

A Study of Vocabulary Acquisition Patterns in High School English Based on Input-Output Synergy

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Abstract

Vocabulary plays an important role in English learning. Traditional vocabulary teaching methods are ineffective and boring. And as the reform of textbook, learners are required to know more words than before, which makes it imperative to find out a better way to enhance incidental vocabulary acquisition. In order to solve this problem, the study aims to construct a systematic teaching framework. Based on the Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis, the framework regulates the quality and quantity of reading task to enhance incidental vocabulary acquisition. The framework also combines the input and output to help learners consolidate their memorization. The study will analyze the input stage and output stage in a detailed way and illustrate how after reading tasks helps learners transition from input to output. This framework offers a new theoretical perspective for vocabulary instruction, providing significant insights for textbook development and subsequent empirical research.

Keywords

Vocabulary; Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition; Input Hypothesis; Output Hypothesis; After-reading Task

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is the foundation of English learning. The Curriculum Standards for General Senior High School English (2017 Edition, Revised in 2020) sets clear requirements for high school students' vocabulary proficiency. As reading serves as a key channel for vocabulary input, incidental vocabulary acquisition—though it helps students acquire new words—has limited effectiveness when relying solely on reading; it must be supplemented with output activities for consolidation. To this end, this study integrates input and output to construct a systematic teaching framework. Based on Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis, this study aims to appropriately regulate the difficulty and quality of reading materials to facilitate students' incidental vocabulary acquisition, provide new

insights for teachers' vocabulary instruction, and increase students' exposure to vocabulary through reading tasks, thereby expanding their vocabulary. At the same time, this study possesses both theoretical and practical value. Theoretically, it offers a new perspective on high school English vocabulary instruction, addresses the shortcomings of traditional rote teaching methods, and aligns with the requirements of the new curriculum standards. In practice, it analyzes the factors influencing vocabulary acquisition and retention, providing guidance for the selection of reading materials and the design of post-reading tasks, thereby bridging the gap between theory and classroom practice.

1.1. Background of the study

Vocabulary is basic for language learning. Without vocabulary, people cannot express their ideas and feelings, which makes communication difficult. Wilkins (1972) stated that the world can live without grammar but not without vocabulary, because the absence of grammar only limited what one can describe. Without vocabulary, however, one cannot describe anything. And it is common that one get stuck in reading or cannot write down his opinions smoothly because he lacks enough words. Thus it's necessary for learners to command vocabulary as many as possible. English Curriculum Standard for General High Schools (2017 edition, 2020 revision) requires that learners should master less than 3100 words in high school. According to Liuyan(2025), the standard emphasizes the significance of fostering learners' ability to understand word chunks in context, expanding their English vocabulary through extensive reading, and enhancing their capacity to comprehend and convey meaning accurately.

It is generally accepted that reading is an imperative way where learners can expose to vocabulary. Vocabulary acquisition often comprise two types: incidental acquisition and intensive learning. Intensive learning takes places in the vocabulary class and the number of words is relatively limited learned by this way. In the traditional vocabulary teaching, teachers present the meaning, context usage of words in the blackboard and learners accept them passively. However, learners can also master some words by reading texts, which called incidental acquisition. In addition, as Krashen states, most vocabulary learning by L2 learners occurs incidentally.

However, incidental acquisition is restricted in some degree. After learners finishing reading , it is necessary for them to consolidate their acquisition. Thus, the study combines input and output to design a systematic framework to consolidate or enhance the vocabulary acquisition.

1.2. Purpose of the study

Based on Krashen's input hypothesis and Swain's output hypothesis, the purpose of the study is to regulate the level, quality and difficulty of the reading materials so

that learners can learn more words by incidental acquisition. Some studies have proved that difference in reading texts can have diversified impact on learners' acquisition. It also can provide a new perspective for teachers to teach vocabulary. Besides intensive teaching, teachers can design proper reading tasks which can provide chance for learners to get wider exposure to vocabulary. By the way, learners can enlarge their vocabulary size and broaden their horizon.

