

# *Implications of Output Functions on College English Teaching*

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**Abstract**—For a long time the importance of output has been underestimated in second language acquisition. With the constant emergence of some researches and investigations, the situation has been greatly improved. Among the researchers, Gass and Skehan explained the important roles which output play in second language acquisition in a detailed and exact way, such as hypothesis testing, receiving feedback, developing automaticity, syntactic processing, generating better input, developing skills and developing a personal voice, which have provided implications for our College English teaching. Input-based teaching approaches are still dominant in the classroom in our country and the role of output is minimized. This is partly owing to our inadequate attention to the role of output in second language acquisition. Output-based teaching approaches should be adopted. In the classroom practice, output-based teaching approaches require teachers to provide students with adequate output-based assignments and activities.

**Keywords**—second language acquisition; output; output functions; college English teaching

## I. INTRODUCTION

Input is defined as “language which a learner hears or receives and from which he or she can learn”, in contrast to which output is defined as “the language a learner produces” according to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics [2].

## II. DEFINITION OF SLA

### A. Ellis’s Definition of SLA

Ellis states, “Second language acquisition refers to the processes by which a language other than the mother tongue is learnt in a natural or a tutored setting. It covers the development of lexis, grammar, and pragmatic knowledge” [4]. The second language to be acquired is often referred to as L2 or the target language (TL). According to this definition, whether you learn a language in a natural way or learn it in a tutored way, it is called second language acquisition. What is more, second language acquisition covers the development of many language levels. What is more, second language acquisition includes the development of many language levels. If learners meet one sentence in a second language, they know what it means but they do not know how to pronounce it. Or they hear the sentence and pronounce it perfectly but they do

not know what it means. Then again they might know the pronunciation and meaning of it, but they do not know how it is constructed. Can we come to the conclusion that they acquire this sentence? The answer is definitely no. Therefore, second language acquisition unites the development of lexis, grammar, and pragmatic knowledge of the target language.

### B. Selinker’s Definition of SLA

Selinker provides a theoretical framework for interpreting second language acquisition as a mental process. This mental system of L2 knowledge is often referred to as interlanguage. This term interlanguage is coined by the American linguist, Selinker. Different researchers have coined different terms to explain the same phenomenon. During the process of second language acquisition, the learners find the similarities between their first language and the second language and unite these together and establish their own rules on second language acquisition.

## III. GASS’ STUDY OF OUTPUT FUNCTIONS

Gass states that output has the following four functions, namely, “testing hypotheses about the structures and meanings of the target language; receiving crucial feedback for the verification of these hypotheses; developing automaticity in interlanguage production and forcing a shift from meaning-based processing of the second language to a syntactic mode” [5].

### A. Hypothesis Testing

Testing the hypothesis is the first function of output. Gass states that “output which involves the negotiation of form and the negotiation of meaning provides means for learners to test hypothesis” [5]. Learners test their hypothesis through two kinds of ways: when learners meet a problem related to linguistics they will discuss about the form and correct them by themselves based on the feedback they get from the persons who take part in the conversation.

#### Example 1

“Hiroko: Ah, the dog is barking to—

Izumi: At...

Hiroko: At the woman” [6].

### Example 2

‘Hiroko: A man is uh drinking c-coffee or tea uh with uh the saucer of the uh uh coffee set is in his uh knee.

Izumi: In him knee... Hiroko: Uh on his knee.

Izumi: Yeah.

Hiroko: On his knee.

Izumi: So sorry. On his knee” [6].

In Example 1, Hiroko modifies her output on the basis of Izumi’s feedback. And in Example 2, both Hiroko and Izumi are tentative and are in a sense searching for the right word and succeed in doing this by incorporating the information they supply for each other.

### B. Receiving Feedback

Receiving the feedback is the second function of output which involves two terms in second language acquisition, namely positive evidence and negative evidence. Positive evidence refers to “input and the set of well-formed sentences to which learners are exposed” and negative evidence refers to “the type of information that is provided to learners concerning the incorrectness of an utterance” [5]. Negative evidence enables learners to be clear about wrong forms in their interlanguage and will provoke them to look for information to verify or disconfirm their hypothesis.

There are some studies which provide some empirical evidence in support of the significance of negative evidence in second language acquisition. White examined two conditions under which Grade 5 and Grade 6 native French speakers acquired adverb placement of English. One group was given explicit instruction as well as exercises and correction on adverb placement. The other group was given instruction on questions using the same type of exercises but no explicit instruction on adverbs. The learners were tested in terms of grammaticality judgment tasks, preference tasks, and a sentence manipulation task. The groups’ performances in the pretest and posttest were compared, which indicated that negative evidence promoted the acquisition of adverb placement. Two years later, a follow-up study was conducted by Trahey and White to investigate the role that positive evidence serves in second language acquisition. The findings showed that although positive evidence was sufficient to help learners realize that subject-adverb-verb (SAV) order is allowed in English, it was not sufficient to enable learners to detect that subject-verb-adverb-object (SVAO). These studies indicate that positive evidence is essential in enabling learners to be aware of the possibility in the target language, but negative evidence is also necessary in that it draws learners’ attention to the deviant forms in their production, helping them to unlearn the wrong hypotheses they have formed about the target language.

### C. Developing Automaticity

Developing automaticity is the third function of output. According to the cognitive view of language acquisition, human mind has finite capacity in processing information.

