

# The Role of Oral Output in Noticing and Promoting the Acquisition of Linguistic Forms

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## Abstract

Many empirical studies carried out to test the three major functions of the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis proposed by Swain lend some support to the Hypothesis in one way or another. This study aims to investigate whether giving the Chinese EFL learners an opportunity for oral output encourages them to notice their linguistic problems in oral output, how they solve these linguistic problems, whether output promote their accurate use of linguistic forms and whether the resolutions they achieve in the reconstruction are retained in their later production. Results of this study are derived from a quasi-experiment designed for this research and show that output prompts the Chinese EFL learners to notice the gaps in their interlanguage and has a positive impact on the acquisition of language forms. Some suggestions are also made to the EFL teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** comprehensible output hypothesis, oral output, noticing, linguistic forms

## 1. Introduction

In the second language acquisition (SLA) literature, much emphasis has been placed on input while output used to be regarded only as the product of SLA that has already taken place and it does not serve any significant function in language acquisition process (e.g. Krashen, 1985, 1989). According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982, 1985), L2 learners acquire by understanding language that contains structure a bit beyond their current level of competence ( $i+1$ ). It stresses that comprehensible input is the only one necessary and sufficient source for second language acquisition. However, observations of Canadian French immersion programs show that although L2 learners in immersion classes were exposed to a rather rich comprehensible input for a period of 8 years, they still performed poorly in their production, demonstrated weaknesses in grammatical accuracy and were thus obviously regarded as non-native speakers or writers (Swain, 1985). Based on the findings from these researches, people began to question the validity of the Input Hypothesis and realize that output is not just the product of acquisition or the means by which one can achieve greater fluency but also a potentially important causal factor in the acquisition process of L2 learners.

The "Comprehensible Output Hypothesis", proposed by Swain in her seminal paper as an extension to the Input Hypothesis, claims that the act of producing language (speaking or writing) constitutes, under certain circumstances, part of the process of second language learning (Swain, 1985). She argued that "comprehensible input", although invaluable to the acquisition process, is not sufficient for successful SLA, but that opportunities to produce comprehensible output are also necessary. More recently, Swain (1995, 1998, 2000) proposed four different functions of output in SLA: it enhances fluency; it promotes noticing; it serves the second language learning process through hypothesis testing; and it serves as a metalinguistic function for language learners. Firstly, producing the target language can enhance fluency, which is obvious and non-controversial, since "practice makes perfect". Secondly, output has a noticing (or consciousness-raising) function. Swain and Lapkin argue that when L2 learners produce the target language, external or internal feedback leads them to notice a gap in their existing interlanguage (IL) knowledge, which "pushes" them to modify their output (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). In doing so, the L2 learners may sometimes be forced into a more syntactic processing mode than might occur in comprehension. The third function of output is a hypothesis-testing function. Producing output serves as a way of testing out one's hypothesis about the target language. Learners can test whether their output is comprehensible and linguistic well-formed according to the feedback obtained from their interlocutors. Finally, output serves as a metalinguistic function. It is claimed that "as learners reflect upon their own target language use, their output serves as a metalinguistic function, enabling them to control and internalize linguistic

knowledge” (Swain, 1995).

Since the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis has been proposed in the 1980s, several empirical investigations have been carried out to test four functions of output: the fluency function (e.g. Bygate, 2001; DeKeyser, 1997), the noticing function (e.g. Izumi, 2002; Izumi & Bigelow, 2000, 2001; Izumi et al., 1999; Shehadeh, 1999, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1995), the hypothesis-testing function (e.g. Ellis & He, 1999; Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993; Shehadeh, 1999, 2001), and the metalinguistic function (e.g. Kowal & Swain, 1994; Swain, 1995, 1998). The results from these investigations lend some support to the claim that “attempting to produce language and reflecting on it makes learners become more aware of the gaps between what they know and what they don’t know, and pushes them to produce more comprehensible output, which has positive effects on language learning processes” (Swain, 1985).

