Lecture 7   Introduction to second language acquisition

Level: Master one   by Dr. Chelli

Lecture Objectives: This lecture helps students to understand

- **second language theories and**

- **how second language is processed**

Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) involves a wide range of language learning settings and learners characteristics and circumstances. Different approaches to the study of SLA have developed from different disciplinary perspectives including the linguistic, psychological and social ones. They attempted to answer three basic questions: What exactly does the L2 learner come to know? How does the learner acquire this knowledge? And why are some learners more (or less) successful than others? (Troike, 2016, p. 5). This lecture will present an overview of some of the theories and models developed in the field of SLA as well as the processes involved in learning a second language.

1. The scope of second language acquisition

The scope of SLA includes:

- Informal L2 learning that takes place in naturalistic contexts (a subconscious process which occurs very naturally in a non-threatening environment).

- Formal L2 learning that takes place in classrooms.

- L2 learning that involves a mixture of these settings and circumstances.

There are no simple answers to the questions posed previously and not a common agreement about them because in part, SLA is highly complex in nature, and in part because scholars in the field come from academic disciplines which differ greatly in theory and research methods. In spite of the development of the disciplinary approach to studying SLA, many mysteries remain (Troike, 2006). SLA has emerged as a field of study primarily within linguistics and psychology to answer the **what**, **how** and **why** of the previous questions. There are corresponding differences in what is emphasized by researchers who come from each of these fields:

- **Linguists** emphasize the characteristics of the differences and similarities in the languages that are being learned, and the **linguistic competence** (underlying knowledge) and **linguistic performance** (actual production) of learners at various stages of acquisition.

- **Psychologists and psycholinguists** emphasize the mental process involved in acquisition, and the representation of language (s) in the brain.

- **Sociolinguists** emphasize variability in learner linguistic performance, and they extend the scope of the study to communicative competence (underlying knowledge that additionally for language use, or **pragmatic competence**.

- **Social psychologists** emphasize group-related phenomena, such as **identity and social motivation, and the interactional and larger social context of learning** (Troike, 2006, p.3).

In sum,

- **Linguistic** frameworks differ in taking an internal or external focus on language.

- **Psychological** frameworks differ in whether they focus on languages and the brain, on learning processes, or on individual differences;

- **Social** frameworks differ in placing their emphasis on micro or macro factors in learning.

All of these complement each other in order to understand the multi-dimensional processes involved in SLA.

2. Theories and models of second language acquisition

SLA is also concerned with the nature of the hypotheses (whether conscious or unconscious) that learners come up with regarding the rules of the second language. Are the rules like those of the native language? Are they like the rules of the language being learned? Are there patterns that are common to all learners regardless of the native language and regardless of the language being learned? Do the rules created by second language learners vary according to the context of rules… Given these varied questions, the study of SLA draws not only from linguistics, psychology, psycholinguistics and sociology, but also from discourse analysis, conversational analysis and education, to name a few (Gass and Selinker, 2008). This is why, there are numerous approaches from which to examine second language data, each of which brings to the study of SLA its goal, its own data-collection methods and its own analytical tools. A summary of the main approaches to second language acquisition is presented below:

Theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

- Behaviorism
  - Skinner
  - Habit formation (stimulus and response; positive reinforcement)
- Innatist perspective
  - Chomsky
    - Universal Grammar; Language Acquisition Device
  - Krashen's Hypotheses
- Cognitive/Developmental Perspective (Psychological Theories)
  - Interaction
  - Input processing
- Sociocultural Perspective
  - Vygotsky
  - Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP)

A set of models have been suggested to explain the processes involved in acquiring a second language, among them, krashen's input hypothesis (innatist model), Mc Laughlin's cognitive model and Long's interactionist hypothesis, a socio-constructivist model.

