An overview of second language acquisition theories
-Panorama general de las teorías de adquisición de una segunda lengua-

Abstract

This reflection paper presents some of the most significant theories of language learning. It intends to compare the process of language acquisition in the mother tongue and a second language by presenting some general distinctions concerning the most relevant hypothesis so far studied. Learning a second language has multiple benefits for people of all ages. Undergraduate students at Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga - UNAB can improve brain function and obtain advantages not only in the professional field but also in the personal one. Studying a second language can help students retain knowledge for school work and the real world and that is ultimately any school's goal.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, SLA theories, Learning, Foreign languages.

Resumen

Este documento de reflexión presenta algunas de las teorías del aprendizaje del lenguaje más significativas. Pretende comparar el proceso de adquisición del lenguaje en la lengua materna y en una segunda lengua presentando algunas distinciones generales concernientes a las hipótesis más relevantes hasta ahora estudiadas. El aprendizaje de una segunda lengua tiene múltiples beneficios para las personas de todas las edades. Los estudiantes de pregrado de la Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga - UNAB pueden mejorar sus funciones cerebrales y obtener ventajas no sólo en el campo profesional sino también en el personal. Estudiar un segundo idioma puede ayudar a los estudiantes a retener conocimiento para el ámbito escolar y para el mundo real, y eso es en últimas, el objetivo de cualquier institución educativa.

Palabras claves: Adquisición de una segunda lengua, Teorías, Aprendizaje, Lenguas extranjeras.

Autora: Sonia Yaneth Méndez Cala es licenciada en idiomas de la Universidad Industrial de Santander. Master en *Teaching english as a foreign language*, Universidad Internacional Iberoamericana de Puerto Rico.

Sonia Yaneth Méndez Cala

Introduction

Research in second language acquisition and its related fields have offered numerous keys to understand how a foreign language is acquired/learned by children and adults in different settings and under different circumstances, and how teachers can enrich the world of the learner.

In order to understand better how the second language acquisition process works, a brief introduction to how the first language is presented and manifested in second language learning, and how some of the most important theories have influenced foreign language learning will be described first. Then, an overview of how to promote the use of the target language in the classroom will be presented.

Theories of Language Learning

Learning a language is a rapid process that begins at birth. Children learn how to communicate their needs and wants first through cries and basic sounds then words, phrases and sentences, and as this learning continues the sentences become more and more complex. After some years, a child's vocabulary has increased so much that communication is performed with ease.

The process of how language develops has been studied since the beginning of child development and three main theories have been proposed to account for the acquisition of the first language or mother tongue: behaviourist, nativist, and developmental. These theories help explain the situation of children who acquire languages more quickly and apparently with much less effort than do adults when placed in the same environment.

The Behaviorist Theory

According to B. Skinner and his colleagues, the behaviourists, the learning of a language is based on the formation of a series of habits that children gradually acquire by imitation. Children imitate the sounds and words they hear around them. They first perceive a stimulus, and then they obtain a response from their parents or from the people around them which encourages the formation of a habit. (As cited in Arzamendi, Palacios & Ball, (ND), p.22).

Language is seen as part of human behaviour based on the operant conditioning: Stimulus Response Reinforcement. They claim that humans are born with a set of instinctive responses to external stimuli, and that by the reinforcement of responses human learn to acquire secondary skills that go beyond their primary instinctive responses. Behaviourists think that children imitate the language behaviour of their parents or caretakers and other members of their social group.

The behaviourists believe that foreign language learning consists of learners imitating what they hear and see. In this view, the learners relate what they know of their first language to what they recognize in the foreign language. The result of similarities and differences between L1 and L2 is known as Positive and Negative transfer. The former one is the result of similarities because habits used in the L1 easily transfer to the L2. The latter one is caused by differences between the L1 and L2 because errors result from using habits from the mother tongue in the foreign language.

