

“Reduced Forms” Influence on Second Language Learners’ Listening Input-Intake Conversion

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Abstract: This article analyses the factors influencing the process of input-intake conversion and focuses on the effect of “reduced forms” on English as a Second Language (ESL) learners’ listening comprehension. The Input Hypothesis, the Noticing Hypothesis, the input-intake relationship, and the factors influencing the input-intake relationship are critically reviewed and analyzed. The empirical study of Brown and Hilferty ^[1] is reviewed and discussed to show reduced forms’ influence on ESL learners’ listening comprehension. The results prove that integrating reduced forms into ESL lessons is both necessary and meaningful for improving students’ listening comprehension ability.

Keywords: Input-intake process; Reduced forms; ESL; Listening comprehension

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1. Introduction

It’s generally accepted in the field of Second Language Acquisition that input is vital for second language (L2) learners. However, the received input cannot be all internalized into intake by learners ^[2,3]. The factors influencing the process of input-intake conversion have been discussed by many researchers for years ^[4-8]. “Reduced forms” is one of the important factors that influence the process of input becoming intake. Compared to other factors, research on this topic is quite limited ^[1].

The purpose of this article is to discuss whether the factor of reduced forms influences the process of English learners’ input-intake conversion and how it affects the learners’ listening comprehension.

2. Theoretical background

To have a better understanding of the “reduced forms” effects on learners’ comprehension, the following theories are critically reviewed.

2.1. Input hypothesis

Being influenced by Chomsky’s theory of Universal Grammar, Stephen Krashen introduces a new theory called the “Monitor Model” ^[9] and explains the theory more specifically in five hypotheses: the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis and the Affective Filter Hypothesis. The Input Hypothesis is the core of the theory and is “central to all of acquisition” ^[2].

Krashen’s Input Hypothesis states that the process of language acquisition happens when the learner is exposed to input “that contains grammatical forms that are at “ $i + 1$ ” ^[3]. “ i ” refers to the language level the learner already acquired and “ $i + 1$ ” refers to a little bit higher level compared to the learner’s acquired

language level ^[4]. He believes that receiving comprehensible input is “the single most important source of L2 learning” ^[5]. Receiving comprehensible input can activate the learner’s “internal language process,” Chomsky’s Language Acquisition Device (LAD), and make the learner to acquire a language ^[6]. It’s the teacher’s job to make sure students are exposed to comprehensible input ^[2].

Schmidt, Swain, Sato and many other scholars have criticized that comprehensible input is necessary, but it is not sufficient for SLA ^[5]. Doughty and Loschky show that learners’ comprehension not equals to their acquisition. The Input Hypothesis has also been criticized for its vagueness. For one thing, Krashen only gives a metaphorical concept of “i + 1” instead of giving a specific standard of knowledge levels. For another, Krashen only states that there should be “sufficient quantity” of comprehensible input, but he doesn’t say how much is enough of the “sufficient quantity” ^[10-12].

2.2. Noticing hypothesis

The Noticing Hypothesis is proposed by Richard Schmidt, ‘noticing’ is the necessity in the process of input becoming intake ^[7]. “Input does not become intake for language learning unless it is noticed” ^[8]. Schmidt says that “noticing” is the “interface” between input and intake ^[9]. Schmidt claims that it’s important for learners to consciously notice “the gap” between their interlanguage output and the target language in order to avoid errors ^[8].

Many empirical studies and scholars of SLA have supported the Noticing Hypothesis ^[8]. Gass and Selinker describes a similar learning process to the Noticing Hypothesis ^[4]. There also exist disagreements against Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis. Tomlin and Villa and Robinson have proposed another two kinds of understanding toward attention and language acquisition ^[10]. Robinson criticizes that it doesn’t explain the input-intake conversion process by ‘noticing’ in detail ^[11].

2.3. Input and intake

Corder makes the distinction between input and intake first. He points out that “there is not a one-to-one relation between input and output” ^[12]. According to him, input is “what goes in,” and intake refers to what the learners actually “take in.” Gass and Selinker define input as “a body of second language data” that the learners get and intake as “the process of assimilating linguistic material” ^[13].

