Landmarks
Second Language Acquisition

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...one would expect SLA theories to...use the natural laboratory of bilingual communities worldwide. (Sridhar, 1994)

Some Issues in the Field of SLA

Introduction

There are some things that human beings naturally do, given the mere opportunity to do so. Walking and talking are the foremost examples of such skills. Babies are not born walking and talking, but by the age of three they usually are doing both. Walking and talking occur naturally in the course of a human being's physical or mental maturation; these abilities are not "taught," or "learnt" consciously. Similarly, we talk of unconscious language *acquisition* by the human infant, rather than language *learning*.

The language or languages acquired in infancy are "first languages", and infants who have the opportunity to acquire two or more languages grow up as "simultaneous bilinguals". Any language acquired after infancy (say, after the age of three) is a "second language". Second Language Acquisition, then, refers to a natural growth in the mind of a "second" language or languages, given the opportunity, i.e. given sufficient "exposure" to the language(s) in question, or sufficient language "input".

The origins of the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) may be traced to a short (8-page) but seminal essay, "The significance of learner's errors" by S. Pit Corder (1967). Corder notes a shift of emphasis, brought about by the discrediting of the behaviourist view of language learning as habit formation (owing to the work of Noam Chomsky), from "a preoccupation with *teaching*" towards "a study of *learning*" languages. This in an affirmation of the Humboldtian view that "we cannot really teach language, we can only create conditions in which it will develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way". The resulting impetus to the study of first language acquisition, says Corder, "has inevitably led to a consideration of the question whether there are any parallels between the processes of acquiring the mother-tongue and the learning of a second language".

Corder's thesis is that learner errors, like the child's errors, offer a window into the process of creative construction of a language system. The "systematic error" allows us to reconstruct the learner's "knowledge of the language to date, i.e. his *transitional competence*".

> No one expects a child learning his mother-tongue to produce from the earliest stages only forms which in adult terms are correct or non-deviant. We interpret his 'incorrect' utterances as being evidence that he is in the process of acquiring language...for those who attempt to describe his knowledge of the

> language at any point in its development, it is the 'errors' which provide the important evidence. (Corder, 1967, p. 165)

In the section "Inflectional Inconsistency in an Emerging Grammar", of this essay, I will apply Corder's approach to a case study on second language acquisition of English in India, to suggest the richness of the mental systems that the learner brings to this process. Another seminal idea that stresses the systematicity of learners' grammars is that of *Interlanguage* (Selinker, 1972).

Individual differences in SLA

Corder's classic essay raises many of the questions that continue to preoccupy the field of SLA. He suggests that if the L1 and L2 are acquired in the same way, "the principal feature that differentiates the two…is the presence or absence of motivation." How "nurseries, streets and classrooms" present dramatically different motivational challenges to the learner was described by Macnamara (1973). Currently, the study of motivation is subsumed under the study of "individual differences" and "affective factors," i.e. emotional factors, including anxiety, personality, and social attitudes, that influence an individual's ability to learn a new language (Piasecka, 2011).

Input, intake and interlanguage

More importantly, Corder realized that "the simple fact of presenting a certain linguistic form to a learner in the classroom does not necessarily qualify it for the status of input," because "it is the learner who controls this input, or more properly his intake." He mooted the idea of a learner's *built-in syllabus*: "The problem is to determine whether there exists such a built-in syllabus and to describe it." This idea was further explored in studies on the stages of acquisition of a second language (including a "silent period", during which the learner develops comprehension, but does not attempt to speak the new language); and on the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes, as compared with a child's first language acquisition data (Brown (1973); Dulay & Burt (1973, 1974a, 1974b, 1975); Bailey, Madden & Krashen (1974); see Krashen (1977) for a review).

But SLA need not progress from one step to the next in an orderly fashion; a learner may use two forms at the same time, as we shall see. This has led to studies on variation in SLA.

Comprehensible input

Stephen Krashen (1982, 1985, 1989) strongly reiterated that a second language is acquired, given "comprehensible input". What drives acquisition however is input at a stage just beyond the learner's current stage of grammatical knowledge, symbolized as *i* in his "*i*+1" hypothesis. Note that this again implicates a learner-determined syllabus, as against an externally sequenced or ordered syllabus. Moreover, it is the learner who determines what is comprehensible to him. As Prabhu was to say later (1987, p. 66), "The same sample of language can be comprehensible to the same learner at one level and for one purpose, and incomprehensible at another." Comprehensibility according to Prabhu was therefore a function of the learner, the text, and a "criterion of adequacy."

Does second language acquisition occur in an instructional context (i.e. in the classroom)∫ Does the age of the acquirer matter∫ Do all second language acquirers reach a

comparable level of proficiency (as first language acquirers are assumed to do); if not, why notʃ Is input sufficient, or is output (or language production) also necessary for success in SLAʃ These are some of the research questions I will look into in my paper.

