LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LITERATURE: COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT IN LITERARY CLASSES

DİL EDİNİMİ VE EDEBİYAT: EDEBİYAT DERSLERİNDE ANLAŞILIR GİRDİ

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the symbiotic relationship between Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and literature, with a specific focus on the role of comprehensible input in English literary classes. SLA theory, as articulated by Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis, posits that language learners acquire a second language most effectively when they are exposed to input that is slightly above their current proficiency level while still remaining comprehensible. In the context of literature classes, this theory can find a valuable application and a solid ground. As students delve into literary works, they can improve their language proficiency while exploring the multifaceted and diversified nature of the language. This study underscores the critical role of comprehensible input in English literary classes as a means to facilitate language acquisition. It further highlights the reciprocal benefits of literature in the process, emphasizing the power of literature to provide authentic language use, cultural insights, and opportunities for critical thinking, ultimately enriching students' language proficiency and appreciation for English language.

Keywords: *SLA, Literature, Language, Krashen, Comprehensible Input.*

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ÖZ

Bu çalışma, İngilizce edebiyat derslerinde anlaşılır girdinin rolüne özel olarak odaklanarak, İkinci Dil Edinimi (SLA) ile edebiyat arasındaki simbiyotik ilişkiyi araştırır. Stephen Krashen'in Input Hipotezi ile ifade edildiği şekliyle SLA teorisi, dil öğrenenlerin ikinci bir dili en etkili şekilde, mevcut yeterlilik seviyelerinin biraz üzerinde ve hala anlaşılabilir bir girdiye maruz kaldıklarında etkili bir şekilde edinimin gerçekleşebileceğini ileri sürer. Edebiyat dersleri bağlamında bu teori uygun ve sağlam bir zemin bulabilir. Öğrenciler edebi eserleri araştırdıkça, dilin çok yönlü ve çeşitli doğasını keşfederken dil yeterliliklerini de geliştirebilirler. Bu çalışma, dil edinimini kolaylaştırma aracı olarak edebiyat derslerinde anlaşılır girdilerin kritik rolünün altını çizmektedir. Bu çalışma, edebiyat derslerinde anlaşılabilir girdilerin dil edinimini kolaylaştırma açısından kritik bir rol oynadığını vurgulamaktadır. Ayrıca, çalışma edebiyatın bu süreçteki karşılıklı faydalarını da öne çıkararak, edebiyatın özgün dil kullanımı, kültürel anlayışlar ve eleştirel düşünme fırsatları sağlama gücünü ön plana çıkarmakta ve sonuç olarak öğrencilerin dil yeterliliklerini ve İngilizceye olan ilgilerini ikinci dil edinimi kuralları ile daha da verimli hale getirebileceği öne sürmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *SLA, Edebiyat, Dil, Krashen, Anlaşılır Girdi.*

Introduction

Students of English Language and Literature departments in Türkiye are supposed to engage with literary texts from their first year onwards. Starting with Old English period, the curriculum covers a wide range of cultural and literary materials that could potentially help students in their further stages of language acquisition. However, most of the time students find it challenging to engage with authentic materials of literature, considering that they are beyond their perceptions and knowledge. However, basic knowledge of SLA theories can transform traditional and enroute aspects of literary classes into productive outputs by which learners can improve their language proficiency levels. At this stage, both instructors and students need to become aware of the intersections between literary and languages modules and the of the ways the two can develop one another. Comprehensible input strategies, such as pre-teaching vocabulary, providing historical and cultural context, and encouraging discussions, can render complex literary content accessible and engaging. This ensures that students not only experience the cultural and literary richness of English literature but also continue to develop their language skills. Engagement with literature goes beyond language learning; it serves as a platform for cultural and linguistic exposure. Literature encapsulates authentic language use,

introduces idiomatic expressions, figurative language, and varied writing styles. However, without comprehending the effective ways of acquiring a specific language, literary modules cannot go beyond memorising mere facts for specific eras that at some points might cause fossilisation.

