

Input and Acquisition in Second Language Classrooms*

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In the speech of a group of francophone ESL learners, we examined introducer forms used to initiate picture descriptions. We then compared the learners' use of these forms to the corresponding forms in the classroom language the learners were exposed to—textbook language, the students' own classroom language, and their

teachers' language. We also compared the learners' use of introducers to that of native speakers performing the same task. Some of the non-target-like characteristics of the learners' language were found to correspond to characteristics of the input they received.

Second language classrooms, especially those for students receiving little or no informal contact with the language, offer a rare opportunity for studying relationships between input and output in second language development. Whereas the input available in "natural" second language exposure is varied and difficult to describe exhaustively, classroom exposure can be sampled, recorded, described and analyzed with a reasonable degree of adequacy. This makes it possible, at least hypothetically, to compare input (the teacher's language, the textbook and the language used by the students in class) to the developing second language of the students exposed to this input. This comparison has theoretical importance because of its relevance to questions about how learners process the input and how much their developing interlanguage can be explained by characteristics of the input—as suggested, for example, in some foreigner talk studies (see Meisel, 1980, and Long, 1981, for discussion) and studies of frequency of occurrence of certain structures (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 1976).

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The study of classroom language as input to second language acquisition clearly has practical importance too. Knowing what learners do with the input should be helpful in evaluating certain input characteristics which are considered important in L2 teaching.

SUBJECTS AND PROCEDURES

In this report, some aspects of second language development are analyzed in terms of some characteristics of classroom language. The second language learners whose development is investigated are French-speaking pupils (11 to 17 years old) receiving 20 - 60 minutes per day of ESL instruction in Quebec public schools. The *input* data for analysis include extensive recordings of 11 ESL classes taught by six teachers sampled over a period of several months. (See Appendix A for the schedule of classroom recordings.) The language production (*output*) data include oral language samples from approximately 100 students: The language samples were recorded at intervals over a period of at least two years.

The *output* data collection procedure involved tape recorded and transcribed interaction with each student in a game in which he or she had to describe each of seven pictures drawn on 3 x 5 cards and hidden from the interlocutor's view. For each picture described by the student, the interlocutor had four similar pictures (including one identical to the student's) in front of her and had to guess which one the student was describing.

The study includes both longitudinal and cross-sectional components which make it possible to examine both short-term and long-term relationships between input and output throughout the period of ESL instruction from grade 6 to grade 11.¹ Both the learners' use of certain language forms and functions (the output) and such aspects of input as the frequency of occurrence, the intensity of practice, and the reintroduction (or lack of it) of previously presented elements in the syllabus are examined. In addition, comparison data were obtained from 90 native speakers of English in the same age groups as the L2 subjects. Table 1 shows the schedule of learner language data collection and indicates the extent of overlap among the groups.

A number of analyses of the learners' speech have been reported previously (see Lightbown, 1983a, 1983b; Lightbown & Malcolm, 1980; Spada, 1979; Lightbown & Spada, 1978). In this study the focus is on relating the target language input available to the students in their ESL classes to another aspect of their developing language: a group of "introducers," linguistic forms which learners used to introduce their picture descriptions. We will report first on the learners' performance and then on characteristics of the input which students were exposed to.

Table 1
School Grade and Month of Administration
of the Picture Card Game

	School Grade	Month
Group I (N = 36)	6	April/May
	7	December
	7	April/May
Group II (N = 36)	8	April/May
	9	April/May
	10	October
Group III (N = 27)	10	April/May
	11	April/May

Note. Comparison data from anglophones were collected one time only from students in grades 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11.

The analysis of introducers was prompted by our observation that the French-speaking subjects often used an introducer form which sounded a little strange—but not exactly incorrect—to the research group. The form was what we came to call *have-as-introducer*—for example, “You have a house and two trees.” Examples of this and of other introducers are shown below:

- there's* There's a table and there's a cake.
- there are* There are four children.
- it's* It's a class.
- I see* I see two boys and two girls.
- have* You have seven people.
- We have a box green and— uh —decoration red.
- Other That's a car and a truck.
- This one is a boy and a girl...

Because we had so much contact with French L1-English L2 interlanguage, we did not trust our linguistic intuitions to judge this form as acceptable or unacceptable. Therefore, we analyzed the data from English L1 speakers in the same age range as our subjects, recording the language they produced in performing the same task—the picture card game.

