

Is It Really Worth Advocating?

—Criticism and Teaching Reflection on Roberto Guzman’s Teaching English without Teaching English

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Abstract

This paper critically analyzes Roberto Guzman’s approach to teaching English, as outlined in his TED talk “Teaching English without Teaching English”. While Guzman focuses on inspirational teaching and open-ended discussion, the analysis highlights some shortcomings of his methods from three perspectives: 1) whether the approach aligns with socio-cultural theories, 2) whether it overlooks the importance of input assumptions, and 3) whether it can effectively improve students’ communicative competence. Through this analysis, the paper sheds light on the potential limitations of Guzman’s approach to teaching English and provides insights into how educators can design more effective language teaching methods.

Keywords

Socio-Cultural Theory, Input Hypothesis, Communicative Competence, Language Teaching Methods, Critical Analysis

1. Socio-Cultural Theory and Guzman’s Teaching

1.1. Socio-Cultural Theory and Second Language Acquisition (SCT-SLA)

Research on socio-cultural perspective has become one of the important trends in second language acquisition research, and SCT-SLA results are emerging [1]-[5]. Vygotsky (1978, 1987) developed a socio-cultural theory to address the ontological and epistemological crisis in psychological research under the influence of dualism and reductionism [6] [7]. Vygotsky’s three core concepts of internalisation, mediation and the zone of proximal development (ZPD) are centred on the development of the individual’s higher mental functions.

Internalisation is the mechanism by which an individual’s higher psychological

functions occur and develop and refers to the process by which an individual translates the social platform's behaviours and ways of thinking into the individual's psychological platform in order to regulate his or her own behaviours and ways of thinking during social interaction activities [6]. The social environment and social interaction are key to the development of the individual's higher psychological functions.

Mediation is central to the development of the higher psychological functions of the individual. The distinction between lower and higher human psychological functions is reflected in the relationship between humans and the world: the former is a direct relationship governed by biological laws and caused by the object; the latter is an indirect relationship mediated by socio-cultural factors (social relations, material, linguistic and other tools). Mediators therefore refer to the social relations, artefacts, etc. that structure the link between subject and object. From a functional point of view, mediators can be divided into external material tools and internal psychological tools. For example, a "shovel" can be both a digging tool and a psychological tool to remind of a relevant activity. Whether it is objects, others or the individual himself, all can facilitate or regulate the development of the individual's psychological functions, and it is the process of moving from the regulation of objects and others to the regulation of the individual's self. He argues that the process of learning needs to be mediated between the learner and the teacher, that is, the development of learning is facilitated by external tools and people. This is also in line with the idea of mediation advocated by Guzman's teaching.

ZPD is a dynamic process of development of higher mental functions, and Vygotsky proposes a theory of ZPD in terms of historical development, arguing that the process of learning must be within a range of possibilities. (This point is consistent with the concept mentioned in Roberto Guzman's TED talk). It can be used to distinguish between developing and mature abilities and observe and analyse the dynamics of the maturation of higher mental functions in response to mediators (including material tools, teachers and self-intervention). The SCT-SLA study focuses on the dual properties of bilingualism as a tool and explores the development of bilingualism from a social platform to an individual platform and the relationship between the various factors involved [8].

Lantolf (1996) was also an early proponent of reconstructing the theoretical system of SLA and pointed out that the socio-cultural dimension should be integrated into the complex process of L2 acquisition and development. Lantolf argues that language acquisition is an internalised process that evolves and improves through social interaction. He emphasises the importance of communicative, contextual, reflective and qualitative aspects, and believes that teaching should be a creative and social activity [9]. In the teaching process, teachers should create a variety of contexts and meaningful interactions in order to facilitate students' language internalization [10].

In addition, while the traditional cognitive school of SLA research views language as a transmitter of already-formed ideas, SCT views language as an important tool

to facilitate the development of thinking and as part of the constitution of thinking. SCT-based second language acquisition research is grounded in practice and directly related to the classroom environment, which Vygotsky also sees as a particular socio-cultural setting in which to conduct experimental research.