Having these in mind, this study will be modelled on understanding the basic tenets of Comprehensible Input in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Firstly, it will focus on the Input Hypothesis by Krashen (1982: 20), arguing that "the input hypothesis attempts to answer what is perhaps the most important question in our field [how we acquire language]", and then it will present the ways in which comprehensible input can be made accessible when acquiring a second language. The study will ultimately examine the role of reading literary texts in the target language in order to enhance and diversify comprehensible input within Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Additionally, it will explore teaching implications by incorporating self-reflection on personal experiences.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis

Gaining proficiency in a second language is often a more sophisticated endeavour than one might initially anticipate, particularly when it comes to its connection with literature and literary texts. Many individuals often seek the quickest and simplest paths to attain a satisfactory level of competence in the language of literature. However, attempting to delve into literary texts in a language entirely unfamiliar or devoid of personal interest can indeed be a discouraging and time-consuming task. In the context of literature and literary classes, Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis can potentially take on particular significance. Krashen, through his Input Hypothesis developed over a series of publications from 1982 to 1989, contributes a valuable perspective to our understanding of how second-language acquisition can also relate to literary engagement. This theory forms an integral part of his comprehensive second-language acquisition framework, which finds direct application in the realm of literature.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis suggests that learners are most successful when they engage with material that is slightly above their current proficiency level while still being comprehensible. In the context of literary studies, this implies that students benefit the most from literary texts that challenge their language skills to a manageable extent, fostering a sense of engagement and intellectual growth. This dynamic ensures that while

grappling with literature, readers are exposed to more sophisticated linguistic structures and expressions, thereby enhancing both their language proficiency and their capacity to engage meaningfully with the nuanced language found in literary works. Integrating Krashen's Input Hypothesis into literary instruction is not only a strategy for language acquisition but also an approach that can deepen one's appreciation and analysis of the language inherent in literary texts.

When comes to language acquisition and language learning, Krashen makes a distinction between the two; in the former language acquisition is a subconscious process in which adults pick up language similar to children's first language acquisition where in the latter, language learning is a conscious process by which adults can study the structure and form of the language. According to Krashen (1982: 15) "acquisition 'initiates' our utterances in a second language and is responsible for our fluency. Learning has only one function, and that is as a Monitor or editor". In relation to this, language acquisition is imperative for gaining competence in the target language and being able to put your thoughts into speech. The fundamental key to language acquisition is not necessarily strenuous effort, but rather, as Krashen (1985) emphasizes, the ability to comprehend messages and receive comprehensible input. In some instances, learners may find themselves in a literary class, listening to their teacher speak in the target language, and yet struggle to grasp a single word. However, the essence of the Input Hypothesis lies in the provision of understandable and meaningful messages to students, thereby facilitating the acquisition of the target language. The core principle is to ensure that learners are presented with content that is not only linguistically accessible but also carries meaningful and engaging messages, creating an environment where language acquisition can naturally take place.

In the context of literature and literary instruction, this underscores the importance of carefully selecting texts that both challenge and captivate students, thus keeping a balance that fosters language development and a deeper appreciation of the language within literary works. As Krashen (1985: 2) succinctly articulates, language learners progress by comprehending messages that slightly exceed their current level of competence. This transition from 'I', their current proficiency level, to 'i+1', the next level in the natural order of language development, hinges upon the comprehension of input containing that 'i+1' complexity. Payne (2011) challenges the universality of Krashen's theory, particularly in the context of real-life teaching in schools and classrooms. He raises the

important question of whether 'i+1' pertains to an individual student's level or represents a collective benchmark for an entire class. Here the importance of applying a relevant theory in pedagogical settings comes into the effect. Nonetheless, the significance of providing comprehensible input beyond a student's current level of competence cannot be overstated. This approach opens the door for language acquisition, granting each student the opportunity to engage with the language in their unique way. Crucially, the material should strike a balance, avoiding excessive complexity, while also igniting interest among learners.

As Krashen and Terrell (1983: 33) aptly summarize, "when the input is understood and there is an ample supply of it, 'i+1' typically falls into place naturally." This suggests that when students can readily comprehend the input, the next level of language proficiency often follows consequently. In the specific domains of literature, this principle can be actualised by selecting literary texts that are challenging yet engaging, providing students with the necessary scaffolding to explore the complexities of language and meaning. As for challenging aspect of a language, White (1987: 97) asserts that "[it] raises a paradox: how can one understand language that contains structures not yet acquired?" In accordance with this, Krashen (1985: 2) already contemplated on the issue and emphasized that, "[w]e are able to understand language containing unacquired grammar with the help of context, which includes extra-linguistic information, our knowledge of the world, and previously acquired linguistic competence." When one tries to learn a new message/language, the important aspects are not to focus only on its structure and try to internalize it instantly; the main point is to understand the message it is giving you. Once you have understood this, you have acquired that message maybe without even recognizing it. As Krashen and Terrell (1983) observed, texts should emphasize the overall comprehensibility and not just keep to the structures or vocabulary.

