

The reason behind my decision to research this topic is that I have come to believe that insufficient input might be a major factor, among many other relevant components, in the generalized failure to produce greater numbers of fluent speakers of English in my Brazil, even though all schools provide students with years and years of English classes. In my experience in private English language institutes and later in undergraduate courses, I nurtured an optimistic hope that more positive results could be achieved if some of the challenges that Brazilian regular schools face were met (teachers who do not speak English; a large number of students per class; students who do not have access to a textbook; teachers who do not have access to the internet, or to sound or video equipment; uninteresting classes, unmotivated students...). My own teaching environment was such a stark contrast to the reality of most of the schools out there (smaller groups of students, comfortable air-conditioned classrooms, all the necessary equipment at my disposal, a textbook in every hand) and myself (fluent, motivated, licensed and trained in language teaching, conference-goer, a reader of linguistics books), that I presumed, in my naïve perception, that both my students and I would soon see noticeable progress in their fluency. When my expectations failed, I thought I could do better as a teacher if I had more preparation, and so I read more, I attended more lectures, I became more competent linguistically over the years – all to no avail. And for all this time I have been teaching, success has never been more than very limited.

Some external facts, having to do with the status English enjoys in Brazil and the expected difficulties of foreign language teaching, have a direct influence in the results obtained in all English courses. That is to say, although English is a valued foreign language in Brazil, direct access to English speakers is uncommon and input beyond the classroom is, therefore, restricted to movies, songs and social media. Students and teachers alike suffer the impact of those circumstances and the small number of fluent English speakers in the country – whether teachers or learners – reflect the degree of effort and the time commitment one has to make to be exposed to English input. Besides that, of course, those numbers also expose the inefficacy of the English teaching system in place.

There is much to be addressed if the goal is to improve the statistics of competent English speakers coming out of the Brazilian English classrooms, but I will focus on input as the general topic of my research project as part of my plan to start an inservice training for English teachers in public schools upon my return to Brazil. The justification for this particular plan is that by teaching teachers we will simultaneously prepare a number of teachers to deal with the issue of language input and turn them into multipliers of the knowledge they acquire in their training.

While reading Lightbown and Spada (2001) recently, it was comforting to finally see recognized in a book as a *sine qua non* condition in language learning a fact I was extremely aware of based on my personal experience: quantity matters. The authors, being aware that a few hours a week are insufficient to lead language learners to fluency, advocate for a more realistic assessment of the amount of time needed to learn a second language in schools – a truly inspirational call to realistic planning in language teaching, where the usual references to time tend to be the number of hours needed to teach a certain syllabus or vague information as to how many years it takes to learn a language. It seems to me that that is a primary fact to take into consideration when the intention is to produce fluent speakers of a second language: how many daily and weekly hours will be allocated to providing learners with quality input. VanPatten et al. (2020) provide sobering evidence of how time-consuming language learning is and of the discrepancy between the amount of time we are prepared to allow for first-language learning and the unrealistic expectations we have for long it takes to learn a second language. In a comparison between a child acquiring his/her first language at 1.5 years of age and a second language learner; they say that in a given day the former might hear hundreds of sentences, while it would take the latter a week to hear, see, or read the same number of lines (p. 108).

As I have mentioned above, the position I occupy as an English teacher is a privileged one: I have the luxury of being able to concentrate my efforts on researching ‘input’ because many of the difficulties my colleagues face in regular schools are absent in my place of work. Input, then, can be isolated in my practice as an object of study, to the exclusion of several variables that might be suspected to interfere in the failure or success of the project. In other words, the change in quantity and quality of input will be solely responsible for any hypothetical improvement in the students performance.

Besides being crucial in foreign language teaching, input deserves attention in any program since, as Carroll (2001) points out, all researchers in second language acquisition – who agree on almost nothing in their attempts to explain the process of acquisition of a second language – share the opinion that SLA requires exposure to the second language, however divergent their points of view may be on the type and quantity of input is necessary (p. 2). A similarly outstanding place is given to input by Hawkins (2019), according to whom learning a second language is accessible to many people, but a major factor in whether or not someone will be successful in that enterprise is if they are motivated, if they interact in that language and for how long they do so (p. 2). Input, then, is the very first condition to be fulfilled when one proposes to learn a language. It is from the linguistic input we get that we can make inferences about the target language. In that sense, input is equal to ‘evidence for properties of the target language’ (Hawkins, 2019, p. 222), which can come, for instance, in the form of everyday interactions, direct instructions by teachers, and corrections made by more proficient speakers. In whatever form it gets to the learner, however, his or her focus will be in understanding the message (VanPatten et al., 2020).

There is no shortage of theories about the type, the frequency, the extent, the level of difficulty or accuracy of input which would be more conducive to learning. At this point, it is convenient to refer to the important distinction Bleyhl makes between ‘input’ as the general stimuli that the sensory system of the learner receives and ‘intake’ as the specific part of that stimuli which the learner’s interests, sensory and cognitive capacity will select. Learning results from the way the learner processes the intake and determines what will be retained for subsequent use (2009, p. 137).

