SED LS 658
Second Language Acquisition and Assessment
Spring 1995
Instructor: Professor Irujo

Electronic Dialogue Journal

Hi Jilani!
My name is Annett Nordek and I'm a Swedish exchange student at Central Missouri
State University. My major is education and when I graduate next fall I will be bale to
teach children age 7 through 14. My minor is English and I'm looking forward to
teaching this subject, especially after taking this class called "Teaching English as a
Second Language." Most of the things we have discussed in class were new to me and I
feel like I have learnt a lot during the few weeks that I have taken this class. Something I
found really interesting was how children acquire a language. We have discussed 3
different theories. The behavioristic, the innatist, and the interactionist theory. The one
that I agree with the most is the innatist. This theory assumes that the child is born with
the ability to learn a language and that the child is not totally dependent on its
environment to make the correct progresses when acquiring the language. The
behavioristic theory claims that a language is learnt by imitation and I think that is partly
true. But I don't think it's the only way for a child to learn a language. A child doesn't
get enough input from his or her parents to be able to develop such an advanced language
as a child eventually does. If they only learnt by imitation their language would be very
limited and their grammar very simple. Instead they manage to discover all difficulties
about a language and eventually they master it. I could probably go on forever about this
topic, but I will quit here. Do you have any opinions about this specific question in
language acquisition? Please write me soon and we can discuss this further.

Annett
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Hi Annett,
        My name is Jilani Warsi, and I am from India. I received my master's degree in
linguistics from California State University at Northridge. Currently, I am pursuing a
Ph.D. in the program in applied linguistics at Boston University. I also teach English as a
second language to Russian Jewish immigrants who have just moved to the United States,
and have little or no English. The course I am taking with Professor Irujo is "Second
Language Acquisition and Assessment." It is an extremely informative course, and we
are learning a great deal as we discuss intriguing issues related to the field of second
language acquisition research.
        It is interesting that you should talk about child language acquisition. I agree with
you that children are born with the ability to learn language. In his book "Knowledge of
Language," Chomsky argues that to postulate a theory of language acquisition, we must
answer the following questions:
        1. What is knowledge of language?
        2. How is it acquired?
        3. How is it used?

These polemic questions are empirical, and need to be discussed with equanimity. Despite the fact that the process of language acquisition is quite complicated, children seem to learn language with relative ease and success. A behaviorist approach to language acquisition is simply that of stimulus and response. In other words, behaviorists claim that children learn language from the linguistic input and interaction with the social environment. From a research point of view, this is a trivial issue because no one would deny that children learn the language that is used by their parents and peers. That is to say, a child born in an English-speaking environment speaks English, and a child born in a French-speaking environment speaks French. There is no argument against this view. What behaviorists tend to ignore is a serious research issue, and that is the logical problem of language acquisition. We all know that the child is exposed to some kind of linguistic input. We also know that that child's linguistic output shows abstract properties of language that it could not possibly have received from its parents. To postulate a theory of language acquisition, we must ensure that it subsumes all factors attributable to the child's language growth. In brief, it is reasonable to assume that maternal speech style has a causal effect on the child's language growth, but the child has a restrictive and non-obvious predisposition to language acquisition. I think this is sufficient for today. Think about Chomsky's questions, and reply soon.

Jilani
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Hi Annett,

I was reading the famous Indian writer Vikram Seth's novel "From Heaven Lake," and found something worth mentioning. Mr. Seth wrote this novel during his trip to China. It seems appropriate to mention his work because it relates to the course we are both taking this semester.

The following paragraph raises an interesting question that has caused much trouble to language planners and educators. Read it carefully:

"As I listen to the sounds outside, it strikes me that although I know a certain amount about the language, literature and history of China, I am appallingly ignorant about the songs, the lullabies, the nursery rhymes, the street games of children, the riddles; all the things that are most important in the childhood of Chinese people. Chinese language courses do not include this; indeed, how could they be expected to? Yet without such things one cannot understand the wealth of references made to a common past, the casual assumptions of shared experiences that lie behind conversation in any language. It is like knowing Macbeth without knowing "Three Blind Mice," or the Ramayana without "Chandamama"… I have been crowned chairman of the Asian Language Department, and have inaugurated a six-month intensive course in Chinese. Each week corresponds to a year in the life of the Chinese child. For the first week my students lie around on cots in the classroom, making various burbling noises while I and two other teacher talk in Chinese to each other. The students throw tantrums, but not often as the American baby. They are wheeled about the campus in prams, and swathed in over-thick padded clothes, just as Chinese infants are: they always remind me of overheated dumplings. In my totalitarian scheme of things, my students are sung to sleep at regular intervals with lullabies. The second week, a few elementary words are taught to them: 'baba', 'mama' and so on. At mealtimes or when taken for a walk they are expected to display a proper

curiosity for the name of objects, though, in conformity with the Mayonnaise Principle, the intake of new lexical information has to be controlled. (The Mayonnaise Principle states that leaning a language is like making mayonnaise: add too much at once and the mixture will separate out.) Slowly, through the compressed years, the students come into contact with nursery rhymes, written characters, simple comic books, schoolchildren's slang and sneers, buying and selling vocabulary, the use of chopsticks, pen, brush, and abacus. They now participate in adult conversation, read short stories, perform songs for visiting party dignitaries and foreign guests, drink endless coups of hot water from brightly-colored thermos flasks, etc. As they rush through their adolescence and early adulthood, I introduce political thought, history, literature, bureaucracy, slogans and obscenities. By the end of the six-month course, in their twenty-sixth year, my students (all of whom are about to be married off and/or be sent off to the post that has been allocated to them) have some idea of the experience of their Chinese peers."

