

Key Elements of Effective Second Language Learning

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効果的第2言語学習に必要な重要項目

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概 要

言語を学ぶこと、特に第二言語を学ぶことはかなりの時間と労力を要する功績であり、どのように第二言語を学ぶべきかを理解することも同様である。実のところ、第二言語習得のメカニズムを人類はまだ完全に把握してはいないのである。この分野における専門家たちが考え出した言語習得理論や教授論が数多く存在するが、その中から特に重要だと考えられる項目をこの論文の中で紹介する。始めに、普遍文法理論や臨界期説を取り上げ、且つ実践調査研究の実例を挙げながら、第一言語習得と第二言語習得の違いを説明する。そして、第二言語習得においてとりわけ重要な言語関連要素(インプットと中間言語、アウトプット、対話、そして社会文化理論からの ZPD や共同学習)と非言語関連要素(動機と自信、不安)をそれぞれ分析する。このような要素が関連し合って、言語習得が成立していくのであり、それはパズルを組み立てていく様に類似している。

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, English Language Teaching, Language Learning theories

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How do people learn language? This is the main issue in the field of second language acquisition as well as first language acquisition. There are numerous methodologies and theories regarding this issue developed in an insightful and astute manner by a great number of researchers including linguists, psycholinguists, teaching professionals and sociolinguists. However, no one can determine for sure which one is the right answer on this issue because no one can prove exactly what happens inside one's brain in language acquisition.

In this paper, as a teaching professional, I would like to present my position statement on adult second language learning and teaching. A great number of studies have been conducted, producing new ideas one after another in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). It seems very difficult to make a stand on what is the best among numerous and expanding theories and methodologies. However, I would like to position myself in this field with the help of empirical support and my own experience as a language learner and teacher. First, I would like to refer to child first language acquisition. Children during the critical period can acquire any language with

the help of an innate linguistic faculty. Then, I discuss how adults learn second language as compared to child language learning in conjunction with appropriate language pedagogies. Unlike children, adults construct grammar of a second language with the help of cognitive ability and their first language. I also present some nonlanguage factors that have to do with successful SLA such as motivation, self-confidence and anxiety.

First Language Acquisition

To begin with, we should consider child first language acquisition. Children, in general, are successfully able to reach a complete level of their native language competence, a phenomenon known as equipotentiality (Schachter, 1988). A normal child born without any mental disability can easily learn any language (Chomsky, 1997). But what is it that makes it happen ? Chomsky (1965) maintains that any language's grammar is too complex for children to learn only by receiving the language that is available to learners known as input. This observation is known as the poverty of the stimulus. Given that a child normally achieves the complete attainment of the first language despite that input alone doesn't provide enough information to fully understand the complex structure of language, it is reasonable to think that human beings are born with an innate language faculty that enables them to reach a state of complete competence of their native language. Chomsky (1965) also states that the properties of an innate language faculty known as Universal Grammar (UG) are triggered by input and come into play to fill in where input fails. UG is "the system of principles, conditions, and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages" (Chomsky, 1975, p.29). Thus, children acquire complex grammar of their first language with the help of UG.

This is not the case with adult SLA. Given that most adult second language learners cannot achieve the same degree of proficiency in a second language as they do in their first language, it is evident that adult SLA is different from first language acquisition. Then, what makes them so different ?

As mentioned above, children can heavily rely on the help of an innate linguistic faculty such as UG. What is significant in second language acquisition is whether or not an adult learner can rely on the innate faculty as well. Johnson and Newport (1989) conducted an interesting study in which they examined the relationship between immigrants' age of exposure to English and their degree of English proficiency. Their study provides us with valuable insights.

The study reports that the participants who immigrated in America and began acquiring English at an earlier age generally demonstrated native-like proficiency in English on a test. On the other hand, those who began later were not able to obtain as high scores as the former groups did. These results show that people who start learning English at an earlier age can learn language better than the counterparts who started later. In other words, these results suggest that there exists a certain period of time known as the critical period during which human beings can acquire native or native-like competence in second language ; however, they face more difficulty after the period. In addition, Johnson and Newport found that there was a wide range of individual variation in terms of proficiency achieved by those who began learning English at a later age. After the critical period, age is no more the prime factor of SLA.

