

Second Language Acquisition and Teaching: How the External and Internal Factors Affect SLA

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Abstract. This paper mainly reviews the features of second language acquisition, and the influential factors on second language acquisition, including the influence of first language, metalinguistic awareness, and culture, along with why these factors are important. Analyzing how these factors affect second language acquisition helps to find out what kind of difficulties learners might encounter during the process of second language acquisition. Both external factors and internal factors should be taken into account. Since learners all over the world have different first languages, their first language plays an important role in second language acquisition, which will affect the learners' speed of accepting the second language. For the individual part, metalinguistic awareness which is usually formed at a young age, and can be recognized as a kind of linguistic talent also impact second language acquisition. Additionally, culture is a kind of surroundings during the process of second language acquisition, which will affect the learners' psychological conditions. With the awareness of how these three factors influence second language acquisition, acquires can correct their mistakes more easily, and teachers also should place emphasis on the particular aspects to improve their teaching qualities of the second language.

1. Introduction

Along with the development of globalization, there are increasing opportunities for people to go aboard to complete their studies or work. As a result, more people have to acquire a second language. It is not limited to English or Chinese acquisition, all kinds of languages have the possibility to be acquired as a second language. Because of the complexity of second language acquisition, different kinds of learners may be influenced by their actual states. Studying from certain aspects, it is found that in order to help the learners overcome their common difficulties, it is necessary to consider how their first language differs from their target language, and which part of their first language has the greatest effect on second language acquisition. And their metalinguistic awareness may promote or hinder their second language acquisition. Teachers should also provide a suitable cultural environment for their students. This paper will review how these three factors influence second language acquisition, and why they play such important roles in second language acquisition.

2. The Peculiarities and Methods of Second Language Acquisition

According to Hoque, second language acquisition is learning and acquisition of a second language once one establishes the mother tongue or first language acquisition [1]. Compared with the other social sciences, the origin of SLA makes it special. Johnson claims that instead of being located in the human mind, SLA forms in locally bound dialogical interactions conducted in various sociocultural and institutional settings [2]. In spite of being based on objective facts, SLA is a subject whose main body is acquirers. Ellis asserts that there are many "key issues" related to SLA, and both external and internal factors should be taken into account [3]. Since people usually need to use their mother language and interlanguage to complete the study of the second language, it makes the study more complex and easier to be affected by some inevitable factors. There are objective factors, such as the different manners of articulation, the distinct grammar rule, and so on, while for the subjective ones, the language transfer of people's mother language, meta-linguistic awareness, and cultural differences all play important roles in SLA. According to Lardiere, the second-language acquirer brings a set of (L1) grammatical categories which are already fully assembled to the SLA task [4]. It means that unlike a child

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acquiring a first, SLA is more related to the extent of the combination and configuration of the features between first language and second language. As a result of this phenomenon, learners may face challenges when they try to find out how to correspond the morphosyntactic categories of the target language to their known language.

Additionally, using the “contrastive analysis” method is also a prominent trait in second language teaching and acquisition. The contrastive analysis is a kind of systematic and all-around method. Simply, it takes two or more languages into synchronic and systematic contrast to find out the similarities and differences between them. Wardhaugh argues that contrastive analysis should be separated into two molds: one is the strong notion which considers that all problems predicted by contrastive analysis are caused by the interference between language, and it is also the only reason for the generation of second-language-acquisition difficulty, while the other one is the weak notion which assumes that the contrastive analysis can only explain some of the learners’ mistakes and almost unable to predict them [5]. However, there are different attitudes toward contrastive analysis, cause the method of contrastive analysis is bi-directional while the target of it is uni-directional, it is undeniable that contrastive analysis gives people help with SLA. Recently, in second language classes, teachers usually use contrastive analysis to figure out the difficulty and focus of the target language. But there is one thing should be taken into account that the contrastive analysis probably pays more attention to the linguistic form and the interference between language while ignoring the function of language and the intralingual interference.

Apart from Wardhaugh’s theory, another important theory in the SLA field is called Error Analysis. Corder insists that because learners sometimes can’t completely understand the language rules thoroughly, this phenomenon may lead to a diversion between output language and target language, then Error Analysis appears [6]. Error Analysis theory pays more attention to the language itself because, with time development, contrastive analysis is found that it is not the only reason for explaining the mistakes that show up in the process of SLA. Error Analysis is often regular and also systematic, instead of a simple mistake, what it truly reflects is the linguistic competence of speakers. There are many different types of errors, such as lexical errors, grammar errors, and so on. It’s really normal to make errors during SLA, but most of the errors are related to their interlanguage system because, for both beginners and people who have already studied for some time, their first language always shows a great influence in their acquisition. With the help of Error Analysis, it is much easier for teachers to correct the errors and mention the learners to avoid making these kinds of errors. Consequently, it can improve the initiative and learning efficiency of second language learners, and attract more people to start a second language learning.

