International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (IJTSRD)
Special Issue on Modern Trends in Science, Technology and Economy
Available Online: www.ijtsrd.com e-ISSN: 2456 – 6470

Developing Learning English as a Second Language

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ABSTRACT

In this article we focus on second language learners' developing knowledge and use of their new language. We examine some of the mistakes that learners make and discuss what mistakes can tell us about their knowledge of the language and their ability to use that knowledge. We look at stages and sequences in the acquisition of some syntactic and morphological features in the second language. We also review some aspects of learners' development of vocabulary, pragmatics and phonology.

KEYWORDS: *approach, method, procedure, technique, methodology, teaching classes, learning a language, strategy, theory and practice*

In this article we focus on second language learners' developing knowledge and use of their new language. We examine some of the mistakes that learners make and discuss what mistakes can tell us about their knowledge of the language and their ability to use that knowledge. We look at stages and sequences in the acquisition of some syntactic and morphological features in the second language. We also review some aspects of learners' development of vocabulary, pragmatics and phonology.

Knowing more about the development of learner language helps teachers to assess teaching procedures in the light of what they can reasonably expect to accomplish in the classroom. As we will see, some characteristics of learner language can be quite perplexing if one does not have an overall picture of the steps learners go through in acquiring features of the second language[2] In presenting some of the findings of second language research, we have included a number of examples of learner language as well as some additional samples to give you an opportunity to practice analyzing learner language. Of course, teachers analyze learner language all the time. They try to determine whether students have learned what has been taught and how closely their language matches the target language. But progress cannot be always measured in these terms. Sometimes language acquisition is reflected in a decrease in the use of correct form that was based on rote memorization or chunk learning. New errors may be based on an emerging ability to extend a particular grammatical form beyond the specific items with which it was first learned. In this sense, an increase in error may be an indication of progress. For example, like first language learners, second language learners usually learn the irregular past tense forms of certain common verbs before they learn to apply the regular simple past *-ed* marker. That means that a learner who says "I buyed a bus ticket" may know more about English grammar than one who says "I bought a bus ticket".

[2] Patsy M. Zightbown and N.Spada. 2006. How language are learned. Oxford University Press.

The one who says "buyed" knows a rule for forming the past tense and has applied it to an irregular verb. Without further information, we cannot conclude that the one who says "bought" would use the regular past *-ed* marker where it is appropriate, but the learner who says "buyed" has provided evidence of developing knowledge of a systematic aspect of English. Teachers and researches cannot read learners' minds, so they must infer what learners know by observing what they do. We observe their spontaneous language use, but we also design procedures that help to reveal more about the knowledge underlying their observable use of language. Without these procedures, it is often difficult to determine whether a particular behavior is representative of something systematic in a learner's current language knowledge or simply an isolated item, learned as a chunk.

Like first language learners, second language learners do not learn language simply through imitation and practice. They produce sentences that are not exactly like those they have heard. These new sentences appear to be based on internal cognitive processes and prior knowledge that interact with the language they hear around them. Both first and second language acquisition are best described as developing systems with their own evolving rules and patterns, not as imperfect versions of the target language.

Children's knowledge of the grammatical system is built up in predictable sequences. For instance, grammatical morphemes such as the *-ing* of the present progressive or the *-ed* of the simple past are not acquired at the same time, but in sequence. Furthermore, the acquisition of certain grammatical features is similar for children in different environments. As children continue to hear and use their language, they are able to revise these systems so that they increasingly resemble the language spoken in their environment. Are there developmental sequences for second language acquisition? How does the prior knowledge of the first language affect the acquisition of the second (or third) language? How does instruction affect second language acquisition? Are there differences between learners whose only contact with the new language is in a language course and those who use the language in daily life? These are some of the questions researches have sought to answer, and we will address them in this research work.

Contrastive analysis, error analysis, and interlanguage

Until the late 1960s, people tended to see second language learners' speech simply as an incorrect version of the target language. According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), errors were often assumed to be the result of transfer from learners' first language. However, not all errors made by second language learners can be explained in terms of first language transfer alone. A number of studies show that many errors can be explained better in terms of learners' developing knowledge of the structure of the target language rather than an attempt to transfer patterns of their first language. Furthermore, some of the errors are remarkably

similar to those made by young first language learners for example, the use of a regular *-ed* past tense ending on an irregular verb.