1.3. Significance of the study

The study has theoretical and practical significance. The details are as follows. For theoretical significance, the study can give a new perspective for teachers to teach vocabulary. Vocabulary is the core of language teaching programme. English Curriculum Standard for General High Schools (2017 edition, 2020 revision) requires that learners need to not only master the pronunciation, form, meaning and usage of words, but also master rules such as derivation, compounding and increase vocabulary related to Chinese culture and patriotism. That means traditional mechanical teaching way is not enough. There is a pressing need to find a effective way to teach vocabulary, which can compensate the limitation of traditional one, as well as meeting the requirement offered by English curriculum. Feng yanfei(2025) holds that incidental vocabulary learning is an effective method for acquiring new words, as it allows learners to encounter and understand vocabulary within meaningful contexts, naturally integrating word learning into the process of comprehending and processing information. And his study finds different output tasks have different impact on incidental acquisition. Furthermore, different input materials also have different influence. The study aims to design a systematical teaching framework to help enhance vocabulary acquisition.

For practical significance, .This study involves gaining deeper knowledge of the factors that influence vocabulary acquisition and retention, including input and output materials. Thus the study can provide a new way of enlarging learners' vocabulary. Traditionally, learners learn new words passively and boringly. However, they can expose to different new words when reading and also can know more contextual usage of the new words. Teachers can know the proper load of reading, which can maximize the vocabulary acquisition. It also provides a bridge between theory and practice. It will offer detailed suggestions on reading materials and the tasks after reading.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Input Hypothesis

Krashen's Input Hypothesis, a core component of his Monitor Model, posits that second language acquisition is primarily driven by comprehensible input which is slightly beyond the learner's current proficiency level, denoted as "i+1". "i" means learners' existing level, and "i+1" means the content of language input. "1" refers to

what language learners can understand, focusing on the meaning of the language itself rather than the form of the language. According to Wangyue (2021), when learn language, we often meet something beyond our capacity, which need the help of contextual and nonverbal information.

Krashen puts forward four features of Input Hypothesis, which is comprehensive, interesting and proper, sufficient, out of grammatical order. Comprehensible input means the content of input should beyond learner's current level, which is a challenge for them but not very far away from what they've already know. Based on Zhupei (2023), comprehensible input is essential for language acquisition, as learners can only benefit from input that they genuinely understand. According to the "i + 1" hypothesis, effective input should be slightly beyond the learner's current proficiency level. Input that is too simple or too complex may hinder rather than support language development. Cook (2000) argues that comprehensible input has a significant impact on second language acquisition. Many teachers only want to help learners master as much as possible and ignore their ability of acceptance. Furthermore, the teachers present vocabulary in a sophisticated way, which decrease learners' interest.

Krashen (1982) argues that language acquisition depends on a large amount of language input, so a large amount of input is necessary for learners. Different kinds of reading texts should be given to learners so that they can learn more. The quantity of input should be substantial. To promote more effective language acquisition, it is recommended to ensure ample exposure by increasing in-class reading, encouraging extensive after-class reading, and providing consistent practice opportunities. Teachers and parents should encourage and provide enough books to support them.

2.2. Output Hypothesis

In order to criticize Input Hypothesis, Swain posits comprehensible Output Hypothesis. Swain (1985), a Canadian linguist, experiences the famous experiment of immersion and tries to prove that Input Hypothesis can't guarantee the successful acquisition of a second foreign language without a large number of comprehensible accurate output. Swain points that Output has three functions, including noticing/triggering function, hypothesis testing function, meta-linguistic/reflective function. The attention or trigger function refers to the process by which learners become aware of their own linguistic gaps and errors during language output. This awareness enables them to consciously focus on specific language features, identify discrepancies between their own production and the target language norms, and subsequently adjust their internal linguistic knowledge. Through this process of self-revision, learners not only develop new language structures but also reinforce previously acquired knowledge (Swain, 1995). When learners have difficulty in output, their will reflect the process of language learning and pay more attention to

the problem they have when learning, which will enforce them to emphasize input. . Swain (1993) believes that the process of language acquisition requires hypothesis of the target language, which language output is the best way to test hypothesis. What's more, the process of output is also a way to test their input because they need to transform knowledge to action or express in their own words which is a good way to consolidate their understanding. Wang manlin(2020) During language acquisition, learners must continuously assess the accuracy of their linguistic expressions and grammatical structures through their own language output. The hypothesis-testing function thus serves as a crucial mechanism, enabling learners to refine and modify their linguistic performance through ongoing trial, evaluation, and adjustment.

