



## Repositioning Recitation Input in College English Teaching

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### Abstract

This paper tries to discuss how recitation input helps overcome the negative influences on the basis of second language acquisition theory and confirms the important role that recitation input plays in improving college students' oral and written English.

**Keywords:** Recitation input, College English teaching, Communicative competence

### 1. Introduction

Recitation is a traditional teaching method in China which is widely used by learners of different levels and studied by some researchers. The theory of the second language acquisition suggests that recitation-input approach is one of the most effective approaches to improve students' oral and written English. The paper implies that with the application of modern teaching theory and teaching aid, recitation as the traditional language teaching method should be repositioned and put into proper application.

### 2. Language learning theories and related studies of recitation

Krashen's Input Hypothesis is the central part of an overall theory of second language acquisition. It claims that learners progress along the natural order by understanding input that contains structures a little bit beyond their current level of competence (Krashen, 1981) and it becomes comprehensible as a result of simplification and with the help of contextual and extra linguistic clues. This kind of comprehensive input can promote language acquisition, and improve learners' speaking and writing accuracy.

According to Behaviorist, the single paramount fact about language learning is that it concerns, not problem solving, but the formation and performance of habits. Learning was seen to take place inductively through "analogy" rather than "analysis". That is to say, language learning is not like the learning of science as we can not learn it well by asking a series of questions. Instead, we need to read more and recite more, allowing us to become more familiar with the language system, find the regularity belonging to the certain language and as a result, obtain a sense of the language.

Rod Ellis (1985) says that reciting is a process of consciousness and noticing. This process really helps the intake of knowledge. By reciting the whole passage, learners can get the sequence and possible permutations of a sentence stem. The learners will unconsciously learn to deal with day-to-day situations. They enable the learners to say the right thing at the right time in the right place. During the process of recitation, the students may read the articles silently first to make themselves familiar with the content and sentences. In other words, learners will have to read intentionally and extensively. This is to use a variety of interpersonal strategies, such as repeating the writer's words, recalling and practicing English words and phrases, creating new linguistic forms, substituting items in utterances, and expanding them and rehearsing utterances for overt social performance. The learners began to speak, using the single words, or memorized chunks.

Harry Bahrick (1984) states that how well people remember something depends on how deeply they process it. Repeating words as strings of sounds is low-level processing which results in poor retention; working out how words fit in the grammatical structure of the sentence is deeper and leads to better memorization; using the meanings of words together within the whole meaning of the sentence is the highest level of processing and ensures the best memorization.

### 3. Function of recitation

#### 3.1 *The improvement of English writing*

Recitation can reduce the negative transfer of the mother tongue. Chinese and English belong to two different language families. The sentence structures and discourse order are totally different. Chinese students can not free themselves from the negative influence of L1 in learning English. Writing ability is an essential part of the learner's communicative

competence. Presently, however, English writing teaching for non-English majors is very weak, which is mainly reflected by learners' substandard and inadequate writing output resulted from the currently unpleasant examination-oriented writing teaching and learning. When they write, they tend to think in Chinese first, and then just put what they think of into English word by word, sentence by sentence. So in their writing, there are a lot of Chinese-way English sentences. This has already greatly limited their development in the proficiency of English. The effective way to avoid negative transfer is to enlarge the students' input of authentic English and improve their monitor consciousness. The characteristics of recitation input are very similar to those of optimal language input in that recitation can increase learners' language input, reinforce their language sense, overcome negative transfer of one's mother tongue, reduce the anxiety in writing process and strengthen, to a great extent, the learner's memory power. Recitation is a kind of conscious input, through which the students can gradually accumulate the language knowledge and discourse organization skills, which are helpful in writing in the target language. The students can monitor the producing process and correct the Chinese-way English in their writing. After they keep practicing the method for a certain period of time, they can get rid of the negative influence of the L1 and write native-like English sentences. That is to say, if recitation is skillfully and tactfully integrated into writing teaching, it will be very effective to assist writing teaching and help improve learners' writing ability greatly.

