

Classroom Activities which Enhance Learners' Production-Ability in English

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The aim of this paper is to present a way to enhance learners' production-ability in English. This study focuses on input-output relationships and classroom activities in the Japanese school. The conclusion presented in this paper is based on data from four months of research which the author conducted at a Japanese senior high school. Through this research, she examined the performance of students who had been divided into experimental and control groups. These groups were presented with the same input material, but were given different instructions. The experimental group was given less Japanese translation and was engaged in output-emphasized practices, whereas the control group was given Japanese translation and an explanation in Japanese of various grammatical points. The instruction and/or activity in the control group are assumed to be those in a typical Japanese classroom. Though the two groups were identical in their performances at the starting-point of the research, the performance of the experimental group far outdid that of the control group after four months of research. The results suggest important implications for English-language teaching in Japan. This study finds that: (1) Japanese translation-oriented instruction can prevent students from storing given English in their memory, resulting in poor output performance; (2) sufficient output practice after providing input helps students store English in their memory and develop their English output ability.

BACKGROUND - Brief Review of Relevant Literature

Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis holds that people "acquire spoken fluency not by practicing talking but by understanding input by listening and reading" (Krashen, 1987: 60). In other words, students' output ability will automatically emerge if they receive sufficient comprehensible input. In this hypothesis, the role of output is limited to indirect contribution which in turn affects the quantity and quality of input. Optimal input for acquisition should be comprehensible, interesting, relevant, randomly sequenced and of sufficient quantity. Though the amount of input necessary for second language acquirers to produce utterance using acquired competence is not clearly defined, one research result cited shows that it demands approximately 720 hours of class time for the average European language students (Diller, 1978, cited in Krashen, 1987).

Swain (1985) argues that Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis cannot fully explain the mechanism of the second language acquisition, especially in its productive ability. Swain examined and analyzed the performance of Canadian children in a French immersion program focusing on the input-output relationships "at the level of language proficiency traits, especially the traits of grammatical, discourse, and sociolinguistic

competence" (235). The research results showed that the subjects' language proficiency at the level of grammatical competence, in particular, was significantly lower than that of native speakers. The subjects' comprehension of the input information observed in listening and achievement tests, however, was similar to that of native speakers.

The poor results of the immersion students demonstrated that they could not acquire the competence for speaking grammatically correct sentences in a target language through comprehensible input alone. Swain states that what was missing for them was "comprehensible output." In other words, the immersion students had less opportunity to use the target language. Swain claims that "comprehensible output is a necessary mechanism of acquisition independent of the role of comprehensible input" (1985: 252). Comprehensible output provides learners with the meaningful use of a target language, the opportunity to test their output-products and the motivation for shifting their attention from semantic to syntactic processing. According to Swain, syntactic knowledge of a language plays a far more important role in language production, whereas semantic knowledge is more significant in language reception. Though admitting the importance of the comprehensible input as the first and basic step for acquisition, Swain claims that learners pay more attention to syntax only when they are forced to or feel the need to speak a target language. The significance of meaningful speaking practice in acquiring the oral production ability is also emphasized by Rivers (1981) and Ferguson (1985).

The distinction between abilities involved in input comprehension and in output production is also indicated from a cognitive viewpoint. As Vollmer and Sang put it:

To our present knowledge, the syntactic level seems to be much more important for the process of planning and producing an utterance than for perceiving and decoding it, Generally speaking, the differences between knowing how to analyze input and knowing how to construct output apparently outweigh the correspondences between these two processes.

(Vollmer and Sang, 1983: 39)

Anderson (1985) presents three comprehension steps: perceptual processing, parsing and utilization. First, input language is retained in short-term memory and initial analysis begins. Information retained in short-term memory is soon replaced by new information. In parsing, people decode the individual words by referring to linguistic and general knowledge. In utilization, an 'achieved mental representation of a text' and knowledge stored in long-term memory are related. The three steps in production are construction, transformation and execution. People plan their production in the first step and convert the information into meaningful sentences in the transformation step. In the execution step, they express the message. In the first two steps people rely primarily on memory.

Ellis (1986) suggests that second language learners, especially beginners, can use the limited production-procedure which is already activated in their memory. Second

language learner output is typified by its semantic-syntactic simplification, which is viewed as an 'Interlanguage' (Ellis, 1986: 42). Following this language-simplification strategy, learners use the correcting strategy; learners monitor their output during or after their own speech or writing. Through this correcting strategy, learners can improve their production-ability.

In summary, there are two opposing views regarding second language production: input-emphasis versus output-emphasis. The output-emphasis view held by Swain presents the difference in cognitive processing mechanism between comprehension and production as one reason for the claim. Different cognitive processing require different practices: speaking ability by practicing speaking and writing ability by writing practice. Swain's claim is also supported by a cognitive analysis. Moreover, we cannot ignore the role of memory in language acquisition.

