

Comprehensible Input and Output

by Judie Haynes

How do newcomers learn English? Can they soak up language by sitting in the mainstream classroom? Learn how Comprehensible Input and Output are important to the acquisition of a second language.

Comprehensible Input

Language is not "soaked up." The learner must understand the message that is conveyed. *Comprehensible input* is a hypothesis first proposed by Stephen Krashen. (Krashen, 1981) He purports that ELLs acquire language by hearing and understanding messages that are slightly above their current English language level. (Comprehensible Input +1)

An English language learner may understand the message "Put the paper in your desk." By slightly changing the message to "Put the paper in the garbage." the speaker scaffolds new information that increases the learner's language comprehension. In order to do this, the teacher must provide new material that builds off the learner's prior knowledge.

When newcomers are assigned to a mainstream classroom and spend most of their day in this environment it is especially critical for them to receive comprehensible input from their teachers and classmates. If that teacher lectures in the front of a classroom, the English language learner will not be receiving this input. Imagine that you and your family were sent to Japan for a year. Would you be able to learn Japanese by simply sitting in a Japanese classroom? You wouldn't unless the teacher made an effort to make the Japanese you were hearing comprehensible.

Comprehensible Output

According to research, learners need opportunities to practice language at their level of English language competency. This practice with English-speaking peers is called *Comprehensible Output*. Many researchers feel that comprehensible output is nearly as important as input. Cooperative learning groups are one way for new learners of English to receive plenty of understandable input and output. Here are some reasons why.

- A small group setting allows for more comprehensible input because the teacher or classmates modify or adapt the message to the listener's needs.
- Speakers can more easily check on the understanding of the listener.
- There is more opportunity for oral practice and for repetition of content information as peers help new learners of English negotiate meaning.
- Student talk in this small group is centered on what is actually happening at the moment as the task is completed.
- Feedback and correction are non-judgmental and immediate.