



Comprehensible Input through Extensive Reading: Problems in English Language Teaching in China

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Abstract

Target language input at the right structural level and in adequate amount is believed to be a primary condition for successful second/foreign language learning. This study was designed to investigate the issue of English language input that younger learners were likely to be exposed to through extensive reading in China. Focused-group interviews and analyses of English textbooks in use and extensive-reading books on the market revealed that these learners received rather restricted English language input in terms of quantity, comprehensibility, and variety, and that input-

poor, a critical issue in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, was not addressed by the recent reform in China. The study called for urgent attention to this problem among reform authorities, school administrators, and English teachers in their efforts to improve students' learning outcomes of English and suggested the adoption of extensive reading programs as the most effective means in the creation of an input-rich environment in EFL learning contexts. Suggestions were also given to book writers and publishers regarding ways to improve children literature, story books, and other books for entertainment reading in English. This study has wider implications for other Asian contexts in which similar issues surrounding English language teaching and learning may arise.

Keywords: language input; extensive reading; comprehensible input; English as a foreign language

Comprehensible Input through Extensive Reading: Problems in English Language Teaching in China

A consensus has developed among researchers of second language acquisition (SLA) over the past few decades on the necessity of target language input at the right structural level (comprehensible input) and in adequate amount for successful second language (L2) learning to occur (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Large doses of input are especially important in the widely adopted pedagogical framework of communicative language teaching (CLT), which endorses meaning-focused instruction and pragmatic functional use of language. In the reality of English language teaching (ELT), however, the role of target language input has been addressed primarily in terms of whether it is comprehensible to students while the adequacy issue is usually neglected, which is less a concern in English as a second language (ESL) contexts, where the target language input is readily available, than in settings where English is learned as a foreign language (EFL). Past research conducted in the latter contexts identified students' lack of exposure to the target language or input-poor environment as a major problem in the learning of English (Kouraogo, 1993; Sze, 1999). Since comprehensible input in adequate amount is a primary (although not an exclusive) condition for L2 learning, its importance cannot be over-emphasized in EFL contexts.

Since the early 1990s, China has launched a series of reforms to improve English language teaching from elementary to secondary grades (Hu, 2005). Students begin to learn English at a younger age now. In addition,

CLT has been vigorously promoted by reform authorities through syllabus revisions (and lately issuance of curriculum standards) and textbook production (Hu). It has gained the status of an officially endorsed methodology (Hu) and being increasingly accepted in the classroom. If, however, changes brought about by reform have affected only how language is presented and organized in textbooks and the way teaching is carried out in the classroom, without simultaneously addressing the primary condition of language learning, exposure to adequate amount of comprehensible input, then it will be rather difficult (if not impossible) to achieve the goal of reform, improvement of student learning, to its fullest.

We therefore designed our study to investigate the state of affairs of Chinese learners' exposure to English language input following the recent reform. Since this topic was too broad and difficult to define, we narrowed it down to the target language input in the written mode with an emphasis on the input provided through extensive reading. An effective and well recognized approach for learners to receive the target language input is through reading, especially extensive reading. This study defines extensive reading as independent free reading at comfortable level (with little use of dictionaries or help from teachers) and reading in quantity, in or out of the classroom or school for the purposes of entertainment, information, or other pragmatic uses.

Extensive reading has been found to be "the single most effective way to improve language proficiency" (Maley, cited in Brown, 2009, p. 238). It contributes to students' learning gains not only in reading and vocabulary, but also writing and overall language development (Day & Bamford, cited in Brown). Although an increasing number of teachers and schools have become aware of the merits of extensive reading, it is not usually integrated as a part of the curriculum (Brown). In EFL contexts, despite of findings from numerous studies showing that extended exposure to books in general and to extensive reading programs in particular are critical for the overall improvement of learners' target language proficiency and especially their literacy development (Dupuy, 1997; Elley, 1991, 1997; Elley & Manghubai, 1983; Hayashi, 1999; McQuillan, 1994; Ng, 1994; Tinker Sachs & Mahon, 2006), extensive reading in many cases is still excluded

from the regular curriculum or extra-curriculum activities and almost totally ignored at early grades such as the elementary and junior secondary.

The overarching goal of the present research is to look into the issues of English language input, mainly comprehensibility and adequacy, through extensive reading at elementary and junior secondary levels in China and whether and to what extent extensive reading is adopted by these learners. Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the sources that provide English language input in print to elementary and junior secondary students?
2. To what extent do learners have access to and utilize these sources?
3. What are the features of the language data contained in these sources?

Methodology

The study was conducted in an inland capital city in China. The researchers decided to choose elementary higher grades (Grade 5 and 6) and junior secondary lower grades (Grade 7 and 8) as the grade levels under study due to the fact that teaching and learning at these levels were less affected by examination pressures and that not all elementary schools offered English to lower-grade students. Three schools participated in the study: a private school that had elementary and junior secondary sectors, a public elementary school, and the junior sector of a public secondary school. The primary researcher visited these schools to examine their textbooks in use and other materials for instruction and learning. With interview guide constructed from the research questions, she had focus-group interviews with English teachers of the selected schools. In addition, the primary researcher visited two bookstores in the city with the largest collection of books in foreign languages to examine English prints such as books designed for entertainment reading by children of the target age group.