As you may see, Mr. Seth has touched upon many interesting, sensitive, and intriguing issues. In devising the totalitarian scheme of things, he might have found an answer to the most crucial pedagogical question: Can a second language be taught in the classroom? He has very clearly explained that learning a second language is more than just learning the form. Apparently, there are many important aspects of language that are simply not covered in the classroom. Let me know what you think of it. Your turn.

Jilani
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Hi Jilani,
I'm sorry it took me so long to reply to your letter. I have been thinking about the questions you wrote down and I will try to respond to them. What is knowledge of language? To me knowledge of a language is when you are able to communicate with other people in your native language or in the target language without misunderstanding each other. Communication is a mixture between oral language and body language and therefore I think it would be easier to determine a person's knowledge level by looking at their written production. As far as your second question How is that knowledge acquired? I thin it is a combination of the innative, the behavioristic and the interactionist models. Even though I firmly believe that the innative approach is the strongest I do agree that the behavioristic theory with its aspects on imitation and repetition do apply to acquisition of a language. The input and the feedback from a parent is also crucial to a child's language development, even though I think it has more to do with the child's self-esteem. You get more motivated and feel better about yourself if you have somebody that takes interest in your language acquisition. Your third question is How is that knowledge used? is kind of hard to answer but I do think you use the knowledge you have of a language to develop it further. A person is always working on perfecting their language either it is your native language or a second language. Hopefully I have been able to give you my opinion on your three questions. If you want me to develop it further, please just ask me to. In our class "Teaching English as a Second Language" we have started to discuss what motivates people to learn a second language. Does your personality, your intelligence, your personal motivation and willingness to learn a language influence how good you will be in a language? Will you make less mistakes if you have a higher IQ or will that not matter? Will your ability to speak a language native

like be influenced by personality, IQ or motivation? We have also discussed what the optimal age is to start learning a second language. Do you have to start when you are young to be able to be successful or can you be a successful learner when starting to acquire a language as an adult? How do you define successful? I know it is a lot of questions at one time, but hopefully you will be able to respond to them. I'm looking forward to your next letter.

Annett
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Hi Annett,

It was quite comforting to hear from you. We are supposed to be talking at least once a week. I hope we do it punctually. You have very rightly said that a person's knowledge of language is his or her ability to communicate effectively and get meaning across. How that language is acquired is still not clear and researchers are trying to postulate a theory that subsumes factors, processes, and constraints that both facilitate and impede language acquisition.

I will talk a little bit about what you have discussed in your letter and then answer your questions; some of them are interrelated, so I will try to touch upon as many issues as possible.

What is more important from a linguistic research perspective is the amazing fact that the child's linguistic output shows subtle and abstract properties of language that couldn't possibly have been present in the linguistic input, since we know that mothers simplify and use only single clauses in their utterances when they speak to their babies. The presence of abstract properties in the child's utterances at a later stage vividly suggest that the child modulates and reorganizes the information that is presented to him. In other words, the child's disposition to language acquisition is highly restrictive and non-obvious and can be discernible only upon the application of a sophisticated linguistic analysis.

This realization brings us to the postulation of a theory of language acquisition that is explanatorily adequate. Jane Grimshaw very rightly points out that the logical problem of language acquisition is "the problem of achieving explanatory adequacy." That is to say, a theory of language acquisition should subsume – and be able to explain – all the factors that influence and determine the child's growth of language. Not only that, it should also be able to provide a substantial explanation of what kind of grammar the child internalizes as it interacts with the presented experience.

I will end this discussion at this point and answer your questions about second language acquisition. You have asked me some interrelated questions and I will answer them in light of our classroom discussions and my reading.

First of all, it is not clear if age plays a decisive role in acquiring a second language. Newport and Johnson conducted an interesting experiment which involved both child and adult learners of English. There were Korean and Chinese speakers of English who were tested on different rule types in English. Based upon the findings of their experiment, Newport and Johnson report that age does play a crucial role and is a determining factor in learning a second language.

However, we need to clarify a few things. In their study Newport and Johnson note that a critical period for learning language exists and extends to second language

acquisition. Implicit in this statement is the argument that presumably children are better second language learners than adults. I personally think that it is quite misleading to make such generalizations. Language acquisition is a complicated process and any mechanism recommending age to be the sole determining factor for language acquisition is not substantial.

We must, therefore, consider the attitudinal and affective factors that may impede language acquisition. In reference to your question about personality factors, such as motivation, desire, cultural identification, etc., they seem to have an indelible imprint on the child's language performance. It is regardless of the fact that children do learn a second language better than adults. However, it would be erroneous to derive from their comparative success rate that better performance could be attributed to age alone. One possible explanation of the fact that children learn a second language with relative ease and success is sociolinguistic. Researchers argue that unlike children, adults have more rigid social and cultural boundaries which pose problems to successful learning. These socioemotional factors are empathy, lack of culture identification, isolation from the target culture, and maintaining stereotypical linguistic behavior in a second language. I can talk forever but the letter is getting too long, so I will stop here and let you think about these issues. What about interlanguage? Are you familiar with the term? I would like you to talk about interlanguage systems and interlingual productions.

Jilani
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Hi Annett,

I haven't heard from you in a while and it is worrying me a little bit. We are supposed to be talking at least once a week. I hope you are aware that this electronic dialogue journal is a partial requirement for the "Second Language Acquisition and Assessment" course. I remember asking you about interlanguage, but since I haven't heard from you, I will talk about it and then wait for your reply.

Last week five of my classmates and I gave a group presentation on interlanguage. The presentation went really well, and we got some positive comments and criticism from our audience members. I will begin with the definition of interlanguage first and follow it with issues concerning interlanguage phonology.

