

THEORIES IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

Several theories have been developed to account for Second Language Acquisition and Learning in ESL contexts. This paper examines them with close attention to their strengths and weaknesses inherent in them. Equally, central to the objective of this exercise is the distinction between theory and hypothesis.

Keywords: *Theories, Hypothesis, Second language acquisition, Model*

INTRODUCTION

There has been no shortage of theorizing about Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The research literature abounds in approaches, theories, models, laws and principles. It is arguable that there has been a superfluity of theorising. Schouten quoted by Rod Ellis, for instance, claim "...in a second language learning, too many models have been built and taken for granted too soon, and this has stifled relevant research" (Ellis, Rod 1997: 10).

Before return to the focus of this exercise, it is pertinent to explicitly define the concept of theory, model, hypothesis and Second Language Acquisition theories, hence, SLA theories.

The word *Theory* comes from a Greek verb *theoria* meaning "contemplate". Though scholars may disagree on the finer point of theory, all would seem to agree on a basic definition that theory is an organized system of accepted knowledge that applies in a variety of circumstances to explain a specific set of phenomena. Theories can incorporate facts, laws and tested hypotheses.

A model is a tool used to facilitate theory construction, typically a written or graphic representation of a theory or one of its components (Shoemaker, Tankard & Lasorsa, 2004: 24). A model however, does not explain things; it merely illustrates or provides a method to explore a theory. Theories in Second Language Acquisition therefore, are various theories and hypotheses in the field of Second Language Acquisition about how people learn and acquire a second language (Wikipedia).

It should be noted that in the field of language and acquisition research, there are many linguists with different views on the various laws that should guide the practice of SLA, though differ in nomenclatures but similar in approach. This paper focuses on the four major perspectives central to SLA research and five others briefly described; the behaviourist, the innatist, the interactionist, the cognitive, the acculturation model, accommodation theory, the variable competence model, discourse theory and the neurofunctional theory. At this junction therefore, it is important to state that not all the theories and hypotheses are exhausted, but we have tried our best to sieve out the ones most central to the study from others.

THEORIES IN ESL ACQUISITION AND LEARNING

BEHAVIOURIST THEORY: This theory came into common use in the 1950's and 1960's after the research from Lado (1945), Skinner (1957), and Weinreich (1953) demonstrated the operant conditioning as a way that humans learn language (Freeman 2007: 773-870). Behaviourists submit that language acquisition is basically a stimulus-response conditioning method, a mechanistic process that require the student to give the correct response to a given stimuli with immediate feedback to the student. This theory has influenced the second language teaching in a number of ways that persist today in classrooms. One behaviourist language teaching method popular in the 1960s is the audiolingual method, in which dialogues are presented on tapes for

students to memorise, followed by pattern drills for practicing verb forms and sentence structures. Students are first taught to listen and speak and then write based on the assumption that this is the natural sequence in first language acquisition and the process in learning a second language consisted of imitation, repetition and reinforcement of grammatical structures. Errors were to be corrected immediately to avoid forming bad habits that would be difficult to overcome later.

Chomsky (1959), amongst other researchers, has refuted the behaviourist theory because the process does not explain how a student is able to make cognitive leap past the trained responses into the unknown. There are three main stages in language acquisition; understanding, drill and application (Chastain 1970). The behaviourist deals with the two levels but not the third. However, just because the theory does not develop the three stages of language development, it can still be useful. At the high school level, for instance, students need to practice phonology and drilling, so the stimulus – response method will be helpful.

INNATIST THEORY: This theory also known as the mentalist or nativist theory, the best known and most influential proponent of the innatist is Noam Chomsky. In his famous review of Skinner's book, *Verbal Behaviour*, he pointed out that imitation and SR-theories (SR = stimulus-response) of learning fail to explain how people come to produce sentences which they never heard before. He is of the view that cognition plays a decisive part in creating the ability to produce an unlimited number of sentences with the knowledge of a limited number of grammatical rules. He calls this ability language competence and distinguishes it from performance, which is the actual use of language which under the heat of communication exchanges or when people are under stress may lead to grammatically faulty sentences. The innatist theory states that learning is natural for human beings, they believe that babies enter the world with a biological propensity, an inborn device, to learn language (Piper 76). This human built in device for learning language has been coined the LAD-Language Acquisition Device. The innatist theory explains how children can generate or invent language they have never heard before. Researcher, Noam Chomsky backed this theory stating that children use the LAD to generate and invent complex speech (Universal Grammar).

