

Response to Yang et al. (2021): Clarifying the Input Hypothesis

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This interesting study by Yang et al. (2021) analyzed the effects of text difficulty on the reading comprehension and motivation of high school students participating in an EFL extensive reading program in Taiwan. The researchers provided one experimental group with graded readers that were one level below their current vocabulary level, and another with books that were one level above.

The authors' stated aim was to determine the optimum reading level for students by testing two hypotheses: The automaticity principle (Day & Bamford, 1998), and the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). They claimed that these two hypotheses are “contrastive” (Yang et al., 2021, p. 79) because the automaticity principle recommends students read below their current vocabulary level, whereas the Input Hypothesis implies students should read above their current level. Because the group reading lower-level texts made greater comprehension gains in this study, the authors claim the results “may not support the postulate of the Input Hypothesis that input at one level beyond learners' capacity may promote acquisition” (Yang et al., 2021, p. 91). This claim merits a closer look.

In the Input Hypothesis, Krashen (1982) posits that students acquire language when they are exposed to comprehensible input that contains some grammatical feature just beyond their current level of competence ($i+1$). He explicitly ties the Input Hypothesis to the Natural Order Hypothesis, which states that grammatical forms are acquired in a set sequence. The “ i ” in the Input Hypothesis represents the stage a student is at in the natural sequence of acquiring grammatical forms, and the “ $+1$ ” represents the next grammatical structure in the natural order.

The authors of the study under discussion, however, interpret the Input Hypothesis as claiming students acquire language when they are exposed to input “at a level beyond the student's current vocabulary capacity” (Yang et al., 2021, p. 79). They define “ i ” as a student's current vocabulary level, and “ $+1$ ” as the additional vocabulary contained in a graded reader a full level above that. It should be noted that vocabulary is not mentioned at all in Krashen's Input Hypothesis. Vocabulary is not acquired in a natural, predictable order like grammatical structures; the order of acquisition depends largely on what words the student is exposed to in a comprehensible context; as such, since all students are not exposed to new vocabulary words in an identical sequence, there can be no “ $i+1$ ” for vocabulary because there is no natural “next word” that a student at level “ i ” should acquire.

Nonetheless, since graded readers tend to simplify their grammatical forms, as well as their vocabulary, to match the reader's level, the results of Yang et al.'s study could still cast doubt upon the Input Hypothesis if graded readers a level above a student's current level are found to satisfy all the requirements for second language acquisition as outlined in the hypothesis.

A key aspect of Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis is his explicit caveat that input must be comprehensible for acquisition to occur: "...a necessary (but not sufficient) condition to move from stage i to stage $i+1$ is that the acquirer understand input that contains $i+1$, where 'understand' means that the acquirer is focused on the meaning and not the form of the message" (p. 21). Nowhere does Krashen ever recommend providing students with incomprehensible input. Therefore, in order for us to concede that the current study calls the Input Hypothesis into question, we must first establish whether graded readers that are a full level above a student's current vocabulary level satisfy the requirement of being easily comprehensible.

Depending on the publisher, some graded readers as much as double the vocabulary size between levels. That is quite a jump given that students should know more than 95% (Walker, 1997) or 98% (Hu & Nation, 2000) of the vocabulary in a fiction text in order for it to be comprehensible. It would be surprising if students understood such a high percentage of the vocabulary in a book which contains double the headwords of the level they tested at. Therefore, the Input Hypothesis seems to have withstood this challenge.

However, this is not to detract from Yang et al.'s study. In fact, the findings are important because they support the Input Hypothesis. Students reading the texts with easily comprehensible vocabulary most certainly encountered grammatical forms that they had not yet acquired ($i+1$). This, in turn, helped them to acquire the language, thereby improving their comprehension. As such, we can rest easy knowing that there is no disagreement between the automaticity principle and the Input Hypothesis; they both support a key tenet of Day and Bamford's (2002) ten principles of extensive reading: students should read texts that are easy.

References

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