The definition of ‘intake’ can be seen from different perspectives. Kumaravadivelu proposes that intake can be seen as a “product” or a “process.” As a product, intake specifically refers to the input before being “processed by learners” (see **Figure 1**). As a process, intake refers to the result of the internalized comprehensible input “after psycholinguistic processing” ^[14] (see **Figure 2**).

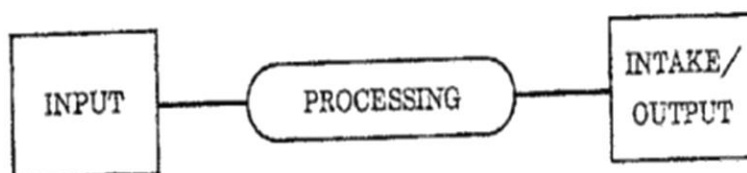


Figure 1. “Input, Intake, Output: The Product View”

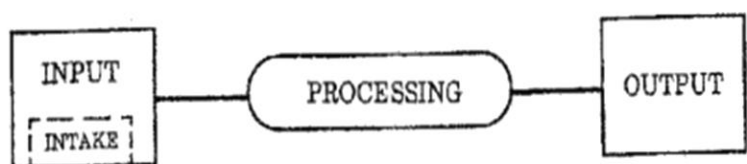


Figure 2. “Input, Intake, Output: The Process View”

Kumaravadivelu illustrates the relationship of input, intake and output from the quantitative point of view in **Figure 3**.

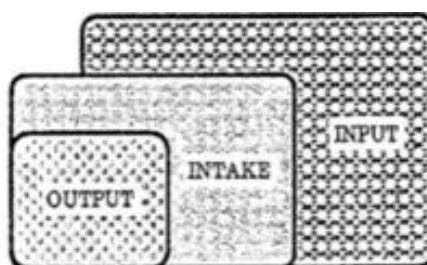


Figure 3. “Input, Intake, Output: A Quantitative View”

Gass and Selinker propose their model of input becoming output. According to them, there’re five stages of converting input into output: “appereived input,” “comprehended input,” “intake,” “integration” and “output” [13]. Krashen claims that there are altogether three steps to convert input into intake. First, understanding the meaning of an “i + 1” grammatical rule in the L2. Second, noticing the gap. Third, internalizing the “i + 1” form into the interlanguage [14-15].

2.4. Factors influencing input to become intake

There’re many factors considered influencing the conversion of input into intake. Kumaravadivelu lists a set of “intake factors” which affect the process, including “individual factors,” “negotiation factors,” “tactical factors,” “affective factors,” “knowledge factors” and “environmental factors” [14]. According to him, these factors can be categorized into learner-internal factors and learner-external ones.

Other linguistic factors are also considered to influence the process of input becoming intake, such as language complexity, frequency, and perceptual saliency [16]. Schmidt claims that factors like “expectations,” “frequency of occurrence,” “perceptual salience” influence the process of input becoming intake by influencing noticing. Loschky finds in his empirical study that there’re three factors which are beneficial for learners to notice the gap: “reliable feedback,” “clear form-meaning relationships,” the repeated appearance of the target forms in the L2 [17].

2.5. Reduced forms

“Reduced forms” is an important concept which affects the process of input-intake conversion. There’re varied terms used to define it. The term “reduced forms” is used by Brown and Hilferty. “Reduced speech forms” is used by Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin. “Sandhi forms,” “sandhi-variation” and other terms are also used by some scholars like Henrichsen.

Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin use the concept of “reduced forms” to refer to the “forms involve unstressed vowels, omitted sounds, and other alternations of the full form, such as assimilation, contraction, and blending” [18]. The phenomenon of “reduced forms” happens a lot in the informal language situations [16]. This concept is related to content words and function words in English. Content words carrying information, like nouns and main verbs, are often stressed in spoken language. However, function words, like articles and prepositions, are often not stressed or reduced [18]. The term of “sandhi-variation” used by Henrichsen refers to “the phonological modification of grammatical forms which have even juxtaposed” [19]. Madsen and Bowen state that “contraction,” “reduction” and “assimilation” are the three typical features of the sandhi-variation of English, especially of spoken English [20].

