



Input Revisited: a Case Study on the Importance of Enhanced Input and Output on the Acquisition of L2 French Tenses

Rabia Redouane¹

Department of World Languages and Literatures, New Jersey, USA¹

Abstract

This study is an attempt to investigate whether both enhanced input and learner output facilitate noticing and learning of the two French past tenses (passé composé and imparfait). Specifically, it aims at demonstrating whether L2 French learners who are given a story with enhanced French past forms and an opportunity to work in pairs to reconstruct the story will exhibit more learning of the two forms, reflect on their linguistic gap and problems, and express themselves (output) than learners without the benefit of such opportunities. An intact class of 18 French intermediate level students participated in this study. Subjects were randomly assigned to two groups: 9 students to the control group (non-enhanced story and no output) and 9 to the experimental (enhanced story and output). Data were collected through a pre-test and post-test that consist of fill-in blank grammar test, and reconstruction of a version of the story using the same targeted past verbs. The findings of the study revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the acquisition of past tenses and were able to reconstruct the story using most targeted verbs in the two past tenses. The findings provide empirical evidence that supports the beneficial effects of both enhanced input and output for learning. Pedagogical implications of the study and recommendations for further research will be offered.

Keywords: *Enhanced input, Output hypothesis, Attention and noticing, L2 production, Story reconstruction.*

1. Theoretical Evidence

According to Krashen (1985), comprehensible input (CI) “is the true and only causative variable in second language acquisition” [40]. But, recent research in second language acquisition (SLA) advances that comprehensible input (CI) is not a sufficient condition for learning. Learners must not only be put in a position of receiving CI, but also being exposed to a modified input that help them focus their attention to the language, raise their awareness, and notice their language gap. This crucial role of attention in language learning pushes for the need of instructional modifications that focus on form and on learners’ identification of the difference between their interlanguage and the target language. Input enhancement defined by Leow (1997) “as attempts to draw L2 learners’ attention to targeted forms in the input by highlighting or making salient these forms through the use of typographic manipulation and typographic cues” [p.167] is argued to be important because not only it makes the input more comprehensible to L2 learners, and most importantly it enables the learners to attend to forms that may not be part of their developing grammars.

Even though comprehensible and modified input offers linguistic aspects that are essential for learning, it only contribute to learners’ comprehension and not to their development of language form and usage. To complement this learning process, Swain (1985) proposes “output hypothesis” advancing that producing language can improve fluency and promote accuracy. Output in learning lies in the learners’ active utilization of their cognitive abilities and presenting them with opportunities to process and use the language. In addition, producing the target language serve as “the trigger that forces the learners to pay attention to the means of expression needed in order to successfully convey his or her own intended meaning” [249] and that learners may notice gaps in their knowledge in an effort to produce language, pushing them solve their linguistic deficiency.

A review of literature on input enhancement reflects a considerable body of studies devoted the effects of input enhancement on learners’ comprehension and acquisition of different L2 grammatical structures, but these studies bare controversial findings. On the one hand, some (e.g., Shook, 1994; Jourdenais, Ota,



Stuffer, Boyson, & Doughty, 1995; Redouane, 2004) found input enhancement effective for learners' intake and production of grammatical structures, other studies, on the other hand, found no effect of input enhancement on the acquisition of grammatical forms (e.g., Leow, 1993, 1995; Shook, 1990; Izumi, 2002; Wong, 2003). Also, output hypothesis and the significance of pushed output were examined quite extensively. Most studies have focused on the roles and different functions of output and they all supported Swain's claim about the importance of pushed output and production on the acquisition of grammatical forms. However, production of output may not be considered the only factor in acquiring the language and its aspects. There are other factors that may play a role in the development of learners' interlanguage and the acquisition of the language and grammatical structures such as types of tasks and activities used for learners' output, the amount of time available for the output production, among other factors. The present study is an attempt to extend this line of research by looking at the two factors (enhanced input and output using a communicative-based task).

2. Study

The study investigates the role of both enhanced input and learner output on the noticing and acquisition of the French tenses (*passé composé* and *imparfait*) and in producing an oral story using both targeted grammatical structures. Specifically, it aims at demonstrating if L2 French learners who are given a story with enhanced French forms '*passé composé*' and '*imparfait*', and an opportunity to work in pairs will exhibit more learning of the two forms, reflect on their linguistic gap and problem, raise their awareness, and express themselves (output) in a communicative activity of restructuring orally the same story than learners without the benefit of such opportunities.