2.1. Krashen (1982) proposed 5 Interrelated hypotheses: The acquisition-learning hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis , the input hypothesis and the affective hypothesis

According to The acquisition-learning hypothesis, we have two different ways of developing ability in another language: We can acquire language and we can learn language. On the one hand, language acquisition occurs **subconsciously** and on the other hand, learning a language is a **conscious process**. It is important also to mention that error correction is supposed to help learning because when we make mistakes and are corrected, we are supposed to change our conscious version of a certain rule. Krashen (2013) explains that fluency in second language performance is due to what we have acquired, not what we have learned and that our conscious

learning processes and our subconscious acquisition processes are mutually exclusive: learning cannot be acquisition. In sum, this theory claims that acquired language results in fluent communication.

We acquire (not learn) the parts of a language in a predictable order. Some grammatical items, for example are learned early while others are acquired later. A consciously learned language is only available to us as a monitor, or editor. The monitor is a kind of fundamental grammatical editing function that regulates or alters the way that a person uses a second language verbally. In other words, the ability to produce language fluently and easily comes from what we have acquired. The grammar rules we learned at school have only one function: They act as a monitor, or editor, which is involved in learning, not in acquisition. In sum, it is a device for 'watchdogging' one's output for editing and making alterations or corrections as they are consciously perceived.

According to the input hypothesis/ the comprehension hypothesis, we acquire language when we understand messages that contain aspects of language (vocabulary/ grammar) we have not yet acquired, but we are ready to acquire; that is, we understand the language we hear or read when we receive comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003). The **i+1** formula symbolizes how comprehensible input works: messages in the language must make sense, just beyond the competence of the learner, who must strain a bit cognitively to understand.

The last hypothesis, called the affective filter hypothesis, refers to the fact that affective variables prevent input from reaching language device (Krashen, 2013). This means that learners' emotional state can act as a filter that prevents or blocks input, necessary for language acquisition. Learners with low anxiety, for example, acquire the second language better than those with a high level.

Assignment 1: Can you explain the diagram below.
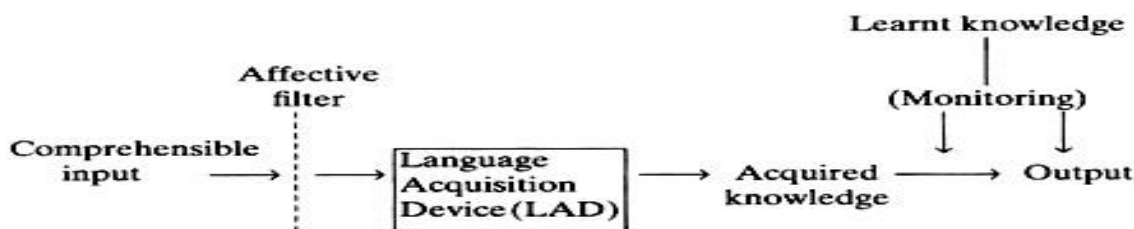
The Input Hypothesis Model of L2 learning and production (adapted from Krashen, 1982, pp. 16 and 32; and Gregg, 1984)

2.2. McLaughlin's information processing model

The earlier view of Information processing models central assumption is that the mind is a general-purpose symbol-processing system. Its capacity as processor is limited; therefore, it is compared as a slow computer with a limited RAM. The refined model finds that conscious tasks require attention, which is limited (memory, processing power) and automatic processes no longer require resources for other conscious tasks. According to the processing approach, you learn the rules (explicitly?), you practice them over and over and eventually, they become automatic.

McLanghlin argues that learning an L2 involves moving from controlled to automatic processing via practice. McLaughlin (1990a, cited in Gass and Selinker, 2008) noted two fundamental concepts in second language learning use: automaticity and restructuring. The former refers to control over one's linguistic knowledge. In language performance, one must bring to either a number of skills from perceptual, cognitive, and social domains. The more each of these is routinized, the greater the ease with which they can be put to use. The latter refers to the changes made to internalized representations as a result to new learning.