A simplified version of the CAH would predict that, where differences exist, errors would be bi-directional, that is, for example, French speakers learning English and English speakers learning French would make errors on parallel linguistic features. Helmut Zobl (1980)[3] observed that this is not always the case.

For example, in English, direct objects, whether nouns or pronouns, come after the verb ('The dog eats the cookie. The dog eats it.'). In French, direct objects that are nouns follow the verb (Le chien mange le biscuit – literally, 'The dog ears the cookie'). However, direct object pronouns precede the verb (Le chien le mange – literally, 'The dog it eats'). The CAH would predict that a native speaker of English might make an error of saying: *Le chien mange le* when learning French, and that a native speaker of French might say 'The dog it ate' when learning English. In fact, English speakers learning French are more likely to make the predicted error than French speakers learning English. This may be due to the fact that English speakers learning French hear many examples of sentences with subject –verb – object wo5rd order (for example, Le chien mange le biscuit) and make the incorrect generalization – based on both the word order of their first language and evidence from the second language – that all direct objects come after the verb. French-speaking learners of English, on the other hand hearing and seeing no evidence that English direct object pronouns precede verbs, do not tend to use this pattern from their first language.

Eric Kellerman (1986)[4] and others also observed that learners have intuitions about which language features they can transfer from their first language to the target language and which are less likely to be transferable. For example, most learners believe that idiomatic or metaphorical expressions cannot simply be translated word for word.

As a result of the finding that many aspects of learners' language could not be explained by the CAH, a number of researchers began to take a different approach to analyzing learners' mistakes. This approach, which developed during the 1970s, became known as 'mistake analysis' and involved detailed description and analysis of the kinds of mistakes second language learners make. The goal of this research was to discover what learners really know about the language. As Pit Corder said in a famous article published in 19676 when learners produce 'correct' sentences, they may simply be repeating something they have already heard; when they produce sentences that differ from the target language, we may assume that these sentences reflect the learners' current understanding of the rules and patterns of that language. 'Error analysis' differed from contrastive analysis in that it did not set out to predict errors. Rather, it sought to discover and describe different kinds of mistakes in an effort to understand how learners process second language data. Error analysis was based on the hypothesis that, like child language, second language learner language is a system in its own right – one that is rule-governed and predictable.

Larry Selinker (1972) gave the name INTERLANGUAGE to learners' developing second language knowledge. Analysis of a learner's interlanguage shows that it has some characteristics influenced by previously learned languages, some characteristics of the second language, and some characteristics, such as the omission of function words and grammatical morphemes, that seem to be general and to occur in all or most interlanguage systems. Interlanguages have been found to be systematic, but they are also dynamic, continually evolving as learners receive more input and revise their hypotheses about second language. The path through language acquisition is not necessarily smooth and even. Learners have bursts of progress, then seem to reach a plateau for a while before something stimulates further progress. Selinker also coined the term FOSSILIZATION to refer to the fact that, some features in a learner's language may stop changing. This may be especially true for learners whose exposure to the second language does not include instruction or the kind of feedback that would help them to recognize differences between their interlanguage and the target language.

Analyzing learner language

The following texts were written by two learners of English, one a French-speaking secondary school student, the other a Chinese-speaking adult learner. Both learners were describing a cartoon film entitled *The Great Toy Robbery* (National Film Board of Canada). After viewing the film, they were asked to retell the story in writing, as if they were telling it to someone who had not seen the film.

Read the texts and examine the errors made by each learner. Do they make the same kinds of mistakes? In what ways do the two interlanguages differ?