Explaining how language learning on a cognitive basis raises the question, however, how children come to know the categories of rules of grammar which they need for a creative production of sentences. In that context the 'logical problem of language acquisition' and 'poverty of their input argument' prompt researchers like Chomsky, Fordor, and Steven Pinker to argue that languages are not learned like any other complex faculty but 'acquired' on the basis of innate knowledge of grammatical principles contained in the LAD. In the later version of Chomskyan theories the LAD is renamed the Universal Grammar. The protagonist of this nativist position of language acquisition aims to explain first language acquisition not second language acquisition based on the LAD which can only be ignited once in a lifetime but the truth is, though, that nativist theories have definitely influenced theories on the so called second language acquisition and they have indirectly had an effect on theories of SLA, a prominent example is the Krashen theory (Anderson 93) also called the comprehensible input hypothesis, or the monitor model (Ellis 1997: 249).

Continuing in the innatist tradition, Stephen Krashen (1982) a series of hypotheses about second language acquisition, Krashen's five hypotheses are: (1) the acquisition learning hypothesis, (2) the monitor hypothesis, (3) the natural order hypothesis, (4) the input hypothesis, and (5) the affective filter hypothesis. Each of these is discussed here.

The first, Acquisition-Learning hypothesis, states that children acquire their L1 naturally from the world around them, accordingly, in order for student to acquire L2, teachers must focus on communication rather than memorization rules.

The second hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, sees that L2 learners could use their monitor to check the language they are producing. In other words, when learners know the rules

of a language, they employ them to correct what they are thinking about, for example, adding –s to the third person in the present tense verbs.

The third is the natural order hypothesis which states that the rules of the L2 grammatical system are learned in a specific natural order. That is, all learners pass through the same natural order of acquisition: (a) preproduction or the silent period, (b) early production – one to two word sentences, (c) speech emergence – three to four word sentences, (d) and intermediate fluency - errors are developmental and students will out-grow them as they are exposed to what is appropriate or correct.

The fourth is the input hypothesis which claims that for acquisition to take place, learners must be presented with comprehensible input, i.e. the language they can understand, just slightly beyond their current level of competency ($i + 1$).

The final hypothesis in Krashen's theory in the Affective Filter hypothesis, it states that the most important affective variable favouring second language acquisition are student's motivation to learn the language, a low anxiety learning environment, self confidence and self esteem.

To sum up, the innatist theory proposes that the ability to learn language is inborn, that the nature is more important than nurture and that experience using language is only necessary in order to activate the LAD. However one problem with Chomsky's theory is that it does not take enough account on the influence that thought (cognition) and language has on each other's development.

Although this theory provides what some claim is a reasonably explanation about acquiring language, this theory lack sufficient evidence. Some of the cases against this theory include: Timing of the language learning varies greatly within cultures, Environment shapes how much and what language is learned, and feedback from other language users affects language acquisition" (Cooter&Reutzel 204).

INTERACTIONIST THEORY

The interactionist theory states that the development of language proficiency is promoted by face-to-face interaction and communication. The idea existed in the 1980s but is usually credited to Micheal Long for his 1996 paper "The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition ". There exists two forms of interaction; the weak and the strong form. The weak form is the position that interaction is simply the way that learners find learning opportunities, whether not they make productive use of them (Keith 1999: 174).

Similarly to Krashen's input hypothesis, the interactionist hypothesis claims that comprehensible input is important for language learning and this is facilitated when learners have to negotiate for meaning (Anderson 56). As meaning is negotiated, non native speakers are actually able to exert some control over the communication process during conversation, thereby causing their partner to provide input that is more comprehensible, that achieve this by asking for repetition, or responding in a way that shows their confusion. The listener's natural response is then to paraphrase or perhaps use some other cues to convey meaning, such as gesturing, drawing or modified speech (sometimes referred to as "foreign talks").

Interaction may serve as a way of focusing learners' attention on the difference between their knowledge of the target language and the reality of what they are hearing; it may also focus their attention on a part of the target language of which they are not yet aware (Ellis 1997:47-8).

There are so many criticism leveled against this theory, while some scholars disagree with the interactionist view (Freeman 2007: 144), others are of the view that interaction does not facilitate learning its only function is the fact that it serves as a priming device, "setting the stage" for learning rather than being the means by which learning occurs (Gass & Selinker 2008:350). In addition, Ellis notes that interaction is not always positive, he says that sometimes it can make the input more complicated, or produce an amount of input which overwhelm learners, this is possible if interlocutors use lengthy paraphrases or give complex definitions of word that was not

understood, and he comes to the conclusion that the role of interaction in second language acquisition is a complex one (Ellis 1997:350).

COGNITIVE THEORY

The cognitive theory of learning views second language acquisition as a conscious process of thinking. This theory contrasts the behaviourist theory, which sees language as an unconscious, automatic process, Jean Piaget, along with others, developed a child language acquisition (Brown 2007: 33).