The Nativist Theory

The mentalist or cognitive models as the nativist theory is also known as, came up as a reaction against the Behaviouristic language learning theory. The major principle of the Mentalistic language acquisition theory is that "everybody learns a language not because they are subjected to a similar conditioning process, but because they possess an inborn capacity which permits them to acquire a language as a normal Maturational Process" (D.A. Wilkins, 1972:168)

This theory deals with the belief that language is an innate feature of the infant. Researcher Noam Chomsky is a firm advocate for this theory. In his view, children come to this world with very specific innate knowledge of the nature of language and of the world. It is believed that despite cultural differences, all humans develop some form of language skills that do not have anything to do with a particular way of teaching children to speak. Language develops in the child in the same way as other biological functions. Chomsky believes that humans are born with a built-in device he calls LAD (Language Acquisition Device) that aides the child in learning the language being heard. Chomsky's theory of language development in children is built upon the principle that language is the result of the unfolding of a genetically determined program. He asserts that children

initially possess, then develop an innate understanding of grammar, regardless of where they are raised. The term Chomsky affixes to this innate grammatical system is Universal Grammar. (Chomsky, 1986).

The Developmental Theory

Also known as Functional Approach or Interactionist Theory. This method tried to reconcile the behaviourist and nativist theories by combining the role of the environment with the learner's innate knowledge of the language. One of the most influential researchers on this field was the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. In his theory of cognitive development, Piaget (1953) describes the way humans gradually acquire, construct, and use the language. He outlines two processes used by the individual throughout its life in an attempt to adapt to the environment in a more complex manner: assimilation and accommodation. The former one is the process of using or transforming the environment so that it can be placed in pre-existing cognitive structures while the latter one is the process of changing cognitive structures in order to accept something from the environment.

The interactionists believe that language which is modified or adapted with the purpose of facilitating the learner's understanding is a crucial factor in the language acquisition process. They have examined the speech addressed to children, which is known as motherese or caretaker talk in order to try to identify exactly what features of it seem to facilitate the learning of a further language. (Arzamendi *et al.*, (ND), p. 24).

Learning L1 vs. Learning L2

For many years the process of language acquisition has been an area of interest to linguistics and psychologists. They have been studious about the way a child acquires and develops his language competence in his native

language, and the way an adult student learns and uses a second/foreign language.

Second language acquisition theory may help to explain the puzzling situation of children who acquire languages more quickly and apparently with much less effort than do adults when placed in a similar environment. The children are in a setting in which they are surrounded by language that is meaningful to them. They are given time to sort out the language and begin to use it for their own expressive purposes. Adult students, on the other hand, are usually busy learning vocabulary and grammar rules , and they attempt to apply them later to a setting in which they have something to say. For Stephen Krashen (1982), the children would be acquiring language while adult students would be learning it.

Second language teaching has often attempted to recreate the conditions of the first language in the classroom mostly in terms of using only a single language and having a simple interaction between the students and the teacher or between students. While there are many similarities between L1 and L2 learning, the variation in situation and other factors also produces many differences. One difficulty is filtering out differences that are accidental rather than inevitable. L1 children mostly acquire language in different settings with different exposure to language than L2 learners and they are at different stages of mental and social maturity.

Some of the differences between first language and L2 acquisition are intrinsic and cannot be avoided; some are, so to speak, accidental in that they vary according to the circumstances in which L2 acquisition takes place, in particular inside or outside a classroom. In the vast majority of cases for instance L2 learners are older than L1 children; age inevitably brings with it a host of factors that have little to do with language acquisition itself. The discussion here excludes early childhood

simultaneous bilingualism, considering this as 'bilingualism as a first language' (Swain, 1972), i.e. a separate process in which first and second languages are not consecutive.

Despite the desired outcomes of child first language acquisition and adult second language acquisition are exactly the same; the actual outcomes are in reality quite different. Factors such as motivation, quality, and quantity of input among many others, will stand in the way of adult second language learning. These two processes and outcomes are only connected by a common goal: to be able to communicate. For further information, see Appendix 1.1: Differences between L1 and L2 acquisition according to Vivian Cook (2009).

Stephen Krashen's Hypothesis

According to Krashen, a linguist who has synthesized much of the recent second language acquisition research, language acquisition takes place most effectively when the input is meaningful and interesting to the learner, when it is comprehensible (i+1) and when it is not grammatically sequenced. For Krashen (1982), the process of language learning breaks into five components: the acquisition-learning hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis.