### 3.2 *The improvement of oral English*

Due to the great linguistic interference among college students' learning English within a non-natural context, in view of their weakness and difficulties and the inadequacy of the English input, the input of recitation could serve as a practical measure to improve the oral communicative competence. Recitation reduces the learners' anxiety, the learning anxiety does harm to students. When students can quote a lot of sentences recited by them somewhere, this makes them become confident in themselves and more interested in learning English. Consequently, recitation can intensify the students' language input, improve their language sense for English and their communicative competence.

#### **4. The selection of recitation materials**

Recitation is not the laissez-faire activity of repeating the assigned text. The teacher can provide some methods to improve students' activities and interests by paying attention to the quantity and quality of recitation input. In other words, the teacher plays the role of controller in selecting the recitation materials. The criteria for the choice of the materials vary from person to person. The following are suggested guidelines:

- A. The material should contain a different cultural topic (e.g., dating) so that students can learn more cultural background behind the language.
- B. The material should contain idiomatic expressions and useful sentence structures.
- C. The material should be composed of only two or three short paragraphs so that the workload is not too heavy.

Besides, students are always encouraged to choose the books or writers they are in favor of to read out of class. Students are instructed to find different kinds of materials in the library or from the Internet. The materials can be a novel, an essay, a short comment, a piece of news, an advertisement or anything they prefer to read. The styles of articles are various, the words and expressions they contact are of different language colors, and the information they obtain is of a great variety. The only requirement for the materials is that the article be written in authentic English by the native speakers. It is personal interest that triggers the students to begin their recitation. This kind of input may first enlarge the language scope and the cultural knowledge concerning the certain foreign language.

It is suggested that the teacher pay greater attention to fluency during the recitation activity. Instead of fluency, students should concentrate on accuracy during the memorization activity. Memorization and recitation involves more than just rote memorization. It is an integration of cognitive and linguistic activities as well as a technique that can be nicely adapted into an EFL class setting.

#### **5. Different input strategies**

The strategy of recitation is also widely used by learners of different levels and studied by some researchers. According to Rod Ellis (1985), input refers to the language that is addressed to the L2 learner either by a native speaker or by another L2 learner. Interaction consists of the discourse jointly constructed by the learner and his interlocutors; input, therefore, is the result of interaction. Stephen Krashen (1987) states, "The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to know. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production." He also says, "In the real world, conversations with sympathetic native speakers who are willing to help the acquirer understand are very helpful."

Long (1983) considers in detail how input is made comprehensible. One way is by the use of structures and vocabulary which the learner already knows. However, this type of input cannot foster development, because it supplies no new

linguistic material. Another way is by a 'here-and-now' orientation, which enables the learner to make use of the linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts and his general knowledge to interpret language which he does not actually know (Rod Ellis, 1985, P157-158). When the learners are reading different language materials, they are often more likely to choose these articles which surpass their present knowledge of the target language, which are the materials containing 'i+1' to recite. But this is only sufficient input, just as Krashen said that comprehensible input is not a sufficient condition for second language acquisition, and only when input becomes intake that language acquisition takes place. When the learners finish reading a material, we don't know what they have selected to proceed in the mind. Sometimes, the learners just keep the information in their mind for a period of time, and they forget soon the linguistic skills which appeared in the material. In order to make the learner have greater knowledge retention, a clear orientation should be assigned to them. With the demand of selection and recitation, the learners have to try their best to understand the materials using the knowledge they already know. As for the knowledge they have not mastered, learners may make use of the linguistic and extra-linguistic context in order to guess the meaning or bring their problems to the teacher for discussion. After they reach a full comprehension of the material, they will recite some paragraphs of the reading materials. The paragraphs chosen are surely a little more difficult than their present knowledge. And this kind of input will be effective and the 'i+1' knowledge will be guaranteed to become intake of the learners. This kind of acquisition helps us produce natural and accurate speech or writing.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, the writer reviews the related language learning theories and the studies of recitation and attempts to explore the positive effect of recitation, which is based on the theory of input hypothesis and accords with the cognitive process of human mind. It is believed that recitation input facilitates the acquisition of language chunk, enhances the language sense, inspires students' confidence in language learning and improves oral fluency and the ability of writing. Therefore, repositioning the role of recitation input in college English teaching is highly necessary.

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