Within the area of input studies, several distinctions between different kinds of input are given. First, reference has to be made to Krashen's ubiquitous comprehensible input hypothesis, explained by Lightbown and Spada (2021) with the formula $i + 1$ which represents an ideal sample of language to be presented to the learner; the 'i' stands for the level of language the learner possesses, and the '+ 1' means language that is a little above that level. Krashen's hypothesis is that when the learner is exposed to such samples of language, acquisition occurs. Closely related to comprehensible input is the concept of modified input, a reference to alterations purposely made to a speech by a more proficient speaker in order to make the language comprehensible to their less proficient interlocutor. Comprehension is, of course, the basic premise for both comprehensible and modified input. VanPatten et al., (2020, p. 106) impresses the need for comprehension upon which both concepts are based saying that 'if language is not comprehensible [...] it is mere noise'

In order to ascertain a clear understanding of their intended meaning, VanPatten et al. (2020, p. 104-7) propose the term 'communicatively embedded input', the meaning acquisition literature attributes to 'input', to differentiate it from the popular use of the word to signify 'information received', with no specification. They proceed to reflect that thinking of input as 'language embedded in a communicative event' leads to the conclusion that 'acquisition is a by-product of learners actively trying to comprehend language', and not a product of 'learning textbook rules and practicing them'. For them, explicit instruction language such as textbook rules and lists of verbs and their conjugations are not to be counted as input for acquisition. Their distinct terminology, 'communicatively embedded input', excludes such instruction language. It is my point of view that this assertion makes too categorical a claim. I do not question that input should preferably be 'communicatively embedded' or that that is usually the case, I only object to this severe rejection of instructional material as input, since my own process of acquisition seems to be evidence to the contrary. My initial study material consisted mainly of non-communicatively embedded input, that is to say, a lot of 'learning textbook rules and practicing them', with very close to zero interaction.

Hedge (2008) lists some reasons to explain the enthusiasm with which the comprehensible input idea has been received: a) it confirms the notion that meaningful input is necessary for learners manage language that is just beyond their linguistic competence. Relevant, realistic, interesting materials are sought that can fulfill that expectation; b) the need for more input encourages the use of resources beyond the those utilized in the classroom; c) it also seems to be in conformity with the need teachers have always felt to simplify their use of the target language to the level their students are at.

Lightbown and Spada (2001) – despite acknowledging that, as research shows, the absence of direct instruction is no impediment to learning if the learner is exposed to comprehensible input – maintain that studies have also indicated the positive impact that instruction can have in second language learning, as an accompaniment to other material supplied as comprehensible input. On this point, then, there is a divergence between Lightbown and Spada and VanPatten et al. The latter explain that researchers have been looking to find out whether explicit instruction in conjunction with what they call communicatively embedded input has an influence on acquisition, and that, although the reader might take such influence as a given, the answer is not as simple as that. For the purpose of this project, we will assume Lightbown and Spada's position that explicit pedagogical intervention does matter and include direct instruction in the activities that will go with the stories narrated.

Similarly, the research will take into consideration the comprehensible output hypothesis, Merrill Swain's response to Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis. Swain's argument, as explained by Lightbown and Spada (2021, p. 178), is that it is during language production that students become aware of their limitations and of their need to express themselves better. That development of the comprehensible input hypothesis led to the decision to not only provide interesting material for the students to read, listen to, or watch, but also encourage interaction among them by requiring that they discuss their ideas in their pairs or groups.

The concept of noticing is also worth mentioning in the discussion of input. The hypothesis is that 'nothing is learned unless it has been 'noticed' (Lightbown and Spada, 2021, p. 119). From that one cannot conclude that noticing itself leads to acquisition, but that without first being noticed, a particular language feature will not be learned. Another way of putting it is that noticing is a necessary, but not sufficient condition in language learning.

A project with a focus on input in a country where English is a foreign language and whose teacher/researcher shares the students' mother tongue should naturally beware of the danger of excessive use of the first language in class. A non-native English teacher can certainly put to use the advantages of being able to speak the student's mother tongue in a single first language class – for instruction and for clarification, for instance. Cook suggests that using the target language for routine communication in class, such as explaining grammar, and giving instructions, 'sets a tone for the class' (2016, p. 192), which may end up affecting the students' involvement and performance positively. Furthermore, it would be a wasted opportunity to put the second language to use for real communicative purposes. She also reports research which recommend that teachers find a balance between the use of the first and second language in class – the first, to communicate important concepts, to do classroom management, to recover the students' attention, to praise and to get them to behave; the second, to revise material that has been taught in the mother tongue. Resorting to codeswitching for certain activities is perfectly acceptable, although a readjustment of the proportion between the languages would be necessary as the group advances towards more fluency.