The term "interlanguage" was coined by Larry Selinker in 1972. While acquiring a second language, the learner constructs a system of rules at a given stage of development. Dulay and Burt call this internalization of rules "creative construction." Nemser calls this intermediate stage between the first language and the second language the "approximative system." Since the inception of interlanguage, it has become an interesting field of research in second language acquisition. In his book "Rediscovering Interlanguage," Selinker notes that language learners are preprogrammed to use transfer as a learner strategy to acquire a second language. Personally speaking, I think it is an extremely strong statement.

Research has shown that transfer is not a simplistic process as once believed. It is a rather complicated process which interacts with many universal processes and constraints to determine and influence the shape and form of interlanguage. In other words, the interlingual productions of a learner results from that multiple causation.

Transfer interacts with these processes and constraints in an interesting way which is discernible only upon the application of a much more sophisticated linguistic analysis.

Tarone has discussed the many processes and constraints that impede successful acquisition of a second language, namely overgeneralization, approximation, L1 transfer, universal CV pattern, the tendency of the tongue to go back to resting position, etc. What I have just mentioned is more related to interlanguage phonology which I will discuss in the next letter. I want you to ponder on the notion of interlanguage.

Researchers argue that interlanguage systems are totally independent of the first and the second language. Some researchers – especially behaviorists – believe that interlanguage systems are the direct result of L1 transfer. What is your impression? Why is it that adult language learners who have delayed second language never get to native-like competence in their second language? If interlanguage is all about internalizing a system of L2 rules, constantly constructing it through several different learner strategies, hypotheses testing, etc., then why is it seemingly impossible to achieve native-like proficiency in an L2. Think about these issues and let me know what you think. After I hear from you, I will talk about interlanguage phonology which is another interesting SLA road that has been less traveled. Hope to hear from you soon.

Jilani
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Hi Jilani,
I have had time to read your message now and I will try to respond to your questions about interlanguage. You stated that some researchers believe that interlangauge systems are the direct result of L1 transfer. I do agree with that to some part, like when it comes to not-native like accents. Otherwise I think that the "transfer of training" plays an important part of how your interlangauge is influenced when learning a second language. I guess that overgeneralization is a related process which influences your language, but most of the time it seems to be a stage a person go through when learning a language and usually overgeneralization mistakes disappears when the student understands the underlying rules. I do think that when two languages are very similar it might cause a bigger problem than when they are very different, since you automatically think that you can transfer similarities to the second language you are learning. You might then apply rules that exist in the L1 but not in the L2. If the languages are totally different you are more careful about how you construct your sentences.

You also had a question about adult learners not acquiring native-like competence. I think it is very unusual to find an adult learner that speaks the language native like, even though there have been cases that proves that it is possible to achieve native like competence even after the critical period is. We read a very interesting article by Ioup that told us about Julie, a woman that managed to acquire Egyptian-Arabic with native like fluency without any formal training. It only took her about 2 ½ years. She did have an unusual learning situation. She was forced to stay with her non-English speaking relatives for a longer time while her husband was called away for military duty. She didn't have anybody to talk English with and therefore her motivation to learn Egyptian-Arabic was very high. Do you think Julie is an exception from the rule or do you think it is possible to acquire native like speech even after the critical period is over? How big of an influence is motivation? Do you think that talent is an important part of

second language acquisition? Since I never received your message of the 18th (journal 3 I think you called it) I wonder if you can respond to the questions I wrote to you again. Hope it won't cause you too much trouble. I'm looking forward to hear from you again.

Annett
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Hi Annett,

I must say that you have done a great job explaining interlanguage and what impedes native-like competence in a second language. As you have mentioned, Julie is an exceptional adult second language learner who achieved native-like fluency in her Egyptian Arabic. However, as you have very interestingly pointed out, she was forced to live with her relatives who didn't speak English at all. The information you have provided is not sufficient for me to answer all of your questions, but I will try to explain some of the reasons for her successful L2 acquisition.

First of all, it is not clear from your letter whether Julie lived in Egypt or American. Second, I don't know if she was isolated from the rest of the speech community. You mention that she was forced to speak Egyptian Arabic to her relatives. Also, you have said that because of this reinforcement she was highly motivated to learn her second language. These are contradicting issues. Just because the learner is forced to learn a second language does not guarantee that he or she will be highly motivated to learn it. Motivation, of course, is one of the extremely important affective factors that facilitate language learning with relative ease and speed.

Another interesting issue that you bring up in your letter is that of competence in L2 speech. Personally speaking, I think it is crucially important that we make a clear distinction between speech and pronunciation. A learner could have communicative competence in his or her second language but still may not be able to achieve native-like pronunciation. If I remember correctly, you did mention something about accent. My opinion is that accent is a relative concept. If you look at accent as a deviation from the standard language, then a native speaker of British English might think that native speakers of American English have an accent and vice-versa. Anyway, let's not get into this political issue.

In terms of the critical period hypothesis, research has shown that age may not be a decisive factor in second language acquisition. For example, Julie's case vividly indicates that it is possible to achieve native-like fluency in a second language even after puberty. So, it is reasonable to assume that there are other processes and constraints that play important roles in determining the shape of interlanguage and that age is not the only factor.

As regards intelligence, talent, and other perceptual capabilities of the learner, our understanding of their influence on second language acquisition is very limited. Perception in itself is an abstract notion, and we are still trying to decipher what perception means.

I want to talk amore about interlanguage, especially interlanguage phonology, but I have to go. Let me know what you think of it. If things are not lucid, feel free to ask me questions.

Jilani

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Hi Jilani!

