Second Language Acquisition Theories and How They Contribute to Language Learning

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Abstract

This paper presents a systematic review of second language acquisition (SLA) theories and how these theories and ideas could contribute to language teaching. It briefly presents SLA theories related to most language teaching approaches, such as behaviorism, interactionism, sociocultural, and comprehension theory. Then it examines some errors and non-systematic errors and how they affect language learning, as well as how to provide learners with the best kind of feedback on different language skills. It also presents first language interference and its positive or negative influence on acquiring the target language. The paper then discusses the comprehensible input in SLA, the role of interactive communication and social interaction in SLA, and how they could improve learners' linguistics competence. Furthermore, it presents the difference between language learning and language acquisition and what could be done to help improve the learning process. Finally, it discusses the differences between foreign language learning and second language learning and how that could affect SLA refereeing to some skills and aspects that would help learners to use language appropriately.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, Language Learning, Language Learning Theories

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) research has been identified as a multidisciplinary field. It is closely related to many disciplines, such as linguistics, psychology, pedagogy, cognitive psychology, and sociolinguistics. In the 1970s, most SLA research focused on morpheme acquisition, the order of acquisition, Selinker's (1972) "interlanguage" and "fossilization," and Corder's (1967) "significance of learners' errors." At that time, much research was refuting Skinner's behaviorist theory. Corder distinguished between systematic and non-systematic errors and suggested that teachers should consider students' needs. He stated:

To allow the learner's innate strategies to dictate our practice and determine our syllabus; we may learn to adapt ourselves to his needs rather than impose upon him our preconceptions of how he ought to learn, what he ought to learn and when he ought to learn.

There are SLA theories related to most language teaching approaches, such as behaviorism, interactionism, sociocultural, and comprehension theory. According to Johnson (2004), "behaviorism undermined the role of mental processes and viewed learning as the ability to inductively discover patterns of rule-governed behavior from the examples provided to the learner by his or her environment" (p. 18). In this perspective, the learning would happen in the process of habit formation via drills and training. The behaviorist theory was found unaffected, making most scholars move to apply Bruner's constructivist theory, which views the learning process as actions that learners build based on their past knowledge. The learners create and construct new concepts based on their previous knowledge, practices, and experiences. Interactionism refers to acquiring the language through interactions between learners. Hatch (1978) argued that "one learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed" (p. 404). The sociocultural theory of language acquisition is based on Vygotsky's phycological ideas that culture is understood through language and communication. In this view, language learning happens through social interactions, events, processes, and activities. On the other hand, the comprehension vision of language learning focuses on the mental process of acquiring the language. Krashen (2004) stated that comprehension hypothesis refers to subconscious acquisition, not conscious learning. The result of providing acquirers with comprehensible input is the emergence of grammatical structure in a predictable order. A strong affective filter (e.g. high anxiety) will prevent input from reaching those parts of the brain that do language acquisition. (p. 1)

2. Feedback and Errors in Second Language Acquisition

According to Corder, non-systematic errors are "mistakes" that occur in learners' native language, which might not affect language learning. On the other hand, errors are systematic, and they occur in second language learning. Language learners make mistakes when they fail to perform their competence, but they make errors when they do not know the correct rule. Most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers do not distinguish between learners' errors and mistakes, which might lead to many misunderstandings and wasting time in class. Unlike the English as a Second Language (ESL) context, EFL learners need much more corrective feedback to improve different language skills. Hence, EFL teachers need to know the best error correction method and consider the different kinds of errors: Error versus mistakes and global versus local errors. They must know how to provide learners with the best kind of feedback on different

language skills. Many factors may influence choosing the most effective feedback, such as the learners' level and age and the target skill. For instance, implicit corrective feedback, such as recasts, could work effectively for improving learners' speaking skills. However, implicit feedback may not help improve the same learners' writing skills. Similarly, explicit and direct feedback might be perfect and improve different language skills for beginners but does not help advanced learners. Sometimes direct oral feedback in speaking, for example, helps to improve kids' and young learners' speaking skills but is not suitable for adults since they might have high anxiety levels. On the other hand, some adult learners prefer direct oral feedback in speaking, as it helps to improve their language. Moreover, like any other classrooms in L2 classes, there are individual differences. Thus, it is the teacher's role to know how to choose the most effective feedback that works for their learners.

