

A Brief Discussion on the Application of the Input Hypothesis Theory in Hierarchical Practical English Teaching in Higher Vocational Colleges

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Abstract: *This paper explores the importance and strategies of applying the Input Hypothesis Theory to teaching materials in hierarchical practical English teaching in higher vocational colleges. By analyzing the core points of the Input Hypothesis Theory and combining with the characteristics of great differences in English foundations among students in higher vocational colleges, it elaborates on how to reasonably select and apply teaching materials in a hierarchical manner based on this theory, so as to improve teaching effectiveness, meet the learning needs of students at different levels, and enhance their comprehensive English application ability.*

Keywords: *Input Hypothesis Theory; Higher Vocational Colleges; Practical English; Hierarchical Teaching*

1. Introduction

The effectiveness of English teaching is reflected through students' learning outcomes. As an English teacher, it is particularly important to first grasp the laws of language learning, gain an in-depth understanding of students' characteristics, and provide targeted guidance and assistance for their learning.

Chen Yanlin^[1] and others have discussed that English language learning is inseparable from language input. Higher vocational college students have few opportunities to go abroad and receive so-called immersive English input in an English-speaking environment. Therefore, they need to learn English through more English teaching activities in domestic schools to reach the same or similar level as international exchange students. Then, how to do it and how to choose language input materials to achieve good results in English teaching for higher vocational college students? Krashen's Input Hypothesis Theory has provided some useful hints for the author.

2. Main Contents of the Input Hypothesis Theory

The Input Hypothesis Theory is one of the components of Krashen's second language acquisition theory in the early 1980s. Krashen believes that foreign language acquisition can only be achieved through understanding information. The hypothesis holds that: 1) The necessary condition for learners to progress from stage i to stage " $i + 1$ " is that they can understand input containing " $i + 1$ ". Here, understanding means that learners focus on the meaning of the input rather than the language form. 2) New language structures can be acquired by understanding language " $i + 1$ " that is slightly higher than the language ability at the current stage. 3) When communication is successful, that is, when input is understood, " $i + 1$ " will automatically enter the current language ability. 4) When acquirers reach a certain language ability through understanding comprehensible input, their speaking ability will naturally emerge, but it cannot be directly taught. He also proposed the ideal input conditions: 1) The input is comprehensible; 2) The input is interesting; 3) The input is not grammatically structured; 4) The input must be sufficient in quantity.

2.1 Language Input Should Follow the " $i + 1$ " Principle

Scholars such as Huang Fang^[2] have discussed that if all language input materials are very easy to understand, it is very bad for language acquirers' learning because it cannot stimulate their learning

interest or enhance their learning motivation. Krashen pointed out that in order for acquirers to move from a lower stage to a higher stage, the language input provided to them must include some language structures of the next stage, that is, new content should be added at each learning stage. So what exactly is Krashen's "i + 1" principle? Krashen uses "i" to represent the acquirer's current level, and "1" represents language materials that are slightly higher than the acquirer's current level. This is the "i + 1" language input principle. Krashen believes that only in this way can acquirers, based on their current level, absorb the language materials they come into contact with through continuous efforts and gradually improve their learning skills.

2.2 Ensure the Effectiveness of Language Input

Krashen believes that second language acquisition relies on a lot of language input information, but this input must be effective. Krashen particularly emphasizes that language acquisition occurs through understanding information. That is to say, if learners focus on the form of the language instead of the meaning of language communication, it becomes formalism, and to a certain extent, language input loses its true purpose. Therefore, Krashen believes that language input must be effective.

2.3 Language Input Should Properly Handle the Relationship Between "Acquisition" and "Learning"

Krashen's "Input Hypothesis" theory points out that people have two independent language learning methods: acquisition and learning. Scholars such as Zhang Meng ^[3] believe that acquisition refers to an unconscious and natural process and is the main way to obtain language; while learning is a conscious and purposeful process. Through learning, one can only obtain relevant language knowledge but not language models. Learning only plays a role in testing and correction in the process of language mastery. Consciously learned language knowledge cannot be applied in real life, and only through acquisition can one truly obtain language for effective communication.