Thank you for forwarding the letters I missed. It seems like I missed two of them. I hope we won't have any problems forwarding our mail in the future. I really enjoyed reading the copy of the story you sent me. I totally agree with you that it is hard to learn a language in the classroom. You don't get all the aspects of the language. You can make yourself understood, but you will never get the "right" comprehension of the language. In order to express yourself you need to be sensitive to the small variations of vocabulary in a language that makes a really big difference. Without knowing the culture, habits or traditions of the target language group you will never get the "in-depth" knowledge you might wish for. A wishful thinking is that anybody learning a second language should be able to spend some time in the target country. I have been very fortunate since I have been able to live in America for such a long time. After a while you start discovering things about a language that you never would have discovered in a classroom. Like intonation patterns depending on the situation, tag-questions or markers that signal that you are starting to respond to a question. (for example the word well. Americans seem to use it all the time.) or the uh-uh' telling a person you are agreeing with them or disagreeing depending on how you stress it. I found this very interesting. What do you think? I agree with you that phonology is very interesting. We haven't discussed it in class that much yet, but I can talk a little bit about it from my own experience. My roommate, Erica, has lived in Sweden for all her life and her mother is American. Her mother only spoke English to her until Erica was about 7 years old. Erica has only spent about a year in the US but her pronunciation is perfect. Most people think she is an American. If you compare her to me there is a pretty big difference. I have a Swedish accent, but it is not that noticeable. I have spent a lot more time in American than Erica, almost 6 years, but still her accent is so much better. I took English since third grade, but I didn't really start learning the language fluently until I moved over here. How can you describe your learning situation? Is it more like Erica's or is it more like mine? Let's discuss this further when I have more background from my classes. Have a nice weekend!

Annett

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Hi Annett,

In answer to your questions, I would like to explain the reasons for Erica's successful acquisition of L2 phonology and then discuss issues related to interlanguage phonology.

Erica's case seems to support the critical period hypothesis. In their paper "Critical Period Effects in Second Language Acquisition: The Influence of Maturational State on the Acquisition of English as a Second Language," Newport and Johnson contend that the hypothesized critical period exists in first language acquisition and extends to second language acquisition. They propose two versions of the critical period hypothesis. According to the "exercise hypothesis," humans are born with superior language learning capacity. If this specialized capacity is exercised before puberty, language learning will take place with relative ease and speed, they argue. According to the "maturational state hypothesis," if the superior language learning capacity is not

exercised before brain maturation, learning will cease. The two versions of the critical period hypothesis have two possible interpretations in terms of second language acquisition. According to the "exercise hypothesis," adults should be better language learners than children because have already exercised the language learning capacity by learning their first language. Hence, learning a second language may not be problematic . According to the "maturational state hypothesis," children should be better language learners because their learning capacity has not declined.

I will now discuss Erica's acquisition of native-like L2 phonology in light of these hypotheses. You said that Erica's mother spoke English to her when she was young. We can find one explanation of her native-like pronunciation within the framework of principles and parameters. It could be the case that while exposed to two languages simultaneously, Erica was simply setting different parameters for the two languages being learned. However, this supposition needs to be proven empirically. If you are particularly interested in interlanguage phonology, read Susanne Flynn's "L2 Parameter Setting in Second Language Acquisition." She argues that universal grammar is available in second language acquisition and that the learner needs to set different parameters accordingly as s/he learns new rules. In his paper "Notes on the Economy of Derivation" Chomsky suggests that languages are principally sets of principles and parameters (except phonology which is essentially rule-governed).

To preclude misunderstanding and complications, I will not get into details. A counter argument to my explanation for Erica's native-like pronunciation would be why adults do not achieve native-like pronunciation in their second language, especially if learning a second language is merely setting parameters. The debate is wide open, and researchers are trying to find a psychological explanation for phonological fossilization in adults. Those who espouse universal grammar, like Susanne Flynn, Lydia White, claim that it is possible to achieve native-like phonology in a second language, provided there is ample assistance available to the learner. On the other hand, those who espouse behaviorism, like Ellen Broselow, Selinker, argue that learners are preprogrammed to use transfer as a learning strategy and that phonological fossilization is inevitable. Interestingly, Douglas Brown suggests that fossilization is reversible. He has proposed a new term "cryogenation" instead of interlanguage and notes that fossilization can be corrected by teaching assistance. This view has been supported in Neufeld and Hill who claimed that their subjects' pronunciation of the target language (English) improved after constant repetition and teaching assistance. However, the veracity of their claim has not been proven empirically by second language acquisition researchers.

In reference to your case, I would like to mention a few theories. According to the neurological theory of language acquisition, the organs of speech including muscles in the mouth get atrophied after the critical period, so it is impossible to make adjustments to the new L2 sounds after puberty. However, I must say that this theory is not substantial and does not subsume other factors such as social and cultural constraints.

Krashen argues that after brain maturation learners cannot achieve native-like phonology in their second language. He refers to Lenneberg, the scientist who proposed the critical period hypothesis, and Piaget who suggested that once learners reach "formal operations" they can go on learning as many languages as they want. Vygotsky refers to "formal operations" as the "zone of proximal development." However, it is the case that many people never reach "formal operations" or the "zone of proximal development" in

their first language. Moreover, I personally don't think that the formal operations type of psychological explanation of phonological fossilization suffices our understanding of the complicated process of second language acquisition. As Tarone very rightly argues, "Why should formal operations affect only phonology, and not syntax and morphology?" This indeed puts a question mark on the formal operations type of approach to language acquisition in general and the problem of phonological fossilization in particular.