In sum, the study suggests that human beings appear to be equipped with an innate language faculty in childhood irrespective of their first or second language, but it seems to gradually cease from operating after the critical period. Importantly, Johnson and Newport (1989) maintain that “language does not become totally unlearnable during adulthood” (p.111). Even though the innate language faculty appears not to function, humans can learn second language in a different way from children’s.

Key Components of Second Language Acquisition

Input

SLA starts by being exposed to the second language. That is, learners need to receive input. Although input is essential for acquiring either first or second language (Long, 1996) , input plays a more significant role in SLA. Besides, input should be understandable for learners. Learning cannot take place without understanding the meaning of linguistic information. For example, when I was a beginner of English, I was completely unable to understand what native speakers of English were saying to each other. I couldn’t understand even one word. I didn’t learn anything from their conversation after all. I suppose that almost all language learners have had similar experiences in early time of their learning. Linguistic information needs to be associated with meaning. Otherwise, learning doesn’t take place at all. As a result, input must be at an appropriate level of difficulty for learners.

Krashen (1985) maintains that second languages are acquired “by understanding messages, or by receiving ‘comprehensible input’” (p.2). According to his theory, the Monitor Model, comprehen-

sible input is language that is a little ahead of the learner's current level of competence, i.e., $i + 1$ (Krashen, 1985). Although this definition is too ambiguous to fathom exactly what the learners' slightly next levels ($i + 1$) are (McLaughlin, 1987), as a pedagogical implication it is important for teachers to take into consideration the level of difficulty of input in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and rate (or speed) of speech so that input should be understandable for learners. For example, modification and simplification of language (e.g., foreigner talk) are helpful, depending on contexts in which learners are situated. In particular, foreigner talks including slow speech rate, simple vocabulary, simple structure, and omission of slang would help beginner learners to understand language better.

Interlanguage

In learning a second language, people construct their own linguistic system in their mind called interlanguage. An interlanguage is an internalized system that the learners create by imposing structure on the basis of available linguistic data (Gass & Selinker, 2001). As for child language acquisition, UG plays an essential role in constructing grammar of any language. On the other hand, adult learners employ their cognitive ability and the knowledge of the grammar of their first language instead of UG. As a result, adult learners tend to rely on their native language in SLA (Lado, 1957). Therefore, an interlanguage is greatly influenced by the learner's native language in terms of syntax, phonology, semantics, morphology, and pragmatics. An interlanguage assumes "many features carried over the learner's mother tongue" (Trask, 1997, p.115). Mitchell and Myles (1998) state that "everyday observation tells us that learners' performance in a second language is influenced by the language, or languages, that they already know" (p.13). To give an example, it was found that Chinese and Japanese speakers learning English often overproduced topic-comment structures such as "As for meat, we don't eat it anymore." (Schachter & Rutherford, 1979, cited in Gass & Selinker, 2001, p.125). It is likely that this is because topic-comment structures are commonly used in both their first languages.

Given that learners are strongly influenced by their native language, teachers can design a syllabus in which focus can be placed on the differences between the native language and the target language. To take an example, the teacher can focus Japanese speakers learning English on the particularly difficult phonemes for them such as [f] [v] [r] [θ] and [ð]. For another example, Japanese learners tend to overuse expressions of regret such as "I am sorry" in many inappropriate cases. The teacher should bear in mind that direct translation from another lan-

guage into English doesn't necessarily make sense and language must be learned with the specific contexts in which it is used (Gee, 1999). It is very reasonable for teachers to focus learners' attention on the particular parts that are difficult to learn. By so doing, students can notice the need for phonetic, phonological, pragmatic, and discursive training.

As mentioned above, an interlanguage tends to be influenced by the mother tongue to some extent. According to Principles and Parameters theory underlying UG (Chomsky, 1981), it is because parameters have already been set for learners' mother tongues. For example, French word order allows the following types: subject (S) Verb (V) Object (O) Adverb (A), SVAO and ASVO, but not SAVO. Native speakers of French conform to this rule, meaning that the adjacency parameter has been set.

