The Role of Output in Language Learning: The Chilean Context

Rosa Delicio Garrido[1]

1. Departamento de idiomas, Universidad de Atacama, Copiapó, Chile.
E-mail: rosa.delicio@uda.cl

_____

Abstract

This paper examines the rationale of the English curriculum design in the Chilean Educational system and its relationship with two major concepts in Second Language Acquisition: "Input" and "Output".

The English curriculum in Chile relies on a methodology based on the assumption that a language is successfully learnt when learners get to understand what they read or listen to. This kind of instruction based on the understanding of written and oral messages agrees with Krashen's Comprehension Hypothesis who postulates that language acquisition is caused by input which is understood by learners. However, those Chilean learners who finish school do not reach any desirable competence in English. The author believes that one of the reasons for the failure in improving the development of language learning in Chile might be the lack of opportunities students have to use the language in the classroom. That is, the exclusion of output in language learning. The review of the literature presented here examines the role of output in language learning and its evolution since discussions started in the 1980's when Merrill Swain claimed that comprehensible input was not enough for language learning. Besides, research on interaction has been focused on determining the relationship between input, output and modified output. The results suggest that negative feedback and negotiation of form are more effective than positive input and negotiation of meaning in making learners modify their output.

Key Words: Input, Output, Negotiation of meaning and form, Positive and negative feedback

_____

Resumen

Este trabajo examina el fundamento del currículo de inglés en el sistema educacional chileno y su relación con dos importantes conceptos en la Adquisición de un Segundo Idioma: "Input" y "output."

El currículo de inglés en Chile confía en una metodología basada en el supuesto que un idioma se aprende en forma exitosa cuando los alumnos logran comprender lo que leen o escuchan. Este tipo de instrucción, fundamentada en la comprensión de mensajes escritos y orales está de acuerdo con la Hipótesis de la Comprensión de Krashen, quien postula que la adquisición de un idioma se debe al "input" (información recibida) la que es comprendida por los alumnos.

Sin embargo, aquellos alumnos chilenos que terminan la escuela no logran alcanzar las competencias deseadas en inglés. La autora cree que una de las razones del fracaso en la mejora del aprendizaje del idioma inglés en Chile, podría deberse a la falta de oportunidades que los alumnos tienen para usar el idioma en la sala de clases. Esto es, la exclusión de "output" (producción del idioma por parte de los alumnos).

La revisión de la literatura presentada aquí examina el rol que el "output" tiene en el aprendizaje de un idioma y su evolución desde que las discusiones comenzaron en los años 80 cuando, Merril Swain afirmó que la comprensión de información recibida por los alumnos no era suficiente para el aprendizaje de un idioma. Además, la investigación sobre interacción ha estado enfocada en determinar la relación entre "input", "output" y "output modificado". Los resultados sugieren que la retroalimentación negativa y la negociación de forma son más efectivas que la retroalimentación positiva y la negociación de significado, al hacer que los alumnos modifiquen su "output".

Palabras clave: input, output, negociación de significado y forma, retroalimentación positiva y negativa.

The Role of Output in Language Learning: The Chilean Context

Introduction

The present paper is motivated by the need to analyse the current situation concerning English teaching within the Chilean context. The aim is to examine and try to understand certain government decisions regarding the English curriculum and to provide solid and reliable information about the implications of these decisions, especially those related to the exclusion of 'output' in language learning. The information presented here is based on a review of the literature of what I consider the most relevant research on the subject. I have concentrated on articles published during the 1980's and 2007. However, I have also included some articles published somewhat earlier.

This paper has been organised following a diachronic rationale, starting from the origins of the discussions about 'output', and going through its development during the last three decades concluding with some relatively new considerations on the issue.

I would like to start the discussion by providing a brief description of the Chilean experience with respect to English language learning.

The Chilean Context

As we already know, the main reason for learning English as a foreign language is its almost universal application in communication all over the world. In 2003 Niño-Murcia wrote a paper about the status of English in Peru which clearly reflects what English represents not only for Peruvian people but also for the rest of the world: "English is like the dollar" (Niño-Murcia, 2003, p.153). It is "like the dollar" because it is considered a global language and an important tool for accessing better job opportunities and becoming successful in life; in this respect, Chile is not an exception.

The curriculum reform process started in Chile over 10 years ago and since then the English Language curriculum has been modified twice, once in 1999 and again in 2002, in order to improve the quality of education and to meet the requirements of society which needs students to graduate from high school better prepared for university studies and professional challenges.

The Chilean educational system is currently divided into the following categories: primary school, 1st to the 8th grades, and secondary school, 1st to the 4th grades. English as an obligatory subject starts in the 5th grade, primary school.