Finally, I want you to think about some issues related to transfer and interlanguage phonology. Researchers suggest that there are processes and constraints that determine and influence the shape and form of interlanguage. Transfer, according to them, interacts with these processes and constraints in an interesting way, and interlanguage results from this multiple causation. We should also be aware that transfer operates in a non-obvious manner which is discernible only upon the application of a more sophisticated linguistic analysis. Some of the processes are negative transfer from L1 (all studies), L1 acquisition processes (Wode 1976, Tarone 1976), overgeneralization (Johansson 1973), approximation (Johansson 1973, Nemser 1973) and avoidance (Celce-Murcia 1978). Some of the constraints are the inherent difficulty of certain target language sounds and phonological contexts (Johansson 1973), the preference of the articulators to return to rest position (Johansson 1973), the preference of the articulators for a CV pattern (Tarone 1976), the tendency to avoid extremes of pitch variation (Backman 1977) and emotional and social constraints (Dickerson 1977, Schmidt 1977). If you do not understand any of these, feel free to ask me. Your turn.

Jilani
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Hi Jilani,
Did you get the message I forwarded back to you?
Like I told you in one of my earlier letters we haven't discussed phonology that much in class yet. Therefore I have to ask you to explain some terms further. What does "approximation" and "The preference of the articulators for a CV pattern" mean? Something that we have discussed a little bit is the inherent difficulty of certain target language sound and phonological contexts. Among Swedish students learning English as a second language there is a recurring problem of the pronunciation of the sound 'th'. Especially hard when it is followed by the letter r, like in three or through or thirty. The th sound is then produced sounding like an f instead. One way to avoid this when teaching your students is to make them put the tip of their tongue a little bit outside their front teeth. Another sound that might cause a problem is the deep L sound of especially American English, but also in British English. One example is the word little. I n American English that sound is very far back in your mouth. By having your students practice different L sounds and eventually they will hear the difference and also feel the difference in their mouth. I have also noticed some difficulties that Japanese students might have when acquiring English as a Second Language. They tend to add an s sound to the end of the words. In our English class there are only two native speakers of English and the rest of us is either from Sweden, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan or Japan. We have spent a lot of time listening to each others pronunciation and discussed what might be a problem when translating or pronouncing a word.

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The last time our class met we discussed an article written by Martha Trahey and Lydia White called "Positive evidence and preemption in the second language classroom" A very interesting article were research were performed to discover if positive evidence was sufficient enough for a second language learner to reset their parameters to the new language. The studies were performed in a French school in Canada with students learning English as a Second Language. White and Trahey wanted to study if the students would discover the correct English word order SAV (Subject, Adverb, Verb) easier by being instructed how to do it or if just regular communication were a lot of adverb were used would be sufficient for the students to discover that English had the SAV order and not the SVAO order as in French. The group that got input were the teacher told the correct usage was called the flood group. The result of the studies proved that the exposure to the flood of positive evidence did not cause the learners to realize that SVAO is an impossible word order in English. What the flood of input did do was to increase the usage of the correct SAV, but the students still used the incorrect form. This proves that the Uniqueness Principle might be incorrect when it comes to L2. According to this theory a learner resets his or her parameters when positive evidence is given. The studies show that two parameter settings can exist alongside each other and that you as a teacher might have to give both negative and positive evidence in order to teach your children the correct use of a grammatical form. IN other words positive evidence is not good enough. Well, I better stop writing now otherwise I never stop. I just want to let you know that I will be going on spring break on March 16th and I will be gone till March 26th. Talk to you soon.

Annett
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Hi Annett,

It is quite heartening to know that you are getting my messages regularly. Yes, I did get the messages you forwarded to me, but there was no content in them. Anyway, you have asked me to explain "approximation" and "the tendency of the articulators to prefer a CV pattern." You have also asked me to discuss both positive evidence and negative evidence. It is not possible to touch upon all of them in a brief manner – each one of them requires a detailed explanation with appropriate examples. However, I will try to give you a summary of the above terms and issues.

Approximation is one of the strategies that the learner employs to overcome problems in his or her second language. Since your question is related to pronunciation, I will give you an example of phonological approximation. Arabic speakers of English often substitute the English sound [p] with that of [b]. This is precisely because in their phonological inventory of Arabic, [p] does not exist. Considering that [p] is a voiceless bilabial obstruent and that [b] is a voiced bilabial obstruent, phonologists say that both sounds belong to the same class; the only distinction being voicing. An Arabic speaker of English – since he or she does not have [p] in his or her native language – tries to come up with a sound that is phonetically close to it. It is very likely that the learner (Arabic) will pronounce [b] as a phonological approximation of [p]. Make sense? Here is a linguistic joke for you:

An Arab, trying to find parking, asks a police officer: Excuse me officer, can I bark here?

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Officer: Sure, as long as you don't bite.

One of my classmates told me a joke about overgeneralization. The following is a conversation between a student and his teacher:
Student: This is a little vaguuu.
Teacher: No, it is not vaguee, it is vague.
Student: I know, it was just a slip of my tonguuuuu.
Teacher: It is not tonguuuu, it is tongue.
Student: All right, let's not arg about it. (The student meant to say argue.)

About the tendency of the articulators to prefer a CV pattern, Tarone argues that most natural languages have a CV pattern, meaning that words in several languages have an open-ended word final syllable. Roughly speaking, an open-ended syllable means that the last sound in a word is a vowel. However, it should be mentioned that certain languages have a VC pattern, which is not very common across linguistic systems. Because of this universal feature of phonology, learners often experience difficulties in pronouncing their target sounds in connected speech, especially if the second language features both CV and VC patterns. Researchers consider this universal preference for a CV pattern one of the constraints.