2.4 Principles to Be Followed in Language Input

Krashen pointed out that the "here and now" principle should be followed in the process of language input. The "here and now" principle means that the language information input in language input should be real, and language acquisition can only occur in a real context. Zhang Yun ^[4] pointed out that only in a real language environment can language communication eliminate the interference of the mother tongue, achieve consistency in pronunciation, form, and meaning, and thus reflect effective meaning. This principle can make learners no longer consciously consider the form of the language they are learning, but think more about pronunciation, form, and meaning. They will not spend more time and energy comparing and translating between the two languages, making it easier for them to achieve better learning results.

3. Strategies for Applying the Input Hypothesis Theory to Teaching Materials in Hierarchical Practical English Teaching in Higher Vocational Colleges

3.1 Student Stratification

With the continuous expansion of enrollment in higher education in recent years, the source of students in higher vocational colleges usually has the characteristics of "irregularity and low level". They come from general high schools, vocational high schools, and technical schools across the country. This leads to huge differences in students' cultural course foundations, which is particularly obvious in English.

The implementation of hierarchical teaching first requires arranging an English placement test for students after they enroll in the school. The test results directly determine the levels, mainly to allow teachers to understand the freshmen's mastery of English knowledge and provide guidance for the subsequent implementation of hierarchical teaching. After the test, the responsible teachers from the Academic Affairs Office divide the students into three levels: A, B, and C based on the test results, where Level A is the highest, Level B is intermediate, and Level C is the lowest. After successful classification and class placement, each teacher takes charge of teaching in their assigned level, providing teaching content and teaching objectives to help students position themselves correctly.

Professor Rogers from the West once said that teachers should treat students with enthusiasm and understand them empathetically to establish a relationship of mutual trust as soon as possible, so that the teaching plan can be carried out smoothly and teaching content can be delivered to students more quickly. Of course, the main reason for stratifying students from different majors is that it is convenient to arrange courses and better control some extra activities when students are in the same hierarchical class. However, there is a disadvantage: since students are from different majors, they return to their administrative classes after classes in the hierarchical class, making it difficult for professional teachers of the hierarchical class to manage them.

3.2 Goal Stratification

Establishing teaching goals for each level is a prerequisite for hierarchical teaching. The "Basic Requirements for English Course Teaching in Higher Vocational Education" issued by the Ministry of Education clearly states: "The teaching purpose of English courses in higher vocational education is to enable students to master certain English knowledge and skills and have certain abilities in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating after 560 class hours of teaching, with the goal of cultivating students' practical language application ability and highlighting the practicality of English teaching content."

In view of the actual situation of students, the goals of hierarchical teaching are set at three levels: A, B, and C. That is, different stage goals and comprehensive goals are formulated for students at Levels A, B, and C in the five aspects of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating. The goals in hierarchical teaching should include basic goals, improvement goals, and developmental goals.

For students at Level A, the teaching method is mainly heuristic, supplemented by the discovery method, to cultivate their self-learning ability, and to pursue quality through quantification. At the same time, some reading content should be added for freshmen at Level A. They are not only required to pass the College English Test Band 4 and Band 6 but also encouraged to participate in speaking or writing competitions and strive to win prizes.

For students at Level B, teachers should focus on improvement goals and move towards developmental goals. They are required to meet the requirements of Level 3 in the College English Syllabus and obtain the national PETAB certificate in the first academic year to prepare for passing CET-4 and CET-6 in the next academic year.

Students at Level C have a low starting point and poor foundation. Therefore, teachers should focus on basic goals for them and consider moving towards developmental goals, so that they can have a sense of achievement of "reaching for the apple by jumping". They are only required to pass the PETB exam, and there is no need to force them to take CET-4. However, it should be pointed out that they must participate in the school-organized academic exams. They are encouraged to study hard on English and other cultural knowledge, so that they can have a goal to strive for in their studies. We should try to avoid the stratified test and class placement plan becoming a reform measure that changes in form but not in content, and try to avoid failure and move towards success.

3.3 Stratification of Teaching Materials

3.3.1 Select Teaching Materials Based on Student Levels

For the elementary level, it requires design of teaching activities focusing that focus on consolidating basic language knowledge and simple oral expression. For example, role-playing games, where students role-play according to daily communication scenarios in the teaching materials, imitate the pronunciation and intonation in the dialogues to improve oral expression ability; word spelling competitions; grammar filling games and other activities to help students consolidate vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

(1) Selecting appropriate teaching materials for elementary - level students is a task that demands careful consideration of their unique cognitive abilities, learning styles, and developmental stages. At this level, children are just beginning to build foundational knowledge and skills, so the materials must be tailored to their current level of understanding while also gently challenging them to grow.