Among the studies conducted to test noticing function of output (Swain, 1995; Izumi, et al., 1999), most of them used the written mode for output task, and there’s very few researches in which oral mode is used. The present study aims to investigate whether collaborative oral output pushes the Chinese EFL learners to notice the linguistic problems in their production. Some of the empirical studies were only concerned about whether the Chinese EFL learners notice linguistic problems in the process of production, but how the EFL learners solve their linguistic problems and whether the resolutions they achieve in the reconstruction are retained in their later production were remained unanswered. These are another two questions addressed in the present study.

The present study aims to investigate whether output serves as a trigger to notice the EFL learners’ linguistic problems and promotes greater linguistic accuracy. Three research questions are thus addressed:

- 1) While experimental group subjects retell the listening passage orally in pairs, do they notice the gaps in their linguistic knowledge? If so, what aspects of language forms do they focus on? How do they solve these linguistic problems?
- 2) Do experimental group subjects with oral output achieve greater linguistic accuracy than control group subjects without output in two posttests?
- 3) Are the resolutions reached by experimental group in their reconstruction retained in the posttests?

## **2. Research Design**

### *2.1 Subjects*

The subjects in this study (N=60) were second year English major students in School of Foreign Languages, Shaanxi Normal University. All of them were females. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 with the average age of 20 and the mean length of exposure to the English language in the classroom set was about 7 years. Before they were enrolled in the university, they mainly focused on English vocabulary and grammar learning and spent most of their time doing exercises in order to pass the National Entrance Examination, so they seldom spoke English in and outside class. After they were admitted by the School of Foreign Languages, apart from taking two-hour oral classes taught by native-speakers every week, they also have adequate opportunities to speak English in other courses. They all agreed to take part in the experiment and would be present in three sessions. They were assigned at random to an experimental group (n=30) and a control group (n=30). The scores of the first year final examinations showed that the subjects in these two groups were almost of similar English language proficiency.

### *2.2 Testing Instrument*

#### *2.2.1 A Listening Passage*

The listening passage was taken from the “21<sup>st</sup> Century College English-Listening and Speaking” (1). It was a 178-word passage. The choice of the passage was based on the subjects’ language proficiency.

#### *2.2.2 Two Posttests*

To test whether the oral output that the experimental group produced had any effects on their subsequent performance, the researcher adopted an immediate test and a delayed test. The first one was administered the next day, and the second one two weeks later. Both of them are in a form of gap-filling test. In the gap-filling test, twenty words or phrases were taken away from the original passage. Those missing words or phrases were the grammatical features that the subjects in experimental group frequently negotiated in their output. The total score was 100 with five points given for each blank if the answer was semantically and grammatically correct.

### *2.3 Procedures*

#### *2.3.1 Administration of Treatments*

The study was carried out in a laboratory setting. Both the subjects in experimental group and control group

listened to the tape. A short story was read (twice) at normal speed. During the first time, they just listened and tried to get the main idea. While listening for the second time, they could take down some notes which control group felt that would help them do some comprehension questions and experimental group felt that would help them retell the story. After that, for control group, the subjects were only to answer five multi-choice comprehension questions, while for experimental group, apart from doing the same comprehension questions, every two subjects were asked to form a pair and retell the story collaboratively. They were expected to reconstruct the story as accurately as possible, both with respect to the content and the grammar. They didn't need to make a word-for-word copy of the story, but should try to make it grammatically correct and coherent. They were also told that they must retell the story in English, but that it would be fine for them to use either English or Chinese as they negotiate with their partner, especially some grammatical terms.

As the subjects in experimental group were not familiar with the procedure, the researcher read the instruction and explained it in detail although everyone had a copy with them as well. In order to encourage the subjects to verbalize their decision as well as acquaint them with the task, they listened to a brief audio-taped recording of a pair of students retelling a story. The time given to complete the task was 15 minutes, and the subjects' interaction was audio-taped.