3. The Influential Factors Acting on Second Language Acquisition

The reasons for difficulties in SLA are multifarious, and the factors that have obvious effects on SLA not only come from the new language itself- but also are provided by the language environment where students used to stay and the students’ personal linguistic awareness.

3.1. The Influence of First Language on Second Language Acquisition

According to Krashen, the first language plays an important role in SLA, and this phenomenon is called first language “interference” [7]. The first language is developed in the speakers’ native linguistic circumstances. Speakers usually develop their first language at an early age which is also supposed to be the only language they can perceive when they start to master the skill of expressing themselves. In contrast, the second language is often acquired based on their first language system without the linguistic environment of the target language, as a result, the first language plays an important role in the SLA. To a certain degree, the differences between the systems of first and second languages affect the outcome of SLA. If the first language and second language have fewer differences in the system, it will be easier for learners to adapt to the new language and vice versa. However, in most cases, the differences among languages are big, when learners study a second language with a distinct known linguistic system, they get more opportunities to make mistakes.

Krashen argues that if a person has not acquired enough of the second language, they will “fall back” on the old knowledge they know [7]. This phenomenon seems to be a transfer between the first language and the second language. The content of first language transfer can be roughly divided into two parts: one is the linguistic habits of the first language, and the other one is the mistakes learners make in SLA. The two parts have a strong connection with each other. However, in some cases, the transfer between first and second languages contributes a negative effect on SLA, which is called the first language negative transfer, because it is less possible that the first language and second language have a very similar linguistic system. There can be many different conditions in SLA: the first language and second language may be similar in structure which means that some particular structures in the first language can be found in the second language, or some structures in the first language are not valid in the second language or compared with the first language, the second language may have a distinctly different syntactical structure order. More seriously, there is no similarity between the first and second languages. For example, it has been found that there are striking syntactical similarities between Korean, Japanese, and Altaic languages, and the orders of basic words in these languages have been found that they have a lot in common [8]. This research means that if a Japanese wants to study Korean as his second language, it will be easy for him to occupy the grammar in Korean. Another example is in

some particular languages, they divide nouns into feminine nouns and masculine nouns, which should be decorated by specific modifiers, such as German and French, while other languages do not have this kind of classification of nouns like Chinese and English. And Chinese and English sometimes have different syntactical structure orders: “The woman who stands behind the table is drinking water.”, while in Chinese, people often set the position of the modifier in front of the subject. So when people start to learn a new language, they are very likely to be interfered with by their first language. On the other hand, the structural mistakes learners made during the process of SLA are not all originated from the negative transfer of the first language, for instance, when Chinese students are learning irregular verbs in Italian, they probably use the base form of a verb, but this kind of mistakes is no relation with their first language, because, in some areas in south Italy, people there sometimes make the same mistakes.

3.2. The Influence of Metalinguistic Awareness on Second Language Acquisition

Tunmer argues that instead of describing linguistic terms such as phonemes, words, and phrases, metalinguistic awareness tends to help people aware of the instantiations of these terms [9]. It means that metalinguistic awareness refers to an individual’s understanding of the underlying structures and rules of language, and it is also a kind of conscious perception and application of language. It includes phonological awareness, morphological awareness, and orthographic awareness. According to Gillon, phonological awareness shows great intervention in children’s reading and spelling skills and even can predict their potential for literacy achievement [10]. The reason for this conclusion is that phonological awareness is a kind of ability to recognize, compare, divide, compose, and pronounce syllables, initial pronunciation, rhyme, and phonemes. Moreover, Carlisle also asserts that morphological awareness plays an important role in the acquisition of reading skills in the early school years [11]. The early school years are a time that children start to form linguistic awareness of their first language. It can be informed from this that morphological awareness is possible to affect SLA. In addition, orthographic awareness helps people to use visual information to identify words. Every orthographic unit is backlogged into people’s memories with its corresponding phoneme, which can have a positive effect on conveying words. Therefore, from what has been discussed above, every aspect of metalinguistic awareness not only influences first language acquisition, but also plays an essential role in the SLA. Since metalinguistic awareness is usually developed during the process of first language acquisition, it also has an impact on the transfer between the first and second languages.