Data analyses began at the onset of the initial data collection. Linguistic features and quantity of language data of the collected English texts were analyzed by examining the repetition, amount and variety of vocabulary, syntactic structures, and language functions. Content of these texts was

analyzed by their readability and interestingness (such as age-appropriateness of the messages and pictures).

Findings

Amount of the Target Language Input

Results of the study showed improvement in various aspects of English textbooks in use as a result of adopting CLT. For example, the presentation of vocabulary and syntactic structures became more contextualized and the learning activities tended to be more task-based. On the other hand, the study found a shortage of English learning materials, which severely limited the amount of target language input that learners were likely to be exposed to. One uniform textbook was the exclusive source of English in most cases at each grade level all year long. Children literature, story books, or other materials suitable for extensive reading were not found to be part of instructional materials. From the interview data, none of these schools adopted an extensive reading program as an addition to their English curricula, nor was extensive reading included in English classes. In out-of-school settings such as home, the great majority of students did not read English for entertainment or other pragmatic purposes (than learning from the textbook and preparing for exams), according to the teachers we interviewed. Very few children purchased or read story books or other entertainment books in English from bookstores. Therefore, they did not receive additional input in English language in everyday life, outside the school.

Comprehensibility of the Target Language Input

In the major bookstores of the city, we found that most of the books suitable for extensive reading in English were written beyond the linguistic levels of our target learners. We randomly picked up samples from the series readers, which usually indicated the grade levels on their covers, and opened three pages from each book, one from the beginning, one the middle, and one toward the end. We checked the vocabulary from each page against the vocabulary lists in the textbooks used by the schools under study because interviews with the teachers at an earlier time indicated

textbooks as the only source from which students learned new words. Although it varied from page to page, a significant number of words on most of these pages checked did not appear in the vocabulary lists of the textbooks and were therefore considered to be unknown words for the students of our target group. Most of the story or children literature books that we found on the market were appropriate linguistically for students at more advanced levels, such as high school or even college. Younger learners had very few selections of books to read for entertainment or other pragmatic purposes.

Variety of Language Data in the Target Language Input

Books suitable for English extensive reading found in the bookstores covered a rather narrow range of topics: mostly fictions and stories, with very few books on science, history, or other subjects. A proliferation of Chinese books covering a broad spectrum of areas and topics written for elementary and middle school students for entertainment or other pragmatic uses (than test preparation) was found in sharp contrast with the paucity of English books serving the same purposes. As a result, learners would be exposed to a rather restricted range of vocabulary, syntax, or writing styles in English. It would be virtually impossible for them to talk about basic medical knowledge or the outer space in English, for example. A thorough search found only one series reader that contained books on science topics.

Other Features of the Target Language Input

In addition, we found a mismatch of language and content in some cases, meaning that some of the story books were written at a linguistic level incongruent with the age levels that their content and pictures were appropriate for. This applied, for instance, to some of the books in Dashan series. One book from the Level Two of the series contained stories such as “The Ugly Ducking” and “Three Little Pigs”, in which the content and pictures were appropriate for kindergarteners and students at early primary grades whereas the linguistic level (judged from the vocabulary) would be as high as the junior secondary. Younger learners would find the stories and

pictures rather appealing and like to read them but would not be able to do so due to lack of language competence. Linguistically, they were denied access to these books. Older students would have little problems with the language but lost interest in the stories or the pictures, which they would probably consider rather childish or immature. The content and pictures were not age-appropriate for older learners.

Finally, a great majority of the books suitable for extensive reading found in the bookstores were bilingual. In most cases, the English version was followed by Chinese translation page by page. In some cases, the two languages appeared on the same page with English on the top part and Chinese on the bottom. In other cases, the Chinese translation was included in the end of the book, with roughly the first half of the book in English and the second half in Chinese. We found this to be rather problematic. Given the young age of the learners under study, they would not be able to discipline themselves well enough to read the English first. What would be the most likely to happen is that these learners read the Chinese translation upon opening the book and then lose the interest to read the same story again in English.

Summary and Conclusions

Findings of the present study uncover problems existing in English teaching and learning in China which have not been addressed by the recent ELT reform. Younger learners of English, the elementary and junior secondary students, do not receive adequate amount of the target language input in their learning of English. Their limited exposure to English inside school and lack of contact with it outside can be severe constraints on their learning gains. In the school setting, the textbook, sometimes coupled with a student workbook, is typically the only instructional/learning material. Although the textbook has been made thicker, with a larger amount of vocabularies and a wider variety of language functions, it would still be inadequate as the exclusive input source for the students. In out-of-school settings such as home, very few children purchase or read story books or other entertainment books in English from bookstores. Therefore, they do not receive additional English language input in everyday life, outside the

school.

