Does Comprehensible Input Activate the LAD and Enable Communicative Competence to Be Obtained?

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Recently, many researchers such as Dulay and Burt (1972), Burt and Kiparsky (1972), Ervin-Tripp (1974), Ellis (1981) and Krashen (1981, 1982) have supported the assumption that the process of L2 acquisition is similar to that of L1 acquisition. In other words, they argue that if an L2 learner is exposed to large quantity of linguistic data he will acquire a second language in a manner similar to the way in which a child acquires a first language. Krashen sees comprehensible input as the necessary condition for L2 acquisition. He claims that the LAD will function properly if only an L2 learner receives “comprehensible input” containing structures that are a bit beyond his current level of competence.

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether a second language can be acquired in a manner similar to the way in which a child acquires a first language when an L2 learner is exposed to comprehensible input. For that purpose, this paper discusses whether four elementary school children involved in a short-term experiment are in the process of acquiring a second language, that is, obtaining communicative competence, on the basis of the four communicative competence components proposed by Canale (1983).

1. Statement of the Hypothesis

Our experiment rests on the premise that a second language is acquired in a manner similar to the way in which a child acquires a first language through the operation of the LAD. On the basis of this premise, we discuss the following hypothesis:

If an L2 learner is exposed to plenty of comprehensible input, he will be able to process the input data through the operation of the LAD and obtain communicative competence. As evidence that he is obtaining communicative competence, he will show the features of the four communicative competence components proposed by Canale (1983): grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence.
2. Method

(1) Subjects
Four elementary school children were involved in this experiment. They were Child 1 (a six-year old girl: 1st grader), Child 2 (a seven-year old boy: 2nd grader), Child 3 (an eight-year old boy: 3rd grader) and Child 4 (a nine-year old boy: 4th grader). None of the subjects had studied English before this experiment.

(2) Material (Input Data)
On the basis of the books quoted below, the input data was reorganized to provide functional uses of language. In this regard, the combined syllabus of "notions and topics" and "functions" (see Appendix) was designed to provide the four children with comprehensible input for basic communicative competence. However, in the actual communicative interaction, unsystematic linguistic data was also provided.

A Bridge to English: Kodomo Eigo Kyoshitsu [The English Classroom for Children].
   Mother Animals and Baby Animals. Level 1. Book C.
   Head to Feet. Level 2. Book B.
   Cats and Kittens. Level 2. Book F.
   Studybook. Levels 1-3.
Start with English. OUP. 1983.

(3) Procedure
This experiment was of a longitudinal nature. The data for this study were collected over a period of 4 months from 4/2/92 (the first exposure to English) to 8/6/92. Twice a week for at least 1.5 hours each session, the four children were exposed to English. The total exposure to English was 45 hours (which is an estimate based on 1.5 hours a day for 30 days). Their spontaneous speech was recorded on tape and later transcribed. Transcription was always done on the same day as the recording, when contextual factors were still fresh in memory. Follows a summary description of the teaching methodology:
a. Large quantity of comprehensible input is given through two-way interaction and discourse.
b. Lowering affective filter can be fully taken into consideration as follows:
   (a) The children are permitted to use L1.
   (b) Production is not demanded. Spontaneous utterances are encouraged in the light of
       "Comprehension precedes production."
   (c) The children's errors are not corrected.
c. The children are not encouraged to repeat words and sentences.
d. TPR is used to facilitate intake.

(4) Limitations
   (a) The total exposure to English was 45 hours over a period of 4 months. Therefore, one
       cannot speak of an intensive comprehensible input.
   (b) Comprehensible input was available only during study hours. The children involved in the
       experiment did not live in English-speaking neighborhood, nor did they speak English at
       home.
   (c) The children had little or no particular motivation to acquire English.

