

Reflections on the Connections between Second Language Acquisition Theories and Language Teaching: A Historical Perspective

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In the 1940s and 1950s, research in second language acquisition (SLA) emphasized the study of contrasts between languages. Errors made by second language learners were attributed to transfer from their first language (L1). The influence of the L1 was thought to play a role of paramount importance in the acquisition of a second language (L2) (Lado, 1957). But as more research was carried out, the idea of explaining language learners' errors in terms of the differences between languages was challenged (Dulay and Burt, 1973, 1974). A new paradigm in SLA research was emerging. The attention of research moved from viewing errors as a product of L1 transfer to viewing learning a second language as a distinct process. This shift of approach has triggered claims with regard to how second languages are learnt and how they should be taught.

What is the nature of this research? And perhaps more importantly for the language teacher, can these findings be translated into effective recommendations for how to learn and teach a second language? The intention of this essay is to explore some salient second language acquisition theories in to the light of their connection with language teaching.

Developments in the Understanding of Second Language Acquisition

A key concept in the study of SLA is that of *developmental sequences*. Developmental sequences refers to the idea that learners studying a second language grasp certain areas of grammatical knowledge early and others only until afterwards, regardless of their mother tongue. A cornerstone of the idea of the existence of developmental sequences in second language learners was the work of Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974). Their research showed that children of Spanish and Chinese background learning English had a similar order of acquisition of a set of grammatical morphemes. Additional research, this time with adults, was carried out by Bailey et al (1974) and confirmed a similar pattern of acquisition order in learners with different language backgrounds. The grammatical morphemes Dulay and Burt investigated in their first study were: progressive '-ing', plural 's', irregular past tense, possessive, articles (a, the), 3rd person singular present, copula be (contractible), and auxiliary be (contractible). Further research has examined these and other features such as negation, questions, relative clauses and references to the past (see Schumann, 1979 for a review, Pienemann et al, 1988, Doughty, 1991, and Bardovi-Harlig and Reynolds, 1995 respectively; cited in Lightbown and Spada, 1999).

A seemingly obvious implication for language learning and teaching is the creation of a syllabus based on this natural order of acquisition: "The most effective instruction is that which follows the observed order of difficulty, one with a 'natural syllabus'." (Bailey et al, 1974:243).

Such a proposal implies that the process of acquiring the natural sequence is linear. It assumes that once linguists have established what the developmental sequence is, course designers or material writers will be able to write a syllabus to fit it. But the whole process of language acquisition is not that simple. To me it seems more reasonable to view acquisition as Corder (1986) describes it: "The spontaneous development of grammar is organic. Everything is happening simultaneously." (Corder, 1986:187).

In addition, research findings acknowledge that whereas in general terms there is a predictable order of stages in linguistic development, there is considerable variation within each stage (see Meisel et al, 1981). Meisel et al suggest that some of the patterns found within this developmental framework are likely to be explained as "being the result of strategies which are not shared by all speakers, but are specific to only one or several groups of learners" (Meisel et al, 1981:131). Strategy is certainly one factor in determining such variations, but there are other factors to be considered. Nonetheless, their argument raises the issue of variability among learners.

Naïve as the idea of a natural syllabus might seem, it is supported by an important underlying premise which emphasizes the role of the learner in the process of learning a second language and acknowledges the presence of innate subconscious processes that guide the acquisition of the second language. What are those processes? In other words, how do we acquire a second language?

An early attempt to present a comprehensive theory of second language acquisition was Krashen's Input Hypothesis. Krashen (1985) affirms that exposure to the target language through natural communication is a necessary condition in the process of acquisition (i.e. a naturalistic approach). But in order for acquisition to take place, the content of this natural communication must be comprehensible for the learner: "We progress along the natural order by understanding input that contains structures at our next 'stage' – structures that are a bit beyond our current level of competence" (Krashen, 1985:2). The context, the learner's knowledge of the world and previously acquired linguistic competence play an important role in Krashen's model of SLA in that they enable the learner to understand language that contains grammar which has not yet been acquired. Krashen also highlights the importance of a 'silent phase' at the beginning of language learning – a stage in which the learner does not produce the target language. In his model, Krashen deals with the idea of variability, not in the sense of differences within developmental stages, as discussed above, but in the sense of success or failure on the part of the learner to acquire language when comprehensible input is available. Emotional states such as anxiety, stress,

lack of motivation and a negative attitude are believed to inhibit acquisition (i.e. through a high affective filter).