(2) First and foremost, the content difficulty of the teaching materials should be in line with the elementary students' existing knowledge reserve. For example, in language learning, vocabulary should be simple and commonly used in their daily lives, such as words related to family, food, and school.

Sentence structures should be basic, like simple declarative sentences ("I like apples.") and short interrogative sentences ("What is this?"). Complex grammar rules and obscure words will only confuse them and dampen their learning enthusiasm. In mathematics, the materials should focus on basic concepts like numbers, simple addition and subtraction, and shapes. Abstract mathematical theories and difficult calculations are not suitable at this stage.

(3) Secondly, the presentation form of the materials is crucial. Elementary students have a short attention span and are attracted by vivid and interesting things. Therefore, teaching materials with colorful pictures, cartoons, and illustrations can effectively capture their attention. For instance, a science textbook for elementary students can use pictures of various animals and plants to introduce different species, making the knowledge more intuitive and easy to understand. Audio and video materials are also great choices. A language learning video with lively animations and catchy songs can make learning more enjoyable and help students remember words and sentences better.

(4) Moreover, the interactivity of the teaching materials should not be ignored. Elementary students learn best through hands-on experience and participation. Materials that include simple activities, games, and experiments can enhance their engagement. For example, a social studies lesson about communities can have a role-playing activity where students act as different people in the community, such as doctors, teachers, and shopkeepers. This not only helps them understand the roles of different people in the community but also develops their communication and cooperation skills. Worksheets with fun exercises like coloring, matching, and simple puzzles can also make learning more interactive and reinforce what they have learned.

In addition, the cultural relevance of the materials is important. Teaching materials that reflect the students' own culture and daily life can make them feel more connected to the content, which in turn increases their interest in learning. For example, a reading material about festivals can include the festivals that the students are familiar with, such as their own national festivals. This allows them to relate the knowledge to their own experiences and makes learning more meaningful.

Furthermore, the gradual progression of the materials is necessary. Elementary-level learning is a process of step-by-step accumulation. The materials should start with simple and easy-to-understand content and gradually increase in difficulty and complexity. This helps students build confidence as they successfully complete each stage of learning and motivates them to move forward. For example, in a reading series, the first books can have short sentences and few new words, and as the students progress, the sentences become longer and more new words are introduced.

Finally, the inclusivity of the materials should be considered. Elementary classrooms often have students with different learning abilities and backgrounds. The materials should be designed to meet the needs of diverse learners, providing different levels of challenges and support. For example, some students may need more visual aids, while others may benefit from additional practice exercises. Inclusive materials ensure that every student has the opportunity to learn and grow.

(5) In conclusion, selecting teaching materials for elementary-level students requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account their cognitive level, learning preferences, and developmental needs. By choosing materials with appropriate content difficulty, engaging presentation forms, interactive elements, cultural relevance, gradual progression, and inclusivity, educators can create a positive learning environment that fosters students' interest in learning and lays a solid foundation for their future education.

3.3.2 Intermediate level: Carry out teaching activities focusing on practical English skill training

For example, workplace English situational simulation activities, where students perform situational simulations according to workplace scenarios in the teaching materials, such as interviews, meetings, and business receptions, to exercise their ability to use English for communication in actual work scenarios; group discussion activities, where students are organized to discuss hot topics in the teaching materials in groups, to cultivate their English thinking ability and teamwork ability.

Intermediate-level learners represent a critical stage in language acquisition: they have mastered basic grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills but lack fluency, precision, and confidence in complex contexts. Selecting appropriate materials for this group requires balancing challenge and accessibility, fostering both accuracy and fluency, and aligning content with their evolving needs—whether for academic, professional, or everyday communication. Below is a detailed exploration of key considerations and strategies for choosing such materials.

(1) Defining Intermediate Proficiency: What to Target

1) Intermediate learners typically demonstrate

A working vocabulary of 2,000–3,000 high-frequency words, but struggle with low-frequency or domain-specific terms.

Ability to form complex sentences (e.g., using relative clauses, conditionals, or passive voice) but with occasional errors in tense consistency or word choice.

Basic conversational fluency in familiar topics (e.g., hobbies, travel) but difficulty with abstract ideas, debates, or nuanced emotions.

