

Essay #4: Questions from Gass, Behney and Plonsky

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WL 664: Second Language Acquisition-Theory and Practice

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April 16, 2021

Question #7 from Gass et al., Chapter 13, page 451

In this chapter, we discussed the role of negotiation. We pointed out that negotiation aids the learner in understanding. What connection can be made between understanding at a particular point in time and actual acquisition (internalization of new linguistic information)? That is, because a learner is able to understand something in a conversation, can we automatically say that he or she will internalize or even understand the same thing at a later point in time?

Negotiation, or the negotiation of meaning, occurs in a conversation between a native speaker (NS) and a non-native speaker (NNS) when there is a breakdown in communication and the meaning of what is being communicated is not clear. Negotiation is a process that takes place, a back and forth so to speak, between the NS and the NNS where questions are asked in order to better understand what is being said. Gass et al. (2020) provide examples of dialogues between two NNSs and also between a NNS and a NS in which various points in their conversations are interrupted with some form of questioning by one of the parties. These interruptions are exchanges to resolve issues of comprehension and can entail asking someone to repeat a question or a statement or a restatement of what is believed to have been said. When there is a comprehension issue in a conversation between a NS and an NNS, then often the NS will resort to *foreigner-talk*, which includes features like speaking slower or louder, using less complex sentences, avoiding slang and jargon, moving the topic or subject to the front of a sentence and using less pronouns (Gass et al., 2020). Sometimes a negotiation exchange will involve a NS using techniques of elaboration and modification and sometimes the negotiation exchange will force the NNS to elaborate or modify their utterances in order to better convey meaning, which according to Gass et al. (2020) has a more positive impact on learning.

These negotiation exchanges are common and extremely useful, if not critical, for comprehension to occur. But that raises the question as to how much does the NNS learn in these instances. That is, just because the negotiation process during a conversation has led a NNS to comprehend the meaning of what was said, does that mean that acquisition has taken place? The answer is quite clearly, no, it does not. Comprehension by a NNS in one instance does not necessarily mean that the specific linguistic information at the center of the negotiation will be retained for use at another time. There are three concepts that have an impact on this process and that can move a NNS along the path from comprehension to acquisition. The first, and arguably the most important, is the concept of *comprehensible output*. Gass et al. (2020) point out that input alone is not sufficient for acquisition to occur. This is because one can often understand the meaning of an utterance without the use of syntax, by referring only to words being used. However, when one is forced to produce an utterance, then the learner is forced to think about the order in which they want to speak the words; they are forced to think about word order and sentence structure; about syntax. Output, then, is essential to the learning process. It creates a more solid foundation for acquisition by moving a learner from semantic processing to syntactical processing.

A second concept involved in the process of moving a learner from comprehension to acquisition is the concept of *intake*. Input and intake are concepts that both refer to incoming information received by the learner. Input refers to all the information a learner is receiving whether or not comprehension occurs. Intake is that part of the incoming information that has been processed by the learner and become part of their knowledge base. It is a psycholinguistic process wherein the incoming information is matched with current knowledge (ie, rules of grammar), and integrated into the learner's knowledge base for later use. Comprehending input

at an instant during a conversation may or may not lead to intake. Increasing the chances that input will be processed to intake is the concept of *interaction*. Not just interaction, but repeated interaction. Interaction (in this instance, conversations between a NNS and other NSs) leads to more opportunities to for negotiation, which in turn leads to more opportunities to received feedback and to test hypotheses and for input to become intake. Essentially, more opportunities to practice conversations with NS will force a NNS to produce speech, which in turn will advance them from semantic to syntactical processing and also provide more chances for negotiation that will lead to a greater amount of input becoming part of their language knowledge base.

Question # 8 from Gass et al., Chapter 13, page 451

Swain (1985, p. 248) reported the following statement by an L2 learner in Grade 9: “I understand everything anyone says to me, and I can hear in my head how I should sound when I talk, but it never comes out that way.” Can you think of examples when this happened to you in an L2? In your NL? What do you think the reason for this is?

Similarly to the Grade 9 student in the question, I have also experienced frequent situations where I have been at a loss to produce a coherent utterance in my L2. These situations occurred primarily (although not exclusively) in the early stages of my language learning and were less to do with vocabulary than a lack of knowledge of grammar rules and structures. With an appropriate amount of time and armed with a notebook and pen I could eventually arrive at a coherent utterance but this would not be realistic for the demands of a conversation at a dinner party or in the workplace that require quicker processing ability. The challenge raised by the 9th

grader in the question, during my own experiences learning French and by countless L2 students across the world regardless of the language being learned, is that the utterance being conveyed is understood but there is a block in output. This seems to be one of the single greatest challenges to language learning and teaching. Why does this happen? How is it that we can easily comprehend what is being said and yet fail to be able to formulate output to respond?