BACKGROUND - Japanese Context

In Japan, the English language is categorized as a Foreign Language rather than a Second Language. Learners of English seldom use English outside the classroom, though they may be exposed to it through satellite TV programs or movies. As a result, the classroom is the only setting in which many Japanese can acquire English. English education in Japan, which has been under severe criticism for being impractical and ineffective, has gradually improved, introducing native speakers of English into classrooms and trying to shift the focus toward more oral/aural-based instruction. However, this goal has not been attained. Three characteristics of Japanese education which cause this deficiency are that:

1. the quantity of input English is far from the required amount;
2. the input English consists of more written than spoken language;
3. the post-input instruction or activity is generally not production-centered, but on comprehension-emphasis, through translation and grammatical analysis.

We must take this Japanese context into consideration when we discuss Japanese learners' production ability in English. Thus, the result of this study could be useful to Japanese educators, as the research was conducted in Japan both with input-output theories and with typical Japanese classroom activities and instructions in mind.

HYPOTHESES

1. Comprehensible input alone cannot enhance learners' output ability.
2. If learners rely mostly on Japanese translation for comprehending input English, they will store the information of input English in Japanese, not in English.
3. It is only by establishing a direct link between input English and its *concept* through sufficient output practice in class that learners can develop their output ability in English.

METHODS - Subjects

Fifty-five Japanese senior-high school students, a class of 20 second year students and a class of 35 third year students, served as subjects. They were divided into three groups:

Table 1 Subjects divided into three groups

Group*	A	B	C
Control/Experimental	Control	Control	Experimental
Total number (3rd year, 2nd year students)	n = 21 (11, 10)	n = 12 (12, 0)	n = 22 (12, 10)

*The initial test score showed that, before this research, groups A, B and C were almost identical in their English ability.

They shared the same motivation and ability in English. The level of their English proficiency were in the third and the pre-second grades range of the STEP test.

METHODS - Data Collecting Procedures

After providing each group with the same listening material accompanied with relevant pictures, different instructions and activities were given to each group.

Group A relied solely on Japanese translation to understand the information. Group B pursued the same procedure as Group A for most of the class time. However, this group had a follow-up English composition and grammar session; they reconstructed the input English by translating Japanese into English in writing, focusing on grammar structures.

Group C, the experimental group, spent no time in translation. Instead, they were encouraged to understand the input information by referring to pictures. After their comprehension was checked in English, they started practicing the target English through various speaking pairwork activities. First, they talked about the story as if they were gossiping, then they performed a role-play. They also retold the story with the help of the pictures, and eventually talked about their own situation using the target English. In this way, they reproduced the input English again and again in different tasks. Despite the repetition, they didn't get bored because each task gave them a different context. Lastly, they shifted their production activity from speaking to writing, which would reinforce the input English and help them internalize it.

Table 2 Amount of time spent on each activity

	Listening (%)	Translation (%)	Speaking (%)	Writing (%)
Control/Group A	50%	50%	0%	0%
Control/Group B	40%	40%	0%	20%
Experimental/Group C	20%	0%	60%	20%

RESULTS - Test Design

Students performance was assessed in three types of tests. TEST 1 consisted of listening, speaking and writing sections. The listening part consisted of multiple-choice questions. The speaking and writing tests featured structured interviews or written questions on everyday conversations. The raw score of each test was adjusted to a maximum score of 10 points. In the speaking test, the time allotted for each question was 30 seconds, so that spontaneous speaking ability could be assessed.

TEST 2 focused on production ability and thus consisted of less controlled speaking and writing tasks. In TEST 2 students were given a series of pictures entitled "Harry's day" and asked to narrate the story in the pictures, first orally and then in writing. After a one-minute planning period, one and a half minutes of presentation was required. In the writing test, the time limit was eight minutes.

TEST 3 was designed to examine students' memory-retention and was called a "Recall-Test." After the principal part of the lesson, the students were given 10 minutes of an unrelated activity, such as video. Following the video, they were given paper without prior notice, and asked to recall what they had learned from the principal part of the lesson. Unlike TEST 1 and 2, which were conducted only once after 4 months of research, TEST 3 was conducted 5 times for the 3rd year students and 4 times for the 2nd year students.

RESULTS - Assessment

Each performance recorded on a tape or written on paper was scored by two teachers, including the author. TEST 2 was assessed from two angles: Accuracy and Fluency. The assessment of TEST 1 and the Accuracy part of TEST 2 was based on the following scale:

Table 3 Rating Scale for TEST 1 and Accuracy score in TEST 2

A	Free from mistakes and perfectly communicative
B	Communicates though with a little strain caused by slight grammatical mistakes
C	Communicates with difficulty caused by significant grammatical mistakes
D	Cannot communicate, or no response

Fluency score in TEST 2 were based on the raw number of the sentences produced in the allotted time-duration. TEST 3 counted the number of correctly recalled items and converted the numbers into percentages, dividing them by the total number of input-items in a class.

