

中国英语教学 (四)

Selected Papers
from the 4th International Conference
on ELT in China

胡文仲 文秋芳 主编

Edited by Hu Wenzhong & Wen Qiufang

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Preface

On May 22-25, 2004 the 4th International Conference on ELT in China was held at the newly-built International Convention Center of Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in Beijing. The theme of the conference was “New Directions in ELT in China”. The number of proposals submitted totaled about 1,700, out of which approximately 400 were selected by a review committee for presentation at the conference. The number of participants was close to 1,500, most of whom were college teachers of English. There were, however, a large number of primary and secondary school English teachers as well. Overseas participants came from more than 20 countries. This was the largest conference of its kind ever held in China. More important than the scale of the conference was its great variety of topics and high quality of presentations, which made this conference a milestone in ELT history in China.

Compared with previous ones, this conference was characterized by three outstanding features. First, the conference provided a special forum on English education for primary and secondary schools. College teachers of English and teachers of English at primary and secondary levels had previously worked more or less in separate compartments and seldom met to exchange views. For the first time they now converged for discussion and debates and better coordination between the two strands in English

education seemed to be in sight. Secondly, a balance was now struck between studies on English learners/learning and English teachers/teaching, which was reflected in the number of papers presented at the conference. Learners/learning and teachers/teaching are two sides of the same coin and we should take account of both. Prior to the 1990s, we laid too much emphasis on teaching methods innovation at the expense of learners/learning. To overcome this shortcoming, our attention was gradually shifted from teachers/teaching to learners/learning. In time we scored noticeable achievements, but with such a shift another problem surfaced, i. e. the neglect of research on teachers/teaching. However, this conference witnessed a balance between research on teachers/teaching and research on learners/learning. It seems to indicate that research on ELT in China has become more mature and less lop-sided. Thirdly, the number of data-based papers further increased and many of the presenters were young MA and PhD degree-holders or doctoral students who had received professional training. We are elated to see such a young generation of professional scholars in China growing, who will be the backbone of China's ELT profession in the future.

The proceedings of this conference contain the papers that had successfully gone through two rounds of screening. Through the first round of screening, 120 papers were selected from more than 500 full-length papers. Forty-two papers out of the 120 were then chosen to be included in this volume after the second screening. The criteria for the selection were: 1) the research topic addressed in the paper is significant for ELT in China; 2) it makes some

contribution to our existing body of knowledge; 3) the research method used is properly described; and 4) the way the paper is written meets internationally-accepted standard. Although we kept the criteria clearly in view during the screening, we still encountered considerable difficulty in determining which ones to leave out.

The papers in this volume are divided into four sections. The first section consists of five plenary addresses. The second section includes the papers reporting studies on second language learners, the third section on second language teaching and teacher education, and the last one on second language production.

In conclusion, we would like to avail ourselves of this opportunity to thank those who kindly helped to select the proposals for presentations at the conference and those who participated in the two rounds of screening for selecting the papers for this volume. Special mention should be made of Mr Liu Xiangdong of the CELEA Secretariat, who contributed in various ways to the successful convening of the conference. We should also record our gratitude to the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press for providing financial and logistic assistance during the entire conference.

Hu Wenzhong
Wen Qiufang

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Plenary Addresses

Language Teaching: Environment, Presentation & Complexity

Susan Gass

Michigan State University, USA

Abstract

In this paper I will first consider language learning in its many environments, focusing on differences between foreign and second language learning. I will consider the question of the extent to which there is crossover between these two teaching situations. In so doing, I will consider two types of variables: variables internal to the learner and those external to the learner. I will argue that there are both quantitative and qualitative differences between the two learning contexts, but that there are enough similarities that we can move forward with our understanding of second/foreign language acquisition by examining one or the other of those contexts.

The second part of my talk will build on language learning in a foreign language context by considering data collected on the relationship between input and interaction. I will briefly outline the role of input and interaction as part of language learning and will present a pedagogical framework that exploits both. This will be followed by a report on data that investigated the learning outcomes from a comparison of four pedagogical treatments. The first involves presenting learners only with input; the second involves presenting new information only in an interaction setting. In the third treatment, students were presented with input followed by interaction and in the fourth treatment students were given new information in an interactive

environment followed by input.

The results show that the ordering of pedagogical materials is highly dependent on what is being taught (this study dealt with three grammatical forms). I will close the presentation with an explanation for the findings that builds on previous work on attention as it interacts with complexity and proficiency.

Key words: language learning environment; foreign language context; input and interaction

Introduction

This paper addresses two main issues. The first has to do with the similarities and differences between second and foreign language learning. Following a discussion of the learning environment, I will look at the roles of input, of interaction, and of the relationship between the two, focusing on issues of ordering of language materials and the effect of the complexity of the language structure involved.