When they have problem in knowledge, they need to make use of previous knowledge to solve the problem. At the same time, they can have new understanding from review. This kind of knowledge can act as a mediator for second language acquisition. Swain (2007) contends that for learners to achieve integrated cognitive and emotional development, language output is essential. Thus, teachers should design sufficient tasks to help learners develop their overall ability.

2.3. Vocabulary Incidental acquisition

Incidental vocabulary acquisition refers to the unconscious increase in vocabulary knowledge that occurs when learners engage in meaningful language activities or learning tasks, without their primary attention focused on vocabulary. It is a cognitive by-product that arises when attention is directed toward other activities (Wang gaiyan, 2010). Webb (2020) suggests that this type of vocabulary learning is a by-product of meaning-focused learning, aimed primarily at information acquisition.

Based on a review of existing empirical studies, incidental vocabulary acquisition can be categorized into three main types: uni-modal, bimodal, and multi-modal incidental vocabulary acquisition. In uni-modal contexts, incidental vocabulary acquisition primarily relies on input from written or auditory information. In dual-modal contexts, incidental vocabulary acquisition is examined through combined input of written and auditory information. In multi-modal contexts, incidental vocabulary acquisition builds upon written and auditory input while integrating visual information. This study main talks about reading input. Wu wenlin (2020) During reading, second language learners can infer word meanings from context, thereby establishing connections between word forms and meanings. These connections are inseparable from the learner's existing vocabulary knowledge.

3. Problem solutions

3.1. The input stage

It is common that input is a necessary way for learners to expose to new words. This study mainly talks about reading as input. According to the features of Input Hypothesis, the input should be comprehensible, sufficient, proper and interesting. thus, it makes some request to the quality and quantity of the reading materials.

3.1.1. Quality of the input

As for the quality of the reading text, it should be proper. According to Input Hypothesis, teachers should provide adequate reading materials for learners. based on some studies, there are adequate texts in class, but the result of reading is not good. Besides enough reading texts, the guidance of teachers is also essential. During reading, teachers should guide learners to make educated guesses based on context and employ efficient meaning processing strategies—such as word form, phonology, and grammar—to enhance their indirect acquisition of vocabulary (Xiaoxuan 2023).

3.1.2. Quantity of the input

As for the quantity of the reading text, it should be comprehensible and interesting. Interesting texts means the teacher should take learners' interests into consideration. What's more, different learners are different from each other. Teachers need to analyse the gender, age, motivation of the learners so that they can choose interesting texts. For example, learner in high school will be more interested in narrative novels than text books. Thus, teachers can select and choose some meaningful novels for them to read. It is generally known that reading interest is an indispensable part of English reading literacy (Wangqiang, 2017). Zou siyang (2022) states that reading interest positively influences learners' reading performance, and fostering an interest in English reading serves as an effective strategy to enhance both reading skills and overall performance. Moreover, when comparing learners with high versus low reading interest, it becomes evident that those with a stronger interest are more likely to engage in regular and consistent reading habits. Thus, providing texts which learners are interested in can not only strengthen their reading ability, but also promote the incidental vocabulary acquisition.

Comprehensible input means the content of the text should be between learners' existing ability and potential ability. Besides interest, teachers also need to find out learner's existing knowledge. When we analyze them, we must be sure what's they already know and what they need to know. In traditional class, teachers pay little attention to the comprehension of text and ignore the levels of different learners. Thus, when choosing texts, teachers should consider both the difficulty of text and the ability of learners. They should choose texts in moderate difficulty. And it is recommended that teachers can design graded reading so that learners can read by themselves in proper difficulty. According to Huang wenjuan (2024) Graded English reading activities enhance learners' overall experience and perception of reading in

English.

