

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Output has an important role in contributing to second language acquisition by stimulating learners to produce language precisely, coherently, appropriately, and to move towards syntactic processing. Therefore, learners should be given opportunities to produce language through speaking and writing after they have been given sufficient language input through reading and listening. In most classroom language learning, textbooks form the core materials. Yuen (1997, cited in McGrath, 2002) states that study means to read the textbooks in China. The content provided by the textbooks determines classroom content in many language classes. Given the importance of output and the influence of textbooks, the present study elaborates opportunities of output provided by textbooks, in particular college level textbooks.

This chapter states the rationale and background of the study, the problem addressed, the purposes of the study, its significance and a definition of terms used.

Rationale and Background of the Study

In this section, the significance of output and the roles of materials illustrate a general view of the rationale of the study. From the background of the study, the

problems that the study is concerned with are elicited to give the purposes of this study.

One debate amongst second language researchers is about input and output in language learning. Some researchers state that the main prerequisite for language acquisition is comprehensible input; others argue that the main prerequisite is opportunity for output, and view output as contributing to second language development (Tomlinson, 1998).

Swain (1985) argues that learners must be given the opportunities for output to produce the new forms even when they have had comprehensible and sufficient input of the new forms. Swain (1983, cited in Ellis, 1985) suggests a three-fold importance of output: 1) giving learners an opportunity to test out hypotheses about the L2; 2) when learners face communication breakdown, they may effort at using alternative means in order to express a message coherently, precisely, and appropriately; and 3) learners produce formal features of the L2 which oppose to simply comprehending. Concerning this last point, Swain emphasizes that output pushes learners “to move from semantic processing which is characteristic of the early stages of SLA to syntactic processing (i.e. whereas comprehension can take place by simply attending to the meaning of content words, production may trigger the focus on formal features)”(p.159).

After his summary of research on output, Shehadeh (1999) claims that input and output are of equal importance. Even Stephen Krashen, the presenter of the Input Hypothesis, believes that output can contribute to language acquisition because it can

provide a further resource of self-input to the learner and output can play a fairly direct role in helping language learning by providing a domain for error correction (Krashen, 1982, 1985), though he argues it is comprehensible input that primarily contributes to language acquisition (Krashen 1989). Anecdotal experience agrees that opportunities of output, especially those in the target language for communicative purposes, are very helpful to second language learning. Since output is important, it is necessary to include opportunities for it in every language program.

In the beginning of every language program, teachers often invest a great deal of energy and time to plan their courses, identify their learners' needs, set goals or objectives for the course to address those needs, design an appropriate syllabus, determine course structure, adopt certain teaching methods, and prepare teaching materials. Later on, they also need to evaluate the course. Richards (2001) defined this process as curriculum development.

Content and methodology are two main factors in the process of implementation of the curriculum. Content consists of "what" is to be taught, which is usually contained in teaching materials, such as textbooks, cassettes, CD-Roms, videos, handouts and newspapers. The most frequently used materials are textbooks. Sheldon (1988, cited in McGrath, 2002, p.3-4) argues that the textbook is "an 'inevitable teaching partner', the basis for everyday teaching and the 'visible heart of any program'". Hutchinson and Torres (1994) and Yuan (1997) hold the same opinion.

Due to traditional language teaching principles, the typical core textbooks used in most universities of China even today are language form-focused materials

which focused on linguistic knowledge rather than helping learners to develop overall language capabilities. A great deal of input can be attained from reading and listening activities without much chance for learners to use language that they learn from these inputs. Specifically, the textbooks in this study employ input in reading articles, reading explanations, vocabulary lists, lexical drills, phrases, notes, grammar rules and forms, cultural knowledge, and listening transcripts. Exercises involve comprehension questions, vocabulary activities, grammar rules, memorization and repetitions. English courses in most universities consist of intensive reading, extensive reading and listening. Input is emphasized more than output. Business English (BE) textbooks are no exception, and are designed in the same manner offering few opportunities for learners to practice writing and speaking to achieve communicative purposes. One result of this kind of traditional English language teaching is that many students have difficulty to communicate with foreigners even after their four years of English study at the university.