Capacity to read and comprehend short texts (e.g., articles, stories) but struggle with dense academic writing or idiomatic language.

2) Materials should therefore focus on

Expanding vocabulary (collocations, phrasal verbs, and topic-specific lexis).

Refining grammar (complex structures, register awareness, and error correction).

Building fluency through extended speaking and writing tasks.

Developing critical thinking (analyzing texts, expressing opinions, and supporting arguments).

(2) Key Criteria for Material Selection

1) Comprehensible Challenge ($i + 1$ Principle)

Materials should be slightly beyond learners' current ability (Krashen's " $i + 1$ " hypothesis) to encourage growth without causing frustration.

Vocabulary: It should include 5–10 new words per 100 words of text and avoid overwhelming learners with obscure terms. Glossaries or context clues (e.g., synonyms, examples) should be provided.

Grammar: Complex structures (e.g., mixed conditionals, reported speech) can be introduced in context, paired with controlled practice before free use.

Example: A news article on environmental issues might use phrases like "carbon footprint" or "sustainable practices"—terms that are relevant, slightly advanced, but inferable from context.

2) Relevance and Engagement

Intermediate learners are motivated by content that reflects their interests, goals, or real-world needs.

Themes: The topics like global trends (social media, climate change), personal development (career planning, relationships), or cultural exchange (festivals, traditions) should be chosen. Meanwhile, overly childish or simplistic subjects (e.g., "daily routines") unless tailored to specific subgroups (e.g., young teens) needs to be avoided.

Authenticity: The real-world materials—newspaper articles, podcasts (e.g., BBC 6 Minute English), YouTube clips, or excerpts from novels can be integrated. Authenticity exposes learners to natural language, including slang, hesitation phrases, and cultural references.

Example: A podcast episode about "urban gardening" combines everyday language with practical vocabulary (compost, mulch) and invites discussion about local food systems.

3) Balance of Skills and Integration

Intermediate materials should move beyond isolated skill practice (e.g., "grammar drills only") to integrated tasks that mirror real communication.

Listening & Speaking: Audio clips (interviews, debates) and discussion prompts (e.g., "Do you agree with the speaker's opinion? Why?") should be paired, which include role-plays or simulations (e.g., negotiating a work contract, resolving a conflict) to practice fluency and pragmatics.

Reading & Writing: The short stories, opinion articles, or blog posts should be used as springboards for writing tasks (e.g., "Write a response to the article" or "Continue the story"). The organizing ideas coherently should also be focus on (e.g., using transition words: however, furthermore).

Example: A lesson on "remote work" could start with reading a study on its pros and cons, followed

by a listening exercise (a podcast interview with a remote worker), then a group debate ("Is remote work better than office work?") and a short essay summarizing their stance.

4) Cultural and Contextual Awareness

Language is intertwined with culture. Intermediate materials should introduce cultural nuances to enhance communicative competence.

Content: It includes texts or media that highlight cultural differences in communication (e.g., formality in Japanese vs. informality in Australian English) or social norms (e.g., gift-giving traditions).

Tasks: It is to design activities that require learners to compare their own culture with the target culture (e.g., "How do people greet each other in your country vs. the U.S.?).

Example: A video clip of a British vs. American workplace meeting can spark discussion about differences in directness, hierarchy, and humor.

5) Flexibility and Adaptability

No single material fits all intermediate learners. Materials should allow customization based on:

Learner Goals: A business English class might prioritize case studies and email writing, while a general English class could focus on travel or social interactions.

Proficiency Sublevels: "Intermediate" spans B1 to B2 on the CEFR scale. B1 learners need more scaffolding (e.g., sentence frames for writing), while B2 learners benefit from open-ended tasks (e.g., "Argue for or against social media regulation").

(3) Sample Materials and Resources

Textbooks: English File (Intermediate), Headway Intermediate, or Oxford English Grammar Course (Intermediate)—all balance grammar, skills, and real-world topics.

Authentic Media: TED-Ed (short educational videos), The Guardian (simplified news for learners), or ESLPod (podcasts with slow, clear speech).

Literature: Short stories by authors like Raymond Carver (simple language with deep themes) or adapted versions of classics (e.g., *Pride and Prejudice* for intermediates).

Digital Tools: Apps like LingQ (for learning vocabulary in context) or iTalki (for interactive speaking practice with native tutors).

