

Comprehensible Input and Output

As language learners enter our classroom they are greeted with tea and snacks and are asked with gestures, *Nts'e dit'ae, ditsiin da*-How are you? Are you hungry? (Wade, 1999). Learners can understand what the teacher is saying through the gestures of offering food and drinks. Throughout the class, teacher and fluent speaker will model asking and answering in the language. Lessons will focus on the meaning of the words and phrases when demonstrating the beading process by creating comprehensible input through the action of showing items and saying words. Learners must be able to demonstrate that they understand what is being said by answering and communicating in the language or by showing what is being asked or communicated.

Krashen (1982) argues that acquiring a language can be achieved by using only Comprehensible Input. Fluency can be learned over time, with gestures, cues and pictures and other methods (p. 22). Comprehensible Input is asking and questioning in the target language, using gestures or other means to stay in the target language. The level of language that is used with learners is just a level higher than their knowledge. Learners will build on that knowledge with new vocabulary to achieve a higher level of proficiency.

Learners are encouraged to verbally ask questions, using output, if they feel comfortable, and fill the gaps of new language. Teachers explain that they do not need to say words correctly at first, but that it will come with time and practice.

It is important that input is understandable, but it cannot be the only way to learn meaningful language. Comprehensible output must be produced; learners must produce language that is meaningful and understandable to them and then use the language in context for real communication to occur. According to Swain (1995), "Learners notice a gap between what they

want to say and what they can say, leading them to recognize what they do not know, or know only partially” (p. 126).

This is significant for the learner, because they begin to critically think about how to answer. Once they learn words in context it will help the learner to retain and continue to use and build on the language learned. This encourages critical thinking and problem solving and helps students to analyze the language in ways that make sense to them. Students negotiate meaning by communicating with questions and answers to solve the problem (p. 223). For example, the teacher and fluent speaker ask a question to students, orally in the Ahtna language, *Gaani yidi nt'aeyi*-What is this? (Wade, 1991) Students can visually see the item the teacher is asking about and by using gestures of pointing at a needle and spatially using facial expressions to convey the meaning to students in the target language. Students analyze the comprehensible input of the Ahtna language and begin to make their meaning by applying their previous knowledge. Students feel safe answering, and orally using their comprehensible output of their meaning, they say, "*Gaani lu' tlankaani*"-This is a needle (Maxim, 2013). They can then gesture by picking up the item while they say the word. The teacher and fluent speaker respond to student with a question, allowing the students to think critically and problem solve and think about the language that they will use. The teacher and fluent speaker ask again in the Ahtna language, *Gaani lu' ts'aex da*-Is this a thread? (Maxim, 2011). Students are encouraged to ask new questions and answer these new questions drawing on what they have already learned. Ellis (2009) states that it is important to hear the language, as well as to produce language. It is important to engage students in communication (p. 224). In my lessons, students will answer by saying yes- '*oen*' or stating no-*kole* (Wade, 1999). Either way, students are noticing the meaning of the questions and looking for the correct language to convey the correct answer.