

L1 versus L2 Learning: A Controversial Issue

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Abstract: *Nobody can deny the interrelatedness of first and second language acquisition. Many factors can affect the way people acquire the two languages and lots of research has been done in order to show the influential causes. In the current paper, an attempt is made to find the differences between L1 and L2 acquisition in terms of learner's goals, error correction, affective factors, critical period hypothesis and UG access*

Keywords: *First Language Acquisition, Second Language acquisition, learner's goal, error correction, affective factor, critical period hypothesis, UG access*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a recurring theme in the realm of language learning that people wonder whether learning a second language is the same as learning their mother tongue or not. For long, many researches have conducted various researches in order to find the similarities and differences between the two. We may simply assume that second language learners make use of the same techniques in acquiring a new language as they do in learning their native language and the ultimate aim for each individual is to transfer the intended meaning through the means of speaking. Yet, as Selinker (1971) puts, the way a second language learner makes an utterance is significantly different from both his or her native language and also the target language the person is acquiring, especially considering the form of speech. That is why many students feel annoyed after spending a long time in a foreign language class and realizing they cannot speak or write as neatly and perfectly as they can do in their mother tongue. In this article, an attempt is made to observe the similarities and the differences in acquiring L1 and L2 with regards to goals, error correction, affective factors, critical period hypothesis and UG access. To have a comparison, two points must be taken into account. First, L2 learners have already mastered their first language and second, in case of adult L2 learners, they have the ability to analyze whereas children do not.

2. GOALS

According to Cook (2008), children are never content with even a level below the mastery of their native language. They try to communicate effectively in all aspects of their lives from greeting a person in simple words to making compound and complex sentences. They acquire their L1 naturally even without much instruction at home and learn when and how to use it to reach their desired goals such as asking for permission, answering a question, making a request and so on. However, the story is really different in L2 acquisition. People learn a second language with different aims. Consider a young learner who comes to English class in an institution with his or her counterpart who learns English at school. The ones who learn English at school usually seek to learn grammatical points and vocabulary simply because of passing the tests and there is usually no attempt to be competent in the domain of speaking or writing. What matters to them is their proficiency in answering the questions and getting a good score and by the time they enter a university, their serious problems in producing statements can be observed, a case which is really popular among Iranian university students. Another case here is university students who just try to learn a second language in order to translate and understand their source books without much, if any, attempt to communicate in that language. On the other hand, those who learn English in private institutions usually have a great control over the use of a new language in terms of both competency and accuracy. They learn to use the language in its

correct context and usually what matters to the instructors is that accuracy is as important as fluency. The aim of acquiring a new language in an institution is mainly getting to know how to produce an utterance effectively and in the correct context. Therefore, learning a second language occurs with various intentions and goals in mind.

3. ERROR CORRECTION

Regarding the views of behaviorists, errors were seen as the formation of wrong habits. Therefore, the goal in learning a second language was to replace proper habits with the bad ones. One major source of this problem as mentioned by Larsen- Freeman (1991) is “negative transfer” which means that errors caused by native language interference are to be avoided or minimized. Later on, with the advent of Chomsky’s theories, errors were no longer seen as evil and learning a new language was considered a rule-governed process. Svartvik (1973) proposed that errors occur as a result of failure in competence or language. Errors were to be seen as frequent in the utterances of L2 learners. According to Ellis (1994), Errors are natural and correction of errors, in its various forms such as teacher or peer correction, can generally benefit the students who are learning a new language and culture. When a student is corrected, he or she may or may not make the mistake again. Students who are sharp and sensitive towards correction quickly get the point and start using the correct pattern whereas those who simply parrot might face the problem of fossilization, in which it is really difficult to eliminate an incorrect data from their minds. According to Bley-Vroman (1998, cited in Cook, 2008), following a set of experiments and research, it turned out that correction was not found and not even necessary for L1 acquisition. It seems that since L1 learners are not exposed to formal instruction, the role of correction has no place in treating their errors. Children are only exposed to mere L1 input and thus, they develop their own competence and later on, their performance, through what they listen to in their environment and simply grasp the utterances by heart. Since the input they face is authentic and error-free, children do not require to be corrected. Also parents are happy to see their children producing an utterance, no matter if the utterances are telegraphese or fully – comprehensible sentences. Therefore, parents seldom correct their children.

4. AFFECTIVE FACTORS

According to Krashen (1988), people can acquire a second language only if the amount of input they expose is sufficient and if their affective filters are low. Affective filters include terms such as anxiety, motivation, attitude and so on. He proposes that the affective filter is responsible for individual variation in SLA. He also puts that this affective filter plays no role for children who are acquiring their L1. No matter what the curricula is, an L2 learner with high anxiety, low motivation or low self-confidence cannot deal with learning a new language easily since the person is exposed to a barrier which prevents the individual from fully communicating with the environment, peers, teacher and the materials being taught. Also, attitude decides commitment to learning. Students who give up in the middle of the way usually achieve less than those who are persistent in learning and participate in class activities. Therefore, teachers can use proper techniques in teaching the new material with the aim of reducing affective filters to minimum. According to Bley-Vroman (1998, confirmed in Cook, 2008), Affective factors play a great role in determining the success of L2 learners. Students who are average and not gifted, yet truly motivated, can overcome the problems easier and learn faster than those who are sharp and talented but not motivated enough to learn. However, like what Krashen mentions, Bley-Vroman, Ellis, and later Cook believe that affective filters have no place in determining the success of an L1 learner since the environment and culture of acquiring L1 is the same as the milieu and culture of the L1 learner. Another point to mention is that when a child learns a second language, he or she goes through the process of enculturation which means the person becomes a member of the target language group. On the contrary, since a second language learner, especially adults, learns L2 with different purposes, the individual may or may not become a member of a second language group and such distance can affect the acquisition.