One important thing for second language learning is how it is possible to reset a parameter. According to White's (1991) study on adverb placement in French and English, exposure involving positive evidence (i.e., "models of what is grammatical and acceptable" in the target language) (Long, 1996, p.413) didn't allow the Francophone learners to reset the adjacency parameter set for their native language. On the other hand, explicit instructions involving negative evidence that tells learners "a particular utterance is deviant vis-à-vis target language norms" (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p.282) had a short-term effect on resetting the parameter. This means that negative evidence helps learners notice a mismatch between what they produce/know and what native speakers of the target language produce. Learners generally keep making errors because they don't notice that they are making errors until negative evidence is given. Although the study shows that learners were not able to retain the correct knowledge of the form until one year later, it is possible that those participants might not have been psycholinguistically "ready" to reset the adjacency parameter. In any case, this study tells us that negative evidence plays a significant role in helping learners notice a gap between their interlanguage and the target language, which leads to successful second language acquisition (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Sasaki, 1998).

Attention

What is essential for noticing is attention. Without attention, learning doesn't come into being. According to Long (1996), attention is a prerequisite for noticing, which leads learners to grammatical development. Therefore, it is a key for teachers to involve learners' attention in classroom instruction.

On the basis of White's (1991) study and my own experience as a language learner and language

teacher, it is reasonable to say that explicit grammar instruction has a useful function in second language teaching to adult learners. Unlike children, adults have already developed an intact first language, cognitive ability, and metalinguistic knowledge. Clear explanation on grammatical rules can help them understand complicated grammar of second language. However, “explicit instruction” can take many forms, not all of which are valuable. An instruction method such as focus on form is one that effectively focuses learners’ attention on form during a meaning-focused activity. Based on the results of a survey conducted by Ellis (2002) that seven studies of Focus on Form had an effect on communicative language use despite that neither two studies of Focus on FormS nor two studies of Focus on Form showed any effect, he maintains that explicit instruction can have “a significant effect on the accuracy of use of grammatical structures (p.231).

Output

Another important factor in successful adult SLA is for learners to engage in output (i.e., production of language). When receiving input by hearing some linguistic information, learners can interpret its meaning without fully understanding its syntax, which is indispensable for language acquisition. For example, if one hears disparate words “a hamburger” “you” “ate” regardless of the order in which one hears those words, one can in all probability interpret the meaning of those words that “you ate a hamburger,” instead of interpreting them as “A hamburger ate you.” Thus, the knowledge of syntax is scarcely involved in interpreting the meaning of words.

Output, on the other hand, requires the knowledge of syntax. I often hear language learners saying that they can hear much better than they speak. I think that such a phenomenon is evidence that comprehension and production are different levels of competence, implying that speaking requires more knowledge about language than listening. When producing language, one has to fully deploy knowledge of syntax, morphology, semantics, phonology, phonetics, pragmatics, speech events, and discourse. Swain (1995) maintains that “output may stimulate learners to move from the semantic, open-ended, nondeterministic, strategic processing prevalent in comprehension to the complete grammatical processing needed for accurate production. Output, thus, would seem to have a potentially significant role in the development of syntax and morphology” (p.128).

Interaction

Thus, based on the arguments above, both input and output are essential factors for adult SLA. Therefore, it is desirable for teachers to engage learners in both input and output. For example, interaction enables learners to have such a desirable opportunity. Language is a medium of

communication. Language learning is enhanced through interactive communication. Interaction is sustained by exchange of a great deal of input and output. During interaction, negotiation by participants would likely take place when a communication breakdown happens. Negotiation of this sort makes learners receive understandable input (e.g., modified and simplified input and repetition) , and produce language (e.g., making comments, asking questions, clarification checks, confirmation checks, and so forth). Long (1996) states that “negotiation for meaning, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the NS [native speaker] or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways” (p.452). Thus, interaction facilitates learners’ comprehension of input and production of language.

Interaction also requires participants’ attention and involvement. Attention leads learners to notice both new forms and mismatches between input and output. Interaction also can provide an opportunity for learners to search for additional confirmatory or nonconfirmatory evidence that enhances internalization of input.

