Input floods revisited. A usage-based approach to incidental second language learning in the classroom

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Constructionist approaches to language acquisition assume that „our knowledge of language is ‘constructed’ on the basis of the input“ (Goldberg, 2009: 93-94). Providing learners with good, rich input is therefore a major task in language pedagogy. Exposing second language learners to natural input is often not sufficient to trigger acquisition, because many constructions are rare, complex or lack perceptual salience (Ellis, 2008), because first language processing routines are deeply entrenched and learned attention may obscure second language cues and construals (Ellis & Sagarra, 2010). In so-called input floods, the input is therefore enriched with many task-essential exemplars of a selected target construction. The availability and visibility of this construction are by this means increased. Learners are therefore more likely to process a critical number of exemplars, which in turn should increase their chances for incidental learning (Wong, 2005). However, the evidence regarding incidental learning from input floods is inconclusive (e.g., Hernández, 2011; De Jong, 2005; Handwerker & Madlener, 2009).

This indicates that mere input flooding is not the whole story, as even for frequently experienced constructions the input may fail to become intake. Now, this is actually expected from a usage-based perspective. Increasing the overall token frequencies for the target construction is certainly crucial, but only a first step into input optimization. As language learning is „the piecemeal learning of many thousands of constructions and the frequency-biased abstraction of regularities within them” (Ellis, 2002: 143), frequency distributions in input floods must be taken into account, balancing variation, repetition and the availability of a constructional prototype in the texts (Bybee, 2008; Ellis, 2009), according at least to target complexity and learners’ prior target knowledge.

As a contribution to resolving the question of what kinds of frequency distributions optimally trigger incidental learning, two-week classroom training studies were run: 96 adult learners of German as a second language were exposed to input floods of varying type frequencies and type-token ratios in exclusively meaning-focused listening comprehension training. The exemplary target of instruction was the communicatively useful but notoriously difficult sein + present participle construction, e.g. Der Film war total spannend ‘The movie was really thrilling’. The study’s main results confirm that input floods are not beneficial per se, but that specific types of structured input floods enhance incidental construction learning. By trend, there is an advantage of exposure to skewed input, where one constructional type accounts for the majority of the tokens (Ellis, 2009), both for pattern detection and productive pattern extension. Skewing effects in the classroom still differ from those suggested by artificial grammar learning studies (Casenhiser & Goldberg, 2005; Boyd, Gottschalk & Goldberg, 2009). In the classroom, the strongly entrenched prototype does not necessarily provide an anchor for establishing the new construction in the learners’ minds. Beneficial effects of skewed input rather depend both on the overall type frequency and learners’ prior target knowledge. Our findings suggest that a usage-based perspective constitutes a promising complement to existing pedagogical Focus on Form approaches in instructed second language acquisition.
References