The most contentious issue you have raised in your letter is that of positive evidence and negative evidence. These issues are quite polemic and should be discussed with equanimity. I am familiar with Lydia White's research on the question of whether teachers should provide their students with positive and/or negative evidence or not. My personal opinion that providing positive evidence in conjunction with negative evidence will help the learner set new parameters. But teachers must bear in mind that adopting such a methodology has serious implications for pedagogy, especially in second language teaching/learning. One of the problems with negative evidence is that learners may make wrong types of generalization based on the input. For example, while a combination of positive and negative evidence will facilitate internalizing new rule types in a second language, it will also trigger the learning mechanism to drive some incorrect generalizations. We know that the learner uses hypothesis testing as a learning strategy while internalizing rules. We also know that sometimes this testing yields incorrect L2 structures, utterances, and meaning which may be attributed – among many other reasons – to lack of positive evidence. Following Vygotsky's proposal that with assistance adults can reach the zone of proximal development, it seems reasonable to assume that positive evidence can be helpful in second language teaching. Negative evidence then would be a catalyst for the learner who would use it to ensure that his or her production is grammatically appropriate and well formed.

There has been no disagreement as to the role of positive evidence in second language teaching. Second language researchers, educators, and second language teachers agree in unison that positive evidence should be provided, but there is a great deal of disagreement in terms of providing negative evidence in second language classroom teaching. As we make progress in the field of second language acquisition research, we will know more about the issues of negative evidence. Suffice it to say at this point that the learner needs both positive evidence and negative evidence, but the

teacher has to be really restrictive and discrete about this combinatorial approach to teaching. That's it for now. Let me know what you think of it. Enjoy your vacation.

Jilani
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Hi Jilani,
You probably started to wonder what happened to the e-mail I promised you after I came back from my spring break. Well, I have spent this week reading 7 articles on form-focused instruction and I have written a LONG paper on it. All the research in these articles supports the hypothesis that form-focused instruction is beneficial to a person learning a second language. They also claim that positive evidence is not sufficient enough for a learner to reset his or hers parameters and therefore negative input and error correction is necessary. One of the articles I have read is Lightbown's and Spada's research article "Focus on form and corrective feedback in communicative teaching." The research was performed on approximately 100 French native speaking children receiving an intensive English as a Second Language course in Quebec. Previous research has shown that learners can develop greater L2 communication abilities through instruction that resembles the naturalistic environment and that this approach might eventually lead to the mastery of the target language much in the same way as a child eventually learns to master his or hers first language. Lightbown and Spada investigates these claims further and in this article they report studies performed to investigate to what extent form-focused instruction was beneficial to classroom learner of a second language. They discovered that the instruction the students received in the intensive programs were mostly communicative in nature and it focused on meaning-based activities. Errors were viewed as a necessary part of development and error correction by the teacher was not very common. The children were divided into four classes and one of the classes seemed to differ a great deal from the other three. One example given is the student's usage of the verb be. In the class that differed the correct usage of this verb were supplied 94% of the times compared to only 36%<43%, 31% in the other classes. It turned out that the teacher in this class spent the greatest amount of time on form-focused instruction, even though the overall focus was on communicative activities. The result of this study suggests that accuracy, fluency and communicative skill are probably best developed through instruction that is meaning based, but also provide timely form focused activities and correction in context. I agree with the authors of this article and think that corrective feedback and focus on form are necessary parts of teaching students a second language, But it should not turn into drilling. Instead it should be provided within the context of meaningful activities. What can be hard to determine is when the timing is right to correct a student so he or she will benefit from it. What do you think about all this?

Annett
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Hi Annett,
        I was beginning to worry about you and our electronic dialogue journal, but then you replied in time. Interestingly, this time you have a lot of issues that we can talk about, especially form-focused teaching.

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Personally speaking, I believe that the learner needs meaning-focused materials in a teaching/learning environment. Though your argument – based on your reading of Lightbown and Spada – that focus on form with corrective feedback in communicative teaching is beneficial for second language learners is valid to a certain extent, my personal belief is that focus on function should be the main emphasis in teaching a second language. You have also said that positive evidence, along with negative evidence, is effective. There is no denying that L2 learners need positive evidence. However, researchers argue whether negative evidence should be provided to learners or not.

While it is important, sometimes, to provide negative evidence, there is a possible drawback in doing so. The argument is that negative evidence can trigger some wrong types of generalization. Based on the explanation of why a certain structure is ungrammatical, the learner may make wrong generalizations of the variables and consider them ungrammatical. Consider this:

*John drove slowly the car.

John drove the car slowly.

One can explain that in English adverbs follow the object that is internal to the VP. This explanation is not sufficient because learners would still rule out the following grammatical sentences:

Slowly John drove the car.

John slowly drove the car.

It is only when the teacher explains that in English the verb and its object form a constituent that cannot be separated that the learner sets his or her parameters accordingly. I have tried doing it and it works. My students find it extremely helpful to understand this grammatical phenomenon in English.

Unfortunately, it has been a trend within the theory of generative syntax to syntacticize all kinds of grammatical phenomena. This tendency has extended to the field of second language teaching. We need to understand that thematic structure, syntactic function, and discourse function in a sentence are superimposed on syntactic representation. It becomes problematic when teachers' yardstick of explaining certain grammar phenomena is purely syntactic. As language teachers, we need to incorporate the notion of lexical functional grammar (please ask me if you are not familiar with the term) to explicate certain movements and the interface between syntax, semantics, and discourse. Apparently, one would not want to bombard one's students with linguistic jargons and philosophical theories. However, the approach to language teaching must be linguistic in my personal opinion. In postulating a theory of language acquisition and its possible application to language learning, we will have to subsume within the framework of our theory thematic, syntactic, and discourse functions as independent yet superimposed formal characters to come to an understanding of language acquisition and linguistic processes. For example, heretofore, little has been done in speech production and speech perception. Non-linear phonology is a significant aspect of language acquisition that has been largely ignored by researchers, ESL teachers, and even language learners. The benefit one can obtain from including these important areas of language acquisition is that learning can be seen as a process of creative construction including all the aspects of natural languages and successful language growth as resulting from this multiplicity of formal categories.