The philosophy on which the English curriculum is based has certain social characteristics which are clearly expressed in the following quote:
"El conocimiento y uso del idioma inglés adquiere cada vez mayor relevancia en el mundo de hoy y del futuro. La participación activa de nuestro país en diversas áreas del ámbito internacional, el desarrollo de las comunicaciones, de la tecnología y de la informática, los avances científicos y el fenómeno de la globalización hacen que el conocimiento del idioma inglés sea fundamental para que las personas enfrenten con éxito los desafíos y demandas del siglo XXI" (5th Grade Study plans and programmes, 1998, p.9).

As the use of English expands around the world Chilean authorities continue to emphasize the importance and the role of English in society, not only as a communication tool but also as a means for integrating Chile into the global economy. Chilean authorities understand that our society must be recognized and fully functional within the current global economic parameters and that English is a must to achieve this objective. Hence, the strong emphasis the Ministry of Education has placed on the teaching of English.

An example of this increasing interest in the teaching of English is the "English Opens Doors Programme" launched by the government, and which clearly explains what English represents for Chilean society. The main purpose of this initiative is to make Chile competent in the use of English. The desire is to achieve certain standards in English which may allow people to communicate in different situations, especially those related to professional areas.

In this context, we would expect curriculum design for teaching English to emphasize the development of integrated skills. It is here, however, that we find a contradiction in curriculum design with respect to its goals, objectives and contents. The current English curriculum focuses the development of receptive skills (reading and listening) over productive skills (writing and speaking) based on the following assumption:

"El enfoque del programa de inglés radica en el desarrollo de las habilidades de comprensión auditiva y lectora, con el propósito de preparar a los estudiantes a comprender e interpretar con éxito textos orales y escritos. El desarrollo de estas habilidades posibilita el establecimiento de una base lingüística necesaria para la generación de lenguaje oral y escrito en etapas posteriores. En el NB3, la generación de lenguaje se circunscribe a la reproducción de expresiones de alta frecuencia y de canciones, poemas, cánticos y rimas. La producción de lenguaje no se excluye, sino que se concibe como una actividad mediadora para el logro de la comprensión." (5th Grade Study plans and programmes, 1998, p.9).

Therefore, they claim that language learning is achieved essentially through the input received through the receptive skills which then has to be understood and interpreted by the learners themselves. This is why oral and written production is de-emphasized in favour of listening and reading. The assumption seems to be that language production does not play a role in language learning; it is only used as a means, but not as an end.

Sandra McKay conducted research in Chile to investigate the relationship between culture and the teaching of English as a foreign language. In her research findings she discovered that the reasons for emphasising the development of receptive skills are different from those stated above:

"The rationale given for this division is that, for most Chileans, English will be used to access the growing amount of information available in that language, which will often be of a technical nature, rather than for speaking or writing. The Ministry believes that an emphasis on receptive skills reflects the local English needs of Chilean youngsters, who will need English to partake in a global economy and information network" (McKay, 2003, p.141).

From a cultural point of view, the reasons presented by McKay suggest that the authorities do not expect people to contribute to the development of the country by producing and conveying information, but only by receiving and internalizing it from those countries which are believed to be of superior importance. In other words, English is only a tool to obtain information or a means for technology transfer from others, because in Chile we have nothing to offer or tell to the world.

At the same time the authorities have also stated that the aim of improving the teaching of English in Chile is to help students achieve a level of language proficiency that will allow them to effectively communicate in English. The following quote explains the Ministry's expectations:

"Los alcances del Programa Inglés Abre Puertas, junto con el sostenido requerimiento por un mejoramiento del manejo de inglés, en el contexto de la creciente inserción internacional de Chile, han conducido a establecer metas más ambiciosas respecto a la expectativa de aprendizaje de los alumnos y alumnas en esta área. Así, se espera que los y las estudiantes egresen con un manejo del inglés que les permita enfrentar con éxito diversos requerimientos idiomáticos, es decir, que puedan tanto comprender lo que leen y escuchan, así como expresarse comunicativamente en este idioma" (Ministerio de Educación, Propuesta de Ajuste Curricular, 2007, p. 16).

This statement clearly indicates a contradiction with that which is stated in the current English curriculum, the focus of which is essentially on the development of receptive skills.

Currently, the Ministry of Education is working on new modifications for the English curriculum, expressly designed to change the specific objectives and the contents. These modifications are founded on the need for improving the level of English achieved when students graduate so that they will be able to successfully deal with the new social and

economic challenges Chile is confronting in the global world.

To achieve this goal, the Ministry of Education is proposing to use a framework based on international standards. These standards are the "Association of Language Testers in Europe" (ALTE) and the Common European Framework (CEF). The application of these standards demonstrates that the authorities have come to recognize the importance of emphasizing the acquisition of the receptive as well as the productive language skills; then we read the following:

"En este contexto, se le asigna igual relevancia al desarrollo de las habilidades receptivas y al desarrollo de la Expresión oral. Esto se refleja en la presencia de Objetivos Fundamentales separados para cada una de las habilidades y en contenidos proporcionales, en extensión y exigencia, a la relevancia de cada una de ellas. No obstante la relevancia otorgada al desarrollo de la comprensión y expresión oral, el presente currículo promueve el desarrollo básico de la competencia de expresión escrita. (Ministerio de Educación, Documento Borrador para consulta pública, 2007, p.3).