Learner 1: French first language, secondary school student

During a sunny day, a cowboy go in the desert with his horse, he has a big hat. His horse eat a flour. In the same time, Santa Clause go in a city to give some surprises. You have three robbers in the mountain who sees Santa Clause with a king of glaces that it permitted us to see at a long distance. Every robbers have a horse. They go in the way of Santa Clause, not Santa Clause but his pocket of surprises. After they will go in a city and they go in a saloon. […]

(unpublished data from P.M.Lightbown and B.Barkman)

Learner 2: Chinese first language, adult

This year Christmas comes soon! Santa Claus ride in a one horse open sleigh to sent present for children. On the back of his body has big packet. it have a lot of toys, in the way he meet three robbers. They want to take his big packet. Santa Claus no way and no body help, so only a way give them, then three robbers ride their horse dashing through the town. There have saloon, they go to drink some beer and open the big packent. They play toys in the Bar. They meet a cow boy in the saloon.

(unpublished data provided by M.J.Martens)

Perhaps the most striking thing here is that many error types are common to both learners. Both make errors of spelling and punctuation that we might find in the writing of a young native speaker of English. Even though French uses grammatical morphemes to indicate person and number on verbs and Chinese does not, both these learners make errors of subject – verb agreement, both leaving off the third person

[3] Zobl H. 1980. The formal and developmental selectivity of Z_1 influence on Z_2 acquisition. Language learning. 30/1 : 43-57

[4] Kellerman E. 1986. An eye for an eye: Cross linguistic constraints on the development of the Z_2 lexicon. New York: Pergamon, pp.35-48

-s marker and overusing it when the subject is plural ('a cowboy go' and 'three robbers in the mountain who sees' by Learner 1 and 'Santa Claus ride' and 'they plays' by Learner 2). Such errors reflect learners' understanding of the second language system itself rather than an attempt to transfer characteristics of their first language. They are sometimes referred to as 'developmental' errors because they are similar to those made by children acquiring English as their first language. Sometimes these are errors of overgeneralization, that is, errors caused by trying to use a rule in a context where it does not belong, for example, the *-s* ending on the verb in 'they plays'. Sometimes the errors are better described as SIMPLIFICATION, where elements of a sentence are left out or where all verbs have the same form regardless of person, number, or tense. One can also see, especially in Learner 2's text, the influence of classroom experience. An example is the use of formulaic expression such as 'one horse open sleigh' which is taken verbatim from a well-known Christmas song that had been taught and sung in his ESL class. The vivid 'dashing through the town' probably comes from the same source.

For those who are familiar with the English spoken by native speakers of French, some of the errors (for example, preposition choice 'in the same time') made by the first learner will be seen as probably based on French. Similarly, those familiar with the English of Chinese speakers may recognize some word order patterns (for example, 'on the back of his body has big packet') as based on Chinese patterns. These are called transfer or 'interference' mistakes. What is most clear, however, is that it is often difficult to determine the source of errors. Thus, while error analysis has the advantage of describing what learners actually do rather than what they might do, it does not always give us clear insights into why they do it. Furthermore, as Jacquelyn Schachter[5] pointed out in a 1974 article, learners sometimes avoid using certain features of language that they perceive to be difficult for them. This avoidance may lead to the absence of certain errors, leaving the analyst without information about learners' developing interlanguage. That is, the absence of particular errors is difficult to interpret. The phenomenon of 'avoidance' may itself be a part of the learners' systematic second language performance.

Developmental sequences. Grammatical morphemes

Second language learners, like first language learners, pass through sequences of development: what is learned early by one is learned early by others. Among first language learners, the existence of developmental sequences may not seem surprising because their language learning is partly tied to their cognitive development and to their experiences in learning about relationships among people, events, and objects around them. But the cognitive development of adult or adolescent second language learners is much more stable, and their experiences with the language are likely to be quite different, not only from the experiences of a little child, but also different from each other. Furthermore, second language learners already know another language that has different patterns for creating sentences and word forms. In light of this, it is more remarkable that we find developmental sequences that are similar in the developing interlanguage of learners from different backgrounds and also similar to those observed in first language acquisition of the same language. Moreover, the features of the language that are heard most frequently are not always easiest to learn. For example, virtually every English sentence has one or more articles ('a' or 'the'), but even advanced learners have difficulty using these forms correctly in all contexts. Finally, although the learners' first language does have an influence, many aspects of these developmental stages are similar among learners from many different first language backgrounds.