In the intersecting realms of literature and language acquisition, the insights of Krashen and Terrell (1983) carry significant weight. They contend that texts should prioritize not only the mere mastery of linguistic structures and vocabulary but also the overall comprehensibility of the message conveyed. This concept is strikingly exemplified when considering how language acquisition transpires within the context of literary content. For instance, consider a scenario in a literary work where a child observes his father gesturing towards a ball and uttering the phrase, 'throw me the ball.' In this situation, the

child easily comprehends the overarching message conveyed by his father, aided not only by the auditory input of the spoken words but also the visual cue of the father pointing at the ball. The child grasps the message and instinctively responds by throwing the ball to his father. What is noteworthy here is that the child may not be familiar with the individual words, 'throw' or 'ball' but through the facilitation of comprehensible input offered by his father, he not only comprehends the message but also acquires the language.

This narrative serves as a compelling illustration of how literature, through its fusion of text and context, promotes language acquisition. It underscores that the effectiveness of comprehensible input lies not solely in the individual components of language but in the holistic communication of ideas, narratives, and messages. Literature's capacity to engage the mind through vivid storytelling and the contextual presentation of language makes it a powerful tool for not only understanding the language but also for immersing oneself in its meaningful and evocative use. In literature, language acquisition is a dynamic journey that transcends mere vocabulary and syntax, embracing the richness of communication and storytelling.

According to the Input Hypothesis, the caretaker speech used when acquiring first language is beneficial for language acquisition. As the caretaker speech is simple and clear, it is much more comprehensible and provides communication among children without any language teaching (Krashen, 1985). However, McLaughlin (1987: 44) comments that, there are children in other countries and cultures who don't receive simple codes when growing up and gives example of Black children in working class community who were not regarded to communicate with until they became information givers. Also, he points out that, "[i]n many societies, parents and other caretakers do not use simpler codes in talking to young children. Simplification is viewed as an inappropriate speech behaviour". There may be lots of variations in many countries and cultures towards helping or providing children to acquire their first language. Faltis (1984: 355) cites that, on the island of Upolu in Western Samoa "[w]hen actual caregiver-infant communication does take place, it tends to be articulated through the medium of songs or rhythmic forms". As Krashen (1985) suggests it is not compulsory to use caretaker speech to help children acquire language but simply "children acquiring second languages who get simplified input are assumed to acquire faster than those who do not" (1983: 34). The main objective is to search for better and effective ways of learning and most importantly

acquiring a second language.

The big question is how we acquire language and how we get enough competence in a second language to communicate without anxiety or tension. Krashen (1982) calls attention to the natural way as children acquire their first language and focuses on understanding the overall messages without worrying about its form. In addition, he regards the second language acquirer whether child or adult as an 'acquirer' akin to a child's first language acquisition and further states that the kind of modified caretaker input can also be obtained by second language acquirers. This modified input can be classified in three ways as *foreigner talk,* which is modifications that native speakers make when speaking with non-native speakers, *teacher talk* this is like the foreigner talk in classroom and *interlanguage talk* which is the speech among the language acquirers. Just like the caretaker speech, the modifications made in these simple codes are for communication not for language teaching.

Comprehensible Input and Literary Classes

"Language is best taught when it is being used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning" (Krashen and Terrell, 1983: 55). As it is emphasized comprehensible input does not require explicit teaching, it is the concept in which the person understands the message and the input that is being presented to him. The person does not need to understand every structure or pattern; instead, he needs to grasp the overall meaning of the input. At the same time, White (1987: 98) claims that incomprehensible input is just as important and states that it is the main factor for "grammar change". This may be correct and at times when we hear or read something, if it contradicts with our knowledge of the world, a grammar change may occur as White states. However, when it comes to the important question of language acquisition Krashen focuses on comprehensible and understandable input. In literature classes, language is primarily a vehicle for conveying ideas, narratives, emotions, and messages. Literature, whether in the form of novels, poems, or plays, is a profound medium for storytelling and expressing complex themes. When language is used authentically to explore the nuances of literature, students are engaged in the act of conveying and interpreting messages, mirroring real-life language use.

According to Krashen (1982: 21) "we acquire by "going for meaning" first, and as a

result, we acquire structure!" To make the students understand utterances, the instructor need not simplify sentences or introduce familiar vocabulary to the students. Besides, to make the message meaningful, the instructor should use language a bit beyond the students' language competence, which contains the *i+1*. By this way, the teacher can provide comprehensible input. Krashen's concept of "going for meaning" potentially aligns seamlessly with literature instruction. Literature inherently invites students to explore and decipher meaning, and this process naturally leads to the acquisition of the language's structural elements. In literature classes, instructors can challenge students with meaningful yet slightly advanced language, promoting comprehension and language development while fostering a deep appreciation for literary works.