It is difficult to understand how these above mentioned standards are going to be realized, if, as it appears in the above quote, once again the focus shifts to the receptive skills. The contradiction seems to emerge again here where we see the Ministry focussing on the development of writing competency reinforcing the idea that the system still believes that language acquisition is through input:

"El aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera es un proceso de construcción progresivo que implica la exposición, la reiteración, la ejercitación, la expansión y el enriquecimiento de experiencias lingüísticas orales y escritas en el idioma extranjero. Implica, además, fortalecer la capacidad de los estudiantes para predecir, relacionar, sintetizar, inferir o interpretar información. En la educación básica se sientan las bases que hacen posible acercarse al funcionamiento del sistema lingüístico oral y escrito del Idioma inglés. Esto implica un énfasis en la adquisición de estrategias de aproximación a textos y en la adquisición de destrezas básicas de procesamiento de

información, que permitan primero comprender, para posteriormente producir lenguaje." (Ministerio de Educación, Documento Borrador para consulta pública, 2007, p.2).

Curriculum design is fundamental to the implementation of a second language (L2) programme and it should be constructed in such a way so as to provide what is necessary to achieve its mission objective. Unfortunately, the current curriculum for teaching English in Chile is not effectively aligned with that mission objective. It is my contention that focussing on the development of receptive skills at the expense of, or the minimizing of, the productive skills is too limiting and will not result in an effective language learning experience. If learners do not get the opportunity to use the language in an active speaking and listening context, acting and interacting in an audio/oral language exchange, then any real language acquisition will be severely reduced. In my opinion, output is a critical element in L2 learning and it cannot be neglected, if, indeed, the goal is to effectively prepare people to communicate in English.

The main objective of my work here is to explore and discuss the various and numerous implications that the output skills have on second (L2) language learning. The following bibliographical review of the relevant literature on the importance of output traces its evolution over the last three decades, and focuses attention on the ongoing analysis of the different positions with respect to the effectiveness of output in language acquisition.

The role of input in second language acquisition

During the last 20 years, Stephen Krashen has made many valuable contributions to the understanding of second language acquisition. He bases his work, in part, on the distinction between language acquisition, involving subconscious processes and language learning which involves conscious processes (1981). According to Krashen, for a person to successfully acquire a language, the processes have to be subconscious because what is learned cannot

become acquisition. Thus, language acquisition is not realized through learning language rules and by correction of errors and mistakes, but through real and meaningful communication experiences where the attention is focused on the message and not on the form. The role of this meaningful communicative interaction is to provide input which is to be understood by the acquirer by means of certain modifications.

Krashen's input or comprehension hypothesis claims that a language is acquired only when the acquirer understands messages:

"The Comprehension Hypothesis states that we acquire languages when we understand messages, when we understand what people say and when we understand what we read" (Krashen, 2004, p.2).

Krashen's theory here goes against promoting output, as he believes it does not have any significant impact on second language acquisition. What is more, Krashen thinks that output plays a negative role in language development because, apart from not contributing to language acquisition, it increases the "learners' affective filter", that is, their anxiety,

"Note that if we ignore the Comprehension Hypothesis, that is, provide students with incomprehensible input, and force early speaking, we will raise students' Affective Filters" (Krashen, 2004, p.2).

Nor does correction play a relevant role in L2 acquisition since it only interrupts the normal flow of a conversation; research on correction has not proven to be effective in helping learners improve or develop their inter-language (Krashen, 2004; Truscott, 1996).

The issue of error correction has been the focus of research analysis for more than 30 years when Corder (1967) wrote about "The Significance of Learners' Errors." In 2000, Roy Lyster, Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada wrote a response to Truscott's "What is Wrong with Oral Grammar Correction" in which they present arguments against Truscott's reluctance to accept that correction can, in fact, help learners develop their interlanguage. Interlanguage has been defined by Selinker (1972), as the language produced by a learner which is different from the learner's mother tongue and the target language. Truscott shares with Krashen the hypothesis that "exposure to comprehensible input would be enough for L2 learners to develop an L2 grammar" (Lyster, Lightbown and Spada, 2000:8). In this sense, Lyster, Lightbown and Spada argue that although learners can learn from input, corrective feedback is necessary when learners "are not able to discover, through exposure alone, how their interlanguage differs from the L2" (2000, p.8).

Krashen distinguishes two theories that oppose what he is proposing in the comprehension hypothesis: the Skill-building Hypothesis and the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis. The first theory states that second language acquisition is achieved when the student learns the rules consciously, and then applies them, producing output which can be corrected.