Lantolf also clearly delineates the distinction between implicit teaching and implicit regulation, these are two important concepts in socio-cultural theory and are also closely related to the teaching philosophy and approach of Roberto Guzman's TED talk "Teaching English without Teaching English". Implicit teaching refers to socio-cultural interactions in which people are not aware that they are learning, but in fact, receive, understand and apply new knowledge or skills unconsciously. Implicit teaching helps students to understand knowledge more deeply and to be more flexible when faced with difficult problems. In Roberto Guzman's TED talk, he also emphasises the purpose of implicit teaching by learning in authentic contexts and by encouraging communication and interaction between students. Implicit teaching is not particularly useful because there are grammatical, discourse, pragmatic and rhetorical complexities in language that require a great deal of exposure to figure out. Despite this, it is sometimes not always possible to fully understand them (e.g. the coronary in English and the "把" clause in Chinese).

Implicit regulation, however, is different in that its main function is to promote competence and to enhance motivation, such as the learner's ability to determine for him/herself what is appropriate or in line with the intention of the expression. In the teaching process, the teacher needs to explicitly deliver the content of the lesson while also appropriately regulating the behaviour of the students in order to establish a good order and atmosphere for teaching and learning. In Roberto Guzman's approach to teaching, he focuses on allowing students to influence and regulate each other through communication and cooperation to establish a productive learning atmosphere.

1.2. Critique of Guzman's Approach to Teaching English Based on SCT-SL

Professor Guzman's approach emphasizes using English for social communication, aligning with socio-cultural theory, which highlights the importance of engaging learners in authentic social interactions. The ultimate goal of second language learning should be to express oneself in various communicative contexts using the second language [11]. Roberto Guzman discusses the three stages that he uses to teach English without teaching English to improve the learning experience for students and the teaching practice for professors. Socio-cultural theory believes that the goal of teaching is "psychological development, not task completion", and the formation of advanced thinking functions requires the dialectical unity of teaching and learning, or teaching and learning from each other. To this end, teachers need to "create a development process to help learners understand, use and internalize relevant concepts in actual goal-oriented activities" [12]. This is indeed in line with the basic principles of socio-cultural theory. However, socio-cultural

theory also stresses the need for learners to possess sufficient language skills for these interactions and to have sufficient language skills to engage in social interaction in authentic situations.

In the first stage, Guzman introduces tools like the “BS detector” to foster critical thinking, helping students analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. From an SCT-SLA perspective, this aligns with the concept of “mediation”, where cognitive tools and social interaction promote learning. Guzman encourages students to focus on the content, so they don’t really realize they are learning a language, because the core of their learning is talking, writing, and comparing notes. It is worth considering that foreign language learners are affected by both cognitive and affective factors when it comes to speaking [13]. However, Guzman’s method assumes students can apply these skills without sufficient linguistic scaffolding. According to Vygotsky’s ZPD, learners need structured support to internalize complex cognitive tasks, especially in a second language. Without such mediation, learners may find it difficult to process and apply critical thinking in a language they have not yet fully mastered, leading to frustration and hindered language acquisition. Guzman’s method could benefit from incorporating more tailored scaffolding to help learners engage in critical thinking tasks at their individual ZPD.

In the second stage, Guzman shifts the focus from language form to content, allowing students to correct papers by prioritizing meaning before addressing grammar. While this encourages meaningful communication, SCT-SLA emphasizes the need for “explicit mediation” of language rules. Vygotsky’s theory suggests that learners require direct, socially mediated guidance to internalize linguistic structures. By deferring grammar instruction, Guzman’s method risks delaying the development of essential language skills, particularly for learners who benefit from explicit grammatical input. A more balanced approach—integrating “form-focused instruction” while emphasizing communication—would better support the internalization of both linguistic form and meaning.