Most SLA researchers value error correction and feedback. However, some researchers are against that view. For instance, Krashen (1982) claimed that negative corrective feedback is not good for SLA since L2 acquisition is like children's L1 acquisition, where they do not receive any kind of explicit negative correction. In fact, during their L1 acquisition, children receive explicit feedback but in different ways than what usually happens in SLA. Given this understanding of feedback, I assert that both ESL and EFL learners need feedback, and it helps to improve their language skills and facilitate L2 acquisition. As mentioned above, teachers must choose the best kind of feedback for ESL and EFL learners—explicit/direct or implicit/indirect—feedback to increase their competence and improve their productive speaking and writing skills.

3. First Language Interference

Most EFL learners are in the early stages of interlanguage. It takes time and substantial effort to reach the target language. The new linguistic system that learners use, which is different from their target and native language, leads to many errors in most cases, and language teachers should know how to deal with such kinds of errors. Learners who want to learn a new language usually have L1 interference. Dulay and Burt (1976, p. 71) defined the term "interference" as "the automatic transfer, due to habit of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language" (cited in Lott, 1983, p. 257). This interference happens when learners use a second language. Weinreich (2011) suggested that there are three types of first language interference: Phonological, grammatical, and lexical interference. This interference might have a positive or negative influence on acquiring their target language, which language teachers could notice in both ESL and EFL contexts. However, it is easier for language teachers in the EFL context to use positive L1 interference since learners in most EFL contexts share the same native language, enabling teachers to create effective strategies to facilitate L2 acquisition. According to Lado (1957), contrastive analysis refers to the linguistic difficulties experienced while acquiring a new language. This theory suggests that difficulties in acquiring a new language might come from the differences between the learner's first and second languages. Indeed, contrastive analysis will not predict all the difficulties that language learners could have, but it could help overcome some learning barriers. Meanwhile, EFL teachers should not focus on contrastive analysis and linguistic interference and forget the interaction part of language teaching; this will lead to teacher-centered classrooms, which is still the style in many EFL contexts. The influence of language transfer has been presented in Chomsky's Universal Grammar theory, in which he explained how that transfer could influence SLA. However, as mentioned before, this should not be the primary concern of second language teachers.

4. Comprehensible Input in Second Language Acquisition

Most importantly, the primary and direct source of information for language learners is their exposure to the target language. Some second language researchers suggest that language acquisition is a matter of exposure. Krashen's input hypothesis asserts the importance of the comprehensible input CI for second language learners. He claimed that to have linguistics competence, L2 learners must have exposure to comprehensible input. The input's structure must be "a bit beyond" the learner's competence level. If the learner's level is i, the input should be $i+1$. In other words, L2 learners should have input that they mostly understand but is still challenging. The input should not be $i+0$, which is too easy to understand, and not $i+2$, which they cannot understand. Most ESL contexts are better than EFL contexts in providing comprehensible input for learners. In the ESL context, learners could be exposed to different sources of input and not only classroom input, which is generally the case in the EFL context. Language teachers in the EFL context sometimes find this limited input challenging. However, EFL teachers can use technology, such as videos, movies, different internet websites, e-learning, and multimedia, to provide comprehensible input inside and outside classrooms to facilitate L2 acquisition, as many studies have found. Using the updated resources of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), such as virtual learning environments, web-based language learning, and mobile-assisted language learning, is very effective in both ESL and EFL contexts. These resources greatly help EFL teachers in second language teaching and facilitate L2 acquisition since CALL provides strong motivation and can adapt to L2 learners' learning styles and different cognitive abilities.