I don't know if I have answered your questions. I apologize for being too philosophical. Please don't hesitate to ask me questions if you do not understand some of the issues I have discussed. I want to talk about the social distance factors and the psychologi8cal distance factors that determine to a great extent the language learner's proficiency in his or her second language, but maybe I will do that some other time. Hope you had a great vacation. Talk to you soon.

Jilani
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Hi Jilani,
I'm so sorry it took me so long to reply, but my life has been up side down lately. Too many papers and too many tests. But here is finally a reply to your last mail. The last couple of weeks in class we have mostly discussed the importance of focus on form, but we have also spent some time reading articles about strategies successful and not so successful language learners use when learning a second language. One of the articles we read were written by Roberta Vann and Roberta Abraham. They studied two Arabian women that were unsuccessfully learning English as a Second Language. The two women, Mona and Shida, were enrolled in an intensive English program. Shida, Mona and the other students in class were tested in four different areas: an interview, a verb exercise, a cloze passage and a composition. The researcher used different ways of monitoring progress. The students test scores as an indication of progress and they also let the students think aloud while performing tasks. I don't really like the approach the researchers used when conducting the research. I don't think that "think aloud" will actually tell you how a person is thinking. It rather gives you an idea of what the learner is thinking about thinking. Do you understand what I mean? Because before they say something they have already thought about it and might have modified what they are saying out loud. What the research discovered though is pretty interesting. Vann and Abraham states that unsuccessful learners in many cases are using the same amount of strategies as successful learners and often they use the same ones, but they apply them incorrectly. The unsuccessful learner is not inactive or lacking in their repertoire of strategies, but in their way of using them.
The authors states some important strategies to know to be a successful learner They can be classified in categories: engagement, risk taking, knowledge, and control. When Monda and Shida were studied they revealed that they sometimes were afraid of taking risks while doing an exercise. They rather ask the teacher than rely on themselves. They also had a hard time retrieving old knowledge they had and apply it to the new situation. Mona and Shida also lacked in their systematic approach to learning a second language. They never went back to check their answers or the forms they used and they also had a difficulty in using helpful cues in texts to answer questions about the text. Learners like Monda and Shida could probably benefit from training in strategy use. The authors don't mention anything about how such training would work. Do you know? I would like to know more about that and how you can detect that a student is applying a strategy incorrectly. Have you discussed this in your class at all or maybe you know something about it anyways? Please let me know.
I'm sorry to say that I won't be in the US in November. I'm going back to Sweden again in May and I'm going to finish up my last semester in Sweden before I graduate in

December. It sure would have been interesting to come though, but I guess money and time won't allow it. Talk to you soon.

Annett
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Hi Annett,

I know that the semester is coming to an end, and we are both in the same boat. Before you know, it will be over and you will ask yourself the eternal question, "What now?"

It is interesting that you should talk about learner strategies. Last week, it was the topic of our classmates' group presentation. A great deal of success in second language acquisition depends upon the strategies that learner uses. Also, there are specific learning styles that seem to be intertwined with learner strategies. You have mentioned an interesting fact about the effectiveness of strategies in terms of successful acquisition. In your reference to the research, you mention that the unsuccessful language learners used exactly the same types of strategies as the good learners, but they applied them incorrectly. This means that their failure to acquire their second language successfully may be attributed to incorrect application of the strategies that are proved to be effective for language learning (roughly speaking). In other words, there seems to be a correlation between strategies and language acquisition.

The realization of this correlation brings up another important issue which is germane to pedagogy. We know that success in second language acquisition depends – among many other social and linguistic factors – on the strategies the learner uses to overcome problems. The real question is then how can we teach those effective learner strategies to unsuccessful language learners so that they also may take advantage of them and eventually succeed. The biggest problem researchers encounter is to determine what strategies are the most effective. This is not an easy task, for it involves measuring affective factors such as motivation, first language acquisition strategies. One can prepare a questionnaire and ask the learner to provide answers to them, but we still don't know the validity of the data collected from the learner. Then there is a great deal of individual variation among learners that is also an impediment to the task. For example, one particular strategy that has proved to be effective for one learner may not work for another. We need to be aware that there are specific learning styles that learners adopt as they employ different strategies.

The Arabian women's failure to perform well in English perhaps indicates that they either didn't have the courage to take risks or the awareness of using risk-taking as a strategy. A psychological explanation of their potential problems in second language acquisition could be that they may not have gained mastery in their first language. This supposition goes back to Vygotsky's proposal that once the learner has reached the "zone of proximal development" (Piaget's formal operations), he can go on learning as many languages a he or she wants. There is probably some truth in this hypothesis. We find evidence in second language acquisition research that superior or inferior language learning capacity and domain-specific skills extend to the learner's second language. It would be quite misleading to attribute either success or failure in second language acquisition solely to learner strategies. I personally am convinced that interactive teaching activities could be a dynamic process for testing and assessment. Vygotsky's

concept that an appropriate teaching role involves active guidance of adult language learners' development of native-like proficiency is quite rich and complex. If we are to postulate a linguistic theory of second language acquisition, we will need to include factors such as learning styles, learner strategies, first language acquisition, universal properties of language acquisition, and last but not least, teaching-learning as a profoundly social process that enables learners to exceed the reaches of their current developmental level, inter-subjectivity or shared understanding as a basis for collective activity, and activity setting as social contexts for dynamic teaching and assessment. This should be our utmost concern for pedagogical applications. Unfortunately, there is a demarcation between linguistic theory and applications for teaching. Theorizing the phenomena of language has no bearing on the practical side of language learning, which is a sad state of affair. If researchers, psychologists, educators, and language teachers realize the importance of the effectiveness of an explanatorily adequate theory in terms of its application to language teaching and language learning, it will be beneficial. The benefit we can obtain from doing so is a better understanding of the complex interrelationships between the mind, body, and the environment.