In the final stage, Guzman focuses on students summarizing and reacting to content, stressing communication over grammar initially. This stage promotes fluency and active use of the language in authentic contexts, which SCT-SLA views positively, as language is learned through meaningful social interaction. However, mediation highlights the need for continuous teacher support, particularly through corrective feedback. Without timely intervention, learners may internalize incorrect language forms, leading to fossilization of errors. A more mediated approach, where corrective feedback is embedded in communicative activities, would help students refine both fluency and accuracy, ensuring they internalize correct forms while engaging in meaningful discussions.

2. Input Hypothesis Theory and Guzman’s Teaching

2.1. Definition of Input Hypothesis

Krashen established that in order for the acquirer to achieve results, the level of

language he is exposed to must follow the “ $i + 1$ ” standard where “ i ” means the acquirer’s actual competence in the language and “ $+1$ ” means a bit further. That is, the students should always be exposed to a slightly more advanced level of understandable input so that they can achieve ever more fluency in the Second Language.

There are three ways in which learners can make sense of structures that contain unlearned knowledge, thus making the loser comprehensible. The first is through the use of structures and vocabulary known to them, the second is through help from contextual or extra-verbal information, and the second is through the modification of the structure of the conversation. “Comprehension” means that the learner focuses on the meaning of the language rather than the form. According to Krashen, the input hypothesis predicts that the language classroom is an excellent place for second language learners (at least at the intermediate level, especially for beginners), because in one hour in the classroom we can provide the equivalent of a full day of comprehensible input. At the same time Krashen also believes that language cannot be taught directly. The teacher provides an ideal environment to give the learner the ideal input in the form of “ $i + 1$ ”. In the process of teaching a foreign language, if the learner is confronted with content that he already knows, his internalisation of language input will be low and his learning will not be efficient. Therefore, Krashen’s proposal that the amount of language input should be “ $i + 1$ ” is quite justified.

Swain *et al.* (1995) found in a follow-up study of French immersion programmes in Canada that students received a large amount of input but still made many errors in their output [14]. They suggested that the main reason for this was that there were too few opportunities for output, so they developed the Output Hypothesis. The hypothesis states that in the output activity, 1) students have to go through a process of constructing, trying and improving the language form (hypothesis-testing) because they need to express their meaning clearly; and 2) students pay more attention to the relevant forms and rules (meta-linguistic awareness) because of the difficulties in expression. This process contributes to acquisition, whereas “comprehensible input” alone does not necessarily trigger this process. This hypothesis has led to an ongoing academic debate, with many studies (e.g. Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Izumi & Bigelow, 2000; Izumi, 2002; de la Fuente, 2002; Erlam, 2003; Gass & Torres, 2005), supporting the assertion that output has a positive effect on acquisition [15]-[20]. This theory considers output as one of the motivating factors for acquisition and advocates encouraging students to output and promoting positive interventions.

In Guzman’s teaching philosophy, he also emphasises meaningful output, which is important for the learners’ language acquisition process. Through output, learners are able to consolidate and apply their language knowledge to real-life communicative activities and identify gaps in their language mastery. Meaningful output also helps to reflect on and evaluate learners’ language output and helps them to better understand the cultural context in which the language is spoken.

2.2. Evaluation of Guzman's Approach to Teaching English Based on the Input Hypothesis

On the one hand, foreign language learning is a cognitive process. Foreign language learners are confronted with many linguistic inputs and selectively take in the information they need according to their needs, their cognitive level and in response to various socio-cultural and psychological factors. The cerebral cortex transmits this information via neurons to memory areas filled with nodes [21]. These nodes are interrelated and intertwined. In other words, knowledge of a foreign language is cumulative, layer by layer, rather than a system of independent blocks. On the other hand, foreign language learning is also a practical process. In fact, the function of practice is not only to consolidate knowledge of the language and to achieve proficiency in its use, but also in other important ways: it is only through practical communication that learners can master the rules of decency, conversational strategies and discourse conventions that govern the use of the language. In other words, it is only in the process of practical communication that learners develop their own "language awareness". After receiving input in a variety of languages, the learner's brain has already accumulated a certain amount of awareness of the language, but at this point it is not yet possible to turn "know-what" into "know-how". It is only through practice that this transformation can take place, when declarative knowledge becomes procedural knowledge.