Communicative activities also encourage learners to use the language effectively, which is an effective method that EFL teachers could adopt in classrooms (Kaisheng, 2007). As much recent research has suggested, unlike traditional teaching, the communicative learning approach, where teachers use interaction activities and authentic texts, helps improve students' language and facilitate SLA (Cruz-Ramos & Herrera-Díaz, 2022; Yuan, 2022; Lee & Chen, 2023). Using such kinds of activities will make room for scaffolding between L2 learners. Learners with high proficiency levels will assist and help lower-level and beginner students. This would be kind of what Krashen refers to as comprehensible input, where high-level learners provide $i+1$ input and interaction for lower-level learners. This social interaction will improve learners' levels and facilitate L2 acquisition. That is what Vygotsky (1978) referred to as the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD is a stage where language learners can do things with assistance and help. It is not something that they can do by themselves without help or that they cannot do even with help, as in Krashen's $i+1$ input hypothesis. Therefore, as mentioned above,

EFL and ESL teachers can use interaction activities and *i+1* input to facilitate L2 acquisition. Communicative activities and comprehensible input will help learners build excellent social interaction skills with each other and the language teacher. According to Long's (1985) interaction hypothesis, interactive communication has an important role in SLA and the improvement of learners' linguistics competence. Accordingly, second language learning moved from focusing on just linguistic competence to much more interactive-based classes and using linguistic competence appropriately in social contexts, referred to as communicative competence by Hymes first in 1966 (Cazden, 2011).

In the EFL context, acquiring communicative competence is difficult. Unlike ESL, in the EFL context, many factors prevent or make it difficult to achieve competent communicative learners, such as crowded classes, class time, curriculum content, and lack of training teachers. Most second language learners in the EFL context have good linguistic competence, and most of them know the correct rules of L2 syntax, phonology, semantics, and morphology; however, they cannot use them appropriately in social contexts. Using L2 appropriately in communication with other people is one of the main goals of second language learning. However, it depends on the objectives of L2 learning since second language learners and the institution's goal is sometimes just to obtain linguistic competence. In Japan, for example, there is a translation institute where learners learn how to translate texts from Japanese to French and French to Japanese. In this institute, teachers teach L2 without any communication skills, and their main focus is on teaching writing and reading skills, and they end up with learners with correct and accurate grammar competence. Consequently, in this EFL context, learners need only the grammatical competence dimension from Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence. There is almost little or no need for sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence, which particularly refers to the ability to solve communication problems. Needless to say, EFL teachers must know learners' needs since most EFL learners are adults, and their needs vary from one context to another. Although there are many different purposes for second language teaching, communication and improving learners' ability to interact with others are still critical goals in many EFL contexts in different institutions, schools, and programs.

5. Language Learning and Language Acquisition

Brown (2001) stated that "second language learning is a process in which varying degrees of learning and of acquisition can both be beneficial, depending upon the learners' own styles and strategies." This is accurate. There is no significant difference between language learning and language acquisition, especially in the EFL context. I believe these two terms could be used interchangeably. Krashen (1981), in his acquisition-learning hypotheses, claimed that there are two different ways of internalizing the target language. The first is acquisition, which is the subconscious way, like kids when they pick up a language, and the second is learning, which is the conscious way where learners study language rules and are aware of their learning process. He suggested that to have communicative fluency, L2 adults should acquire the target language, not learn it. I believe "consciousness" is a tricky term when used in SLA, as McLaughlin (1990) and Schimdt (1990) concluded. I opine that what makes a child acquire L1 effectively is not related to conscious and subconscious processes, but rather, it is the relaxed and friendly learning environment. In family settings, children are not anxious when they want to speak or when they make mistakes. Therefore, in the EFL context, teachers should try to create a relaxed learning environment and family-like atmosphere and choose suitable feedback to facilitate L2 acquisition. Doing so will move the learning process from extreme explicit traditional teacher-centered teaching models to much more implicit interactional models. In addition, EFL teachers can create syllabi that help them to improve learners' language and make L2 acquisition easier. Taking learners' needs into consideration, EFL teachers could also use communicative teaching methods, such as a communicative approach or communicative language teaching and task-based methods, to develop learners who can acquire the language easily and use it effectively (Yuan, 2022). Such methods promote classroom interaction between the learners themselves and between learners and language teachers, which can positively impact SLA. In some contexts, EFL teachers still use old traditional methods, such as the grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method, which makes SLA more difficult since learners cannot practice the target language and use it actively in communication.