Grammatical morphemes

Some studies have examined the development of grammatical morphemes by learners of English as a second language in a variety of environments, at different ages, and from different first language backgrounds. In analyzing each learner's speech, researches identify the OBLIGATORY CONTEXTS for each morpheme, that is, the places in a sentence where the morpheme is necessary to make the sentence grammatically correct. For example, in the sentence 'Yesterday I play baseball for two hours', the adverb 'yesterday' creates an obligatory context for a past tense, and 'for two hours' tells us that the required form is a simple past ('played') rather than a past progressive ('was playing'). Similarly, 'two' creates an obligatory context for a plural *-s* on 'hours'. For the analysis, obligatory contexts for each grammatical morpheme are counted separately, that is, one count for simple past, one for plural, one for third person singular present tense, and so on. After counting the number of obligatory contexts, the researcher counts the correctly supplied morphemes. The next step is to divide the number of correctly supplied morphemes by the total number of obligatory contexts to answer the question 'what is the percentage accuracy for each morpheme?' An accuracy score is created for each morpheme, and these can then be ranked from the highest to lowest, giving an ACCURACY ORDER for the morphemes.

The overall results of the studies suggested an order which, while not identical to the developmental sequence found for the first language learners, was similar among second language learners from different first language backgrounds.

For example, most studies showed a higher degree of accuracy for plural than for possessive, and for *-ing* than for regular past (*-ed*). Stephen Krashen summarized the order as shown in Figure 4.1. The diagram should be interpreted as showing that learners will produce the morpheme in higher boxes with higher accuracy than those in lower boxes but that within boxes, there is no clear pattern of difference. The similarity among learners suggests that the accuracy order cannot be described or explained in terms of transfer from the learners' first language, and some researches saw this as strong evidence against the CAH. However, a thorough review of all the 'morpheme acquisition' studies shows that the learners' first language does have an influence on acquisition sequences. For example, learners whose first language has a possessive form that resembles the English *'s* (such as German and Danish) seem to acquire the English possessive earlier than those whose first language has a very difficult way of forming the possessive (such as French or Spanish). And even though 'article' appears early in the sequence, learners from many language backgrounds (including Slavic languages and Japanese) continue to struggle with this aspect of English, even at advanced levels. For example, learners may do well in supplying articles in certain obligatory contexts but not others.

[5] Schachter J. 1974. An error in error analysis. Language Learning 24/2:205-14

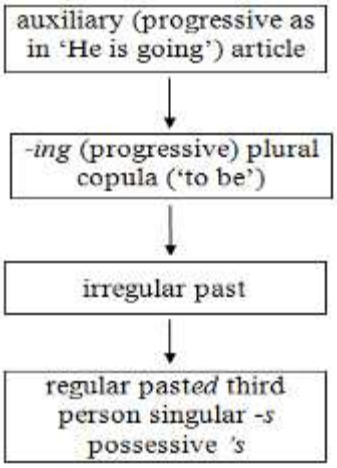

Figure 1 Krashen's (1977)[6] summary of second language grammatical morpheme acquisition sequence

If the language sample that is analyzed contains only the 'easier' obligatory contexts, the learner may have a misleadingly high accuracy score. Another reason why something as difficult as English articles appears to be acquired early is that the order in the diagram is based on the analysis of correct use in obligatory contexts only. It does not take into account uses of grammatical morphemes in places where they do *not* belong, for example when a learner says, 'The France is in Europe'. These issues have led researches to question the adequacy of obligatory context analyses as the sole basis for understanding developmental sequences.

The morpheme acquisition literature raises other issues, not least of them the question of why there should be an order of acquisition for these language features. Some of the similarities observed in different studies seemed to the use of particular tasks for collecting the data, and researchers found that different tasks tended to yield different results. Nevertheless, a number of studies have revealed similarities that cannot be explained by the data collection procedure alone. As with first language acquisition, researches have not found a single simple explanation for the order. Jenifer Goldschneider and Robert De Keyser (2001)[7] reviewed this research.

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