Cognitive theory proposed that children pass through certain stages at different rates. Piaget developed a model and outlined how children progress through these stages and the course of their intellectual development. According to Brown, the stages include the following periods of development: "Sensorimotor (birth to 2 years old), Preoperational (ages 2 to 7), Operational (ages 11 to 16)" (165). The formal operational period begins about ages 11 and lasts into adulthood. During this time abstract thinking is developed. Skills such as deductive reasoning and logical thought processes emerge which high school students are often required to utilize in mathematics and science courses.

There is a critical stage when considering the effect of age on second language acquisition. Piaget asserts this happens at around puberty or age 11 (Brown 2007: 65). It is during the formal operational period, when abstract thinking occurs. The cognitive theorists make the argument that there is a critical period of language acquisition and a connection between language acquisition and the concrete or formal operational stages. However, others argue that children learn second languages without benefit of formal operational thought. Research has confirmed that the linguistic and cognitive learning of a second language in young children are similar to the first language processes (Brown 2007:73).

THE ACCULTURATION MODEL

Acculturation is defined by Brown as "the process of becoming adapted to a new culture". The central premise of acculturation model according to Schumann quoted in Ellis: "...second language acquisition is just one aspect of acculturation and the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language" (Ellis 1997: 34).

According to Schumann, acculturation is determined by the degree of social and psychological distance between the learner and the target language culture. Social distance is as a result of factors like whether the overall learning situation is 'good' or 'bad'. Good in terms of positive response and mutual understanding between the L2 group and the target language group, and bad in terms of negative attitudes between the two groups. The psychological factors on the other hand include; language shock, culture shock, motivation and ego boundary. When social and /or psychological distance are great, the learner fails to progress beyond the early stages, with the result that his language is pidginised. Schumann refers to this account of SLA as the pidginisation hypothesis (Ellis 1997:252).

The theory provides explanations of why L2 learners, unlike first language learners, often fail to achieve a native like competence though the theory never shed light on how L2 knowledge is internalized and used.

ACCOMMODATION THEORY

Accommodation theory derives from the research of Giles and associates, its to the intergroup uses of language in multilingual communities such as Britain. Language acquisition is seen as matter of nurture only, learners adjust their speech towards that of the person they are talking to when they want to reduce social distance. This theory might help us to know more

about some sociolinguistic preconditions in maintaining communication rather than help us see how a language is really acquired (Ellis 1997:255).

THE VARIABLE COMPETENCE MODEL

The variable competence model proposed by Ellis states that language acquisition is a two sided phenomenon: the process and the product of language. The process refer to the distinction between the linguistic rules and the ability to make use of the rules, and the product refers to discourse types to be generated from unplanned. The variable competence model attempts to account for (1) the variability of language learner language and (2) the external and internal processes responsible for SLA. It incorporates within the framework, a theory of language use and a theory of SLA. Nevertheless, the model is in need of development in two directions. First, detailed analysis of the primary and secondary processes responsible for use and acquisition. Second, it needs to incorporate a more detailed role of the input into the overall framework (Ellis 266).

NEUROFUNCTIONAL THEORY

Ellis notes that this theory is based on two systems: the communication hierarchy and the cognitive hierarchy, the former means language and other forms of interpersonal communication, while the latter, refers to a number of cognitive information processing activities possibly related with "conscious" processes. The theory also makes a sharp distinction between Primary Language Acquisition (PLA) and Secondary Language Acquisition (SELA), PLA is seen in child's acquisition of one or more languages from the age of two to five. SELA is found in both adults and children, it is in addition divided into two parts (a) foreign language learning, and (b) second language acquisition, that is, the natural acquisition of second language after the age of five. This theory claims that PLA and (B) are marked through the use of communication hierarchy while (A) is marked by the use of cognitive hierarchy only, if we are to accept the existence of some innate and subconscious linguistic properties, which is what nativist have claimed, we then have the right to ask the question of why (A) is treated only as a cognitive process (Ellis 1997:271).

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A THEORY AND HYPOTYHESIS

Because theory is a complex subject, some may confuse theory with its components of the process of theorizing, consequently it is important to distinguish theory from related term such as hypothesis. Hypothesis is a process of induction, what appears to be a general statement governing the phenomena observed (Tomori 1997:9). In contrast, a theory is a strongly substantial and unified explanation for a set of proven hypothesis. Moreover, a hypothesis must be specifically testable, whereas a theory does not. A hypothesis therefore is a component of a theory.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the search for SLA theory is a complex issue. There is no single comprehensive theory of SLA; all that we have at present are a number of partial and incomplete accounts. In this paper, we have tried to illustrate the relevance of a linguistic perspective (from the generative linguistics), from the behaviourist, innatist, interactionist and cognitive perspectives. SLA can also be approached from other perspectives, the neurolinguistics, discourse analysis, social psychology and many others. Each of these disciplines can make a contribution to SLA theory. Gass points out that "...it is only with a multiplicity of perspectives that we can begin to unravel the mystery of SLA".

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