### 2.3.2 Administration of Two Posttests

The next day, all the subjects both in experimental group and control group listened to the passage once again and completed the gap-filling test, which took about 10 minutes. Two weeks later, the same test was administered to the experimental group and the control group.

### 2.3.3 Administration of Interviews

In order to obtain some information about what kind of problems the subjects had while producing output and their perceptions about the role of output in promoting their later correct use of grammatical features, a brief interview was held between the researcher and all the experimental group subjects. It was conducted in a quiet classroom after the delayed posttest when all the subjects were available. The researcher asked three questions one by one and all talks were recorded in terms of note-taking. The questions asked of the subjects were the following: (a) When you were listening to the story, which did you pay more attention to, the meaning of the story or the language form? (b) While you were retelling the story, did you notice any grammatical problems? (c) Do you think that retelling the story with your partner is helpful for you to do the following two tests? If the subjects gave positive answers to question (b) and question (c), the researcher guided them to talk about their opinions about the story-retelling task. The interviewees could use either English or Chinese when answering questions.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

### 2.4.1 The Amount of LREs Identified

The subjects' interactions were transcribed and analyzed. First of all, the transcriptions were analyzed to see whether the subjects noticed the gaps in their linguistic knowledge and what aspects of language forms they focused on. According to the work of Kowal and Swain (1994) and Swain and Lapkin (1995), the unit of analysis used to code data was a language-related episode (LRE). The LRE is defined as "any segment of the protocol in which a learner either spoke about a language problem he/she encountered while writing and solved it either correctly or incorrectly; or simply solved it (again, either correctly or incorrectly) without having explicitly identified it as a problem" (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). As Ellis has put it, LREs are:

Occasions where linguistic form is explicitly discussed by the learners. Such episodes arise when learners temporarily attend to form in the context of performing a task. They involve what might be called the "negotiation of form" – an attempt to determine collaboratively which form to use in order to express meaning accurately and coherently (2000).

Usually each LRE dealt with one linguistic item, but it was possible for one episode to be embedded in another or for an episode to deal with two items simultaneously. An LRE generally began with some form of identification of a problematic item either by way of a grammar check, confirmation request or repair and ended when the issue was resolved (either successfully or unsuccessfully).

The following example illustrates an LRE dealing with the use of determiner in a negative sentence.

#### *Example 1: Determiner*

S1: One night he couldn't come up with some ideas for his story.

S2: Couldn't, so we should use "any" instead of "some".

S1: Yeah, you're right. In the negative sentence, we should use "any". So it should be "One night he couldn't come up with any ideas for his story".

The example begins with S1's using determiner "some". S2 disagrees and emphasizes the negation "couldn't". S1 realizes her mistake and replaces "some" with "any". The grammatical problem is solved correctly.

#### 2.4.2 The Nature of LREs Classified

In the second stage of the coding, how learners resolved grammatical episodes was identified. The categories are mainly based on those established in the previous research by Storch (Storch, 1998).

- 1) Apply a grammatical rule [G]: Instances where the learners cited or alluded to some sort of grammatical rule.
- 2) Use contextual clues [C]: Instances where learners used contextual clues as the basis for final decision.
- 3) Intuition [I]: Instances where learners seemed to be resorting to what sounded or seemed correct.
- 4) No reason given [NR]: Instances where the participants didn't articulate the reason for their grammatical choices.
- 5) Meaning of words or phrases or knowledge of the topic [M]: Instances where learners seemed to tap into their knowledge of lexis or the topic area and called upon that information to assist in their grammatical choice.

The following examples from the transcripts illustrate the above categories.

##### *Example 2: Article [G]*

S1: He wrote detective stories for magazine.

S2: I think it should be "a magazine". "Magazine" is a countable noun, so we should use "a" in front of its single form.

S1: Yeah, you're right. A magazine.

In the above episode, S1 and S2 discuss whether the indefinite article "a" should be used before the single noun "magazine". S2 refers to the grammatical rule that there should be an indefinite article in front of a single countable noun. S1 accepts and a correct decision is reached.

##### *Example 3: Article [C]*

S1: I'm the burglar.