Krashen (1989) proposes some of the useful ways to aid comprehension and they are mainly language simplification, using more common vocabulary, and providing background information such as visual aids. With the help of less complex sentences or words, the learner gets the chance to understand the messages and internalize them. According to White (1987: 96) the idea of simplifying input is a kind of manipulation as it can result in an unexpected situation, leaving out the important messages. She further states that "many forms of simplified input would result in i-1, rather than i+1!" I would agree that this might occur, and thus great care needs to be taken when using simplified input. The message needs to be given without leaving out the important aspects and in relation to this the teachers should be very careful.

The use of visual aids such as gestures, mimics, body movements, and pictures can also be very beneficial to make the utterances comprehensible. Krashen and Terrell (1983: 55) state that "pictures and other visuals supply for the adult what the "here and now" does for the child". Visuals give the learner the background information to help comprehend the message. Also, the formal environment such as the classroom can also be a useful aspect in providing a much more comprehensible input especially for beginners of language acquisition and learning. Krashen and Terrell (1983) observed that, the input from the informal environment could be very difficult to understand for the beginners and hinder their language acquisition. In the second language classroom with the duration of 40 to 60 minutes a useful amount of comprehensible input can be provided for the learners. After receiving enough input, the learners can begin to practice their language and hopefully acquire some new vocabulary.

Optimal Input for Acquisition

The key aspect of input is that it is comprehensible. When the instructor is telling a story, it must be meaningful and understandable for the students, otherwise it would be nothing more than just noise. With the help of background information and simplified input, the instructor can enable the learners to comprehend and acquire the target language. As Krashen (1982: 65) concludes, "if we [teachers] focus on comprehension and communication, we will meet the syntactic requirements for optimal input". The essential focus is to enrich communication via the most natural way akin to a child acquiring the first language. When the learners are enthusiastic and interested in the language, they seem to forget they are in a class and acquire the language subconsciously (Krashen, 1982). Capturing every single learner's attention may seem to be difficult since they all have different personalities and interests; however, this can be accomplished throughout the language learning. Attention can be kept over students' interests and goals.

As the answer to second language acquisition is based on the natural way of acquiring language, the language lessons do not require a traditional lesson plan. According to Krashen (1982: 68-69) when there is a sequenced grammar lesson, some problems might occur keeping in mind that all the students may not be at the same level of language competence and there can also be some individual differences among the students. As a result, he concludes that "[u]nsequenced but natural input, it is hypothesized, will contain a rich variety of structure-if it is comprehensible, there will be i+1 for everyone as long as there is enough input". The role of natural and comprehensible input is once again emphasized which tends to be like the daily language that first language acquirers receive. When one acquires his first language, there would be almost no need for a planned language lesson from his parents or caretakers. In the same way, second language acquisition can be accomplished via adequate natural input.

The Role of Reading for Comprehensible Input

Literature provides a unique avenue for language learners. It lets readers immerse themselves in a world where language is woven into narratives, emotions, and ideas. This narrative structure offers a form of comprehensible input, where readers are exposed to language in a context that is meaningful and relevant to the characters' experiences. Just as language learners seek engaging and comprehensible language input, readers benefit

from the language they encounter within the narrative. Comprehensible input serves as a cornerstone in language acquisition, and literature plays a pivotal role in providing material for this vital element. Nuttall (1982, cited in Renandya, 2007: 136) underscores the power of literature, stating, "The best way to improve one's knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it." Indeed, extensive reading is a potent tool in the process of acquiring a second or foreign language. It serves as a reservoir of vocabulary and a source of comprehensible input, nurturing speech and fluency. Drawing parallels with the early stages of first language acquisition, where children go through a 'silent period,' second language learners experience a similar trajectory. As learners engage with comprehensible input while acquiring the target language, their competence grows, leading to the production of utterances.

Nuttall (1982 cited in Renandya, 2007: 136) indicates that, "The best way to improve one's knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it." Reading can be a very powerful tool in the process of acquiring a second or foreign language. It will provide the necessary vocabulary and help accumulate the comprehensible input to develop speech and fluency. For Krashen, children when acquiring their first language, go through a stage called 'silent period' in which they built up their language competence without much speech. Day by day, when they receive enough comprehensible input throughout the silent period, they begin to speak in normal conversations. Similarly, second language acquirers experience the same situation. As they start to learn the target language and receive comprehensible input, they start to become competent and produce utterances. Gregg (1984) claims that, there is no reason to wait for making utterances during the early days of second language learning just because it emerges over time. However, one can imagine how difficult that can be as it would make the learner scared and anxious to speak in a language that he has just started learning. Krashen (1982: 76) points out that "language lessons inspire fear even among professional language teachers, and one of the reasons for this is our insistence on early speaking..." Reading opens the doors to comprehensible input and motivates learning the target language. Importantly, to sustain reading, students should be directed towards the books and subjects they are interested in.