3. Results and Discussion

(1) Grammatical Competence
   Our data show that the four children are acquiring the knowledge and skill required to
   understand and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances.
   Firstly, they are acquiring marvelous comprehension skills. They can understand a wide
   variety of questions: those with such question words as *where, which, what, who, why, what time,
   how many, how many times* and *how about*, including Complex Sentences, the past tense, and the
   like. They can also understand much of what is said and act as they are told, as in *Put your
   things away and Close the door, please.*
   The following data show how the children can understand the meaning of what is said and
   respond spontaneously in Japanese:

   5/11  Teacher :  Is he Ken? (looking in a picture book at a boy)
            Child 1 :  *Mata machigae ta, Jun-chan dayo.* (meaning ‘You have made a mistake
                        again. He’s Jun’)
            Teacher :  Oh, yes, he’s Jun-chan.

   6/1  Teacher :  What’s this monkey doing? (looking in a picture book at a monkey)
            Child 3 :  *Iwa ni nobotte iryo.* (meaning ‘It’s sitting on the rock’)
Teacher: Did you write five words?
Child 1: *Umun Mada.* (meaning ‘No, not yet’)

Teacher: What time do you start eating?
Child 4: *Tabe hajimeru jikan?* (meaning ‘Do you mean the time when I start eating?’)

Teacher: Why does she have a pair of scissors? (looking in a picture book at a girl)
Child 3: *Happa wo kiru.* (meaning ‘So that she can cut the leaves off the tree with it’)

Secondly, they are progressing in productive skills.

(a) They can respond in English as follows:

Teacher: What’s this? (looking in a picture book at the pasture)
Child 3: Rail.
Teacher: How many boys are there?
Child 3: Ten. (This is our earliest data of production.)

Teacher: Do you think it is a wolf?
Child 3: Fox!

Teacher: How many times did you listen to it? One time? Two times? Three times?
Child 3: One time.
Teacher: One time?
Child 3: One time.

Teacher: What time is it now?
Child 2: Ten forty-five.

Teacher: Do you know what time it is now?
Child 2: Eight o’clock.

(b) Child 3 can use “be copula” and articles as follows:

Teacher: It’s a flower.
Child 2: Flower. (looking at another card) Car.
Child 3: It’s a car.
(c) Creative utterances are also increasing in the children’s speech:

6/15 Teacher : Do you know what it is? (looking in a picture book at a gas station)
Child 3 : Gasoline. Restaurant and gasoline (= a gas station with a restaurant in it).
( “And” was used for the first time.)

7/13 Teacher : Are you fine today?
Child 2 : O.K. (“O.K.” was used for the first time for “I’m fine.”)

8/6 Teacher : Do you like a bicycle?
Child 3 : Small. (This may mean “a little.”)

Lastly, the children seem to have found the rules of syntax for themselves and constructed their own grammar. Child 2 and Child 3 have discovered the /z/ sound of the plural-ending and Child 2 has discovered the /s/ sound of the possessive-ending.

4/16 Teacher : Potatoes. (pointing on a picture card to two potatoes)
Child 3 : Futatsu dakara /z/ ka. (meaning ‘The sound /z/ represents two’)

7/9 Teacher : Where are her shoulders? (looking in a picture book at a girl)
Child 2 : /z/? (Child 2 has confirmed that the teacher indicates both her shoulders. This seems to be an example of confirmation checks.)

8/6 Teacher : Shark’s teeth. (looking on a picture card at a shark)
Child 3 : Same dake nara sharks. (meaning ‘Same means sharks’)
Child 2 : /s/ wa iran no dayo. Shark dayo. (meaning ‘You don’t need /s/. Same is a shark’) (In this case, the children are looking on the picture card at a shark. So it seems reasonable to expect that Child 2 can tell the difference in meaning between the plural sharks and the possessive shark’s.)

(2) Sociolinguistic Competence

The children are developing the ability to use language appropriate to a given context. They can use please and thank you of their own free will, considering the setting and the purpose of the interaction.

6/25 Teacher : Come in. Hello! How are you?
Child 3 : Fine, thank you.
Discourse Competence

It seems reasonable to suppose that the children are acquiring the ability to connect sentences to an overall theme or topic, though utterances are often given in Japanese.