China's accession to the World Trade Organization has opened its door wide to the world. As a member of the global village, China is inevitably involved in deeper and greater cooperation with other countries. English as an international language plays an incontestable and significant role in various communications. That is why, at present, people all over China are learning English. Meanwhile, due to broader business cooperation between China and other countries, Chinese businessmen need to know English and use English effectively to achieve communicative purposes in their career.

Therefore, training Chinese English learners to communicate effectively is an imperative need and the problems arising from traditional language teaching principles mentioned above need a solution. The textbooks, core materials should provide more opportunities for output to develop learners' speaking and writing skills rather than focusing on reading and listening skills only. They should include more activities for using language to achieve communicative purposes.

Purposes of the Study

From the above discussion, the purposes of this study are to investigate opportunities for output in textbooks through:

1. An analysis of the amount of opportunities for output in four selected BE textbooks.
2. An analysis of the kinds of opportunities for output provided in the four selected BE textbooks.
3. The results of these analyses being used to evaluate and compare the opportunities of output in the selected BE textbooks.

Significance of the Study

There are a large number of textbooks published every year. McGrath (2002, p.12) notes that "Since there has been no slowing down in the production of language

teaching materials, and since some of this is presumably still 'rubbish', it is clearly important that teachers and others who select textbooks for a specific context at least are able to distinguish between what is likely to be more and less suitable”.

In this study, a close analysis of output in textbooks was carried out. By analyzing and evaluating what is actually offered by textbooks and discussing the findings, the study first may help both local and international material designers and developers to recognize the quantity and types of output provided in the current published materials. Therefore, the study may help material designers and developers to consider how to provide more opportunities for output in their future design.

Secondly, the evaluation provides a basis for Chinese BE teachers to choose textbooks after considering their learners' actual needs and comparing with other textbooks. This study provides a basis for changing, adding, adopting, replacing, deleting and supplementing of tasks in the classroom.

Thirdly, the evaluation provides a basis for the design of replacement and supplementary tasks to match specific learners' actual needs.

Definition of Terms

Since different research areas have different definitions about some terms, it is necessary to define the terms used in this study.

Acquisition refers to “a subconscious process that is similar to the way that children develop ability in their first language. They are not usually aware of the

fact that they are acquiring language, but are only aware of the fact they are using the language for communication. The result of it is also subconscious” (Krashen, 1987, p.10).

Analysis refers to a verifiable description of what is there. “It is a preliminary step of evaluation which is a process that leads to an objective” (McGrath, 2002, p.22).

Evaluation refers to discovering whether what one is looking for is there or not, and if it is there, to put a value on it. It involves the making of judgment (McGrath, 2002, p.22).

Feedback refers to “the response to efforts by the learner to communicate. Feedback can involve such functions as correction, acknowledgement, requests for clarification, and back channel cues such as ‘Mmm’. It has been suggested that feedback plays a major role in helping learners to test hypotheses they have formed about the rule system of the target language” (Ellis, 1985, p.296).

Fossilization refers to “the phenomenon where a linguistic form, feature, rule, etc. becomes permanently established in the interlanguage of a second-language learner in a form that is deviant from the target language norm and that continues to appear in performance regardless of further exposure to the target language” (Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1987).

Input refers to “the form of content offered to learners (Littlejohn, 1998, p.213). The input constitutes the language to which the learner is exposed. It can be spoken or written. Input serves as the data that the learner must use to determine the rules of the target language” (Ellis, 1985, p.298).

Learning refers to a conscious process of gaining knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them. "Learning is 'knowing about' a language in non-technical terms. Known to most people as 'grammar' or 'rules' some synonyms include formal knowledge of a language, or explicit learning” (Krashen, 1987, p10).

Materials refers to classroom tools “in the form of a textbook, a workbook, a cassette, a CD-Rom, a video, a photocopied handout, a newspaper, and a paragraph written on a whiteboard: anything which presents or informs about the language being learned” (Tomlinson, 1998, p.xi).

Output refers to the form of content to be produced by learners (Littlejohn 1998, p.213). “The “output” is the language produced by the learner. This can be comprehensible or incomprehensible. The efforts that learners make to be comprehensible may also play a part in acquisition, as they may be forced to revise their internalized rule systems” (Ellis, 1985, p.295).

Task refers to “any proposal contained within the materials for action to be undertaken by the learners, which has the direct aim of bringing about the learning of the foreign language” (Littlejohn, 1998, p.198).