Second and Foreign Language Learning: What Difference Does the Environment Make?

In general, language learning takes place in one of two environments: 1) second language and 2) foreign language. In the first case, second language learning, learning takes place in the environment of the language being studied (e. g. , Chinese in China); in the second, foreign language learning, learning takes place in the environment of the native language rather than the target language (e. g. , English in China). One needs to pose a number of questions: What difference does the environment make? Is second language learning like foreign language learning? If so, how? If not, in what ways do they differ? These are important questions for both teachers and researchers alike. The questions are important as we constantly seek to inform

our teaching practices and to understand the nature of learning. If we were to assume that the two environments are so different that they dictate different teaching practices, we would only need to consider the literature that relates to our own teaching context.

I would like to look at these questions in two ways, first, by considering what I call variables internal to the learner and second, by considering variables external to the learner. I turn my attention to internal variables focusing on what is common to the two learning environments.

Internal Variables

In this section I deal with 1) fundamental aspects of learning and 2) completeness. When we think of fundamental aspects of learning, it is necessary to think about psycholinguistic processing and general language learning abilities. And, it is clear that these basic processing capacities and abilities do not change within an individual if she or he moves from one environment to another. All learners, regardless of environment, have to take in information from the input (broadly interpreted to include listening or reading or signed language). All learners, as a result of taking in information, have to come up with a grammar of the language they are learning and modify and restructure whatever system they have constructed (interlanguage) as and when appropriate. All learners, regardless of environment, have to put their linguistic knowledge to use and “translate” that knowledge into output (writing or speaking).

A second area of similarity is completeness with the primary question being “Can one really learn a non-primary language without living in the environment in which that language is spoken?” In other words, can a non-primary language be learned without extensive exposure and extensive opportunities for interaction and practice and feedback? The simple answer is probably not, but there might be a better way of thinking of the question since one can probably not achieve native-like proficiency even after many

years of living in a country where the language is spoken (see Coppietiers, 1987 for a classic example of this). So, we are left with the question of whether or not the variable of completeness can differentiate the two learning contexts.

The answer to this complex question is probably both yes and no. No, in the qualitative sense. No individual can be identical to a native speaker in a second language (unless both languages are learned young). Yes, in the quantitative sense in that it is likely that a second language environment will provide richer contextualization for learning and may lead to more learning although probably not “complete” learning.

Thus, the variables that are internal to the learner are fundamentally the same: processing is the same, the starting point for learning is the same and neither environment guarantees completeness.

External Variables

One can take a broad perspective on external variables. In this section, I will consider two variables that the learner does not necessarily have control over: input and interaction. Considering differences in the two environments, external variables play an important role.

By input I mean the language that is part of the learner’s environment. It is obvious that this is the basis of language learning for without exposure to the language in some form, there will be no learning. This may be the language she or he hears (e. g. , from a teacher, from music, from television) or that she or he reads (e. g. , a newspaper, a billboard advertisement) or the language that she or he sees in the case of signed language. It is clear that in foreign language environment, there are greater limits on the amount of language available to learners. The major input available is through the classroom and, depending on the particular location (e. g. , a major city such as Beijing versus a much smaller town), there is greater or lesser input available. But, even in a language classroom, there is often a surprisingly

small amount of target language input available. In fact, Won (2004) investigated the use of English by five EFL Korean teachers in South Korea. The amount of input ranged from about 20% to 80% depending on the teacher. One teacher even said that she did not think it was necessary to use the foreign language in the classroom. What was important, in her view, was that the students understand the lesson and this can be accomplished better through the native language.

The second area to look at in this section is interaction. And here, as with input, the differences exist primarily in the opportunities available. By interaction we mean exchanges in which there is some negotiation (and usually feedback) in a conversational interaction. Long (1996) and Gass (1997) have argued for the benefits of interaction as a means for driving learning and Mackey (1999), Philp (2003), Ishida (2004) have provided empirical evidence on the benefits of negotiation and feedback during interaction.

Long (1996) puts this in the framework of the Interaction Hypothesis, which was defined as follows:

... *negotiation for meaning*, and especially negotiation work that triggers *interactional* adjustments by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways. (pp 451-452)

What is crucial to understand is the function of interaction. A number of researchers have proposed that through an interaction, a learner received information about what is and what is not possible in the language being learned. Long (1996) provides the following definition:

[I]t is proposed that environmental contributions to acquisition are mediated by selective attention and the learner's developing L2 processing capacity, and that these resources are brought together most usefully, although not exclusively, during *negotiation for*