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis

Krashen says that there are two independent systems of second language performance: the acquired system and the learned system. The former is the product of a subconscious process very similar to the process children undergo when they acquire their first language. Here, children are more concerned with communicating meaning than with sentence structure. The latter is the product of formal instruction and it comprises a conscious process which results in

conscious knowledge about the language. According to Krashen acquisition is more important than learning.

The Monitor Hypothesis

The monitoring function is the practical result of the learned grammar. It is an editing device that learners can choose to apply to edit the language they produce. According to Krashen, this monitoring is conditioned by time, a focus on form, and knowledge of the rule to be edited. It is a device that can be used with learned knowledge and with acquired knowledge.

The Natural Order Hypothesis

This hypothesis shows that learners acquire grammatical features in a predictable order regardless of age, L1 background, and learning conditions. It also states that language acquired through natural communication tends to follow this standard order while language learned through formal and conscious focus on grammar will exhibit a different order.

The Input Hypothesis

The input hypothesis is only concerned with acquisition, not learning. According to Krashen's input hypothesis, the most important factor in the amount of language acquired by a learner is the amount of comprehensible input to which the learner is exposed. Comprehensible input is understood as the amount or level of meaningful and interesting language that the student can fully understand, plus just a little more: i+1. (Curtain, H & Dahlberg, C. 2004:2)

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

This hypothesis is based on Dulay and Burt's notion of the Affective Filter that is seen to control the amount of input that is converted into intake depending on a number of affective factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. Krashen claims that learners with high motivation, high self-confidence, and low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition while learners with low motivation, low self-confidence and high level of anxiety would experience a raise in the affective filter and form a mental block that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. This filter is seen to influence the rate but not the route of learning.

Merrill Swain's Hypothesis

Merrill Swain has taken Krashen's idea one step further with her suggestion that students acquire language most meaningfully when they also have the opportunity for comprehensible output. That is, they need to have a setting in which their attempts at communication are valued and shaped to make them acceptable and understandable though communicative rather than grammatical means of correction. Swain (1985) has proposed three functions that comprehensible input could not do: the noticing function, the hypothesis-testing function, and the meta-linguistic function.

The Noticing Function

Learners encounter gaps between what they want to say and what they are able to say. As a result, they notice what they do not know or only know partially in the target language.

The Hypothesis-Testing Function

When learners say something there is always a hypothesis underlying. When speaking, the learners test this hypothesis and receive feedback from an interlocutor that enables them, if necessary, to reprocess their hypothesis.

The Meta-linguistic Function

Learners reflect about the language they learn and hereby the output enables them to control and internalize linguistic knowledge.

Swain does not claim that Comprehensible Output is responsible for all or even most of our language competence. Rather, she claims that input is necessary but not sufficient for successful L2 learning. She thinks that output facilitates second language learning in ways that are different from, or enhance, those of input.

Target Language and Interlanguage

The main objective of acquiring a second language is to be able to communicate with others. At UNAB, teachers and administrators try to promote the use of the target language not only in the English classes but also in classes related to specific fields of study. Promoting the use of the target language in the classrooms constitutes a challenge as students may often want to communicate in their mother tongue. In order to avoid rejection from students, teachers need to encourage the use of Interlanguage. Interlanguage can be defined as the type of language used by learners of a second/foreign language (L2) who are in the process of learning a target language. Interlanguage is metaphorically a halfway house between the mother tongue (L1) and the target language (TL). The L1 is the source language that provides the initial building materials to be gradually blended with materials taken from the TL, resulting in new forms that are neither in the mother tongue, nor in the target language. This term is used to refer to both the internal system that a learner has constructed at a single point in time (`an interlanguage') and to the series of interconnected systems that characterise the learner's progress over time (`the interlanguage continuum').

For undergraduate students at UNAB, having a second language affords them not only with opportunities in a socio-cultural field to get to know people from all over the world in order to develop and maintain their skills, but also in the academic and economic field since it provides the students with opportunities to study and/or work abroad or simply communicate with people of other backgrounds who reside in Colombia. From more diverse social interactions to improved employment prospects, the benefits of learning a foreign language are numerous.