5. CRITICAL PERIOD HYPOTHESIS

According to Lenneberg (1967) a successful language learner is the one who acquires the language before puberty and during a critical period. This matter results in the fluency of the learner and causes him or her to have fewer pauses while speaking. The reason why such age is significant is that before puberty, brain has a good capacity for learning and has not lost its plasticity yet. CPH is basically involved in learning the mother tongue in which a child becomes fluent and accurate in producing

native structures due to the fact that the brain is agile and ready to learn. However, whether this case is true about the learners of L2 or not is still a big question. Mclaughlin (1992) stated that the rate of success in acquiring L2 may seriously depend on psychological and social factors not biological ones. Learners who start to learn a second language after puberty usually fail to speak with a native like accent and at times, they make mistakes due to the interference of their L1 competence since many of them try to translate from L1 to L2 and also attempt to transfer their native structures. Hence, it can be said that Learning L1 is followed by an inductive method in which there is no formal teaching whereas acquiring a second language urges many learners, especially the adults, to go through logic and analysis in order to internalize grammatical rules and sentence structure, a problem which might increase their accuracy but lower their fluency. According to Moinzadeh, Dezhara and Rezaei (2012), learning a new language also causes an adult to adopt a new ego or identity which can be in contrast with the ego of the first language. Such conflict may result in an inhibition on the way of learning the second language.

6. UG ACCESS

According to the theories of Chomsky and other cognitivists, Universal Grammar plays a key role in acquiring the first language. However, there is no ultimate answer for the true involvement of UG in learning a second language. According to Cook and Newson (2007) there are mainly four access hypotheses regarding UG. The model that all these hypotheses work with is that UG provides learners with a blueprint by which they are enabled to acquire the language.

6.1. No Access Hypothesis

Based on No access hypothesis UG plays no role in L2 acquisition. As soon as the critical period is over, the availability of UG for learning a new language fades away. Therefore, L2 acquisition is a separate learning process and L1 has nothing to do with it. That is why sentences can be observed in interlanguage that are neither perfectly the same as L1 structures nor L2 utterances.

6.2. Full Access Hypothesis

Full access Hypothesis puts forward the idea that the accessibility of UG does not differ between L1 and L2 acquisition. Thus, the grammar of the Interlanguage conforms to the restrictions UG places on natural languages. The parameters are all set to a setting which is likely in natural languages. Cook and Newman (2007) state that, in the sense of full access hypothesis, SLA is like a mirror to FLA in that the copy of UG available to L2 learners survived intact from the process of L1 acquisition. Hence they consider it as the purest assumption available on the role UG in SLA.

6.3. Indirect Access Hypothesis

According to Indirect access hypothesis UG does not directly affect L2 acquisition but the properties of UG reflected in L1 are also available in L2 learning. It is assumed that all the parameters that are operative in L1 should also be functioning in Interlanguage.

6.4. Partial Access Hypothesis

Partial access hypothesis proposes that just parts of UG are available in L2. Thus, we might observe evidence of principles that are not used in L1 but provided in UG. Cook and Newson (2007) regard the Partial Access Hypothesis as an amalgamation of different alternatives for the initial state of SLA, which are elucidated in the following sections: a) Minimal Trees Theory, b) Valueless Feature Theory, c) Modulated Structure Building Theory (added by Hawkins, 2001), and, d) Failed Functional Features Theory.

7. CONCLUSION

First and second language acquisition are quite complex and complicated processes. The relationship between how people learn their L1 and L2 has concerned first and second language acquisition research. If SLA did not differ in some way from FLA, L2 acquisition research would be merely a sub-field of language acquisition research rather than a field of its own.

The arguments considering L1 and L2 acquisition are inconclusive and that's why many studies were conducted to explain the nature of L1 and L2 acquisition. While FLA and SLA reveal some similarities, they also show a number of differences. This study focused on the differences and considered five prominent areas of difference: learner's goals, error correction, affective factors, critical period hypothesis and UG access.

The first distinction made between SLA and FLA in this paper was in terms of learners' goals. The arguments presented in this study indicate that L1 and L2 learners differ regarding this concept.

The results concerning error correction show that it can generally benefit the L2 students who are learning a new language and culture. However, it seems that, the role of correction has no place in treating L1 errors.

The next issue discussed was affective factor which was claimed to play a great role in determining the success of L2 learners while it has no place in determining the success of an L1 learner.

With regards to critical period hypothesis, it can be said that it is basically involved in learning the mother tongue. However, whether this case is true about the learners of L2 or not is still a big question since the research findings have not yet been conclusive.

The last point mentioned in this paper was UG access. Most researchers, cognitivists in particular, confirm the key role that UG plays in acquiring the first language. However, after a multitude of studies carried out there is no ultimate answer for its true involvement in the realm of SLA and its role has not received the consensus of all the researchers of the field.

To sum up, this paper has presented the main points that have been raised over the differences between L1 and L2 acquisition.

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