RESULTS

When we compared the introducer forms used by native speakers of English with those used by the ESL learners, we found rather strong evidence to suggest that, at least in this task, native speakers have one set of forms which they prefer over all others and, beyond that, a relatively small and narrowly distributed set of alternatives. As Table 2 shows, both elementary (grade 6) and secondary (grades 8-11) native speakers use *there's* as the favoured form. There was very little difference between the two native speaker groups. One thing is quite clear: *have* was not commonly used in introducer formulas by native speakers. The picture was quite different for the ESL learners: (1) no ESL groups showed a preference for *there's* equal to that of the native speakers; (2) the groups were different from each other; (3) for two of the groups (grades 6-7-7 and grades 8-9-10), there were some changes over time within groups.

Characteristics of the Input

INTERVIEWERS' SPEECH

A first attempt to explain the differences within and across L2 groups was the hypothesis that members of the research team who administered the task had somehow influenced the forms used by the learners. Analysis of the transcripts did not support this. There were very few cases of *have* in interviewers' questions, and responses with *have* were overwhelmingly spontaneous, that is, not in response to a question with *have*. One case where the question did seem to influence the answer was that of one interviewer who asked "What do you see in your picture?" and received "I see..." as an answer more frequently than others. Most interviewers used the formula "Tell me about your picture" or simply waited silently for the student to begin his or her description.

CLASSROOM LANGUAGE: GROUP I

In contrast to the analysis of the interviewers' speech, analysis of classroom language proved very revealing in explaining the use of *have* as an introducer.

First, the absence of *have* in the Group I students' speech in grade 6 is easily explained. They did not know the verb: It had never been formally presented in their textbook (*Look, Listen and Learn*, Alexander, 1972-3), and although the teacher used the verb occasionally when she spoke spontaneously, it was very infrequent overall because her "spontaneous speech" was quite limited. She followed the text very closely and her use of English was almost always limited to the lesson being taught. It is virtually certain that she never formally taught the verb *have*, as the text did not

Table 2

Introducer Forms Used in Picture Card Game
% All Introducers Represented by Each Form

	Native Speakers		ESL Learners									
	Elementary		Group I			Group II			Group III			
		Secondary		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Grade	6	8-11	6	7	7	8	9	10	11			
	N=37	N=53	N=36			N=36			N=27			
Introducer	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<i>There's/there are</i>	73	73	35	44	44	18	24	30	26	27		
<i>Have</i>	1	1	2	17	21	35	30	29	25	33		
<i>It's</i>	13	14	34	30	22	16	34	32	32	34		
<i>I see</i>	7	1.5	11	0	3	24*	10	8	10*	6		
Other	6	10	17	9	9	6	2	1	6	2		
Total No. of occurrences	457	851	239	280	322	303	410	292	259	342		
Avg. No. per Speaker	12	16	7	8	9	8	11	11	10	13		

* Influenced by interviewer's question "What do you see in your picture?" in about half the cases.

require it, and it certainly was not practiced and drilled for weeks and weeks as were certain other structures—including the type “There’s a book on the table,” “There are some candies in the jar.”²

The increased frequency of *have* introducers in subsequent speech samples from these students in grade 7 was accompanied by other inappropriate extensions of *have*. For example, having correctly used forms such as “I’m 11 years old” in grade 6, they began in grade 7 to use forms such as “My sister has 14.”

CLASSROOM LANGUAGE: GROUPS II & III: TEXTBOOKS

When we analyzed the presentation of *have* in the textbook series used by the secondary students (*Lado*, 1970), not surprisingly, we found no evidence of *have* as an introducer. We did find a highly structured presentation of the various forms and functions of *have*—with little or no overlap of functions in a given lesson or even in a given book! Table 3 summarizes some of these findings for Books I, II, and III of the textbook series. In Book I—used in grade 7—*have* was presented only as a main verb, first appearing in Unit 15 of 20; in Book II, *have* was used as a main verb or in the modal *have to* construction; in Book III, over half the occurrences of *have* were auxiliaries in the newly introduced perfect tenses. In Book IV, *have* was not a point of focussed instruction, thus its use became more natural, integrated into reading material. Clearly there was nothing in the textbook which could have given students evidence for the hypothesis that *have* could be used in English as an introducer.

Table 3
Occurrence of *have* in Students’ ESL Textbook

	Main Verb	Aux.	Modal	Total
Book 1	133	—	—	133
Book 2	93	1	85	179
Book 3	205	312	31	548

STUDENTS’ SPEECH

We examined the students’ use of *have* in the classroom in order to determine whether students used this form as an introducer in their classroom speech, thus providing each other with an incorrect model. Such usage, we hypothesized, could have originated as a transfer form: students, having learned that *have* was equivalent to *avoir* in certain contexts, could have overgeneralized the equivalence to another context,

where their native language uses *avoir*: the introducer *il y a* (literally it has there = there is).³

Thus, we hypothesized, a form which entered the classroom speech as a transfer error could have been reinforced by frequent use on the part of the group as a whole.