Conclusions

Throughout time, important researchers such as Skinner and his behaviourist theory, Chomsky and his nativist theory, and Piaget and his developmental theory have paved the dirt road for two of the most important linguists of all times: Stephen Krashen and Merrill Swain. For years, Krashen and Swain have studied the way people learn a second language but unfortunately for the Second Language Acquisition community, they have not drawn alike conclusions.

Krashen claims that "Acquisition occurs, according to the input hypothesis, when acquirers understand input for meaning, not when they produce output and focus on form" (Krashen, 1982:117). On the other hand, Swain claims that negotiating of meaning needs to incorporate the notion of being pushed toward the delivery of a message that is not only conveyed, but that is conveyed precisely, coherently, and appropriately. Being 'pushed' in output is a concept parallel to that of the i+1 comprehensible input. Indeed one might call this the 'comprehensible output hypothesis'. (Swain, 1985:248)

The way a language is acquired is not merely as simple as understanding the message as Krashen's Input Hypothesis claims, but also

being able to develop the learner's communicative competence as Swain suggests with her Output Hypothesis.

Little or no agreement is found among linguists regarding the theories of educating individuals in a second language. I think it is possible to reconcile Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output. Both, Stephen Krashen and Merrill Swain, have their own point of view of second language acquisition. Each theory represents a different view but they can complement each other to benefit the second language learner. I see this "conflict" as if Krashen were working hard on listening and reading; and Swain were working hard on speaking and writing. I believe that the liaison of these two hypotheses would greatly benefit the L2 acquirer by strengthening his/her language skills.

The purpose of this exercise was to highlight important aspects related to the theories of language learning, the contrast between learning the mother tongue and learning a foreign language, and finally the role of interlanguage in second language acquisition.

References

Arzamendi, J., Palacios, I. & Ball, P. (ND) The acquisition and role of the First Language. In Funiber (Ed.), *Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 22-24).

Chomsky, N. (1986) *Knowledge of Language: its Nature, Origin and Use.* Praeger, New York.

Cook, V. (2009) *First and Second Language Acquisition.* Retrieved from http://homepage.ntlworld.com/vivian.c/SLA/L1%20and%20L2.htm

Curtain, H., Dahlberg, C. (2004) *Languages and Children. Making the match.* Pearson Education, Inc. United States of America.

Krashen, S. (1982) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition.* Pergamon. Oxford.

Piaget, J. (1953) *The Origins of Intelligence in Children.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Skinner, B. (1957) *Verbal Behaviour.* Appleton-Century-Crofts. New York.

Swain, M. (1972) *Bilingualism as a first language.* PhD Dissertation, University of California, Irvine

Swain, M. (1985) Communicative Competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In Susan Gass & Carolyn Madden (Eds.), *Input in Second Language Acquisition* (235-253). Rowley, MA.: Newbury House.

Wilkins, D.A., (1972) *Linguistics in language teaching.* MIT Press. London.

APPENDIX 1.1

Differences between L1 and L2 acquisition

Ellis 94 (based on Bley-Vroman 1988); updated in Cook (2009)

Feature	L1 acquisition	L2 (foreign language) acquisition	VC's objections
1. Overall success	children normally achieve perfect L1 mastery	adult L2 learners are unlikely to achieve perfect L2 mastery	All implicitly see 'success' in the sense of what a mono-lingual native speaker does, not an L2 user
2. General failure	success guaranteed	complete success rare	
3. Variation	little variation in degree of success or route	L2 learners vary in overall success and route	
4. Goals	target language competence	L2 learners may be content with less than target language competence or more concerned with fluency than accuracy	
5. Fossilisation	unknown	common, plus backsliding (i.e. return to earlier stages of development	And L2 users too have L1 attrition
6. Intuitions	children develop clear intuitions about correctness	L2 learners are often unable to form clear grammaticality judgments	But bilingual children are better at this than monolinguals
7. Instruction	not needed	helpful or necessary	All depends!
8. Negative evidence	correction not found and not necessary	correction generally helpful or necessary	Recasts are in fact based on L1 acquisition ideas
9. Affective factors	not involved	play a major role determining proficiency	Again measured against monolinguals