2.1 Materials and Procedures

An intact class of 18 university students enrolled in L2 French Intermediate class took part in this study. These students were at the same proficiency level of French. Most of them took the two Beginning French levels I & II at the university, those who did not were placed in this level after taking the placement test. Subjects were randomly assigned to two conditions and equally divided into two groups: An experimental group with 9 students exposed to an enhanced input and worked in pairs in reconstructing a story in the past, and a control group with 9 students exposed to non-enhanced input and constructed the story individually. The specific questions that guided this research are the following:

- Will learners exposed to both enhanced input and output recognize and recall more forms of the two past tenses than learners exposed to non-enhanced input and no output?
- Does providing students with the opportunity to work in pairs and produce orally the language help them notice and reflect on their linguistic gaps?

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected by means of two instruments: a fill-in blank test, and a treatment task (reconstruction of a story). Before taking part in the study, students were exposed to teaching sessions which consist of two class meetings. Students were introduced to the two French past tenses (*passé composé* and *imparfait*) and were taught the meaning of both tenses, their forms and past participles of regular verbs in the *passé composé* and some irregular past participles. All was emphasized and practiced through guided exercises. To measure participants' recognition of the targeted past tenses in the input provided, a fill-in blank pre-test which consists of 20 sentences with verbs between brackets with the right tense was performed before the experiment. On the next day, students were given a story in the past from the textbook *En-Avant* that is used for this level. The story is about Madeleine's winter vacation in a chalet in Switzerland to read with most verbs taught. For the experimental group, the verbs in either *passé composé* and *imparfait* were made salient by bolding them and providing a marginal gloss that identifies the tense. After reading and explaining the story to both groups, students were asked to reconstruct the story. Students in the experimental group were asked to work in pairs to reconstruct the story using most verbs that they learned in the story. 8 students were put in pairs which make 4 groups of two students each. The one student left was teamed up with one student from the control group leaving the original control with 8 students instead of 9. Each group in the experimental group was told to speak French to each other and their interaction was recorded, transcribed, and coded in order to identify and classify the critical language-related episodes. For the control group, each student worked individually to



reconstruct the story in his or her own. A week after the construction session, the post-test for the fill-in blank was administered to all participants. The purpose of the post-test was to compare how well students would perform before and after the treatment task. Questions in the posttest were identical to those found in the pretest.

The responses of both groups for the pre-test and post-test fill-in blank were compared quantitatively. Due to the limited length of the paper, quantitative results comparing the two groups will be briefly discussed and some examples of critical language-related episodes from the experimental group will be provided.

3. Results and Discussions

Table 1 displays the mean scores and standard deviations for each group on the pre-test and the post-test fill-in blank. Findings reveal that the means of the enhanced input are higher than those of the non-enhanced input. Participants in the experimental group did better in the post-test than the control group and made significantly greater gains in the post-test than the learner in the control group. The low score of the control group strongly suggests that just having comprehensible input provided only by formal teaching during the two class meetings is not enough. Providing students with input enhancement and in this case verbs in both tenses in bold and with their gloss in the margin identifying the tense in the reading story made them notice the verbs and their forms and helped them recall them and outperform in the test. **Table 1** displays the scores of each group.

Group	Pre-test		Post-test
Enhanced input	Mean	6.62	9.12
	Standard Deviation	1.30	0.99
Unenhanced input	Mean	5.77	6.66
	Standard Deviation	1.64	1.36

Table 1: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Each Group on Pre-test and Post-test Fill-in blank

The result of the Anova in **Table 2** performed on the scores on the pre-test and post-test fill-in blank revealed that the main effect for the input enhancement was significant ($F[1,17]=1.36$, $p=.026$). Subjects in the enhanced group showed an overall improvement in performance on the post-test when compared to their performance in the pre-test (6.62 vs.9.12)

Source of variation	df	Squares	Sum of Square	Mean	F	P
Pre-test	1		3.040	3.040	1.36	.026*
Post-test	1		25.595	25.595	9.39	.007*
Error			15	33.47	2.22	

Table 2: Anova Results on Pre-test and Post-test Fill-in blank

Based on these quantitative results, the answer to the first research question that asked whether learners exposed to enhanced input would recall more verbs in the right forms (passé composé or imparfait) contained in the written story than learners exposed to non-enhanced input appears to be affirmative. Learners exposed to enhanced input seem to recognize and recall more verbs compared to learners that were not exposed to the non-enhanced input. Highlighting the verbs in the passé composé and imparfait in the story through the use of bolding and explanatory note for each form did appear to be effective in focusing learners' attention to these targeted forms and to comprehend their use. Findings of this study corroborate findings reported in Shook's (1994), Jourdenais et al.', and Redouane (2004, 2005) that input enhancement promotes attention and recall of the targeted L2 forms in the input.

For the qualitative analysis, only the data from the experimental group were transcribed and coded, and the critical language-related episodes (CLREs) were identified and classified. According to Kowal & Swain, a critical language-related episode is "an episode in which language was the focus of the



discussion” (p. 9). For this data, the focus of discussion and negotiation between pairs was mainly grammar. There were also episodes of vocabulary, meaning and sentence structure. **Table 3** shows the different grammatical aspects that constituted the problem and were the subject of discussion and negotiation.