3. Empirical study of Brown and Hilferty

Brown and Hilferty investigated the effectiveness of teaching reduced forms for improving Chinese ESL learners' listening comprehension in their empirical study. They randomly drew 32 samples of Chinese graduate students, 29 males and 3 females, studying at the Guangzhou English Language Centre (GELT) as participants of the study. The participants were all intermediate (B level) ESL learners at that time. They came from several different first Chinese dialect backgrounds and majored in varied subjects in universities. Nevertheless, all of the participants spoke standard Mandarin. The mean age of the participants was 38.5 years (with a standard deviation of 5.3). All these participants were randomly assigned equally into two groups. One was the experimental group with 16 samples and the other was the control group with 16 samples. Learners in the experimental group received less than ten minutes lesson of selected reduced forms from American English before their everyday course for the total duration of four weeks. There was a presentation involved in every short lesson for learners to reflect by themselves on the reduced forms they learned. Besides the presentation of reduced forms, there were altogether seven dictation practices containing reduced forms developed for the learners. The learners were asked to listen and to write down all words appeared in the listening materials. Learners in the controlled group received practices for ten minutes every day on discriminating minimal pairs in accordance with Trager and Henderson. Meanwhile, English consonants, consonant clusters, intonation, stress and rhythm were covered in the short lessons for the control group. The Bowen Integrative Grammar Test, the listening test of the UCLA English as a Second Language Placement Examination (ESLPE), and reduced forms of dictations were applied both as pretests and posttests.

The results of this study were as followings: First, the Bowen Integrative Grammar Test revealed that the mean grade of the experimental group is significantly higher than the mean grade of the control group. This indicated that teaching lessons of reduced forms for four weeks could help improve participants' performance in Bowen's IGT. Second, there wasn't a significant difference between the two groups' performance in the UCLA ESLPE listening test. This could be attributed to the short four weeks duration of the experiment and the lack of reduced forms appeared in the UCLA ESLPE listening test. Third, the reduced forms dictation test showed a statistically significant difference between the means of the two groups. This proved that the four weeks lessons on reduced forms could highly improve learners' performance on the reduced forms dictation.

Brown and Hilferty's study is a quite logical and persuasive one. For one thing, the three tests used are chosen scientifically. They are utilized to respectively circumvent the problem of sampling, controlling for testing effect, and controlling for differences in teaching style. For another, pretests of the three measures are carefully conducted by Brown and Hilferty to make sure that the preliminary performance of the randomly assigned experimental group and control group are at an almost equal level. This helps to improve the validity of the study. In addition, randomly drawing samples from a large population and dividing them into two groups make this study an effective one that is in accordance with the statistical sampling theory.

However, there also exist some aspects to improve. First, the design of this experiment violates the freedom rules to some degree "by making much multiple comparisons". Second, the tape quality and the playback equipment are factors that might have affected the result of the Bowen's IGT. The equipment should be changed to the one the original Bowen's IGT requires. Third, the duration of this experiment is limited and affects the result of the UCLA ESLPE listening test. Fourth, the result of the reduced forms dictation test may be influenced by the fact that the experimental group has taken the same kind of practices for four weeks before test. Fifth, besides variables like sampling, controlling of the testing effect and differences in teaching style, there're other variables like practice effect that need to be considered and controlled for a better experimental design ^[1].

4. Conclusion

Both the related theories reviewed and the empirical study have shown the effect of reduced forms on L2 learners' listening comprehension. The presence of reduced forms lessens the effect of "perceptual salience" and can be a difficulty for L2 learners' comprehension and acquisition of the L2. The study of Brown and Hilferty reveals the importance of teaching reduced forms in L2 classes to facilitate L2 learners' input-intake conversion.

It has given us some suggestions for future research on this topic: More studies need to be done with learners from different language backgrounds and at different language levels; further studies with longer duration are necessary to be done; more authentic listening materials should be adopted to test the reduced forms' influence on learners' listening comprehension. Besides, the reduced forms should be taken into consideration by more teaching materials and be taught in future L2 classes.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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