Acquisition in an instructional context

The procedural syllabus (the Bangalore Project)

Our experience with English shows that language taught systematically in the classroom is not "deployable" by a learner in real time (Prabhu, 1987). Ordinary language use is fundamentally a "creative", rule-governed process, that requires an automatic conformity to grammatical norms, and that has no correlation with conscious performance in grammar tests. Prabhu's Bangalore Project demonstrated how a "procedural syllabus" can evolve in classrooms that follow a communicational or meaning-focussed approach (not to be confused with the "communicative" approach, which aims at a "communicative competence"). The syllabus and the language input in the project hence emerged out of classroom discourse, which in turn arose out of the learners' problem-solving activities that engaged them in an effort to comprehend language. Note the implication here that the teacher and the learner set their own "standards" for English. This is pertinent given that learners of English in India necessarily acquire the kinds of English that occur around them; these may range from international and national varieties (e.g. in the media) to local varieties of the language. (See also the discussion of immersion and English medium education in this article.)

Learner autonomy, authenticity, and whole language

If learner-driven processes are central to successful (second) language acquisition, much of what is done by specifying the classroom syllabus, methodology and testing amounts to "interference" with acquisition (Newmark, 1966), and an erosion of learner autonomy (Amritavalli, 2007). Amritavalli found that learners read and understand texts that they choose for themselves with greater success than those that are prescribed or teacher-chosen texts, *even from within the textbook*. Self-chosen texts tend to be shorter, are at the appropriate cognitive level, and include a variety of genres, such as poetry, letters and visual-verbal material. They also allow learners to set their own limits on comprehensibility.

Learner autonomy leads to an authentic learning experience (as against play-acting at learning, for passing examinations). Authenticity is sometimes (mis)interpreted as the mere use of "real" or "occurring" texts; but Widdowson (1979, p. 165), distinguishes "genuine" or occurring texts from authentic ones. He tells us that authenticity is "not a quality residing in instances of language but...a quality which is bestowed on them, created by the response of the receiver".

The whole language movement is an approach to language teaching that incorporates the essence of many of the ideas outlined above. Presenting language as story reading and storytelling, whether in first or second language classrooms, it ensures age appropriateness, authentic engagement with meaning, and unconscious acquisition of recurring language. It also promotes aspects of language use ranging from punctuation, spelling and paragraphing, to reading and writing multi-lingually. See Mangubhai

(2011) and Jangid and Amritavalli (2011) for a contextually relevant introduction to whole language.

Immersion and "English medium" education

The clamour for "English medium" education in India, and the relative success of "English medium" schools in promoting knowledge of the language, indicates (not unexpectedly) that English is learnt not only in the English language classroom, but from any and every opportunity to learn the language. The Indian experience of "Immersion" programmes (described in Wikipedia as "educational programs where children are instructed in an L2 language" in a "sociolinguistic setting that facilitates second-language acquisition") thus by far predates the institution of such programmes in Canada. In fact, immersion programmes may correspond better to the bilingual situation in our Kendriya Vidyalayas than the often monolingual situation sought to be promoted in English medium schools. Swain (1991) provides some critical insight into these programmes.

Is there a critical period for language acquisition?

Patterns of recovery from language loss due to brain damage showed that until around puberty, the brain was plastic enough to reorganize language representation into the undamaged brain areas (the "critical period hypothesis," Lenneberg, 1967). Neuronal plasticity has been a fertile area of interdisciplinary research, and the questions for SLA have become more complex. There may be multiple age cut-offs: e.g., native-like pronunciation is difficult to acquire after age 7. However there is no clear evidence that other aspects of a language cannot be acquired after this age, or after puberty. Indeed, the study of infant speech perception suggests that infants "tune out" of sound distinctions which are absent from their language as early as the end of their first year, although they are born as "universal listeners"! However, four-year-olds "tune in" again to foreign language sound distinctions (otherwise, children could never "pick up a native accent" after infancy). This yo-yo development in the ability to listen (known as a U-shaped curve in the acquisition literature) is typical of language acquisition.

A path-breaking brain study (Perani et al., 1998) showed that irrespective of age of acquisition, the brain area for L1 and L2 is the same, provided that late acquirers (>age of 10) and early acquirers (>age of 3) are equally proficient in the language. However, this is a chicken and egg situation: we do not know whether some learners acquire L2 better because they use the same brain area for their L2 and L1, or whether, when a certain level of proficiency is reached, the L2 gets represented in the same area as L1.

When people learn a second language, their first language may also change in subtle ways (Chang, 2012; Cook, 2008). This suggests that different languages exist in the mind as related systems, not as separate systems.

Inflectional Inconsistency in an Emerging Grammar

An error-ridden sample

Consider these opening sentences from two paragraphs of 138 and 132 words, written on two topics suggested by a candidate in an M.A, English entrance examination.

i. Rural childrens can be provided better access to schooling by making their parents aware of the future of their children....Children in rural areas doesn't go to school for the reason that...

ii. It's a well known fact that "Doctor's are human not God." But do they ever try to gain the position of even a human. For the doctors money is god and the life of a patient is useless. ... Doctor's prefer to be in big cities for better sattlement (sic) of their life and job ...