We found, however, that because the students' classroom speech was highly constrained, their opportunities for making errors were extremely limited. As shown in Table 4, the verb *have* was quite rare in student speech in the classroom corpus, and where it occurred, it was almost never an introducer.

These findings do not address the question of the source of the form. They simply show that it was not a significant part of the input students provided *each other* in the classroom.

Table 4
Students' Use of *have* in Classroom Data*

Grade	Overall frequency	% Used as Introducer
6	8	0
8	97	11
9	89	6
10	224	3
11	163	0

* Unfortunately, no classroom data are available for Grade 7 (see Lightbown, 1983b).

TEACHERS' SPEECH

The principal source of English language input to the students was their ESL teachers, and it was this speech which we examined next. Three of the teachers (grades 8, 9, and 11) were native speakers of French. The grade 6 teacher was a Rumanian who spoke English better than French. The grade 10 teacher was a native speaker of English.

We first looked at the overall frequency of the verb *have* in the teachers' classroom speech—combining all forms and with all functions. The results are presented in Table 5. The table shows (1) total occurrences; (2) the average frequency of *have* in each hour of classroom instruction; (3) the percentage of uses of *have* which were metalinguistic—defined strictly as cases where *have* was being “talked about” (e.g., “What is the past tense of *have*?”). The grade 8, 9, and 11 teachers—the three native speakers of French—stand out from the others as frequent users of *have*.

We then coded all uses of *have* in terms of a number of form and function categories. In this paper I will discuss only the function categories, which are shown in Table 6.

Table 5
All Uses of *have* by ESL Teachers*

	Total Occurrences	Occurrences Per Hour	% Meta-linguistic
Grade 6 (7½ hours of transcript)	163	21.7	5
Grade 8a (10 hours of transcript)	435	43.5	1
Grade 8b (9 hours of transcript)	637	70.7	2
Grade 9 (4 hours of transcript)	268	67.0	0
Grade 10a (11 hours of transcript)	329	29.9	12
Grade 10b (10 hours of transcript)	284	28.4	2
Grade 11 (6 hours of transcript)	259	43.1	1

* No classroom data are available for Grade 7 (see Lightbown, 1983b).

Table 7 shows the proportional frequency of the codable functions of *have* in the speech of these three teachers. It is immediately obvious that the grade 8 teacher provided very strong evidence to support a possible student interlanguage hypothesis that *you have* or *we have* is an appropriate introducer form in English. Indeed, it may be acceptable in some cases. What is striking is that it represents nearly half of all this teacher's uses of *have*. This was very different from the distribution in the speech of all the other teachers.

We then analyzed these same transcripts to determine the frequency with which the three most frequent introducer forms occurred in the teachers' classroom speech. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 8 in terms of the number of occurrences per hour of classroom speech.

Table 6
Functions of *have* in Classroom Speech

Existential	- where <i>have</i> was used as an introducer "You have a clock on the wall"
Main verb	- all other main verb uses "She has one dollar"
Modal	- have to/has to/had to "I have to study tonight"
Auxiliary	- in the perfect tenses "She has lived here for two years"
Other	- odd and idiomatic usages "Let's have Martine play the storekeeper"
Have as <i>be</i>*	- where " <i>have</i> " is used in place of " <i>be</i> " "I have hungry" "He has 14 years"
Uncodable	- false starts/incomprehensible "I have... I am... I don't..."

* Occurred in teachers' speech only in metalinguistic discussion of this incorrect form.

Table 7
Frequency (Percent) of the Form *have* in Teachers'
Classroom Speech, by Function

Function	Grade						
	6	8a	8b	9	10a	10b	11
Existential	17.0	42.5	42.3	16.4	8.4	11.4	15.9
Main Verb	30.0	29.6	23.4	43.3	28.4	51.8	40.9
Modal	19.0	6.3	10.8	6.7	26.2	14.3	10.7
Auxiliary	13.7	4.1	3.3	18.3	28.4	19.5	31.3
Other	15.7	14.8	.2	15.3	6.3	1.1	1.2
Have is <i>Be</i>	3.9	2.4	1.1	—	2.2	1.8	—
Total Freq. of <i>have</i>	153	413	610	268	320	272	252

Note. Uncodable cases were eliminated before percentages were calculated. The number of uncodable cases ranged from 0 (grade 9) to 27 (grade 8b).

Table 8
 Three Introducer Forms: Frequency
 Per Hour of Classroom Instruction
 in Teachers' Speech

Grade	Introducers		
	<i>there</i>	<i>it*</i>	<i>have</i>
6	19.6	3.3	3
8a	2.6	.2	17
8b	3	0	29
9	12.5	0	11
10a	5.5	0	2
10b	5	0	3
11	7.8	0	7

* Although forms of *it* rarely occurred in the function of introducer, the forms occurred frequently in other functions.