Krashen's idea of comprehensible input assumes that because the new information is slightly above the actual level of knowledge of the learner (i.e. $i + 1$), he or she will be able to process both content and form. But the process of comprehension is much more complex and the principle behind comprehensible input appears to be too naive.

From a cognitive perspective, it is assumed that human cognition is information processing and that information is stored in different memories with different capacities. Information recently attended to by the central processor is kept in short term memory, which has a limited capacity (see Ericsson and Simon, 1993). Because of this limitation, learners simply cannot process all the input they are exposed to; rather, they focus on particular features of the information they are receiving. In a context where the content of the information is privileged over linguistic form, such as the communicative or naturalistic classroom, the priority of learners will tend to be to process language which has the most communicative value. In the case of English, it is lexical words rather than grammatical words that carry the most communicative value.

It follows that if content and linguistic form compete for attention in comprehension, and it is content (or meaning) that generally prevails, how is the learner expected to develop his or her interlanguage system in a naturalistic environment? Arguably, comprehensible input is not enough.

While Krashen contends that a necessary condition for acquisition to take place is comprehensible input, the role of interaction and communication is not emphasized in his model. However, interaction is believed to play an important role in second language acquisition. Swain (1985), for example, suggests that 'comprehensible output' (also referred to as 'pushed output') contributes to acquisition as well. Comprehensible output occurs when learners are encouraged to reformulate their messages to make them more comprehensible. Similarly, Long (1996) affirms that acquisition is aided when input is made comprehensible through negotiating for meaning (i.e. the Interaction Hypothesis). Negotiation for meaning refers to attempts of learners during interaction to overcome comprehension difficulties through interactional adjustments so that partially comprehensible or incomprehensible input becomes comprehensible. In this sense, negotiation for meaning in an activity occurs when the listener signals to the speaker that his or her message (the speaker's message) is not clear, hence they need to work linguistically to resolve this difficulty (see Pica, 1994).

In the context of the classroom, the processes of negotiation of meaning leading to reformulation are potentially promoted by the teacher or by other learners, and in either case they constitute excellent opportunities for providing genuine communicative interaction (Cook, 2001).

A reaction to these ideas in the field of ELT was the advent of task-based instruction; that is, an approach where students in the classroom carry out tasks which produce a definite outcome. To complete a task, students are engaged in meaningful interaction and in doing so they are expected to negotiate what they want to convey when they encounter gaps in their understanding. But how much do students really negotiate in task-based activities? And how much do students reformulate in classroom interaction?

Based on a database of lesson extracts, Seedhouse (1999) evaluated the interaction produced by tasks in the classroom. He found that learners tend to minimize their effort (including linguistic effort) to complete a task. Rather than linguistic competence being stretched, challenged and upgraded, learners' interaction portrays "such a minimal display of their linguistic competence that it resembles a pidgin" (Seedhouse, 1999: 154). Similarly, Foster (1998) analyzed the language produced by intermediate EFL students engaged in 'required and optional information exchange tasks' in pair and group work. He found that very few students in either setting reformulated. He suggests that negotiating for meaning is not a strategy that learners are willing to use when facing communication problems. Furthermore, of the few interaction modifications learners made, the most common were lexical, not syntactic.

To summarize the preceding discussion, it has been proposed that (1) learners tend to process what is communicatively valuable; (2) the language used for task completion tends to be syntactically poor; and (3) lexical items appear to take priority both in comprehension and output adjustment. These contentions seem to undermine the value of comprehensible input and comprehensible output for language acquisition.

