaluation and refinement through a process of continuous experimentation and reflection, with the aim of facilitating the continuous advancement and evolution of English education.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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