Grammatical Aspects	Total = 45
Adjectives	5
Articles	8
Gender	5
Preposition	2
Plural	5
Tenses (passe compose or imparfait)	12
Verb agreement	8

Table 3: Grammatical aspects Episodes during Pair Reconstruction Task

Below are examples of episodes from different pairs while attempting to reconstruct the story, they confronted problems, became aware of them, reflected on them, and managed to resolve them and try to resolve them through negotiation.

S1: Em we ca we can start comme par exemple l'année dernière je parti ...

S2 : Oh ok l'année dernière je parti...ah partait

S1: non parti

S2: passe compose or imperfect

S1: C'est parti passe compose

S2: sure missing quelque chose

S1: (writing) Oh oui a est parti ...eum not sure

S2: Oh I see est parti

S3: sa famille a loue une ch cha..

S4: what a loue what

S3: a place in the mountains pour ski

S4: Oh I see a loue une maison ..Yah maison

S3: No not maison .. je ne sais pas le mot

S5: Quand mes parents préparent le repas, je mettre table

S6: Pourquoi préparent ce n'est pas passé

S5: Oui oui préparaient non passé composé ont préparé le repas, je mettre le la table

S6: Quand mes parents préparaient c'est imparfait mais mettre needs to be conjugated

S5: Yah oui j'ai mé

S6: mettre au passé compose mé ...non é is for regular verb



4. Pedagogical Implication and Suggestion for Future Research

This study has provided empirical evidence that supports the validity and efficacy of exposing L2 learners to enhanced input to facilitate their comprehension and recall of both French past tenses that are difficult to master. It has also offered further insight to the role of “output” in noticing a linguistic problem and in modifying the output. In selecting written or oral stories, teachers should take into consideration the limited cognitive capacity of learners in the L2. They should also choose contextualizing texts that present the grammatical structures in a specific context. While findings of this present study seem to suggest that input enhancement and output have some positive impact on L2 learners’ noticing the target grammatical forms, they cannot be generalized and need to be taken with some caution due to some limitations. Thus, more data is needed to test the validity of the findings and their generalization. A larger sample involving students from different classes of the same level or different level is needed in order to attain a considerable sample of subjects. Also, exploring different grammatical structures or vocabulary to find out whether input enhancement of different French language aspects would lead to the same outcomes. In addition, further research is needed to gather more data via other data collection instruments and methods such as spontaneous speech and oral elicitation techniques, in order to assess the different data collection methods on learners’ responses, to find out what learners do and do not know about French past tenses.

5. Conclusion

This study which reports the effectiveness of both input enhancement and learner’s output on noticing, recognizing, and practicing French past tenses contributes to the field of research of input enhancement and learners’ output. It also addresses the importance of enhanced input and learners’ interaction and negotiation for processing, retaining and recalling targeted linguistic forms, and for producing them in a context. More importantly, it provides L2 French teachers with useful insights into the teaching of complex grammatical structures through enhanced materials and learners’ output.

References

- [1] Jourdenais, R., Ota, M., Stauffer, S., Boyson, B., & Doughty, C. (1995). Does textual enhancement promote noticing? A think aloud protocol analysis. In R. Schmidt (Ed.), *Attention and awareness in foreign language learning* (Tech.Rep.No.9, pp.183-216). Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- [2] Izumi, S. (2003). Comprehension and production processes in second language learning: In search of the psycholinguistic rationale of the Output Hypothesis. *Applied Linguistics* 24.2, 168-196.
- [3] Krashen, S.D. (1985). *The Input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. New York: Longman.
- [4] Leow, R. (1995). “The effects of input enhancement and texts length on adult L2 readers’ comprehension and intake in second language acquisition”. *Applied Language Learning* 8(2), 152-182.
- [5] Leow, R. (1993). “To simplify or not to simplify : A look at intake”. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 15, 333-355.
- [6] Redouane, R. (2004). Input enhancement: A way of promoting L2 learner’s comprehension and noticing linguistic forms. In R. Di Donato & Nancy A. Humbach (Eds.), *Making Connections. From the Classroom to the World Beyond* (pp.45-56). Report of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.
- [7] Shook, D. (1990). *The Processing of grammatical structures via written input*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- [8] Shook, D. (1994). FL/L2 reading, grammatical information, and the input-t-intake phenomenon. *Applied Language Learning*, 5, 57-93.
- [9] Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles for comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S.Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp.235-253). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- [10] Wong, W. (2003). “Textual enhancement and simplified input: Effects on L2 comprehension and acquisition of non-meaningful grammatical form”. *Applied Language Learning*, 13, 17-45.