Roberto Guzman makes students aware of the fact that learning a foreign language is a cognitive process and emphasises the importance of practice. "They're going to go into a work environment, in which they are expected to think at higher levels of cognition. They're expected to analyze, to synthesize, to evaluate, and they have to do it in a language that is not their first language, in English". ... "Whenever they listen to a debate, a conversation, they should ask a number of questions. For example, Is the speaker being specific? People who know what they're talking about usually are very specific. They can say who, what, where, when, how many, how often". Guzman helps students to understand and use their language knowledge better and encourages them to participate actively in the cognitive and practical aspects of learning a foreign language, thus developing their overall language skills.

However, Krashen argues that the process of language acquisition relies heavily on the language input that students receive, which contains a certain level of difficulty. When students receive the right amount of language input, they will naturally transform it into their own second language knowledge and skills. From this perspective, Professor Guzman's approach to teaching English does not, to a certain extent, fully comply with the input hypothesis. The input hypothesis is based on several premises: firstly, that learners need to be exposed to input of appropriate difficulty; and secondly, that learners need to acquire new knowledge through guessing and inferring. In Professor Guzman's classroom, students may face communication barriers and be unable to access input of sufficient difficulty, thus limiting their progress in acquiring English.

Besides, it is also important to recognise that the input hypothesis cannot be simply applied to all teaching and learning processes. Educators and scholars have identified that learners' different acquisition strategies and the ways in which strategies are used may also affect the effectiveness of English language learning. Guzman advocates against the use of traditional textbooks, proposing that lessons should be based on real-world events instead. However, textbooks usually play an important role in guiding teachers toward certain content, topics, and a certain way of approaching language skills development [22]. Without the structured progression offered by textbooks, students may struggle to develop a comprehensive understanding of language forms, particularly if real-world materials are too advanced. Guzman's method could start with simpler content and gradually introducing more complex texts, ensuring learners receive manageable input aligned with their proficiency level.

Therefore, when evaluating ELT approaches, we need to take into account a number of factors that are not limited to input assumptions. There are also a number of ways in which we can facilitate the English acquisition process, to improving students' listening and speaking skills, and using a variety of teaching tools and resources.

In conclusion, although Professor Guzman's approach to teaching English may not be entirely consistent with the input hypothesis to a certain extent, we should not simply dismiss the quality of his teaching, but take more account of the impact of multiple factors on English language learning, while providing students with a more personalised, flexible and diverse learning environment and support. This approach remains an interesting and creative language education practice that can bring new ideas and insights to the field of language education.

3. Communicative Competence and Guzman's Teaching

3.1. Definition of Communicative Competence

The concept of communicative competence, developed in the 1970s to achieve communicative language functions, remains central to understanding language use [23]-[26]. Recent research has emphasized the practical application of language competence across different communicative contexts, focusing on language expression, interpretation, and the negotiation of meaning. Communicative competence is typically divided into four key components: 1) Linguistic competence, which refers to the ability to produce grammatically correct discourse, based on knowledge of phonology, vocabulary, and syntax; 2) Socio-linguistic competence, the ability to produce discourse that is socially appropriate, based on an understanding of the social application of language; 3) Discourse competence, which involves using coherent and complete discourse, including the ability to listen, speak, read, and write effectively, based on rhetorical knowledge such as style and genre; and 4) Strategic competence, which involves using appropriate strategies to overcome communication problems, such as clarifying meaning, asking for repetition, or adjusting speech pace [27]. This framework covers almost all aspects of language

use, classifying them under communicative competence [28]. Moreover, the availability of mentor support and the establishment of meaningful relationships among participants have been identified as critical factors in shaping learners' satisfaction and communicative success [29].

3.2. Criticism of Guzman's Approach to Teaching English Based on Communicative Competence

Professor Guzman's approach to teaching English focuses on using English for communication, which does stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm for learning English. However, it is important to note that this approach may not be well suited to meet the various language needs of students. According to Hymes' four components of communicative language competence, Guzman does not foster students' complete communicative language competence: "What I did was I moved away from the grammar, and I developed a system, in which I divided the class into three stages". For example, students need to use English in formal situations, and they need to acquire more academic and professional terminology. In addition, students need to receive input and feedback at an appropriate level of difficulty and to undertake a systematic acquisition of language knowledge. If these needs are not well met, then students may not improve their competence.