S2: A, I'm a burglar. It's the first time that the writer mentioned it.

S1: Oh, yes, a burglar.

This episode starts with S1's using the article "the" and S2 points it out and suggests the article "a" should be used since it's the first time that the writer mentions it. S1 realizes her mistake and the grammatical problem is correctly solved.

##### *Example 4: Verb Aspect [I]*

S1: When he came back, he found he had a visitor.

S2: He had a visitor. He had had a visitor, had had a visitor. I think "he had had a visitor" is better.

S1: Um, yeah, he had had a visitor.

In this episode, S1 and S2 talk about whether the past tense or the past participle should be used in the clause. S2 repeats the sentence several times to see whether it sounds right. The final decision is based on his intuition.

##### *Example 5: Preposition [NR]*

S1: He left the unfinished story on the typewriter.

S2: I think it should be "near, near the typewriter".

S1: Um, near the typewriter.

This episode begins with S1's using the preposition "on". S2 suggests the preposition "near" should be better but offers no reason for the suggestion. S1 thinks for a while and accepts the suggestion.

##### *Example 6: Preposition [M]*

S1: He sat with his typewriter in front of him, in the front of him, which one? I don't know which one to use.

S2: In front of. They are different. "In front of something or some place" means you are before it. "In the front of some place" means you are in it and in the front part of it. So we should use "in front of".

S1: Yeah, you are right. He sat with his typewriter in front of him.

This episode begins with S1's confirmation check whether to use "in front of" or "in the front of". S2 affirms that "in front of" is correct by providing the explanation of the two prepositions.

### 2.4.3 Statistical Analysis

After the comprehension test and two gap-filling tests, the papers were collected and marked by the researcher. All the data were submitted to SPSS 17.0 to analyze. The independent samples *t*-test was also employed to examine the differences between the experimental group and the control group in three tests.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Research Question 1

While experimental group subjects retell the listening passage orally in pairs, do they notice the gaps in their linguistic knowledge? If so, what aspects of language forms do they focus on? How do they solve these linguistic problems?

#### 3.1.1 Results

As mentioned in part 1, the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis maintains that when learners produce the target language, external or internal feedback leads them to notice the gaps in their existing IL knowledge. Based on the analysis of subjects' interactions, the subjects in experimental group do notice the gaps in their linguistic knowledge while reconstructing the story they've just listened to. The total number of LREs generated by 15 pairs was 80 with an average of 5 LREs for each pair. The grammatical feature which elicited the most attention was the use of verbs (tense, aspect and form) accounting for 46.25% of the language-related episodes, followed by the use of nouns (singular or plural form), the use of articles (definite, indefinite or zero) and so on. Table 1 displays the numbers and percentage of grammatical features in language-related episodes.

Table 1. Numbers and percentage of grammatical features in language-related episodes

Grammatical features	Number	Percentage (%)
Verb tense/aspect/form	37	46.25
Noun	7	8.75
Article	8	10
Participle	6	7.5
Preposition	5	6.25
Pronoun	4	5
Word form	6	7.5
Conjunction	3	3.75
Other	4	5
Total	80	100

As can be seen, the production enables the subjects to notice the gaps in their linguistic knowledge. To overcome these gaps, they verbalize the problems, and work together to solve them by engaging in certain grammatical processing until a satisfactory resolution is reached.

The second stage in the analysis considered how the subjects resolved grammatical LREs by examining which knowledge sources they drew on to resolve grammatical LREs and make their grammatical decisions. Table 2 features the number of LREs each pair produced, the number and percentage of grammatical LREs which were resolved by drawing on the different knowledge sources.