With the help of pleasure reading, the learners will become familiar with the vocabulary

and start acquiring the language subconsciously. The more learners read the more they "develop positive attitudes and become motivated to read in the second language." (Day and Bamford, 1998: 38) Krashen (1993: 3) also mentions pleasure reading as free voluntary reading (FVR) and summarizes that, "FVR means reading because you want to". Also, Krashen (1993) exemplifies the importance of reading with the cases of one of the prominent authors Richard Wright who relates his language competence to reading novels and further writes about Malcolm X and his reading journey in prison.

In a similar vein, Ben Lovatt, the unwanted child, the prisoner in the family in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988) can be an ideal example to reveal the connection between language acquisition and the world of literature. Although the novel does not explicitly connect to the process of learning a language, it offers valuable insights into how characters within a narrative grapple with language, creating a resonance with the Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The sense of alienation that dominates the entire work can be linked to conditions of learners in their early stages of language learning. Ben's non-normative behaviours and the way he can communicates makes him different from his siblings, and his perceived "abnormalcy" leads to his isolation from the family. The feeling of being an outsider can find parallels with the experience of language learners as they try to learn a foreign language, often feeling alienated and disconnected from the linguistic community.

Teaching Implications

In Türkiye, the Grammar-Translation method is popular among the state schools in second language teaching. In second language classes, the emphasis is mostly on language form and structure rather than meaning and communication. After several years of taking English classes, most of the students still cannot go further than uttering basic phrases during a conversation. Significantly, the way to a proper language acquisition is by means of understanding the overall messages, the key problem here is that the learners mostly focus on the grammar of the text without giving much attention to its meaning. Students generally memorize the vocabulary and language forms to pass the class exams. Unfortunately, I have experienced this situation with many of my students. Krashen generally stresses the importance of understanding the input without worrying about its grammar. As a result, the aim of the teachers should be to provide the learners with the

materials that are comprehensible and interesting for them to subconsciously acquire. By this way, the grammar of the target language would also be acquired and after receiving enough comprehensible input, the learners would be able to start speaking in the target language.

In teaching English, the teachers have a planned class syllabus, and they are obliged to teach their classes accordingly. As the exams are generally grammar based, the teachers tend to give more attention to the subjects that are being evaluated. Nevertheless, every attention should still be given to help students gain comprehensible input via simplified input, gestures, pictures or other means. Pleasure reading or as Krashen terms it free voluntary reading can be introduced to the students to get them interested and motivated towards learning and acquiring the target language. Hafiz and Tudor (1989) investigated the effects of extensive reading for pleasure in the UK with the Pakistani origin students and found out that pleasure reading had substantial improvement in the students' linguistic proficiency. Consequently, providing comprehensible input is essential for the development of students' language acquisition, speech and fluency in the target language.

Conclusion

Literature in language acquisition can be employed as a transformative agent. It shifts the focus from rote memorization and grammar drills to a world where language serves as a vehicle for rich and meaningful communication. By prioritizing meaning contributions, literature provides students with a dynamic and engaging pathway toward language acquisition, equipping them not only with linguistic skills but also a profound appreciation for the power of language. Literary classes stand as a beacon of opportunity for the development of language proficiency. In stark contrast to rigid grammar-focused methodologies, literature introduces students to a world of language rich in narrative, emotions, and ideas. This study has concluded that the crucial role of literary classes in language acquisition are twofold. Firstly, they nurture the art of understanding messages rather than simply dissecting structures. This focus on meaning over form aligns with Krashen's insights, emphasizing that comprehensible input is the key to language acquisition. Literary texts inherently invite students to delve into narratives, characters, and themes, prompting them to engage with language as a vehicle for conveying and interpreting messages. Secondly, literature inspires engagement, unleashing the potential

of language as a tool for expression and analysis. Students in literary classes are encouraged to explore not only vocabulary and grammar but also the very nature of language and its cultural connotations. Reading and discussing literature sparks their critical thinking, while simultaneously deepening their language skills. The study has offered an insight into the synergy between literature and language acquisition advocated by Krashen's theories. Awareness into the symbiotic relationship between SLA and literature can motivate students to explore topics and books that captivate their interest, an approach that enhances comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and overall language fluency.

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