The aims of the investigation

I am well aware of how elementary this project still is, but I have high hopes that with more time and more reading I will be able to develop a mature, viable, and useful research proposal. I gain confidence in Barkhuizen's guidance when he says that all that is needed at the first stage is a starting point, that is, the identification of a topic of study which should be 'more narrow than a broad research area and less narrow than specific research questions'; that it is to be expected that the topic, the research questions, will be refined or change altogether as the project evolves into something more achievable and sustainable (2019).

Having said that, the proposed object of the research at this point in time is to determine if an added element of input in in-class and out-of-class activities will result in measurable progress in the students' output.

The rationale for the investigation

The fact that students attend English classes for approximately ten years in regular schools in Brazil and yet no one comes out fluent as a result of that process has been the object of debate for decades in the country and a source of frustration and guilt for me personally. This project will be driven by the decision to tackle that issue.

Solving a national problem is not my ambition, but finding ways to elevate the degree of success my students attain in their efforts to speak English seems to be an achievable goal.

The relevance of input – as seen in the SLA module – was the inspiration for this project. Also, the constant reminder of how much more challenging it is to learn a language in a country like Brazil, where English is absent from people's daily routine, than to learn it in a country where it is native. Around every aspect of language teaching/learning studied in class there seemed to be a connection to the need for frequency and quality of input. Krashen's theories on input, as well as the concepts of noticing, interaction and output are the foundation of this project.

Brazilians are taught English for approximately ten years at school. However, a survey by the British Council revealed that only five percent of Brazilians say they have 'some knowledge of English'. That is translated as an ongoing debate in the country and in frustration and guilt for me.

This project will attempt to tackle that issue by aiming at an achievable goal: finding ways to elevate the degree of success students attain in their efforts to speak English, an inspiration that was born in the study of the relevance of input – as seen in the SLA module. Also a contributing factor was the constant reminder, living in

Wales, of how much more challenging it is to learn a language in a country like Brazil, where English is absent from people's daily routine, than to learn it in a country where it is native. Around every aspect of language teaching/learning studied in the English Language Teacher Education classes there seemed to be a connection to the need for frequency and quality of input.

Krashen's and subsequent scholars' theories on input, as well as the concepts of noticing, interaction and output are the foundation of this project

Description of the expected evidence

Examples of students' work in the form of transcriptions of recorded retelling of stories in pair work will be collected at every session, but only the first and last will be assessed for comparison.

After the last session the students will be asked to record their assessment of their own progress throughout the project.

Method to collect evidence

The students will be given two one-hour long extra-class activities weekly adding up to a total of approximately 16 hours of added input load.

The activities will consist of listening to, and discussing stories in pair work with the help of a set of questions, and in the end retelling the narratives to be recorded. Each class the students will listen to a story which is within their range of understanding, but which also contains enough novel features, so as to offer some challenge and be given ample opportunity to make sense of what they hear to guarantee the input is comprehensible. Because listening only, without the opportunity to interact with other speakers has been shown to produce little benefit to learners, in the sequence the participants will also discuss answers to open-ended questions about the story in pairs, choose from a variety of pictures and words the ones they will need and establish a sequence for retelling the tale together. A recording of each retelling will be produced and kept as evidence.

This particular activity was chosen to fulfil the need to extend the number of hours of contact with L2, English, as well as the opportunity to use it.

Interviews will also be carried out at the end of the project as a means to gauge the students' perception of their own progress after their participation in the project.

The settings of the research

The subjects of the research are undergraduate students of Portuguese and English language and literature at a public university in the Northeast of Brazil. They typically have elementary reading, writing, and even poorer listening and speaking skills. The few students who had the means to attend a private language institute are the exceptions in this scenario, but even among these a fluent speaker is a rarity.

Ethical issues

Before the study initiates each participant will be asked to read and sign a voluntary informed consent form. Their right to withdraw at any time for any reason will be made clear to them.

Participants' names will be withheld, each being assigned a number instead. In the paper they will be designated S1, S2, etc.

To avoid bias in the initial and final assessment of the participants a third party will be in charge of the task.

Method to analyse the evidence

Saldaña says qualitative research encompasses a range of "approaches and methods for the study of natural social life" and that it collects and analyses mostly nonquantitative data varying from interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents, and/ or visual materials such as artifacts, photographs, video recordings, and Internet sites. As can be seen from the types of material collected for analysis, the focus of qualitative research is on human experiences about others and/or one's self in social action and reflexive states (p. 3-4). This is the type of data that will be collected in the interviews with the students who participate in the research project.

The recordings will be transcribed and assessed according to three categories: extension of the retelling, complexity of the lexicon used, complexity of the grammatical structures used.

The interviews will also be transcribed

The results of both assessments will then be compared.

Timetable for the development of the research

	May-July 22	August 22	September 22	October 22	November 22	December 22
Reading						
Planning						
Implementation						
Analysis						
Writing						

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