Table 2. Knowledge sources used to resolve grammatical LREs per pair

	Grammar (G)	Context (C)	Intuition (I)	No Reason Given (NR)	Meaning (M)	Total
Pair 1	4	3		1		8
Pair 2	4		1			5
Pair 3	2		1	2		5
Pair 4	2	2		1		5
Pair 5	2		2	2		6
Pair 6	5		1		1	7
Pair 7	2	2	2	1		7
Pair 8	2	1	1			4
Pair 9	4	1				5
Pair 10	4					4
Pair 11	2	1	1	1	1	6
Pair 12	3		1			4
Pair 13	4		1	2		7
Pair 14	2			2		4
Pair 15	3					3
No.	45	10	11	12	2	80
%	56.25	12.5	13.75	15	2.5	100

As shown in Table 2, there's a high percentage in which the subjects resorted to grammatical rules in their existing linguistic knowledge and engaged in certain grammatical analysis to solve the problems. And in some cases, they made use of context clues, language intuition or meaning of words to develop solutions. In about 15% of cases, no reasons were given why certain language forms were used.

### 3.1.2 Discussion

The findings in the present study provide support for the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, which claims that the activity of producing target language may prompt learners to recognize their linguistic problems.

With regard to the language features that the subjects focused attention to in their production, the use of verbs comes first, followed by the use of nouns, articles, participles, prepositions and so on. Those features are also found to be problematic in previous research within an EFL setting (Garcia & Pica, 2000), which suggests that these grammatical items are the major problems that EFL learners feel difficult to overcome and need great efforts in their future learning.

The third concern of this study is how the subjects resolved their grammatical problems and what knowledge sources they fell back on. Swain and Lapkin propose that it is important to study and analyze the reasoning learners engage in to solve the problems they encounter in their production (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Some of the mental processes that learners reflect in the solution to problems seem to be potentially involved in second language learning. The analysis of language-related episodes has given answers to this question. While reconstructing the listening passage, when one subject had difficulties in going on with her retelling, such as when she was not sure which verb tense to be used or whether to use a definite article or an indefinite article, she would raise the question and discuss it with her partner. When the subject didn't agree with what her partner has said, she made clarification request and negotiated with her partner until the final decision was reached. They applied several language sources in their decision making, such as grammatical rules, context clues, language intuition and meaning of words. In most cases, they made use of grammatical rules and engaged in grammatical processing to solve their linguistic problems, which is claimed to represent an important part in EFL learning (Swain, 1995).

### 3.2 Research Question 2

Do experimental group subjects with oral output achieve greater linguistic accuracy than control group subjects without output in two posttests?

#### 3.2.1 Comprehension Test Results

To measure whether the subjects in the control group and the experimental group reached the same level of comprehension of the listening passage, an independent-samples *t*-test was used to compare their scores in comprehension test. Mean scores, standard deviations and *t* value for comprehension test is revealed in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean scores, standard deviations and *t* value for comprehension test

Group	Number	Mean	Std. Deviation	T-value	P
Control group	30	3.27	1.081	-1.812	0.075
Experimental group	30	3.73	.907		

As can be observed, the control group scored a mean of 3.27 and the experimental group scored a mean of 3.73. By comparing the mean scores of both groups, it can be seen that there is no significant difference between two groups in comprehension test ( $p=.075 > .05$ ), which is a good indication that the subjects in experimental group achieved the same comprehension level with the subjects in control group. It also confirms that the subjects in these two groups are at the similar language proficiency level.

#### 3.2.2 Gap-Filling Tests Results

As the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis maintains that output encourages learners to notice the linguistic problems and solve them by engaging in certain grammatical processing, which in turn leads to greater linguistic accuracy (Swain, 1995). Thus a hypothesis comes that the subjects in experimental group with oral output outperform the ones in control group without output in two gap filling tests. To determine whether there was statistically significant difference in their performance in two gap-filling tests, the scores were then submitted to a *t*-test for independent samples. The mean scores and standard deviations for two tests are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Mean scores and standard deviations for gap-filling tests

Subject		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	P
Gap-Filling Test 1	Control group	30	37.17	12.435	2.270	.000
	Experimental group	30	50.83	15.091	2.755	
Gap-Filling Test 2	Control group	30	48.00	15.403	2.812	.019
	Experimental group	30	57.17	14.000	2.556	

As shown in Table 4, in Gap-Filling Test 1, the control group got the mean of 37.17 while the experimental group got the mean of 50.83. The mean score of the experimental group was higher than that of the control group.  $p < 0.01$  which proves that the experimental group was significantly better than the control group. A similar pattern was also observed in Gap-Filling Test 2, which suggests that even after two weeks, the experimental group still significantly outperformed the control group in the delayed posttest.