Some processes are thoughtful, which require a great deal of space and time, whereas other processes are self-acting, which occupy little space and time. McLaughlin insists that automaticity refers to “a learned response that has been built up through the consistent mapping of the same input to the same pattern of activation over many trials” [1]. This concept also can be applied to output during the process of which the consistent mapping of grammar leads to producing automaticity.

### D. Syntactic Processing

Forcing a shift of processing is the fourth function. The shift refers to the change from the meaning processing into the syntactic processing. Meaning-based processing emphasizes on the understanding of the meaning. By contrast, learners will seek for proper syntactic structure to express their meaning during the process of output.

## IV. SKEHAN’S STUDY OF OUTPUT FUNCTIONS

Skehan states that output has six kinds of functions, of which the three functions of hypothesis testing, automaticity development and syntactic processing will not be discussed because they overlap with those postulated by Gass. The rest three functions will be discussed.

### A. Generating Better Input

The first function of the rest three functions is to generate better input. During the process of reading and listening, learners are prone to be passive in receiving what they get from the input material. But during the process of output, learners actively involve themselves in the negotiation of forms and meanings. Learners will gain comprehensive input that is fundamental for second language acquisition with the help of comprehension checks, clarification requests and confirmation checks. This role of output in generating better input can be supported by the evidence from Seliger’s study, in which he investigated the relationship between learners’ participation pattern and their acquisition achievement. He classified learners into two types: high input generators and low input generators.

### B. Developing Skills

Developing skills is the second function of the rest three functions. Developing language performance at the sentence level is not the supreme target of second language acquisition. Cultivating communicative competence at the discourse level is the most important, which requires learners to grasp devices such as reference, coherence, ellipsis, substitution and cohesion.

### C. Developing a Personal Voice

Developing a personal voice is the third function of the rest three functions. Holquist & Emerson state that finding a personal “voice, the talking personality, the speaking consciousness” plays a very important role in second language acquisition [3]. Acquiring skills through being familiar with the rules and taking part in practice step by step is crucial for second language acquisition. Just receiving input cannot

enable learners to conduct output. Learners not only listen to others to understand how language is used for communication but also express their own voice in a way which is appropriate for them. The feedback which they get from their speaking will change their oral expression and will help them to form their own style of output.

To sum up, Skehan proposes output has six functions which are conducive to second language acquisition.

## V. OUT-BASED COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING APPROACHES

### A. Major Problems

Nowadays, there are some strange phenomena existing in most English learners in our country. After a period of nearly ten years of English learning, these learners not only equip themselves with a lot of vocabulary and basic grammar knowledge but also they are good at passing different kinds of examinations, especially they can understand written materials well. However, their productive performance, both writing and speaking remains fairly weak. This is so called dumb English, time-consuming with low effect, high score with low competence. These strange phenomena have something to do with the problems with our College English teaching, which can be manifested as follows:

1) Teachers play a dominant role and occupy a lot of class time inculcating the knowledge related to the target language instead of providing students with enough opportunities to do output exercises.

2) Teachers adopt input-based teaching approaches, neglecting the role of output in College English teaching.

3) Language tests put the knowledge students have grasped in the first place.

Therefore, the major problems with our College English teaching can be summarized as follows: teacher-dominated classroom, input-based teaching approaches, and input-oriented tests. Realizing clearly these problems and absorbing research fruits of output theory are surely beneficial to our College English teaching. Hence, focusing properly on the role of output is an effective approach to the problems mentioned above.

### B. Teachers' Role

Teachers' role should be adjusted. In most second language classes in China, Teachers are the major role and impart language knowledge actively. While learners just receive knowledge passively. Therefore, teachers should change their roles in order to improve the effect of teaching.

Specifically, teachers should build context to stimulate students to take part in group activities which supply both comprehensive input and comprehensive output. Students are provided enough chances to find out the difference between what they intend to write and say and what they are able to write and say, which will enable them to be clear about what they do not know on the target language. Being aware of the problems urges the students to find out the relevant input with

more attention and to participate in the output process more accurately.

### C. Output-based Teaching Approaches

Output-based teaching approaches should be adopted. Input-based teaching approaches are still dominant in the classroom in our country and the role of output is minimized, which is owing to our inadequate attention to the function of output in second language acquisition.

What the output studies have revealed is that we need output-based teaching approaches, which center on the learners' interaction as well as the interaction between learners and teachers. Indeed, output-based teaching approaches lay stress on interactions through which students can learn to how to solve problems and make decisions and exchange opinions and describe pictures. This kind of interaction makes contribution to the students' development of accuracy and fluency of the target language.

Through adopting output-based teaching approaches, teachers can stimulate learners to produce the target language in classroom situations which enable students to pay more attention to the linguistic features from the given input materials and test the hypotheses on their own language structures. Learners not only practice oral expressions but also do more written exercises which will lead to right and proper language structures. What is more, learners own more opportunities to recognize their own problems and then correct them on their own or through cooperation.

In the classroom practice, output-based teaching approaches require teachers to provide students with adequate output-based assignments and activities. In addition, teachers should change their way to conduct classroom activities and they may prepare some questions with open-end which can enable students to take part in communication and interaction, share ideas and solve problems through cooperation and try their best to help themselves understood. This kind of classroom is just like a community which is good to the acquisition of the target language.

### D. Adjusting Tests

The composition of test paper needs to be adjusted. Language testing can have a washback effect on teaching. This washback effect can be beneficial or harmful to college English teaching.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Through systematic research, Gass and Skehan have proved the important roles of output in second language acquisition, which not only clear up the barriers for second language acquisition but also provide the implications for our College English teaching.

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