Krashen argues that conscious learning, that is to say, the teaching and application of grammar rules, and correction, is not effective because the learner must know the rules and focus his or her attention on form. Concerning this, Krashen argues that knowing grammar rules is quite difficult even for native speakers, and also when someone is involved in an interaction situation the focus is on the message, not on the form.

On the other hand, the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis states that second language acquisition is achieved when the learner is encouraged to produce new language structures and vocabulary. Krashen argues that this theory is not strong enough because of the following problems: Comprehensible output is very unlikely to happen in this way, there is no significant evidence to support the theory, and acquisition can be achieved without output. But Krashen does assign 'output' a role in language acquisition:

"This does not mean that output should be forbidden. Oral output (speaking) invites aural input, via conversation. If you talk, somebody might answer back. The comprehension Hypothesis predicts, however, that the contribution of conversation to language acquisition is what

the other person says to you, not what you say to them." (Krashen, 2004, p.7)

So that we can better understand the pedagogical application of Krashen's theory, I would like to present some of his suggestions that are relevant to his theories on language teaching.

As indicated above, Krashen claims that successful language acquisition depends on comprehensible input. The ideal environment for acquisition, it seems, would be a place where the target language is spoken as the first language, and not in an artificial environment created for formal instruction. However, Krashen proposes a teaching method to be applied in the classroom and which offers the necessary comprehensible input to help learners acquire the language. He suggests using the "literature and culture of the English-speaking world" (Krashen, 2004, p.11). This is exactly the same application established in the Chilean English curriculum.

He states that the main objective for a teaching program based on comprehensible input is to make students 'autonomous acquirers.' That is, a learner who knows about the importance of comprehensible input and who has already acquired some of the second language. Krashen also assigns the first language a role in the classroom. It can be used to make input comprehensible.

According to Krashen, the application of such a programme requires that the students first be oriented as to how a language is acquired so that they can become independent language acquirers.

In Krashen's teaching programme, comprehensible input can be effectively provided by literature. Krashen distinguishes six levels of reading, from simple to complex. And, for the programme to be successful, it is necessary for the texts to appeal to students.

Krashen's distinction between language acquisition and language learning and the different processes involved is very appealing. Of course, research on language acquisition of the first language can help us understand some of the subconscious processes Krashen is referring to, and they can serve as a basis for pedagogical uses in teaching L2, but it is difficult to contend that acquisition can be reproduced in exactly the same way as L1 acquisition. The classroom is a special environment created with the purpose of teaching and learning and much of what takes place there points to the development of people's intellect by means of conscious processes. The term language acquisition here could be questionable as it might not adequately define what really happens in an L2 classroom; language learning here seems a much more appropriate term.

I agree with Krashen when he claims that input has to be comprehensible but I do not think that by just understanding a message a learner will be able to acquire L2, though it can facilitate the learning process. According to Krashen, those learners exposed to comprehensible input, at any certain point in the learning process, are supposed to produce some acquired language, but, based on my experience as a teacher, I am sure that what learners will still produce is interlanguage, not acquired target-like language. On the other hand, getting comprehensible input implies that the learner makes a mental effort to decode the message; this mental activity is also a conscious activity. The difference with output is that the mental effort to understand a message may be less demanding.

The role of language in language learning

Discussions on output and its role in second language acquisition (SLA) have their origin in a sociocultural theory that considers learners as part of society in which learning results from experience within the social environment and interaction with other people. On the whole, learning is mediated by language use in social interactions. This sociocultural theory started long ago with Vygotsky's studies and it is still recognized as influential in SLA.

In 1978, Vygotsky launched his sociocultural theory about the role of language (speech) in learning, based on work carried out in Russia in the 1930's. His work provides a scientific basis for the output theory as it provides important information about the role of language in the development of psychological functions. This work is the result of experiments and

investigation carried out by researchers interested in understanding children's psychological development.

The first experiments carried out by Köhler and Buhler (In Vygotsky, 1978, p.20) show that children in their pre–verbal stage use practical intelligence in the same way apes do. Vygotsky concludes that at the genesis of practical intelligence children's behaviour and actions are independent from speech. Practical intelligence, then, develops as a result of the need to solve certain problems with the help of tools provided by the environment and also influenced by imitation.

According to Vygotsky, the differences between apes and children start with the development of speech. He states that Kohler and Buhler's findings, "support my assumption that speech plays an essential role in the organization of higher psychological functions" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.22). With the development of intellect, speech becomes more and more important. Children cannot work independently as they can during the practical intelligence period. In other words, the development of intellect is mediated by speech and social interaction. Vygotsky goes on to clarify his premise, "the most significant moment in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of development, converge" (1978, p.24).

