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Using the Second Language Acquisition Theory "Input, Interaction, and Pushed Output" to Reinforce Elementary Chinese Writing

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I. Background

Based on the theories of how young children acquire and develop their first language through interaction, theories concerning second language acquisition (SLA) such as The Input and Interaction Hypothesis, Input Hypothesis, Interaction Hypothesis, and the Comprehensible Output (also known as Pushed Output) Hypothesis, gained support by educators and practitioners in the field of second and foreign language acquisition. The role of input, interaction, and output in second language production as it relates to classroom instruction has been a major focus and empirical findings from the research have, in turn, served as guidance to improve classroom teaching.

But not all input that is comprehensible leads to output that is the goal of language learning. There is evidence of some learners being inactive in the language they have been exposed to for a number of years before any vocal production. While the children learned their second language at school, a lot of children of the second or third generation in immigrant families lost their mother tongue although they are exposed to the home language on day-to-day basis.

Marilyn Swain (1985) suggested that there are roles for output in SLA that are independent of comprehensible input. In order to learn the target language, learners have to be willing to take risks and to learn to speak by speaking. To Swain, being pushed in output is a concept parallel to that of the "i+1" of comprehensible input. Thus the Comprehensible Output also known as Pushed Output Hypothesis has gained its ground and has been put into practice in second language teaching and learning to develop the learners' skills in all the aspects of language learning especially in speaking and writing.

Inspired by the research results in second language acquisition, though mainly from teaching English or French to speakers of other languages, the purpose of the present paper is to examine the results of applying the Pushed Output theory to reinforce elementary Chinese writing as a second or foreign language in classroom settings. And the use of computer to assist the writing process is also addressed and emphasized.

II. Research Problem

While character recognition and character writing are aspects of output in the Chinese language, the ultimate goal of learning Chinese is to turn comprehensible input into comprehensible output in the form of speaking and constructing sentences. So the problem is rather what the learners do with all the characters they have learned to recognize and to write. Writing is the most difficult aspect that the students of Chinese, either heritage or non-heritage, are facing and needs to be taken care of in the early stages. Therefore to teach or not to teach students to write at an early stage and how to teach are the problems under investigation.

III. Teaching Writing at an Early Stage.

There have been different opinions on when and how to teach writing in overseas Chinese teaching. Some colleagues hold that writing should occur naturally and should wait till a later stage after the students have learned more of the Chinese structures and have more vocabulary. This assumption is apparently based on Swiss Psychologist Piaget's theory of cognitive and intellectual development, that is, learning cannot occur unless the learner is physically and mentally ready. But I share the same idea with those who believe that students should learn how to write through writing and writing should begin as soon as they begin their language learning. This position is also derived from the theory of cognitive development but of a different theorist— the Russian Psychologist Lev Vygotsky who holds that learners develop through learning. Vygotsky proposes two kinds of learning: the actual level of development and the potential level of development known as the Zone of Proximal Development. Based on this theory of learning, learning occurs when learners try to understand a concept or perform a new skill guided by those who have the knowledge and skills. Subsequently, the learners will retain knowledge and skills for unaided use in the future. And in turn, the learner's ability has been developed one step further from his or her *Zone of Proximal Development*. To some extend, Vogotsky's theory coincides with Krashen's theory of language acquisition i + 1 (input hypothesis). The follows are the factors that support the position of teaching wring in an early stage of learning Chinese.

1. Serving the learners' needs:
More than 60% of the non-heritage students and almost 90% of the heritage students responding to the question "Why do you want to take Chinese?" expressed their desire to learn or to improve reading and writing skills in Chinese.

2. The higher level of college students' cognitive development and motivation ensure a positive writing experience in Chinese language.
Although they are beginners of Chinese language, the students of Chinese at college level are young adults with an extensive experience of writing in their native language. The skills and techniques they use to write in their first language such as logic of thinking, organization of ideas, categorization, and choice of appropriate expression, as well as their social competence can be transferred into their second language writing and make writing a positive experience in their language learning.

 3. The characteristics of Chinese structure make it possible for the learners to begin writing at an early stage.
The structure of Mandarin Chinese and English are different in a number of ways by contrastive analysis and more learner friendly than English and other European languages. Since there is no conjugation and inflection in Chinese language, which means there are no grammatical morphemes involved in words that serve grammatical functions such as plural form, possessive, articles, copula, and third person singular, learners of Chinese do not have as much worries as learners of English do to start their writing experiences. For instance, After two weeks of learning Chinese in a regular class, that have class meetings four times a week, students are competent enough in the target language to write a narrative to introduce themselves and talk about their families without worrying about the change of copular and plural forms, but it is impossible for learners of English to do the same within the same time frame. The absence of moving "be" and the wh- words to the initial position to form questions and the absence of "do" support to form negation in Chinese syntactic structure also free the beginners of Chinese from making grammar errors in their writing and therefore makes them feel more confident in pursuing their writing task.