3.2. The Output Stage

The output here means after reading tasks. The appropriate tasks can not only test learners comprehension of the texts, but also strengthen their vocabulary acquisition.

Analytical output means the tasks are analytical. It needs learners to analyze the text and go deep into the text. It is more difficult than understanding questions and it requires learners to think deeply and critically. However, it should be noted that teachers need to reduce the difficulty to some degrees and assign reading tasks that match the learners' learning level. Based on studies, Zhupei(2023) believes that the greater the difficulty of the tasks assigned by teachers, the higher the error rate in learners' responses, which in turn reduces their motivation to engage in reading activities. Therefore, she recommends that teachers adjust the difficulty level of reading tasks to better match learners' abilities, thereby enhancing their accuracy and boosting motivation.

Similarly, teachers should consider the difference of learners and vocabulary. Teachers can design graded tasks in order to match different learners. According to Wangqiang, there are receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary. Teachers should be aware of them and make learners know the distinction between as well. For example, In reading instruction, teachers should more frequently employ output tasks that enhance learners' attention to new vocabulary (such as fill-in-the-blank exercises) and exercise caution with tasks that may distract learners from new vocabulary (such as sentence-building activities). This approach is particularly important for lower-to-intermediate English learners.(Baogui & Li jingyi 2017). it is also important to have graded tasks according to levels of learner. For example, high-level learners can choose sentence writing or sentence translation output tasks to facilitate their vocabulary learning according to their interests, while middle-level and low-level learners can choose the sentence writing task to effectively promote their vocabulary acquisition.(Wen yuhua 2023)

Reading-based output tasks that incorporate target vocabulary can be carefully designed or selected to support learners' vocabulary acquisition. Since most learners typically concentrate on comprehending the overall meaning of the text, they often pay insufficient attention to the new words encountered within it. However, teachers are encouraged to design tasks which can combine reading and vocabulary acquisition. Some studies shows that there is some degree of decline in the vocabulary to learners. Thus, teachers also guide learners to review from time to time to help them consolidate vocabulary.

4. Conclusion

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the template file by using the Save As command, and use the naming convention prescribed by your journal for the name of your paper. In this newly created file, highlight all of the contents and import your prepared text file. You are now ready to style your paper. This study addresses critical challenges in high school English vocabulary instruction by integrating Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis to construct a "Input-Output Synergy" framework for incidental vocabulary acquisition. The study clarifies that the input phase must ensure reading materials are comprehensible, abundant, relevant, and engaging, laying the foundation for vocabulary acquisition through graded texts and targeted guidance. The output phase emphasizes designing tiered, analytical post-reading tasks tailored to learners' proficiency levels to consolidate vocabulary retention. This framework organically links input and output through a task chain, overcoming the limitations of traditional rote vocabulary teaching while addressing the diverse requirements for vocabulary acquisition outlined in the new curriculum standards. It offers a new theoretical perspective and practical pathway for high school English vocabulary instruction, providing valuable reference for textbook development and subsequent empirical research.

There are some limitations: First, The study lacks large-scale empirical validation. The framework's effectiveness and applicability have not been sufficiently tested across diverse high school classrooms at different levels and in different regions, with insufficient quantitative data to support its claims. Second, the criteria for selecting input materials and the dimensions for grading them are presented only as principles, without developing a concrete, actionable assessment system. This leaves implementation susceptible to teacher subjectivity. Thirdly, the study did not explore acquisition differences for distinct vocabulary types within this framework, nor did it account for the impact of learner individuality. Lastly, there is insufficient tracking of the long-term consolidation effects of output tasks. The framework does not clarify the forgetting curve for acquired vocabulary or provide corresponding review task designs, making it difficult to ensure long-term retention of vocabulary.

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