When children start speaking, they use speech as a tool to organize their intellectual activity and to control the environment as well. "In such circumstances it seems both natural and necessary for children to speak while they act; in our research we have found that speech not only accompanies practical activity but also plays a specific role in carrying it out" (Vygotsky,1978, p.25).

His experiments show that speech plays two important roles in problem solution: 1) it accompanies actions and 2), depending on the complexity of the problem; it becomes essential in the organization of psychological functions that make problem solving possible, Vygotsky states,

"A child's speech is as important as the role of action in attaining the goal. Children not only speak about what they are doing; their speech and action are part of one and the same complex psychological function, directed toward the solution of the problem at hand" (1978, p.25).
And further reinforcing this idea he points out that,
"The more complex the action demanded by the situation, and the less direct its solution, the greater the importance played by speech in the operation as a whole. Sometimes speech becomes of such vital importance, that if not permitted to use it, young children cannot accomplish the given task" (1978, p.25).

Vygotsky claims that in the early stages of development actions occur first, and they are independent from speech. Later, when the child has started developing his or her intellect, speech occurs first and it "guides and determines the actions." In other words, the more intellectually developed a person is the more important the use of speech.
"Initially speech follows actions and is provoked by and dominated by activity. At a later stage, however, when speech is moved to the starting point of activity, a new relation between word and action emerges. Now speech guides, determines, and dominates the course of action, the planning function of speech comes into being in addition to the already existing function of language to reflect the external world" (1978, p.28).

From his experiments Vygotsky also derives important information about the relationship between the child's speech and the environment. He uses the term "socialising speech" to refer to the use of speech by children when confronting problems they cannot solve by themselves. Thus, children use speech to ask for help from adults which shows that, apart from guiding the actions, it is in itself a tool mediating the relationship between intellect and the environment.

In his sociocultural theory, Vygotsky presents another important concept which has important pedagogical implications, that is, the 'Zone of Proximal Development'

(ZPD). In Vygotsky's terms, "It is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with a more capable peer" (1978, p.86). He also states that learning originates, first, in social activity, in collaboration with others and that later, this social learning becomes internalized, that is to say, through internal psychological processes it becomes the possession of the individual. Merrill Swain (2000) refers to the pedagogical application of this theory to language learning which will be discussed in the subsequent sections of this paper.

The role of output in language learning

Vygotsky's work can clearly be identified in what Swain is proposing in her theory. She also assigns language a role in language learning. According to Swain's Output Hypothesis language can serve the purpose of second language learning in two ways: as a means of achieving knowledge and as product. As a means through collaborative dialogue or social interaction it may result in 'knowledge-building', that is, the product.

During the 1980's research was mainly focused on input and its role as the cause of L2 acquisition. At that time, output was only considered a product, the final result of continuous exposure to comprehensible input. It was in 1985, that Merrill Swain observed, during research on a French immersion course based on continuous exposure to comprehensible input, that the results were unsatisfactory. This led her to consider that learners needed to be provided with opportunities to use the language: "Students' meaningful production of language-output would thus seem to have a potentially significant role in language development" (Swain, 2000, p.99). Since this discovery, Merrill Swain has claimed that output plays a more fundamental role in L2 learning, and that it is not just an outcome or final product but a process, which she calls "languaging".

According to Swain output has three functions in language learning:
1. The noticing/triggering function
2. The hypothesis testing function.
3. The metalinguistic (reflexive) function.

Learners who are 'pushed' to use the language might be able to notice there is a gap between what they want to say and what they can say. As a natural reaction, and consistent with Vygotsky's ideas, learners will look for solutions in the environment asking the teacher or someone more knowledgeable. This way, learners are provided with opportunities to process the information they receive and, therefore, improve their output.

When learners are given opportunities to speak or write they also have the chance to test their knowledge about the language. This is a key aspect of all learning processes where learners try out their hypothesis, fail, notice, repair, try again and finally succeed.

On the other hand, collaborative dialogue encourages learners to reflect on what has been produced which is the third function of output, the metalinguistic function. Swain defines collaborative dialogue as 'dialogue that constructs linguistic knowledge and where language use and language learning can co-occur' (2000, p.97).

According to Swain, interaction should not be exclusively focused on input and the means to make it comprehensible through negotiation of meaning, as this establishes the role of social interaction within the parameters of receptive and passive learning (2000, p.97), which in turn leads to what Krashen suggested as language development determined by subconscious acquisition of comprehensible input (1981, 2004). But even if we follow Krashen on this point it is still unclear how we can know if a learner has 'acquired' something or not. Ellis (1997, p.4) suggests that one way is to get samples of what the learner says or writes. In fact, most research on SLA is done by collecting information from the learners' interlanguage; output, then, being the only concrete product that can provide evidence as to a learner's use of the L2. This means that understanding the language by using different strategies such as the learner's background, their knowledge of the subject, or by negotiation of meaning does not prove to be successful

until learners have the opportunity to use the language and this can only be achieved by promoting output, specifically in the form of speaking. Concerning this, Swain claims that output plays an important role in language learning making learners produce something with 'more mental effort'. Output is, then, the result of several psychological processes which help the learner to process information and to use this information to produce the language. As output needs the learners to be 'in control' of what they produce, it requires from them to be conscious of what they are doing, paying attention to language form and meaning at the same time, and noticing the gap between what they can do and what they cannot do. Swains agrees that noticing is a key element in language learning and she believes that output plays an important role promoting it:

"We have observed that those learners notice holes in their linguistic knowledge and they work to fill them by turning to a dictionary or grammar book, by asking their peers or teacher. Learners seek solutions to their linguistic difficulties when the social activity they are engaged in offers them an incentive to do so." (Swain, 2000, p.100)

As I said before, Swain's theory claims that output may have two roles in language learning: the product, what the learners can actually do and the means, which is, using the language (sometimes the learner's mother tongue), to construct knowledge through collaborative dialogue: "Collaborative dialogue is dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building." (Swain, 2000, p.102)

She agrees with researchers such as Stetsenko and Arievitch (In Swains, 2000, p.103) who state that "psychological processes emerge first in collective behaviour, in co-operation with other people, and only subsequently become internalized as the individual's own possessions."

Therefore, the importance of language use is in its mediating role. It is the tool that mediates external and internal activity, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978).

Research on interaction

For a better understanding of the role of output in language learning, it is important to review research on interaction, so that we can determine how language is used as a means and as an end.

Swain states that output is more than just a product. Before reaching this product, learners interacting in an L2 classroom experience various important psychological processes. Swain refers to interaction as a key aspect which deserves to be studied from other perspectives too, not just focusing the attention on input and how to make it comprehensible by negotiating meaning. Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Long's Interaction Hypothesis emphasize the role of interaction as a provider of input whose most important value is in understanding the meaning of the message. But for Swain interaction (peer- or teacher-interaction), has other implications that are part of other psychological processes which also play a role in language learning. That is, interaction through collaborative dialogue which may drive learners to focus not only on meaning but on form as well. In this way, interaction provides instances to negotiate meaning, noticing the gap, negotiation of form and hypothesis testing; a much wider pedagogical role.

Roy Lyster (2002) distinguishes between negotiation of meaning and negotiation of form; both of them part of interaction but whose roles in language learning differ a great deal.

Negotiation of meaning refers to the use of different strategies to make a message comprehensible. Therefore, its main role is to achieve understanding in a conversational situation. Thus, modified input is one of these strategies.

According to Lyster, negotiation of meaning is too limited as a strategy to help learners develop an L2. He argues that negotiation of meaning can even drive learners to fossilization as little linguistic knowledge is needed to achieve understanding and communication.

Researchers such as Long suggest that negotiation of meaning may contribute to an L2 development by providing "negative evidence", that is to say, that learners get target-like input which informs them of their linguistic errors. This strategy is known as "recasts." (Long, 1996. In Lyster, 2002, p.240). Concerning this, Lyster says:

"I argued in previous work that recasting, as defined in the L1 literature and as observed in immersion classrooms (i.e., an implicit target-like reformulation of the learner's utterance), is not the most effective way of drawing young L2 learners' attention to form."

And later, he adds:

"I would argue that, when students' attention is focused on meaning in this way, they remain focused on meaning, not on form, because they expect the teacher's immediate response to confirm or disconfirm the veracity of their utterances" (Lyster, 2002, p.240).

On the other hand, negotiating form refers to the use of strategies to promote noticing and the reformulation of the non-target-like utterance by the learner. According to Lyster, its pedagogical value lies in its roles to promote "accuracy and mutual comprehension." (Lyster, 2002, p.243)

Lyster agrees with Swain that learners need to be encouraged by teachers to produce language which is focused on meaning and form in order to develop their interlanguage.

Strategies suggested by Lyster and Ranta (1997) to make learners produce target-like utterances by means of feedback are:

"Clarification requests": The use of expressions to show lack of understanding.
"Repetition": Repetition of the learner's error using intonation to raise attention.
"Metalinguistic clues": Providing implicit information about the language correctness.
"Elicitation": Asking the learners directly to reformulate their sentences or to provide correct answers. (In Lyster, 2002, p.243)

Therefore, these strategies provide prompts and thus give learners opportunities to notice the gap, reanalyse and repair their interlanguage resulting in further L2 development. On the other hand, the use of recasts and explicit correction as noted by Lyster, allows repetition and does not necessarily provide learners with negative evidence, that is, evidence that informs the learners that what they have produced in the target language is incorrect. What is more, in recent research by Hauser (2005), the real value of recasts as a provider of negative evidence has been questioned. Recasts are defined as target-like utterances provided in response to a non-target-like utterance and whose principal characteristic is to maintain its original meaning. Therefore, in an interaction situation negotiation of meaning allows the teacher to interpret what the learner is trying to say. The recast, then, does not necessarily maintain the exact meaning the learner wants to convey, but what the teacher supposes the meaning is. According to Hauser, this is 'problematic' in that teachers might be mistaken in their interpretations of the real intention and meaning in the learner's brain.