#### 3.2.3 Discussion

The findings in the present study provide evidence for the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis which claims that the output enhances greater linguistic accuracy. It may be predicted that the scores of the experimental group should be higher than the ones of the control group. This prediction was fully borne out in both immediate posttest and delayed posttest. Those engaged in output treatment outperformed those exposed to the same input for the sole purpose of comprehension in later use of grammatical features. The opportunities for output prompt the EFL learners to notice the linguistic problems in their interlanguage. To solve these problems, they may process input immediately provided to them with more focused attention, as described in Izumi's study (1999).

Or they may work together in a collaborative production task and engage in certain grammatical processing, which may deepen their understanding of grammatical knowledge, as described in the current research. In either case, learning is believed to be promoted through the act of producing the target language. It can also be observed that both the experimental group and the control group improved from immediate posttest to delayed posttest. The possible explanation could be the lightened processing load experienced by both groups on delayed posttest. VanPatten argued that as limited capacity processors, L2 learners process input for meaning before they process it for form; they process content words before they process less meaningful, grammatical morphology (VanPatten, 1995). On the delayed posttest, the subjects in both groups have been exposed to the listening passage several times, so they have fully understood the meaning of the passage. Their attention could be more focused on those less meaningful and more grammatical features, which results in great gains on the delayed posttest for both groups.

### 3.3 Research Question 3

Are the resolutions reached by experimental group in their reconstruction retained in the posttests?

#### 3.3.1 Results

The third question set out to investigate whether the solutions reached by the experimental group in their reconstruction were retained in their linguistic knowledge. By comparing the interactions made by the experimental group subjects and the answers in immediate and delayed posttests, correct answers indicate that the solutions are retained in their interlanguage and the incorrect answers suggest that although the subjects consciously recognized the linguistic problems and reached the final decisions by negotiating with their partners, the process doesn't have any positive effect on the development of their interlanguage. The comparison between the interactions and immediate posttest showed that 60 answers (68%) were correct while 28 were incorrect answers (32%). The comparison between the interactions and delayed posttest showed that 62 (70%) were correct while 26 (30%) were incorrect answers.

#### 3.3.2 Discussion

The above findings show that the majority of the correct decisions concerning the linguistic problems in L2 learners' reconstruction were retained in their later production, which may suggest that oral output has a positive effect on learners' second/foreign language learning. The possible explanation might be the process of solving linguistic problems by drawing on linguistic knowledge and engaging in grammatical processing allows the ESL/EFL learners to deepen their knowledge of linguistic forms.

### 3.4 Interview

To supplement the tests, an interview was conducted to examine the subjects' attitudes and opinions about the output task.

Question (a) was concerned about whether the subjects paid more attention to the meaning of the story or the language forms while listening to it. All the interviewees told that during the first and second listening, they mainly focused on the gist of the story to catch the main idea; after the completion of output task, they noticed there were some linguistic problems in their reproduction, so while listening to the story for the third and fourth time prior to the gap-filling test, they listened with more attention focused on some specific linguistic forms. The subjects' responses were consistent with the findings in Izumi's study (1999) that learners' recognition of linguistic problems prompts them to notice relevant features if input is subsequently provided to them.

Question (b) asked whether they noticed any grammatical problems while retelling the story. About 60% of the subjects said that they noticed some of the grammatical problems in their production, either by themselves or by the interlocutors. Another 40% said they noticed many problems and solved them with the help of the interlocutors. The following two examples are the typical comments made by some interviewees.