From grade 8 to grade 11, *have* accounted for 29% to 35% of the students' introducer forms in the Picture Card Game (see Table 2). However, as shown in Tables 7 and 8, students in grades 9, 10, 11 rarely heard this form from their teachers or, if they heard it, they also heard *there is* at least as often. Grade 8 students, on the other hand, were receiving input which corresponded more closely to what both they and the older students produced. The influence of the grade 8 teacher is apparent when we recall that the grade 9 subjects are actually the same students as the grade 8 subjects, recorded a year later. Furthermore, many of the grade 10-11 subjects had had the same grade 8 teacher. It seems plausible that the students' initial hypothesis that *have* can be used in introducer construction was based on transfer. However, the confusion of *have* and *be* is widely reported in interlanguage studies—and not only in the interlanguage of L1 speakers of French or related languages. Thus, the initial interlanguage hypothesis may be multiply-determined and not attributable to transfer alone. In the case of these students, it appears that an interlanguage hypothesis combined with the frequency in the input to make *have-as-introducer* a very stable interlanguage form.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The research reported in this paper seems to reflect, at least in part, the existence of a mismatch between what teachers intend to teach and what their students do with the input outside the constraints of classroom exercises. The results of this study suggest that students receiving formal second language instruction in what Krashen (1976, 1981) calls “acquisition-poor” environments do not simply “learn” linguistic elements as they are taught—adding one after another in neat progression. Rather, the students process the input data in ways which are more “acquisition-like” and often not consistent with what the teacher or textbook intends for them to “learn” (see also Felix, 1981). This is not to say that these findings contradict Krashen’s current theory of language acquisition. As Krashen himself has said, his is not a theory of *teaching* but of *learning* and *acquisition*. That is, what happens in a classroom is not necessarily what the teacher thinks is happening—or even, for that matter, what the students think is happening.

Constraining classroom language in such a way that students hear and produce a restricted group of “correct” utterances does not block the process of language acquisition—does not prevent learners/acquirers from generating false hypotheses about the underlying structure of the language. Nor does intensive practice of particular elements prevent elements from dropping out or becoming confused with others once others are introduced—particularly when those first learned elements become infrequent in the input. Students in grade 7 began using *have* as an introducer and in age construction (e.g., I have 14 years) as soon as they learned the verb in other (main verb) contexts.

In any case, it is unrealistic—and probably not even desirable—to expect teachers to control their own language in ways which make available to students only those elements foreseen by the textbook or syllabus writers. Deviations from the intended syllabus may contribute to the development of non-target-like forms in learners’ speech. On the other hand, when teachers go beyond the syllabus, they can provide students with the rich raw material necessary for real language acquisition. Some non-target-like forms, such as the one reported in this paper, would be a small price to pay for richer input and more challenging content in the language classroom.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Subjects began receiving ESL instruction in grade 4 or 5, and had an average of less than two hours of instruction per week in grades 4, 5, and 6, and four hours per week in grades 7-11.

- ² An interesting footnote to this is that the ESL learners, especially the grade 6 students, were considerably more likely to use "there are" with a plural complement (in about 25% of the cases) than were native speakers (about 5%).
- ³ This, of course, depends on the assumption that the students have identified the relationship between *have* and *a* in *il y a*—an empirical question. Other kinds of data are needed to support this explanation, for example, transcripts of French speakers playing the Picture Card Game—in French.

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APPENDIX A
SCHEDULE OF CLASSROOM RECORDINGS

Grade	Total Hours Recorded	Date of Recorded Sessions
6	7½	(1977) October 5, 12, 19, 26; November 2, 9, 16, 23, 30; (1978) February 15; March 1, 22; April 5, 11, 25; May 26
8a	10	(1977) October 4, 13, 27; November 7, 21, 30; (1978) February 16; March 7; April 12; June 6
8b	9	(1977) October 21; November 1, 24; (1978) February 22; March 17; April 12, 25; May 31; June 6
9	4	(1978) October 11, 20; November 1, (1979) April 12
10a	11	(1977) October 12, 26; November 4, 18, 29; December 8; (1978) February 23; March 17, 29; April 13; May 31
10b	10	(1977) October 13, 26; November 4, 18, 29; December 8; (1978) February 23; March 30; April 11; May 31
11	6	(1978) September 22; October 17, 26; November 6; December 1; (1979) April 12

Note: Each class session was 60 minutes long except for the grade 6 classes which met for 30 minutes.