In order to learn a second language, which is viewed as a complex cognitive skill, various aspects of the task must be practised and integrated in fluent performance. Therefore, this requires the automatization of sub-skills. As performance improves, there is a constant restructuring as learners simplify, unify and gain an

increasing control over the internal representations. These notions- automatization and restructuring are central to cognitive theory (McLaughlin, 1987, pp133-134.).

Conscious- controlled- processing puts lots demands on the learners' cognitive skills and the short-term memory, which limits what can be consciously learned. Even a very simple sentence requires a lot of controlled processing by early learners. But eventually, such simple sentences can be said or written automatically, leaving room for new structures to be consciously processed, because they can be accessed rapidly as they are stored in the long-term memory. This means that a learner's interlanguage is being restructured as items move from the short-term memory to the long-term memory. However, if some of them move earlier, this can lead to fossilization of errors.

2.3. A socioconstructivist model: Long's interaction hypothesis

In Long's view, interaction and input are two major players in the process of acquisition and conversation and interactive communication are the basics for fluent linguistic rules. Input is considered as the result of modified interaction; learners learn new forms in a language through the negociation of meaning that occurs when they engage in communication and communicative activities. Long (1983) argues that modified interaction is the necessary mechanism for making language comprehensible, what learners need is not necessarily simplification of the language forms, but rather an opportunity to interact with other speakers , working together to reach mutual comprehension.

The social constructivist perspective emphasizes the dynamic nature of the interplay between learners and their teachers and others with whom they interact. Furthermore, Long's hypothesis centres on language classroom that is not only as a place where learners of varying abilities, styles and background mingle, but also as a place where the contexts for interaction are carefully designed.

3. Second language acquisition stages

In order to acquire a second language, learners pass from a **pre-production** stage to an advanced one. At the pre-production stage, the learner listens and absorbs the sounds and rhythms of the language. Then, he can respond with gestures or physical actions. This technique, called Total Physical Response, actively involves learners in responding to spoken language. After that, they can start pronouncing words. At the **early stage**, the learner produces single words and two to three word phrases. Many learners enjoy repeating simple rhymes or songs, which can help them refine their awareness of the sound system. In this kind of stage, they need a safe and comfortable atmosphere to encourage oral language.

At the **speech emergency** stage, the learner experiments more freely with the language, combining words and phrases. In this stage, errors are obvious because of the complexity of speech. In the **intermediate fluency** stage, the learner is capable of initiating and sustaining conversation. Many learners are capable of speaking with intermediate fluency, but they still have large gaps in vocabulary and syntax. Therefore, this fluency does not imply academic fluency. In the advanced stage, the learner reaches a near native level of speech.

4. Factors influencing second language acquisition

Numerous factors can affect second language acquisition among them:

- Motivation

- Age

- Access to the language

- Personality

- First language development

- Quality of instruction

- Cognitive ability

The relation between a learner's age and his/her potential success in second language is complex and controversial. This needs to take into account his/her cognitive development, his motivation , his goal for learning

and the context in which the learner learns including the quantity and quality of language input, the learning environment, the time allotted to learning and the socio-cultural context in which learning takes place.

5. Test yourself

A. Develop a paragraph in no more than ten lines about the following.

- In your experience as a language learner, which characteristics seem to you most likely to be associated with success? (

- if you learn something about a language really well, have you acquired it, or learned it (McLaughlin, 1987)?

- Explain Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) with illustration.

- Is there a difference between the ZDP and i+1?

- explain the table in which McLaughlin illustrating information processing (attention to formal properties of language).

B. Write and essay in which you compare first acquisition and second acquisition referring to the theories used in each one as well as how language is processed.

References

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Krashen,S. (1982). Principles and practice in second language acquisiton. New York: Pergamon Press.

Krashen, S. (2013). Second language acquisition, applications, and some conjectures. Cambridge:Cambridge University Press.

McLaughlin, 1987. (1987). Theories of second language learning. London: Edward Arnold.

Troike, M.S (2016). Introducing second language acquisition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Further reading

Cognitive models you are provided with.