4. The use of Chinese Word Processor helps to make the writing experience more desirable and less stressful.

The students are required to use word processor to write essays as homework assignment. The advantages in using the word processor over handwriting are as the follows:

    a. Faster.
    b. Convenient to use online dictionary for unknown expressions.
    c. Make writing and revising easier and save time.
    d. Feel accomplished to see their writings in "print".

But having said all the advantages of an early start in Chinese writing, the following problems are identified in the students learning how to write.

- Don't have much to say.
- Don't know what to say.
- Don't know how to express the ideas.
- Vocabulary limits
- Structure problems

IV. How to Make it Happen

The following were what I have been doing to push my students to write in Chinese

- **Striking for quantity at the beginning stages**

    Quality of writings should be based on quantity. Quality cannot be achieved without adequate quantity.

- **Promoting quality based on quantity**

    Teach simple writing styles and formats to promote quality by giving them certain words and expressions and discourse connectors to include in both the in-class and outside class writings. The students' writing ability was pushed into a higher level and their work became more cohesive and the content of the writings were kept relevant to the assigned topic.

- **Sensitive to the Students' Needs**

    "Don't have much to say" and "Don't know what to say" usually occurred among students with Chinese background. It is caused by the mismatch of their level of cognitive development and the level of their Chinese as a second language. The heritage students who already know how to speak the language felt frustrated when they had to use the basic vocabulary to write an article at an elementary level. To these students, the nature of help had been more of psychological than academic instructional. A careful selection of the topics that are more relevant to their life as a student and more on their family or people around them can ease this problem. By talking about this they may feel less "incompetent" and less "limited" by vocabulary in their writing.

    "Don't know how to express their ideas; vocabulary limits; and structure problems" usually occurred with non-heritage students. More sessions of counseling were given, in which their writings were checked over and discussed in person to clarify the grammatical and vocabulary errors they had made. Through the counseling, the students could get a better idea why they had made the grammar errors and how to improve them. This had been proved a very useful tool to help the students develop from their *Zone of Proximal Development* to go one step further in their learning of Chinese.

- **Sensitive to Cultural Diversity**

    The "culture-bound" learning behavior of the students from different nationalities and ethnic groups is another challenge for teachers' decision making. The method of "peer editing" was adjusted because some students of Asian origin seemed reluctant to show her writing to her classmates and was not open to help her peers with the editing. And they were very uncomfortable when their writings were read to the class, too.

- **Using Computer Program to Assist Writing**

The use of Chinese Word Processor provided the students with help in finding the words and expressions they wanted to use in their writing and checking the meaning in their first languages. Most students accepted it as an effective tool. The use of Chinese Word Processor has enlarged the students' working vocabulary and enriched the students' knowledge of the target language. As some students expressed it, the finished writing assignments gave them a sense of accomplishment and therefore they feel very confident about achieving their goal of learning Chinese.

V Results

By the end of the second semester, for the in-class writing, almost all the students could write an essay of 200 to 250 characters or more in about 30 minutes. In contrast, the majority of those who were not in my class in the first semester could only write about half the length even when they were give extra time to complete their writing after class. For the outside-class writing assignments, most students could easily write an essay of about 500 Characters within a time frame of an hour or so. On the contrary, although I spent a lot of time working with those who did not have the experience of being pushed to output until the second semester, most failed to achieve a similar level.

All the students under my observation were happy about their learning experiences and their achievements. Some were stunned by their own success as they declared in the follow-up questionnaires at the end of the two semesters at Elementary level.

Though there have been complains about the time spent in practicing writing, there are students, mostly heritage students with pervious learning background, who think they need to be assigned more writing homework and given more instructions in order to progress to a higher level. Most were happy to write diary entries to earn extra credits.

VI Conclusion

Through implementing the Pushed Output theory into teaching Chinese elementary writing, I am pleased to see that first year students of Chinese are already on their way in using the language to compose an essay with topics around their life and things that they are interested in and the finished work is in good length and of good quality. The results of putting the theory into practice suggest that with Vogotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development in mind, teachers of Chinese language can always help push the students from their level of approximate development one step further to the actual development level. To the question of "to teach or not to teach", the answer is positive: Let us work enthusiastically to educate active learners and not wait passively until they are "ready".