Gass et al. (2020) could not be any clearer in their response to this question. They argue that comprehensible output is absolutely critical to the L2 acquisition. An L2 learner may feel a sense of satisfaction at comprehending what is being conveyed (and indeed they should as this is an important element of the L2 learning process), but only processing language at the semantic level will not lead to an understanding of how to process a language at the syntactic level and it is in fact syntactic knowledge that is required for production.

Output in the L2 classroom is not a new concept but traditionally it has been used more as a method to repeat, practice and drill what the teacher has instructed. Comprehensible output, on the other hand, requires students to engage in more cognitive processing and move from a semantic knowledge base to one based on syntax. Gass et al. (2020) refer to a study conducted by Swain (1985) that compared the lack of development in the speech and conversation ability of young students participating in a French immersive school. The main conclusion from the study was that although the students were able to comprehend at advanced levels, their speech ability did not develop because they were not provided enough opportunities to engage in comprehensible output. Comprehensible output is essential to the L2 learning process.

Conversation-based interactions, with all of their elements of negotiation, feedback, and intake, require a student through communicative pressure, to think of and use language syntactically. The more this occurs the more language learning takes place.

Another very important aspect of comprehensible output is that of automaticity (Gass et al. (2020). Frequent opportunities to produce language will lead to more opportunities to test hypotheses and add to correct structures and lexicon to the learner's knowledge base. This will lead to more opportunities to use and repeat tried and test phrases, constructions and words and to a certain level of automaticity in the learner's response. Essentially, it is a consistent mapping of the same grammar to a certain output.

Question #11 from Gass et al., Chapter 13, page 452

Think about the possibility of success in the study-abroad classroom situation, where your fellow students were not members of the host community but speakers of your NL. Thus, the input you receive from your classmates is not the standard language but what Wong-Fillmore (1976) called "junky data." Do you think practice with this type of input data is problematic? If the situation were, instead, a foreign language classroom, would your answer be the same?

Input, output, interaction, negotiation and feedback are all essential L2 learning but can one develop their L2 if the input is not entirely accurate or even wrong? Can one develop an L2 if engaged in a conversation with another NNS and both are using different interlanguages and struggling to produce coherent and accurate output? This is the situation that many students can face in their study abroad classrooms as well as in their L2 classrooms. Is this type of input problematic to the learning process? Can learning take place in this situation? I think it depends. There are certainly situations in which L2 learners interact in conversation and lead each other astray. The example in Gass et al. (2020) of a Spanish NS and a Japanese NS both learning English and conversing in English is a good example of the challenges this can create. The

majority of their conversation was spent in clarifications, confirmations, repetitions and it is not clear whether in that instance if either person left the conversation having progressed in any way. Similarly in the L2 classroom, it is frequently the case that one student will respond to a teacher's question with inaccurate syntax which other students will copy, thus furthering the errors unless corrected by the teacher. So in many cases, it would seem challenging for L2 students to learn their L2 from each other.

However, there are exceptions. Students in an L2 classroom that are more advanced in their L2 development can definitely learn from each other. They are able to comprehend better and are able to produce more accurate comprehensible output. But even at the novice level, learners can benefit from each other's input. First, hearing other's produce language contribute to one's metalinguistic awareness. This, in turn, over time can help students develop their syntactic knowledge and in turn produce more accurate output. Furthermore, novice learners that are given frequent opportunities to produce can make significant developments in production through feedback, through repetition leading to automaticity and hopefully in many cases, leading to a decrease in affective barriers like anxiety.

One recent personal example of L2 learner input helping the development of other learners was in my French 2 class where I had the students conduct an exercise in peer collaboration. I divided the students into small groups and had them collectively work on solving problems on the placement of direct and indirect object pronouns in the passé composé along with the necessary agreement to the past participle. They worked in English but were able to speak intelligently about the problems to solve. One would make a perhaps offer an inaccurate idea or solution, that others in the group would repair it. Together I believe they were able to solve these grammar problems and increase their metalinguistic awareness of the language.

References

Gass, S. M., Behney, J. & Plonsky, L. (2020). *Second language acquisition: An introductory Course* (5th ed.). Routledge.