Nevertheless, the naturalistic view strongly influenced the teaching practice of the language classroom in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The communicative approach, task-based instruction, and content-based instructional programs had their heyday in those years. Common to these approaches is the heavy emphasis on meaningful interaction and language use rather than knowledge about language; materials and activities emphasize a communicative purpose rather than just a linguistic goal; and the attention of the students should primarily be on messages, ideas, and content rather than on the linguistic form in isolation (Ellis, 1982). After all, the central aim of second language teaching is to develop communicative competence in learners.

But communicative competence implies providing the language learner with a balance among sociolinguistic, discourse, pragmatic and grammatical competences (Canale, 1983). It follows that an approach that pays extreme importance to language use at the expense of linguistic form (i.e. grammatical competence) is not actually promoting a fair balance of communicative competence.

What is the role of a conscious focus on linguistic form, then? The concept of consciousness has been an important issue in second language acquisition research since the 1980s. A radical viewpoint is Krashen's. He makes a distinction between learning and acquisition and posits the consciously learned system as a 'monitor' which is used when the learner's focus is on being correct. The role of conscious learning is regarded as playing no role in acquisition (Krashen, 1985). Conversely, Schmidt (1990) argues for the importance of conscious attention. He asserts that conscious attention is necessary for conversion of input to intake⁷: "Subliminal language learning is impossible, and ... intake is what learners consciously notice" (Schmidt, 1990:149). Similarly, other researchers (Ellis, 1994, 1997; McLaughlin, 1987, Sharwood-Smith, 1993; Long, 1996) challenge Krashen's distinction between conscious learning and subconscious acquisition.

It is widely accepted that conscious learning (such as that enhanced by focus on form, creating salience, input enhancement, the development of learning strategies, or contrasting the L1 and the L2) facilitates the learning of a second language in adults. Long, for example, suggests that success or failure to learn can partially be explained in terms of the learner him- or herself, "in the areas of attention, awareness and cognitive processing" (Long 1996:425).

Under the perspective of meaningful communication, explicit dealing with grammar is expected to be different from traditional grammar teaching. An alternative trend in research is the idea of focus on form (cf. focus on forms⁸), where the emphasis is on drawing the learner to view 'language as object, but in context.' To put it in Long's words "learners need to attend to a task if acquisition is to occur, but ... their orientation can best be to both form and meaning, not to either form or meaning alone" (Long, 1996:429). It is important to note that the idea of conscious attention applies not only to grammar, but also to vocabulary, collocation, phonology, and pragmatics (see Schmidt, 1990, Willis and Willis, 1996).

Recommendations for how to learn and teach languages

The following is a summary list of implications drawn from the discussion in the previous section. Some have already been explicitly made while others were implicit in the overall discussion above. They try to be congruent with the findings about the nature of second language acquisition:

Recommendations for the teacher

- Allow for a rich exposure to the target language.
- Allow for silent periods, especially at early stages, but also at other stages,

⁷ i.e. input which is actually helpful for the learner.

⁸ see Long 1986:429 for a discussion of the differences between *focus on form* and *focus on forms*

- to give learners an opportunity to reflect and internalize.
- Allow for different sources of input - pair and group work.
- Seek a balance between teacher-talking time and student-talking time.
- Do not expect accurate production, especially at early stages - favour meaningful communication.

Recommendations for the learner

- Read extensively.
- Be creative with language; do not be afraid of making mistakes.
- Use language genuinely, inside and outside the classroom.

Activities and materials should...

- Be set up in meaningful, contextualised situations (including drills!).
- Link new to old or given information (both linguistic and world knowledge).
- Emphasise what language does rather than what language is.
- Offer opportunities to negotiate and reformulate meaning.
- Increase the learners' sensitivity to language and learning.

I have tried to bring together some important issues that, in my opinion, are relevant to the discussion of second language acquisition and language teaching. While this account is by no means exhaustive, I hope I have aroused an interest for further discussion.

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