I hope I have answered some of your questions. I can go on and talk about inner speech, thinking aloud, good learners, bad learners, and cognition and language, but I think this is enough for today. However, I agree with you that thinking aloud is not an actual representation of the learner's competence. First language acquisition research, especially within the framework of cognitive theories, involves game playing and eliciting thinking strategies for problem-solving tasks. But I personally think that all of this should be done in a reasonably natural situation. Thinking aloud in an experimental situation in itself is a constraint because the setting is artificial and researchers' agenda is hidden. May we will talk about that next.

Jilani
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Hi Jilani,
I hope you had a really nice Easter weekend. The international students were pretty much the only ones left at the university during the weekend and every thing was closed. Not much you can do then, but taking it easy, but you sure need that once in a while too. Last week we had some classroom presentations about different approaches and methods in language teaching. They were based on a book written by Richards and Rodgers. The presentation I did was on the oral approach and situational language teaching. This approach was developed from the 1930's to the 1960's by British linguists and the two leaders of this movement were Harold Palmer and A. S. Hornby. Speech is regarded as the basis of language and in the classroom English structures should be taught through oral practice of the structures. According to this view language learning is process based on the behaviorist learning theory. The teacher present what should be taught. The students memorize the knowledge by repetition and eventually the student should be able to use it in actual practice until it becomes a personal skill. Situational language teaching adopts an inductive approach to the teaching of grammar. The meaning of words or structures should not be given through explanation in either the target language or the native language, but the students should be able to understand it through the context it is in. Accuracy of pronunciation and grammar is crucial, errors should be avoided at all

costs and automatic control of sentence patterns is the foundation to reading and writing. It is important that the learner can speak fairly correct and use the appropriate vocabulary before the teacher can allow the student to a free choice in sentence patterns and vocabulary. This method uses a situational approach to present new pattern and by situational they mean a carefully controlled situation when presenting new material such as pictures and realia together with actions and gestures. When I first learned English I was taught by this method and I don't like it at all. The learner's role is too passive. They are just required to listen and repeat what the teacher is saying and they have no control over the content of the lesson. Errors are not allowed in the learner's language and I think errors are a natural part of language development. Acquisition is often shaped as a u-shaped curve and errors occur. Another aspect I don't like is that the lesson is so dependent upon the textbook. The textbook decides what is going to be taught and what vocabulary words that should be emphasized. This method focus on form and I guess that is one of its assets. It should be combined with a more communicative learning technique though. The learner should be able to influence what is being taught. We have also discussed some other approaches to language learning such as the audiolingual method and communicative language teaching. This week we will discuss some more methods. Have you discussed any in your class? Do you prefer one method over another? Let me know.

Annett
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Hi Annett,

As you have very rightly pointed out, the inductive approach to situational language teaching is based on the behaviorist paradigm. What is problematic for language teaching in general and second language acquisition in particular is that language teachers tend to ignore the linguistic nature of language learning. Second language acquisition is not necessarily about learning specific rule types of a specific second, third, or whatever language. I know you must be wondering what I mean by the linguistic nature of language acquisition. I will try to explain it on the basis of my own understanding of linguistic theory and language acquisition.

The inductive approach to teaching grammars of a particular language is form-oriented with some process approach. I personally think that learners are seen as mere machines, much in the connectionist – model approach, listening and imitating, supposedly memorizing and thereby learning the vocabulary, grammar, and perhaps other aspects of their second language. There are other methods of language teaching such as total physical response, silence period (wherein learners assume an extremely passive role), and sometimes the obsolete translation method. You have also mentioned that in the situational teaching method, learners do not participate actively in the interactive teaching/learning process. This is quite a hindrance to learning if we are to consider second language learning a creative construction process. The generative aspect of language learning has been established as an important factor in the learners' language growth. And in this regard, I would like to mention Chomsky's view on second language teaching.

In his paper, "What is Native Competence?" Selinker mentions Chomsky's philosophy of language acquisition. It should be mentioned that Chomsky never set out

to postulate a theory of language acquisition. He was, and is, essentially concerned with the linguistic processes that are operational during the learner's internalization of rules. Chomsky is firmly convinced that explanation and instruction do not help the learner master his or her second language; a philosophical assumption that is quite stultifying for language teachers. In proposing so, I think he is thinking about universal properties of language acquisition. He elaborates on his stipulation and stresses that regardless of the amount and quality of explanation and instruction, the learner will not benefit much. I personally think that Chomsky is saying that in regard to his nativist theory of language acquisition. As in any field of philosophy and applied science, opinion is sharply divided between those who espouse Chomsky's view and those who espouse Vygotsky's approach to bilingualism and teaching as a dynamic interactive process. One wonders why it is the case that despite providing the learner with all kinds of explanations and appropriate instruction, the learner seems to have crucial problems, which suggests that there is something internal which is germane to linguistic processes.

I will leave this point here and backtrack on what I had said earlier. What I mean by the linguistic nature of language acquisition is the metalinguistic knowledge, the learners' cognitive system, his ability to synthesize and analyze patterns and grammar rules in a second language pretty much on his own. Teaching does help, but the biggest problem facing teachers is incorporating real-life language in classroom instruction. It is only when we see the learning process as a combinatorial approach subsuming important aspects of human languages such as formal categories and their intertwined superimposition on actual surface structures, that we begin to understand learning as a cognitive process. There is a lot of cognition involved in learning, and it is unfortunate that we don't consider it important. Research in cognitive theories of language learning has been inconclusive, and in that respect, research in second language acquisition has been limited and limiting. It is in the interest of both language teachers and language learners that we preclude misunderstanding and move away from the rigid stratification of form-based teaching. That's it for now. I have to go. Hopefully, I will hear from you soon.

Jilani

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