Student A: *I didn't expect I would make some simple mistakes. I've acquired that grammatical knowledge. Only when I actually produced, did I realize the weakness in my grammar.*

Student B: *It's easy to understand the story, but while retelling it, I became aware of the problems in my grammar. With the help of my partner, I tried to recall what I've learned and express myself in a correct way.*

Question (c) asked whether oral output is helpful for them to do the gap-filling tests. The responses showed that all the interviewees viewed output task positively. The majority of them agreed that retelling task was very helpful for their later use of these grammatical features. Three interviewees' comments were presented as follows:

Student C: *It's very useful. It's a good way for me to recall the grammatical knowledge I've learned before and*

*negotiate with my partner to reach a correct decision.*

Student D: *While I was retelling the story, my partner reminded me of some grammatical rules I've forgotten. By applying those grammatical rules, a correct solution was reached and that left me a deep impression and helped me to finish the gap-filling test.*

Student E: *While I'm doing the gap-filling test, I find my partner and I have talked about some of the language forms needed for the blanks. I still remember what we said and finished the test easily.*

#### **4. Implications**

The present study set out to investigate the function of output as a trigger to notice the gaps in EFL learners' interlanguage and to promote their linguistic accuracy in attempt to solve the gaps. Based on the findings in this study, it is concluded that oral output enables EFL learners to become aware of their linguistic problems in their interlanguage and EFL learners mainly draw on grammatical knowledge and engage in the grammatical processing in an attempt to solve the problems, which leads to greater linguistic accuracy. There are some implications for English teaching in China:

Firstly, in China, most EFL teachers stress the importance of input while ignoring the role of output in learning English, which leads to their students' disregard for language production ability and therefore weakness in their speaking and writing. The English classes are always teacher-centered and students rarely have chances to speak or write. The traditional concept of output should be changed. Output is not only the outcome of acquisition, but contributes a lot to SLA. So the Chinese EFL teachers should attach greater importance to the role of output and provide their students with more opportunities to develop their productive skills.

Secondly, as Swain suggested, output-based tasks which require L2 learners to produce output should be adopted in the language classroom, such as text reconstruction, information gap, dictogloss. All of these activities engage students in producing a meaningful and accurate passage, which enables them to focus their attention on language forms. In making one's output more accurate and appropriate, L2 learners draw on grammatical knowledge, which serves to deepen their understanding of and consolidate these grammatical knowledge. In designing the tasks, the EFL teachers should take learners' proficiency into account. The input stimulus, whether auditory or written, provided for reconstruction should suit the learners' language proficiency so that the EFL learners' attention wouldn't be overloaded.

Thirdly, this study shows that output can promote the learning of grammatical features, so it is suggested that the English grammar teaching be integrated into a communicative methodology. Traditional grammar study is often associated with the dry memorization of rules and the boring prospect of applying these rules in pattern practice, substitution, transformation exercises, which fails to improve the Chinese EFL learners' accurate use of English grammatical rules. The EFL teachers should design more activities that involve students to produce, to notice the problems in their grammar knowledge and consolidate their grammatical knowledge by using it.

#### **5. Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research**

Although the present study produces expected results which are strong evidence for the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, there are still some limitations.

First, the two posttests have the advantage of controlling, to some extent, for the content and form that EFL learners produce, but they may not provide EFL learners with opportunities for more natural and generative use of the linguistic forms. For further exploration, researchers should design a posttest which can prompt EFL learners to make natural production.

Second, because the time span of the present study was short, the experimental group subjects were only offered one opportunity for their oral output, which might reduce the effect of oral output on learning and retention of linguistic features. In future research, it is recommended that more chances of output be provided to EFL learners.

Finally, the generalizability of the results obtained in this study is constrained by the small sample size of the study. In the future, more subjects should be included in the experiment to substantiate the claims mentioned above.

In spite of those limitations, this empirical study has proved that output prompts EFL learners to notice the gaps in their interlanguage and has a positive impact on the acquisition of language forms. In the EFL teaching, both input and output are needed, the former is a prerequisite for successful language learning and the latter is a guarantee of successful language learning.

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