Evidence to support the above is found in experiments conducted by Lyster and Ranta, (1997); Lyster (2001); Lyster and Mori, (2006); and Mackey (2006). Lyster's research on corrective feedback in four French immersion classes shows that the tendency among teachers is to provide different types of feedback depending on the kind of errors learners commit. The observations show that teachers tend to provide recasts after phonological and grammatical errors; and negotiating the form after lexical errors. Nevertheless, the findings show that lexical and grammatical self-repair occur as a result of negotiating the form, and that only phonological errors benefit from recasts.

Similarly, Mackey's experiment aims to determine the relationship between feedback, noticing and L2 development. The method consists of supplying two groups of learners with similar activities, providing them with similar exposure to the language and with similar opportunities for production as well as with opportunities to report noticing. The difference is that only the experimental group receives "interactional feedback," consisting of negotiation and recasts. The results suggest that a) there is a relationship between feedback and noticing

and b) there is a relationship between noticing and learning even in the process of negotiation. "Negotiation involving questions also led to more modified output than recasts following plural or past tense. This may indicate a relationship between modified output and noticing" (Machey, 2006, p.425).

In 2000, Hossesin Nassaji and Merrill Swain published the results of their research on feedback based on Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective and his theory about the (ZPD) Zone of Proximal Development. They state that,

"what distinguishes this perspective from the conventional perspective is that in this framework, error correction is considered as a social activity involving joint participation and meaningful transactions between the learner and the teacher" (Nassaji and Swain, 2000, p.35).

In other words, learning starts as a social process mediated by interaction between a learner and an expert (the teacher) and that for learning to take place this interaction must occur within the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978).

The ZPD is related to the idea of scaffolding, that is to say that the learner receives help or support during the process of expanding his/her knowledge, help which depends, according to Nassaji and Swain, on the learner's needs. Both authors suggest that the effectiveness of using corrective feedback within this ZPD perspective "...is not dependent as much on the type of feedback, but on the way it evolves in interaction and the way it is negotiated between the novice and the expert" (Nassaji and Swain, 2000, p.36).

To prove the effectiveness of such correction, they conducted research with two adults in an English writing course. The method was to provide one of them with collaborative ZPD help and the other with non-ZPD help. The results, which were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively, showed that ZPD help was more effective. These results come to support what Vygotsky stated in his sociocultural theory many years ago, that learners can develop their potential in collaboration with other more knowledgeable people, As we can see, recent research has shown that there is a relationship between interaction, feedback and modified output, suggesting that 'pushing' learners to produce output is more effective than just providing comprehensible input.

In her recent work Larsen-Freeman has clearly pointed out the importance of interaction, feedback and modified input in language learning saying that, "Indeed consciousness itself can be viewed as the end product of socialization, involving the learner in a conscious tension between the conflicting forces of their current interlanguage productions and the evidence of feedback, linguistic, pragmatic, or metalinguistic, that allows socially scaffolded development" (C. Ellis, Larsen-Freeman, 2006, p.572).

Conclusions

After examining the literature on the issue of output and its implications for language learning we can conclude that:

a) Learning is socially constructed, and with the classroom as a social environment it should promote active participation of learners in building knowledge with the help of teachers.

b) Output is an important component of language learning because of its social nature, it triggers noticing, negotiation of meaning and negotiation of form, it relates input, output, feedback and modified output in such a way that it is pedagogically more valuable than just focusing on input.

c) Language learning consists of various psychological processes that stem from a conscious activity stimulated by the need to solve linguistic problems. Input and output are part of these processes and therefore should not be separated; they have to work together by providing information and by allowing practice, especially if the aim is to achieve comprehension and communicative competence.

d) Although the Chilean curriculum for the teaching of English does not explicitly state why it is mainly focused on the development of

receptive skills, there is an important detail which can help us understand this point without justifying it: In the curriculum, what is required is called 'objetivos y contenidos mínimos' (minimum objectives and contents). The Ministry's decision to focus more on input rather than output was based on the assumption that reading comprehension is what learners need in order to develop effective understanding of the target language. But what the Ministry of Education considers minimal is not enough to achieve the language learning goals required by society, which demands competent users of the language to understand and to communicate in the target language. My position on this agrees with Larsen-Freeman and Long who clearly explain the role of instruction and state that what is minimum is not always the best.