Strategic Competence

The children are beginning to show the ability to compensate for imperfect knowledge of linguistic rules.

Word-coinage

The children created non-existing lexical items in the target language, as in *gootiful, donking, Twelftember, fiteen* /faitən/:
Child 3: Donking ... close door please ... donk, donk ... knocking a door. ("Donk" may represent the knocking sound on the door.)

7/13 Teacher: Summer is June, July,....
Child 3: August.
Teacher: Fall is September, October,....
Child 3: ... eleven ... Fri ... Twelftember. (Child 3 combined "twelve" and "September" and coined a new word "Twelftember," which may mean "the twelfth month of year." He may have mistaken "Twelftember," however, for the 11th month of year.)

7/13 Teacher: What time is it now?
Child 2: Three ... four ten-five ... chigau (meaning 'no') ... four fifteen /fai'ti:n/.
Teacher: O.K. Fifteen. Good.
Child 2: Fifteen. (Child 2 combined "five" and "teen" on the analogy of "fourteen" and coined a new word "fiteen", which was pronounced /fai'ti:n/ by him. "Ten-five" may be transfer from Japanese.)

(b) Language-switch

The children often used linguistic strategy involving recourse to their first language:

8/6 Teacher: What's this?
Children: Dog!
Teacher: What's your dog's name?
Child 3: Koro-chan. (meaning 'Koro')
Teacher: Do you like your Koro?
Child 1: Un. (meaning 'Yes')
Teacher: Oh, you like your Koro. Do you like Koro, Teiji? (Child 2 lives next door to Child 1)
Child 2: Daisuki. (meaning 'Yes, I like him very much')

(c) Substitution

The term substitution is originally defined in this paper as a communication strategy where some routine expression is used as a substitute for some other expression:

7/6 Teacher: Are you fine?
Child 2: Thank you (= I'm fine, thank you). (Child 1 used her routine expression “Thank you” for “Yes, I'm fine, thank you.”)

Child 3: Close the door, please (= Would you like me to close the door)?
Teacher: O.K. Please do, thank you. (Child 3 was not able to use an expression appropriate to this occasion. Therefore, he used his routine expression as a substitute for it.)

4. Conclusion

Judging from the results of this short-term experiment, we can say that the children are processing comprehensible input and obtaining communicative competence. The evidence for this is the fact that the children are beginning to show the features of the four communicative competence components (grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence) proposed by Canale (1983). Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that if only an L2 learner is exposed to proper linguistic data (i.e. plenty of comprehensible input), he will be able to process the input data through the operation of the LAD and obtain communicative competence in a manner similar to the way in which a child acquires a first language.

References


Appendix

Notions and Topics

1. Greetings
   Establishing friendly relations
   Name:

2. Motivation
   Confirming purposes of acquiring English
   Location of Japan:
   Location of foreign countries:
   America (U.S.A.), England, France, Germany, Africa, China, Australia, etc.

   Features of countries:
   Japan: Mt. Fuji; America: buildings;
   England: Big Ben; France: the Eiffel Tower;
   Germany: beer; Africa: elephant;
   China: Banri no Chojo (the Great Wall of China); Australia: kangaroo, etc.

Language Functions

Socializing
   Hello! How are you? I’m fine, thank you, and how are you? I’m fine, too, thank you.
   What’s your name?
   My name is.... Your name is....
   I’m Mr..... I am a teacher. You are....

Asking and identifying factual information
   Where’s Japan? Here’s Japan. Here it is.
   Where’s America? Here’s America. Here it is.

This is Japan. This is Mt. Fuji.
Languages:
Japanese, English, French, German, Chinese, etc.

In Japan people (we) speak Japanese.
In America people (they) speak English.

3. People
Knowing people around us
boy, girl, man, woman, Japanese,
American, English, French, German, etc.

Identifying factual information
This is a Japanese girl. She has brown eyes.
She has dark hair. This is an American boy.
He has blue eyes. He has blond hair.
This is a man. He is German.