

Lecture Three: Theory of Second Language Acquisition

Introduction:

Second language acquisition theory can be viewed as a part of "theoretical linguistics", i.e. it can be studied and developed without regard to practical application. As is the case with any scientific theory, it consists of a set of *hypotheses*, or generalizations, that are consistent with experimental data.

Second language acquisition theory seeks to quantify how and by what processes individuals acquire a second language. The predominant theory of second language acquisition was developed by the University of Southern California's Steven Krashen. Krashen is a specialist in language development and acquisition, and his influential theory is widely accepted in the language learning community.

Krashen's Five SLA Hypotheses:

1)- THE ACQUISITION-LEARNING DISTINCTION:

The acquisition-learning distinction is perhaps the most fundamental of all the hypotheses to be presented here. It states that adults have two distinct and independent ways of developing competence in a second language.

The first way is language *acquisition*, a process similar, if not identical, to the way children develop ability in their first language. Language acquisition is a subconscious process; language acquirers are not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring language, but are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication. The result of language acquisition, acquired competence, is also subconscious. We are generally not consciously aware of the rules of the languages we have acquired. Instead, we have a "feel" for correctness. Grammatical sentences "sound" right, or "feel" right, and errors feel wrong, even if we do not consciously know what rule was violated.

Other ways of describing acquisition include implicit learning, informal learning, and natural learning. In non-technical language, acquisition is "picking-up" a language.

The second way to develop competence in a second language is by language *learning*. We will use the term "learning" henceforth to refer to conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them. In non-technical

terms, learning is "knowing about" a language, known to most people as "grammar", or "rules". Some synonyms include formal knowledge of a language, or explicit learning.

Some second language theorists have assumed that children acquire, while adults can only learn. The acquisition-learning hypothesis claims, however, that adults also acquire, that the ability to "pick-up" languages does not disappear at puberty. This does not mean that adults will always be able to achieve native-like levels in a second language. It does mean that adults can access the same natural "language acquisition device" that children use. As we shall see later, acquisition is a very powerful process in the adult.

Error correction has little or no effect on subconscious acquisition, but is thought to be useful for conscious learning. Error correction supposedly helps the learner to induce or "figure out" the right form of a rule. If, for example, a student of English as a second language says "I goes to school every day", and the teacher corrects him or her by repeating the utterance correctly, the learner is supposed to realize that the /s/ ending goes with the third person and not the first person, and alter his or her conscious mental representation of the rule. This appears reasonable, but it is not clear whether error correction has this impact in actual practice.

Evidence from child language acquisition confirms that error correction does not influence acquisition to any great extent. Brown and his colleagues have shown that parents actually correct only a small portion of the child's language (occasional pronunciation problems, certain verbs, and dirty words!). They conclude from their research that parents attend far more to the truth value of what the child is saying rather than to the form.

The acquisition-learning distinction may not be unique to second language acquisition. We certainly "learn" small parts of our first language in school (e.g. for most people, the who/ whom distinction), and similar distinctions have been made in other domains.

2) - THE NATURAL ORDER HYPOTHESIS:

One of the most exciting discoveries in language acquisition research in recent years has been the finding that the acquisition of grammatical structures proceeds in a predictable order. Acquirers of a given language tend to acquire certain grammatical structures early, and others later. The agreement among individual acquirers is not always 100%, but there are clear, statistically significant, similarities.

English is perhaps the most studied language as far as the natural order hypothesis is concerned, and of all structures of English, morphology is the most studied. Brown (1973) reported that children acquiring English as a first language tended to acquire certain grammatical morphemes, or function words, earlier than others. For example, the progressive

marker *ing* (as in "He is *playing* baseball".) and the plural marker /s/ ("two dogs") were among the first morphemes acquired, while the third person singular marker /s/ (as in "He lives in New York") and the possessive /s/ ("John's hat") were typically acquired much later, coming anywhere from six months to one year later. De Villiers and de Villiers (1973) confirmed Brown's longitudinal results cross-sectionally, showing that items that Brown found to be acquired earliest in time were also the ones that children tended to get right more often.

In other words, for those morphemes studied, the difficulty order was similar to the acquisition order.

Shortly after Brown's results were published, Dulay and Burt (1974, 1975) reported that children acquiring English as a second language also show a "natural order" for grammatical morphemes, regardless of their first language. The child second language order of acquisition was different from the first language order, but different groups of second language acquirers showed striking similarities. Dulay and Burt's results have been confirmed by a number of investigators, Dulay and Burt used a subset of the 14 morphemes Brown originally investigated. Fathman (1975) confirmed the reality of the natural order in child second language acquisition with her test of oral production.

3) - THE MONITOR HYPOTHESIS:

While the acquisition-learning distinction claims that two separate processes coexist in the adult, it does not state how they are used in second language performance. The Monitor hypothesis posits that acquisition and learning are used in very specific ways. Normally, acquisition "initiates" our utterances in a second language and is responsible for our fluency. Learning has only one function, and that is as a Monitor or editor. Learning comes into play only to make changes in the form of our utterance, after it has been "produced" by the acquired system. This can happen before we speak or write, or after (self-correction).

The Monitor hypothesis implies that formal rules, or conscious learning, play only a limited role in second language performance. These limitations have become even clearer as research has proceeded in the last few years. This research strongly suggests that second language performers can use conscious rules only when three conditions are met. These conditions are necessary and not sufficient, that is, a performer may not fully utilize his conscious grammar even when all three conditions are met. These three conditions are listed here, with a brief description.