Interaction in the classroom that involves teachers and peers such as pair work and group activity has great potential for SLA. When a learner works on a task with support from someone else such as peers or a teacher, the learner may outperform his/her present competence by accomplishing the task that seems too difficult for him/her. From the sociocultural perspective, human beings have potential known as “zone of proximal development (ZPD)” to be able to outperform their present competence when working collaborately with others (Lantolf, 2000). According to Vygotsky (1978) , ZPD is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p.86). There is evidence that interaction in the classroom enables learners to exercise their ZPDs. Ohta (2000) witnessed two learners, Becky and Hal, collaborately tackle a task in her language classroom. She reports that “through the process of receiving developmentally appropriate assistance, Becky, who had the greater difficulty with the task, dramatically improves in her use of a difficulty construction” (p.52). Thus, learners have the potential for language development through “a collaborative process called scaffolding” (Ohta, 2000, p.52).

Swain (2000) introduces a new phase of interaction, by using a case in which two learners of French worked on a task together. In doing a task, an utterance produced by a participant made

them realize what they didn't know. Then they made hypotheses, tested them out, and eventually reached new linguistic knowledge. According to Swain, "collaborative dialogue is dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building. It heightens the potential for exploration of the product" (p.102). Thus, learners can stretch their interlanguage while interacting with each other.

Nonlanguage factors

Motivation

Furthermore, I would like to state that there are nonlanguage factors that have much to do with successful adult SLA (e.g., motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, social distance and prestige, willingness to communicate, etc). These factors may be responsible for individual differences. Although those factors are not necessarily independent from one another, there is empirical evidence that those nonlanguage factors affect SLA (Lefkowitz & Hedgcock, 2002 ; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement & Conrod, 2001 ; Schmidt, 1983 ; Spratt, Humphreys & Chan, 2002). From my own teaching experience at secondary schools in Japan, I can confirm that such factors definitely influenced the students' learning. Although I don't refer to all of them, an influential factor among them is motivation or a lack thereof. It goes without saying that the degree of motivation varies from learner to learner. Whereas highly motivated students advanced steadily, I watched some students with no motivation learned very little. I tried to motivate those unmotivated students in vain. They ended up arguing that they had no need to learn any foreign language because they didn't use it outside the classroom.

Self-confidence

I assume that motivation must arise out of a learner him/herself. However, teacher can have some effect on learners' motivation. Although most learners have motivation to learn second language, desire to accomplish a goal, effort, attitude can vary over time (Gardner, 1985). Motivation is related to a number of factors such as self-confidence. When I was a teacher, I met a learner who had motivation to learn a second language (foreign) language. One day he got worse marks on a test than he had expected. This incident caused him to lose his self-confidence. By losing self-confidence, he also lost motivation to learn the language. Since I noticed him lose self-confidence, I praised him whenever he answered correctly in lessons. He gradually restored self-confidence and finally motivated himself again. It is very important for a learner to have

self-confidence that he/she can achieve a goal because learning a second language requires considerable amount of time and efforts. Self-confidence will help learners hold the hope of being eventually successful in language learning. Without self-confidence, the learner cannot accomplish the goal.

Anxiety

Anxiety also has to do with successful second language classroom. If learners have too much anxiety in lessons, desirable outcome is not expected (Hoffman, 1986). Teachers should strive to make a class safe, comfortable, respectful environment in which learners can take risks without being afraid of making a mistake. I believe that language learners often learn from their own mistakes because they make mistakes and then receive feedback containing valuable information from their interlocutors. In a sense, language learning resembles completing a puzzle. Like a puzzle, a learner first collects pieces of linguistic information and places them one by one so that each piece connects with one another. He/She has to find missing blanks and incorrect pieces in his/her interlanguage. Then he/she has to fill in the blanks with correct information and replace the wrong pieces with right ones, thereby constructing his/her interlanguage into a target-like one. There are several possible ways for learners to find what information is missing or incorrect in their interlanguage. As noted above, it is definitely obvious that learners can do so through making mistakes.

Conclusion

To find out an effective method of language learning is for me to solve a difficult puzzle. I have not yet finished it. But I have shown the puzzle halfway done in this paper. I at first have presented child first language acquisition. I mainly have discussed how adult SLA takes place in conjunction with pedagogical implications. I also have presented that nonlanguage factors also have an effect on adult successful SLA, resulting in individual differences. In sum, learning a second language is an exceptionally complex issue especially for adults in which a variety of factors are intricate. It is evident that there is no monolithic methodology and pedagogy for SLA. I believe that further research will contribute to further developed theories of second language learning and teaching. Although I have stated my current position in SLA, my understanding of SLA will continue developing as further research takes place.

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