The problem of learning English in input-poor environment is not new in China or other EFL contexts, but has not drawn the level of attention for it to be addressed in the formal educational system. The crucial role that input plays in language learning and the severe impact that poor input can make seem to be little recognized among teachers, school administrators, or ELT reform authorities. The recent series of ELT reform in China, ascribing students' low competence in English to ineffective classroom teaching believed to originate in the traditional teaching methodologies, have been preoccupied with promoting CLT as the solution to the perceived problems (Hu, 2005), while successful language learning actually involves a myriad of factors, among which adequate amount of comprehensible input is essential. As a result, the reform has exerted influences on EFL classroom teaching but made little impact on students' exposure to the target language input. Students are still struggling to learn English in an input-poor environment, which has not been improved as a result of the reform.

Although a large collection of English books could be found on the market, books designed for elementary and junior secondary learners for entertainment reading or other pragmatic uses (than test preparation) were very limited in quantity, and most of them were linguistically too challenging for these students to read. As a result, even if younger learners would like or have developed the habit to read English in their leisure time, they can hardly find resources that enable them to do so.

The only alternative left in a lot of cases for students at younger ages to learn English is therefore to study the same English textbook repetitively within the period of one year: to repetitively read the same vocabulary and sentences and memorize them, which is a common practice that they are engaged in, with the help of their parents sometimes, as part of homework given by the teacher, in order to compensate for the lack of exposure to the target language input from diverse sources through increasing exposure from the same source. The lack of diversification of books and materials not only puts severe constraints on how much language input students are likely to receive but also undermines their interest in learning English,

which probably explains why the teachers we interviewed identified the pervasive existence of low motivation among the students as a big problem in their teaching. For the students, learning English can be described by one word: BORING.

The apparent negligence to the issue of target language input may arise from a line of thinking that input-poor environment is an inherent problem of English language learning undertaken in EFL contexts, given the nature of such contexts, and can therefore hardly be addressed the way teaching methodologies are, the latter of which is relatively easier to be altered or even replaced. As a matter of fact, although the physical settings of EFL cannot be changed, there is a variety of ways to enrich target language input, or in other words, to create an input-rich environment for language learning within those settings. One of the most effective and convenient ways is reading, especially extensive reading, as argued for in previous sections of this article. Children literature, story books, and other books for entertainment or pragmatic purposes, written at appropriate linguistic levels and age levels, addressed to learners' interest, covering a wide variety of topics, and provided in quantity, can turn an input-poor environment in EFL learning contexts into input-rich.

We make suggestions here at two levels. Rather than viewing certain teaching methodologies as the answer to language learning problems, ELT reform endeavors should take a broader perspective on foreign language education that embodies acknowledgement of a myriad of factors involved in English teaching and learning. Among these factors, the issue of target language input should be given prominent attention and addressed in the ELT reform agenda, with an expected outcome of incorporating extensive reading as an essential part of the English curriculum or syllabus. If reform is chiefly carried out through re-designing and issuing textbooks, consider developing and issuing a variety of supplementary textbooks or readers accompanying the existent textbooks on similar or different topics, which can be used by students for additional reading in class or at home.

At the school level, an extensive reading program can be developed and implemented in a variety of ways. For example, the school can establish connections between their English teachers and publishers or bookstores so

that the teachers receive updates of English books suitable for extensive reading. The teachers go through these books on a regular basis and compile a reading list of books appropriate for their students, who will be not only encouraged but also rewarded to read them. Or alternatively, with funding if possible, teachers collaborate with one another, with the help of ELT experts, in writing story books for their students to read.

Additionally, book writers and publishers should consult ELT experts, EFL teachers, and even learners regarding issues such as readability, age-appropriateness, interestingness, range of topics, and so on when designing children literature, story books, and other books for entertainment reading in English. For the books that have been published, feedback from teachers and learners who have read them should be sought out so that they can be improved in later issues.

The present study dealt with an essential aspect of English teaching and learning in EFL contexts, which has unfortunately fallen in cracks in the recent ELT reform in China. It revealed areas of concern that need to be addressed in their future reform endeavors. Driven by the need to keep up with economic globalization, many Asian countries see good mastery of English by their citizens as an important means toward this goal and are stepping up efforts to reform ELT. Findings of this study therefore have wider implications for other Asian contexts in which similar issues surrounding ELT reform may arise.

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Comprehensible input is language input that can be understood by listeners despite them not understanding all the words and structures in it. It is described as one level above that of the learners " if it can only just be understood. According to Krashen's theory of language acquisition, giving learners this kind of input helps them acquire language naturally, rather than learn it consciously. An example: The teacher selects a reading text for upper-intermediate level learners that is from a lower advanced level coursebook. Based on what the teacher knows about the learners, the teacher believes Comprehensible input is language input that can be understood by learners even when they don't understand all the words and structures in a given text, or bit of audio they are listening to. It doesn't have to be 100% comprehensible. It has to be mostly understandable, with the means to gain a greater level of comprehension by looking up words, reading again or listening again. I make quite a few videos in languages other than English at my Youtube channel. I am often asked to provide subtitles or a transcript for the videos I do in these languages. Regrettably, I simply don't have time to do this. However, these videos in Japanese, or Spanish, or Mandarin, or French, usually cover the same ground as my English videos.