- 1- **Time:** In order to think about and use conscious rules effectively, a second language performer needs to have sufficient time. For most people, normal conversation does not

allow enough time to think about and use rules. The over-use of rules in conversation can lead to trouble, i.e. a hesitant style of talking and inattention to what the conversational partner is saying.

- 2- **Focus on form:** To use the Monitor effectively, time is not enough. The performer must also be focused on form, or thinking about correctness (Dulay and Burt, 1978). Even when we have time, we may be so involved in what we are saying that we do not attend to how we are saying it.
- 3- **Know the rule:** This is a very formidable requirement. Linguistics has taught us that the structure of language is extremely complex, and they claim to have described only a fragment of the best known languages. We can be sure that our students are exposed only to a small part of the total grammar of the language, and we know that even the best students do not learn every rule they are exposed to.

4) - THE INPUT HYPOTHESIS:

The input hypothesis attempts to answer what is perhaps the most important question in our field, and gives an answer that has a potential impact on all areas of language teaching. The important question is: How do we acquire language? If the Monitor hypothesis is correct, that acquisition is central and learning more peripheral, then the goal of our pedagogy should be to encourage acquisition. The question of how we acquire then becomes crucial.

(a) Statement of the hypothesis:

Let us first restate the question of how we acquire: given the correctness of the natural order hypothesis, how do we move from one stage to another? If an acquirer is at "stage 4", how can he progress to "stage 5"? More generally, how do we move from stage i , where i represents current competence, to $i + 1$, the next level? The input hypothesis makes the following claim: a necessary (but not sufficient) condition to move from stage i to stage $i + 1$ is that the acquirer understand input that contains $i + 1$, where "understand" means that the acquirer is focussed on the meaning and not the form of the message.

We acquire, in other words, only when we understand language that contains structure that is "a little beyond" where we are now. How is this possible? How can we understand language that contains structures that we have not yet acquired? The answer to this apparent paradox is that we use more than our linguistic competence to help us understand. We also use context, our knowledge of the world, our extra-linguistic information to help us understand language directed at us.

The input hypothesis runs counter to our usual pedagogical approach in second and foreign language teaching. As Hatch (1978a) has pointed out, our assumption has been that we first learn structures, then practice using them in communication, and this is how fluency develops. The input hypothesis says the opposite. It says we acquire by "going for meaning" first, and as a result, we acquire structure!

We may thus state parts (1) and (2) of the input hypothesis as follows:

- 1- The input hypothesis relates to acquisition, not learning.
- 2- We acquire by understanding language that contains structure beyond our current level of competence ($i + 1$). This is done with the help of context or extra-linguistic information.

A third part of the input hypothesis says that input must contain $i + 1$ to be useful for language acquisition, but it need not contain only $i + 1$. It says that if the acquirer understands the input, and there is enough of it, $i + 1$ will automatically be provided. In other words, if communication is successful, $i + 1$ is provided, this implies that the best input should not even attempt to deliberately aim at $i + 1$. We are all familiar with syllabi that try to deliberately cover $i + 1$. There is a "structure of the day", and usually both teacher and student feel that the aim of the lesson is to teach or practice a specific grammatical item or structure. Once this structure is "mastered", the syllabus proceeds to the next one. This part of the input hypothesis implies that such a deliberate attempt to provide $i + 1$ is not necessary. As we shall see later, there are reasons to suspect that it may even be harmful.

Thus, part (3) of the input hypothesis is:

- 3- When communication is successful, when the input is understood and there is enough of it, $i + 1$ will be provided automatically.

The final part of the input hypothesis states that speaking fluency cannot be taught directly. Rather, it "emerges" over time, on its own. The best way, and perhaps the only way, to teach speaking, according to this view, is simply to provide comprehensible input. Early speech will come when the acquirer feels "ready"; this state of readiness arrives at somewhat different times for different people, however. Early speech, moreover, is typically not grammatically accurate. Accuracy develops over time as the acquirer hears and understands more input.

Part (4) of the input hypothesis is thus:

- 4- Production ability emerges. It is not taught directly.

Evidence supporting the hypothesis:

- 1- First language acquisition in children. The input hypothesis is very consistent with what is known about "caretaker speech", the modifications that parents and others make when talking to young children. The most interesting and perhaps the most important characteristic of caretaker speech for us is that it is not a deliberate attempt to teach language. Rather, as Clark and Clark (1977) point out, caretaker speech is modified in order to aid comprehension. Caretakers talk "simpler" in an effort to make themselves understood by the child.
- 2- A second characteristic of interest to us here is the finding that caretaker speech, while it is syntactically simpler than adult-adult speech, is "roughly-tuned" to the child's current level of linguistic competence, not "finely-tuned". In other words, caretaker speech is not precisely adjusted to the level of each child, but *tends* to get more complex as the child progresses.

5) - THE AFFECTIVE FILTER HYPOTHESIS:

The Affective Filter hypothesis states how affective factors relate to the second language acquisition process.

Research over the last decade has confirmed that a variety of affective variables relate to success in second language acquisition (reviewed in Krashen, 1981). Most of those studied can be placed into one of these three categories:

(1) *Motivation:* Performers with high motivation generally do better in second language acquisition (usually, but not always, "integrative"

(2) *Self-confidence:* Performers with self-confidence and a good self-image tend to do better in second language acquisition.

(3) *Anxiety:* Low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety.

The Affective Filter hypothesis captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition by positing that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their Affective Filters. Those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not only tend to seek less input, but they will also have a high or strong Affective Filter--even if they understand the message, the input will not reach the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition, or the language acquisition device. Those with attitudes more conducive to second language acquisition will not only seek and obtain more

input, they will also have a lower or weaker filter. They will be more open to the input, and it will strike "deeper".

End of Lecture Three!