One specific example that metalinguistic awareness has an impact on SLA is the role it plays in vocabulary acquisition. Individuals with a higher level of metalinguistic awareness are more likely to correspond the words with their meanings, which can aid in the process of

acquiring new vocabulary in a second language. For instance, a learner with high metalinguistic awareness may understand the connection between the word “dog” and “canine,” and this understanding can help them to better remember the meaning of “dog” in the target language. Furthermore, metalinguistic awareness also acts on the ability to draw inferences about other cases from one instance, which means with a higher level of metalinguistic awareness, learners may master vocabulary which is of the same type or has something in common. For instance, if a learner with a higher level of metalinguistic awareness has learned the meaning of “sunrise”, he may quickly make a reaction that how to say “moonrise” in his target language. Another example of the impact of metalinguistic awareness on SLA is in the development of grammar skills. Individuals with a higher level of meta-linguistic awareness are better able to identify and understand the grammatical rules of the target language, which can aid in the acquisition of more complex grammar structures. For example, learners with a high level of metalinguistic awareness may feel easier to match the corresponding grammar points between their first language and target language, such as the words express tense or the modifier, even if the position or the modality of these syntactic components changes dramatically in the target language.

Moreover, the influence of metalinguistic awareness on SLA is a dynamic process, which means that it is hard to measure which aspect of the three is more important than the other two because when the features of a second language are different from the ones of the first language, the relative importance of phonological awareness, morphological awareness, and orthographic awareness will change. Which part of metalinguistic awareness tends to be the most important one depends on what kind of language the learners acquire.

3.3. The Influence of Acculturation on Second Language Acquisition

Mazari and Derraz assert that language is a branch of culture that has a distinct nature, and language also has a historical relationship with the ethnic group so that people with the same ancestors have the same language [12]. People who speak the same language often live in convergent areas, which means that they are supposed to be affected by the local culture. So compared with other academic subjects, SLA is not just affected by the target language itself, the cultural factors also need to be taken into account. When learners try to master a new language, it is also a process of accepting a new culture for them, as a result, acculturation seems to be important. Acculturation can be divided into four distinct patterns: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization, and these four aspects are connected with differing levels of acculturative stress and adaptation difficulties [13]. These factors also have a strong link with the acquisition of a new language. According to the relationship between culture and language, no one can accept a language without getting in

touch with its culture, which has an unconscious influence on learners.

3.3.1. *Social Distance and Acculturation*

Social distance is the second language learners' relative status in the group of the target language. There is a positive association between the stronger motivation for interaction with a target language group, the frequency of inter-group contact students made (i.e., social distance), and the degree to which the second language group was held in positive regard [13]. So social distance has a direct impact on the learners' psychological factors. There are many specific aspects. For example, the learners' and target language group's social ladders will affect social distance, when they have more equal social ladders, which means that compared with the target language group, the learners have a little gap in political, economic, and technical domains. When a person is studying a new language, he is trying to integrate himself with the culture of the target language. Therefore, it is not hard to see less social distance means easier for learners to accept and adapt to a new language.

3.3.2. *Psychology Distance and Acculturation*

Compared with social distance, psychological distance tends to express learners' own overall psychological feelings about the culture and the language of the target group. The level of open-mindedness of the language learner also has a link with the motivation for SLA [13]. It means that if a learner has a higher level of cultural receptivity and can eliminate more psychological depression about the culture of a second language, he will be more motivated to accept the second language. Krashen provides us a vivid example that a missionary who had become an expert in the grammar of his target language, he never spoke it though. The reason for this phenomenon was that he was afraid to make a mistake that might expose his background [13]. Therefore, accurate mastery of the second language is important, but a higher level of open-mindedness may mean more practice and can learn a lesson from their mistake which can help second language acquirers yield twice the result with half the effort.

4. Conclusion

This review analyses the particularity of second language acquisition, two frequently-used second language acquisition methods: Contrastive analysis and Error Analysis, and three influential factors on second language acquisition: first language interference, metalinguistic awareness, and acculturation. First-language interference is a kind of phenomenon in that learners will fall back to their first language when acquiring a second language. Metalinguistic awareness is the linguistic ability formed when the learners master their first language. Acculturation is the degree to which learners adapt to the culture of the second language. Additionally, in the process of SLA, these factors are not isolated, they interact with each other instead.

Therefore it is important for learners to balance the second language and its culture. While for teachers, they should fully respect individual differences, especially the difference in learners' metalinguistic awareness and native culture, in order to strengthen the students' motivation, enhance the teaching quality, along with help learners overcome their anxiety and fear originating from cultural differences.

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