(4) Final Tips for Effective Use

Supplement, Don't Replace: It should use textbooks as a foundation but augment with authentic materials to keep lessons dynamic.

Solicit Feedback: It should ask learners what topics interest them (e.g., "Would you prefer to discuss technology or health next week?") to boost engagement.

Focus on Output: It should ensure that materials include ample opportunities for speaking and writing, with constructive feedback on both accuracy and content.

By prioritizing challenge, relevance, and integration, educators can select materials that empower intermediate learners to move beyond basic competence toward confident, nuanced communication.

3.3.3 Advanced level: Organize teaching activities aimed at cultivating comprehensive English application and cross-cultural communication skills

Such as English debate competitions, where controversial topics in international business, cultural exchanges, etc., are selected for students to debate, to exercise their logical thinking ability, language organization ability, and oral expression ability; academic paper writing guidance and practice activities, which guide students to read English literature, learn to write academic papers, and improve their academic English level.

(1) For advanced - level students, selecting teaching materials requires careful consideration of their solid knowledge foundation and strong learning ability. It is necessary to pick materials with in - depth content and rich connotations to meet their desire for further exploration. Classic academic works in related disciplines are excellent choices. These books have stood the test of time, with rigorous logical systems and profound theoretical insights. For example, in the field of literature, the complete works of classic writers can let students appreciate the charm of language and the depth of thought. In science,

authoritative monographs can help them delve into cutting - edge theories and research methods.

(2) Professional journals and research papers are also indispensable. They reflect the latest developments and academic trends in the discipline, enabling students to keep abreast of the forefront of the field. Reading these materials can cultivate their ability to analyze and solve complex problems, as well as their critical thinking.

(3) In addition, materials with cross - disciplinary characteristics are beneficial. Advanced students often have the ability to integrate knowledge from different fields. Selecting such materials can broaden their horizons, stimulate innovative thinking, and help them establish a more comprehensive knowledge structure.

At the same time, the difficulty of the materials should be properly controlled. It should be challenging enough to inspire students' potential, but not so difficult that it frustrates their learning enthusiasm. The language expression should be precise and concise, suitable for the cognitive level of advanced students, so that they can focus on understanding and absorbing the core content.

4. Implementation Case Analysis

4.1 Case Background

A higher vocational college selected two parallel classes for a practical English hierarchical teaching experiment. One class was the experimental class, adopting the hierarchical teaching mode and teaching material application strategies based on the Input Hypothesis Theory; the other was the control class, adopting the traditional unified teaching mode and the same teaching materials. The experimental period was one academic year.

4.2 Implementation Process

Stratified Testing and Grouping: Before the experiment, English proficiency tests, including listening, reading, writing, and speaking, were conducted for students in both classes. According to the test results, students in the experimental class were divided into three levels: elementary, intermediate, and advanced, with different levels of teaching materials selected and teaching carried out in accordance with corresponding teaching strategies; the control class was taught uniformly in the traditional way.

Teaching Activities: During the teaching process, teachers of the experimental class designed a variety of teaching activities based on the characteristics of students at different levels and the content of teaching materials. For example, students at the elementary level did a lot of basic vocabulary and grammar exercises, as well as simple oral dialogue exercises; students at the intermediate level carried out workplace English situational simulations and group discussions; students at the advanced level received training in English debates and academic paper writing. The control class was taught regularly according to the chapter order of the teaching materials.

4.3 Experimental Results

At the end of the academic year, a comprehensive English proficiency test was conducted for students in both classes, including final exam results, oral test results, and English application ability competition results. The results showed that the average scores of students in the experimental class were higher than those in the control class in all tests. Especially in oral expression and practical English application ability, students in the experimental class performed more prominently. In addition, through a questionnaire survey, it was found that students in the experimental class had significantly increased interest and confidence in English learning, and were more satisfied with the teaching effect.

5. Conclusion

The Input Hypothesis Theory provides scientific guidance for the application of teaching in hierarchical practical English teaching in higher vocational colleges. By selecting appropriate teaching materials according to student levels, optimizing the input of teaching material content, and designing teaching activities based on teaching materials, we can meet the learning needs of students at different levels, improve teaching effectiveness, and enhance their comprehensive English application ability. In

actual teaching, teachers should continue to explore and practice, flexibly apply the Input Hypothesis Theory according to students' actual situations, and cultivate more application-oriented talents with good English ability for higher vocational colleges.

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