

Preface

The study of second language acquisition (SLA) in the multilingual, multicultural, mixed ability classes has always been an exciting and challenging experience to an English language teaching (ELT) theorist and action researcher. This book presents a study on learner language in the spoken and written output of English as second language (ESL) learners of English in the Indian classroom teaching–learning context. There has always been a hiatus between theories and classroom practices. Either the two go completely in different directions or the practice blindly depends on theory without a consideration of the feasibility problem. The basic argument in the book, based on two empirical studies reported, is that learning theories and pedagogical practices need to be constantly revised through classroom based action research studies that throw light on the appropriate convergence of theory and practice.

The study of SLA has looked into the relationship between input, intake, and output in the context of task performance. The cognitive processes that are triggered in the mind of an ESL learner while processing input for spoken or written output in the classroom situation is the focus of the study in this book. What is the nature of intake or rather what is the nature and type of processing done for subsequent output? What are the strategies used by the ESL learners at every stage of the input–intake–output framework? These are the questions put at the beginning of the study of SLA in the context of Indian ESL classroom situation. Multilingual classroom refers to the minimum of two languages that the ESL learners in our study have. Mixed ability classroom refers to the difference in language level among the students in terms of learning style, students’ background knowledge, knowledge of the world, their skills and talents in other areas and finally in the levels of motivation.

This book is based on the results of two empirical studies done to identify the relationship between input, intake, and output in spoken and written task performance. For capturing the learner language in the spoken output, the learners were given a Seminar Speech Task, where the subjects spoke for 5 min on a “prepared”—3-day preparation time—topic chosen out of 6 given by the teacher-researcher. The seminar speeches were recorded and transcribed

phonologically. For capturing the learner language in the written output, the learners were given a written test performance task. The subjects selected text sources (3 minimum) to make an oral presentation on their favourite (self-chosen) topic. Within a uniform preparation time of 3 days, they prepared a script for the seminar task. There were 15 subjects, each of who presented his or her seminar in front of the others. Each of the seminars was followed by a written test which had content questions (on the topic) prepared by the teacher-researcher on the spot. Each of the subjects thus gave speeches to the other 14. Thus, every subject took 15 tests. In every test the subjects had to answer two questions.

The study of the learner language in the SST is based on the hypothesis that there are clearly distinguishable “acquired” and “learnt” elements in the spoken output of second language learners as theorized by Krashen (1985) through the distinction made between “acquisition” and “learning”. The study of the learner language in the WTPT is based on the hypothesis that the cognitive processes involved in SLA are triggered positively when an autonomous learner processes self-chosen text input to perform a spoken task. The processes would involve information processing (for idea units; chunking—reflective of script dependence; and discourse structure) and input processing (for self-corrections, creativity, and new vocabulary—involving errors as a part of all the three criteria). The task performance of subjects, irrespective of their proficiency levels, would be better on self than others. A low proficiency subject would achieve successful task performance with a structured text input source and formatted notes taken while listening to others. A high/medium proficiency subject works with creativity and attempts at clarity of expression for effective communication.

The subjects for the SST were 15 adult learners of English (20–22 years of age) enrolled in a proficiency course in English at Vivekananda School of Languages, Ramakrishna Muth (Hyderabad). Finalization of subjects was done based on the following inclusion/exclusion criteria: mother tongue (Telugu); years of exposure to English as a second language (14–20 years); age (21–22); sex, and Class X (secondary) and Class XII (higher secondary) board examination percentage and scores in the class tests. The subjects were categorized into three types—high, medium, and low proficiency—based on a diagnostic test. The subjects for the WTPT were (from a random sample of 32) the select sample of 15 subjects who were finalized on the basis of the following inclusion/exclusion criteria: age (range 21–22 years); mother tongue (Hindi); exposure to language (from 14 to 20 years); language proficiency (scores of the diagnostic test ranging from 15 to 24.5); socio-economic background (middle class); ethos of the college campus (same); preparation time for the seminar task and the written test (same); and test conditions (same).

The analysis of the learner language in the SST revealed “acquired” (Indianisms, sentence frames, use of articles, and instances of self-monitoring) and “learnt” (routines and patterns, formulaic expressions, rote-learnt chunks, and monitoring from the learnt system) elements. Depending on their fluency and discourse level strategies, the learners could be divided into good, poor, and okay speakers. All learners resorted to the acquired system in seminar speeches, irrespective of their

proficiency level. The data analysis of the learner language in the WTPT revealed that there are two processes involved in text processing for written test performance: information (for idea units or information chunks) and input processing (for linguistic structure). Depending on their strategies of text source processing, the learners could be categorized as high, medium, and low proficiency learners (based on the diagnostic test); high, medium, and low scorers (based on the written test); extensive, optimal, and intensive information processors; and finally, maximal, optimal, and minimal input processors.

The results of the SST are presented within the framework of input, intake, and output; and the relationship among the three—in the context of SLA. The focus, however, is only on the spoken output. We studied in detail constituents of (spoken) learner language, fluency, monitoring, and self-monitoring. The results of the WTPT gave us rich insights into the role of input processing in the SLA process. One obvious insight is the better task performance results by a greater number of subjects who did input processing when compared to their performance on the diagnostic test. For example, as per the proficiency level categorization, there were only 5 high proficiency level subjects out of a total of 15. The low proficiency subjects had a good score in the written test with the help of extensive and optimal information processing of their self-chosen text sources, painstaking preparation of the script, and meticulous note-taking. In fact, the first rank holder in the written test—S3 with a cumulative rank of 3H (3 high ranks—5th rank on self; 1st rank as a speaker; and 3rd rank as a listener) is as per the diagnostic test a low proficiency subject!

We can say that input processing has a highly positive role in the process of second language acquisition (SLA). Results indicate that low proficiency as a criterion to label a group of students is completely erroneous and unnecessary because students in this category process information as well as input, differently, i.e. the choice of strategies is different. The book hopes to fill the lacunae in the area of empirical studies based on the data from Indian classrooms and from the domains of learning and teaching of English as a second language. There is not much research based on empirical data collected from heterogeneous and mixed ability classrooms in Indian institutions of higher learning. The language of the book is lucid and accessible to dedicated teachers who have been in the field for a long time but do not have the required knowledge to comprehend the complex and complicated processes that take place in the minds of the learners—the black boxes.

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