If you are a teacher of English as I am, the underlined errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar must have leapt to the eye. It is unlikely that this writer got a good grade.

Now let us look at the same writing with the eyes of an SLA researcher. We see now not just that there are errors, but that errors co-occur with the correct forms in the same sample, sometimes in the same sentence: *Rural childrens, their children, Children in rural areas; Doctor's, doctors, Doctor's.* This is the variability in SLA mentioned in the section "Input, intake and interlanguage". Why does this happenʃ Is there a pattern hereʃ

The irregular noun

On the "impaired representation" or "feature-deficit" hypothesis of morphological error, the learner does not mentally distinguish singular from plural; s/he uses these forms at random. But in our sample, the plural is consistently marked, even if it is "wrong". Bishop (1994) showed that in children with SLI (Specific Language Impairment), errors of commission (where a plural is used instead of a singular) are few or non-existent, whereas errors of omission (singular used for plural) are far more common. This shows the importance of looking at the larger picture, and not only at the errors. Incidentally, research shows that normal Second Language Acquisition (SLA) populations manifest difficulties similar to SLI populations in their L1 (Paradis, 2005).

The "error" *Doctor's* shows confusion in the conventional use of the "apostrophe *s*". However, it is the punctuation that is wrong here, not the "grammar". The error *childrens* is due to an "over regularization" of an irregular plural, a kind of error that occurs during first language acquisition. Looking now at all the nouns in our candidate's sample, we find:

- 29 correctly used tokens of singulars (*aim (2), money (4), disease, life (3), govt. (3), govt. job, private practice, private practise, fact, position, human (2), god, patient, process, oath, beast, school (3)*)
- 20 correctly used tokens of regular plurals (ignoring wrong punctuation) (*check-ups, Doctor's (2), doctors, studies (3), cities, areas (2), fees, parents (4), advantages, brother's, sisters, things (2)*)
- 5 correctly used tokens of irregular plurals (*people (2), children (3)*)

Thus, in a total of 57 noun tokens, there are 54 correct tokens, and 3 errors—childrens, children's, and bondages—hence an error rate of < 6 per cent.

The errors are limited to specific words. *Bondage* is an abstract noun that does not pluralize. As for childrens/children's, note the absence of a possible error, *childs*. The learner knows the irregular form *children*, but a productive rule of plural formation occasionally overrides it. The over regularization of an irregular form is typical of competing rule and item-based mental representations during acquisition. There is instability in the learners' mental representation of this particular word, interpreted as a positive sign of living and changing grammatical knowledge in this adult learner (age 18+).

The verb do in "do-support"

Turning to the verb error in "Children in rural areas doesn't go to school", let us now look at this learner's overall use of verbs, constructing a "morpho-syntactic profile". There are 38 tokens of correctly used verbs, regular and irregular, finite and non-finite; including two correct tokens of *do*. As against this, there are three incorrect tokens of *do*.

Verb, 3rd person singular

the govt. spends

Verb, 3rd person plural

they try to; do they ever try to; in this process they don't even care for; they forget; they wish to; doctors prefer; they know; they provide

Verb *be* (Irregular)

their main aim is (2), It's a well known fact, Doctor's are, money is, the life of a patient is, people are poor and are unable..., those things... which are of

Verb –ed/ -en (regular)

can be provided

Verb –ed/ -en (irregular)

had taken; must be told; must be fed; must be taught; should be given

Verb, infinitive

their main aim is to earn money (2); try to show; by asking to get; wish to do; prefer to be; Try not to be..., but be; have to look after; in order to; must teach; may help them to; must make them

Again, the error rate is a little above 6 per cent. More interestingly, the error is in the use of only one verb, *do*; and again, errors co-exist with the correct form. Let us now compare the correct and incorrect uses of *do* by this learner.

×agreement Children…doesn't go to school; they doesn't care for; they doesn't want to...

***Ok* agreement** they don't even care for...; do they ever try to...

The learner's simultaneous use of correct and incorrect forms shows instability in the grammar. What causes this instability∫ Is the problem specific to the use of *do* with negation∫ Does the learner sometimes use *doesn't* and *isn't* as fixed forms∫ There is no instance of *be* with negation in the data, so we must leave this as speculation.

Knowledge of Grammar and Knowledge of Conventions

This mini-analysis suggests a difference between knowledge of language, and knowledge of conventions. For a linguist, the learner described here mainly lacks the knowledge of conventions—of punctuation, of spelling (*practice*/*practise*), of irregular plurals. There is a very specific problem of agreement when *do*- support occurs along with negation. But the very instability of the learner's grammar argues that the grammar can change, that given better opportunities for input and intake, it will attain normative standards.

In the educational and social context of language use however, conventions matter. So does content, i.e. the argument, and the construction of the discourse. But then, the characteristics of a sound argument and a good discourse construction are again best acquired by exposure to good examples of argumentation and discourse. The sample of learner language discussed here thus both holds out a promise (on the learner's part), and requires a promise (on our part) to continue to provide English learning opportunities to all learners.

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