Although Professor Guzman focuses on heuristic teaching and open-ended discussion, encouraging students to participate and intervene to question, his approach may be somewhat overly open-ended and lacking in purposefulness and systematisation. In language learning, being goal-oriented and systematic is very important. For example, students need to have a clear language goal and a clear direction and pace of learning. In addition, systematic teaching creates a better classroom atmosphere and order, ensuring that students learn and digest their knowledge effectively. We therefore need to balance openness and systematicity in our teaching to create sustainable and productive approaches to language teaching.

In summary, although Guzman's approach to teaching English does have the potential to stimulate students' interest and enthusiasm in learning English by allowing them to use English to communicate their feelings and engage in social activities, the approach still has some limitations. Therefore, in teaching practice, we need to use a combination of different teaching methods in order to meet the various language needs of students and improve their overall language skills.

4. Summary

Roberto Guzman's English teaching approach is an effective and relevant method that integrates important aspects of SLA research into language teaching and learning classrooms. However, there are always opportunities for improvement in any teaching approach. This section aims to improve Guzman's method in the light of the previously mentioned limitations and provide pedagogical insights for language teachers.

One area for improvement is the use of authentic materials. While authentic materials can be effective in promoting language acquisition, they can pose challenges for learners who may struggle to comprehend them. A solution is to use scaffolded materials that gradually increase complexity and difficulty. For example, an ESL instructor could start with simplified news articles before moving on to more advanced materials. This approach is supported by Vygotsky's ZPD, which emphasizes the importance of providing learners with support and feedback as they acquire new skills.

Another way to enhance Guzman's approach is to incorporate more explicit instruction on the rules and structures of the target language. While the approach emphasizes the use of authentic materials, it sometimes assumes that learners will simply acquire grammar and vocabulary through exposure to these materials. However, research has shown that explicit instruction can be highly effective in helping learners internalize the rules and structures of the target language. For example, a teacher could provide direct instruction on verb tenses or sentence structure before using authentic materials to engage learners in communicative practice. This approach is supported by Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which suggests that learners need both sufficient input and explicit instruction to acquire new linguistic structures effectively.

Additionally, Guzman's approach could incorporate strategies to help learners better understand the cultural context of the materials being used. For example, a language teacher could provide background information on the historical, social, and cultural context of a particular piece of literature or media before asking learners to analyze or interpret it. This approach is supported by the socio-cultural theory of learning, which posits that language development is closely linked to the socio-cultural context in which it is used.

Finally, it's crucial to provide learners with regular opportunities for feedback and correction. This can be achieved through peer review, teacher feedback, and self-assessment. Providing feedback and correction is supported by the socio-cultural theory of learning, which emphasizes the importance of feedback in the process of learning and developing communicative competence.

Teaching is successful only as it causes people to think for themselves. Language is not just a structural system to be learned, but also a tool for communication and thinking. Teaching should therefore provide students with mother-tongue-like experiences and opportunities for personal creativity that have been gradually lost in the process of their socialisation. At the same time, adults (parents, teachers, etc.) demand that they conform to certain social rules, which gradually inhibit their creativity. In fact, teachers should allow students to regain this childhood freedom to be creative. Effective second language communication does not necessarily have to conform to the norms of the target language, but should allow students to understand the elements of the language that produce and convey meaning according to their own preferences. Our language education is neither "teacher-focused" nor "student-focused", but rather "focused on the collaborative process of teaching and learning", with the goal of developing students' creativity.

The aim is to develop students' ability to use their second language creatively rather than attain native language proficiency. In other words, language education needs to start from the assumption that learning a new language is about learning how to use a new way of making linguistic symbols convey meaning rather than acquiring a set of rules that supposedly define or describe grammatical structures and mistakenly assuming that these rules can be matched and used without thinking.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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