"Thus, while comprehensible input may be necessary and sufficient for untutored second language acquisition, it does not necessarily follow that instruction should be limited to what is necessary and sufficient. Surely the motivation for language instruction is not simply to supply what is minimally necessary for learning to take place, but rather to create the optimal conditions for effective and efficient L2 pedagogy" (In Larsen-Freeman, 1990, p.1).

e) Although research has not yet proven the exact relationship between modified output and language development, research results show that there is a relationship between feedback and modified output, suggesting that focusing on meaning and form is possible and more beneficial for learners.

In conclusion, the role output plays in the learning process can no be denied and efforts should be made to give learners opportunities to work with the language and for the language.

References

Carroll, S. 1999. 'Putting 'input' in its proper place.' University of Potsdam. Second Language Research. 15, 4; pp 337-388.

Corder, S. P. 1967. 'The Significance of Learners' Errors.' IRAL, Vol. V/4. Julius Groos Verlag, Heidelberg.

Ellis, R. 1997. 'Second Language Acquisition.' Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ellis, N. and Larsen-Freeman, D. 2006. 'Language Emergence: Implications for Applied Linguistics-Introduction to the Special Issue. Applied Linguistics 27/4: 558-589. Oxford University Press.

Hauser, E. 2005. 'Coding Corrective Recasts: The Maintenance of Meaning and More Fundamental Problems.' Applied Linguistics 26/3: 293-316. Oxford University Press.

Krashen, S. 1998. 'Comprehensible output.' System 26: 175 – 182.

Krashen, S. 2004. 'Applying the Comprehension Hypothesis: Some Suggestions.' Presented at the 13th International Symposium and Book Fair on Language Teaching (English Teachers Association of the Republic of China), Taipei, Taiwan.

Krashen, S. 'The Comprehension Hypothesis and its Rivals.' Selected papers from the 11th International Symposium on English Teachers/Fourth Pan- Asian Conference (In press). Taipei: Crane Publishing Company.

Krashen, S. 1981. 'Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning.' University of Southern California. First printed edition Pergamon Press Inc. First internet edition 2002.

Larsen-Freeman, D. 1990. 'Teaching Grammar'. From Teaching English as a Second Language.

Long, M. 2001. 'English Language Teaching in its Social Context.' Chapter 10, Focus on Form: A Design Feature in Language Teaching Methodology. New York and London. Routledge.

Lyster, R. 2001. 'Negotiation of form, recasts, and explicit correction in relation to error types and learner repair in immersion classrooms. Language Learning.' 51 (Suppl.1). Montreal, Mc Gill University.

Lyster, R. 2002. 'Negotiation in immersion teacher-students interaction'. International

Journal of Educational Research (237-253). Montreal: Pergamon.

Lyster, R., Lightbown, P. and Spada, N. 2000. 'A Response to Truscott's What's Wrong with Oral Grammar Correction.' The Canadian Modern Language Review. 457-467.

Lyster, R. and Ranta, L. 1997. 'Corrective Feedback and Learner Uptake.' Negotiation of Form in Communicative Classroom. SSLA, 20, 30-66. Cambridge University Press.

Lyster, R. and Mori, H. 2006. 'Interactional Feedback and Instructional Counterbalance'. SSLA, 28, 269-300. Cambridge University Press.

Nassaji, H. and Swain, M. 2000. 'A Vygotskian Perpective on Corrective Feedback in L2: The Effect of Random Versus Negotiated Help on the Learning of English Articles.' Language Awareness. Modern Language Centre. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. University of Toronto.

Niño-Murcia, M. 2003. 'English is like the dollar:hard currency ideology and the status of English in Peru.' World Englishes. Vol 22, Nº2. Blackwell Publishing Ltda.

Mackey, A. 2006. 'Feedback, Noticing and Instructed Second Language learning.' Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McKay, S. 2003. 'Teaching English as an International Language: the Chilean context.' English Language Teaching Journal. 57 (2), 139-148. Oxford University Press.

Ministerio de Educación de Chile: www.mineduc.cl Documentos Públicos sobre Currículo y evaluación.

Ministerio de Educación. 2007. www.bibliotecas-cra.cl Propuesta de Ajuste Curricular. Documento para Consulta Pública.

Ministerio de Educación. 2007. www.bibliotecas-cra.cl Documento Borrador para Consulta Pública.

Ministerio de Educación. 1998. Programas de Estudio de Inglés para enseñanza Básica y Media.

Swain, M. From Lantolf, I. 2000. Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning. 'The Output Hypothesis and beyond: Mediating Acquisition through Collaborative Dialogue.' Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Selinker, L. 1972. 'Interlanguage' IRAL, Vol. x/3. Julius Groos Verlag, Heidelberg.

Selinker, L. and Lakshman, U. 2001. 'Analysing Interlanguage: How do we know what learners know?' 17, 4. 393-420 USA. Arnold.

Vygotsky, L. 1978. 'Mind in Society. Tool and Symbol in Child Development.' Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. 1978. 'Mind in Society. Internalization of Higher Psychological Functions.' Cambridge: Harvard University Press.