RESULTS - Score

Table 4. 1 Score of TEST 1

3rd Year Students		Listening		Speaking		Writing	
Group	N	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Control/Group A	11	3.1	0.7	4.7	1.0	3.4	1.8
Control/Group B	12	3.9	1.7	5.3	1.8	3.8	3.0
Experimental/Group C	12	3.7	1.8	5.7	1.3	4.9	3.2

ANOVA $F(2,33) = .71(ns)$ $F(2,33) = 1.21$ $F(2,33) = .96(ns)$ $p < .05$

Table 4. 2

2nd Year Students		Listening		Speaking		Writing	
Group	N	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Control/Group A	10	4.2	1.6	3.9	1.5	2.0	1.9
Experimental/Group C	10	3.7	2.0	5.5	1.8	3.5	2.5

t -test $t = .62(ns)$ $t = 2.16$ $t = 1.51$ $p < .05$
 Note; Critical Value for $t = 2.101$ in $p < .05$

Table 5. 1 Score of TEST 2

3rd Year Students		Speaking		Writing	
Group	N	Fluency	Accuracy	Fluency	Accuracy
Control/Group A	11	9.7s*	48.5%	16.8s	54.8%
Control/Group B	12	11.3s	55.2%	16.2s	52.4%
Experimental/Group C	12	12.0s	64.3%	17.8s	66.6%

*S stands for sentences.

Table 5.2

2nd Year Students		Speaking		Writing	
Group	N	Fluency	Accuracy	Fluency	Accuracy
Control/Group A	10	9.6s	43.3%	13.7s	42.3%
Experimental/Group C	10	10.4s	67.3%	17.0s	65.9%

Table 6 Score of TEST 3 Recall Tests from May to July

3rd Year Students/Group	Recall (%)	2nd Year Students/Group	Recall (%)
Control/Group A	5%	Control/Group A	7%
Control/Group B	20%	NA	NA
Experimental/Group C	54%	Experimental/Group C	33%

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

All in all, these test results support the hypotheses in this paper. Firstly, the results in TEST 1 and 2 in Table 4 and 5 show that the experimental group's scores are superior in all the production-skill tests, most notably in the speaking part. In Table 4.2, we find critical differences between the experimental and the control groups. These results indicate the significant contribution of output practice in improving production ability in English, as stated in Hypothesis 3. In contrast, there is no significant difference in the listening section results of TEST 1.

Secondly, the quality as well as the quantity of the students' output English is distinct between the experimental and control groups, as is clear in the results of TEST 2 Accuracy (See Table 5). The students in the experimental group produced more grammatically correct sentences. In fact, their performance outdid that of the control group B, which had a grammar session in class. The experimental group's performance also showed their mastery of a grammatical item which they had failed to master in an English grammar class. This is partly because they made use of the input English which they had stored in their memory during the course work, which students in the control group failed to do. The high correlation between output practices and mastery of syntax claimed by Swain (1986) and Ellis (1986) is another probable explanation for this result. While practicing speaking, students automatically corrected their mistakes by degrees. In addition, the English produced by the experimental group was not just a reproduction of the input English but something more creative; students worked with new expressions, altering some elements to fit their own sentences. They also used connectors between sentences more often, which resulted in text cohesion in their products. One probable explanation of this is that their stored knowledge of the input English had been activated through repetitive practice, so that they gained more productive ability. In conclusion, the experimental group students enjoyed double gains in Fluency and Accuracy.

Thirdly, there is a striking finding in TEST 3. As we see in Table 6, the recall rate of the experimental group is over ten times that of the 3rd year control-group students and about five times that of the 2nd year control-group students. This is probably due to the mechanism in memory; in the control group, the original English in students' short-term memory had been replaced by Japanese translation. This assumption is proved true because the students in the control group were found to memorize the content very thoroughly in Japanese. The quality of the recalled items also differs in two groups. The experimental group tended to recall the input English in sentence form, whereas the control group's approach was word by word. This shows that the experimental group was more syntax-conscious, while the control group semantic-conscious in their cognitive processing in class. Consequently, the TEST 3 results are significant in these three ways. First, the difference in the results in two groups is by far greater

than expected. Second, the results are not accidental at all because the rates presented in Table 6 are the average numerical value of several recall-tests. Lastly, as mentioned before, the instruction or activity in the control group is assumed to be the representation of a typical English classroom in Japan. Thus, the results imply that in translation-oriented classes, students are less likely to gain speaking and/or writing ability because they have stored the content in Japanese in their memory.

Lastly, there is another positive finding in the experimental group results: this output-emphasis instruction functions as motivation for students to study English more. Most students in the experimental group state the change in their perspective for studying English. A typical statement includes that: (1) more attention paid to syntax; (2) improvement in retaining English; (3) decreased hesitation in speaking English; and (4) increased motivation for listening and speaking in English. All students stated their desire to continue learning English in this way.

To conclude, this study presents the positive effects of output-emphasis activities and the negative effects of translation-oriented activity as post-input classroom activities. The classroom activities which enhance students' production ability in English should focus on helping students: (1) establish the link between the input English and the concept behind it, not between the input English and its Japanese translation; and (2) activate the input English in their memory by repetition in contextualized practice activities, making the practices meaningful and purposeful.

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