6. ESL and EFL in Language Acquisition

Brown (2001) stated, "the seemingly clear dichotomy between ESL and EFL has been considerably muddied in recent years with the increasing use of English worldwide." He mentioned examples of how ESL contexts vary in native speakers' counties, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, and countries such as India and Singapore. However, there has been much research that found a perceived difference between foreign language learning and second language learning. (e.g., Freed, 1995; Huebner, 1995) Furthermore, many researchers (e.g., Spada, 1986; Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1993; Lennon, 1995; Tonkyn, 1996) compared EFL and ESL contexts and concluded that studying in the ESL context is much more effective and positively influences learners. On the other hand, Longcope (2009) argued that context does not "refer simply to the environment in which the learner is situated at a given time, but also to refer to the learner's relationship with that environment." Therefore, language learners could be in the same class at the same time but experience different contexts. Thus, the context in language learning could be investigated by studying the amount of second or foreign language exposure and the underlying circumstances and conditions that might influence language learning (Longcope, 2009). For example, Khouya (2018) found in his study that, unlike most ESL settings, many factors affect language learning in EFL settings, such as crowded classrooms, textbook content, and classroom atmosphere.

Some language researchers investigated the difference between ESL and EFL regarding attitudes, motivation, cultural content, and L1 use in classrooms. In the ESL context, most classes are multilingual, and the learners experience the target culture and language outside classrooms, unlike learners in EFL settings. Even though Brown (2001) mentioned that the ESL/EFL distinction had been muddied in recent years, he said,

it is still useful to consider the pedagogical implications for a continuum of contexts ranging from high visibility, ready access to the target language outside the language classroom to no access beyond the classroom door.

In terms of motivation, Xu (2010) concluded that learners' attitudes and motivations vary depending on their context, ESL or EFL. The researcher found that after what he refers to as a "contextual switch" changing from EFL to ESL, learners have a stronger desire to integrate with the target language's community and are satisfied with their learning outcomes. As mentioned above, ESL learners are likely to have stronger motivation since they can practice the target language in their daily lives with other people. Furthermore, most ESL learners have personal motivations to study a second language, such as communication or professional purposes. In contrast, many studies have found that EFL learners have less motivational intensity (e.g., Tuan, 2011; Sahragard & Alimorad, 2013; Mirza, Khatoon & Lohar, 2016; Ali & Pathan, 2017; Hojaji & Salehi, 2017; Suzuki, 2017). Some studies (e.g., Haniefi, Izadpanah & Bijani, 2018; Prihantoro, Widyana & Setiawan, 2018) suggest prompting positive motivation in both ESL and EFL contexts to improve learners' language and creativity. On the other hand, some researchers suggested that using information technology and media, such as video, movies, the internet, e-learning, and multimedia, play a critical role in EFL learners' attitudes and motivation to learn the language; they found that by using technology, EFL learners become highly motivated (Genc, 2009; Kim, 2010).

Regarding culture in EFL and ESL settings, unlike ESL, there is much more need for cultural-oriented instructions in EFL settings, as Al-Amir (2017) suggested. EFL learners have no exposure to the target culture like ESL learners do. Shukri (2014) noticed that cultural content has helped promote EFL learners' pragmatics awareness. Moreover, many researchers in language teaching have emphasized the importance of integrating culture into EFL classrooms (e.g., Alptekin, 2002; Mao, 2009; Hua, 2013; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018), as it would provide EFL learners different skills and knowledge that help them to use language appropriately. Integrating culture effectively into EFL classrooms will improve learners' linguistics and communicative competence and oral and written skills, as many studies have suggested (e.g., Planken, van Hooft & Korilius, 2004; Liaw, 2006; Kourova & Modianos, 2013; Popescu & Iordachescu, 2015; Allo, 2018). Nevertheless, there are challenges in both EFL and ESL contexts. Language teachers need to modify their teaching instructions, styles, and strategies according to each context. Likewise, language researchers need to consider the diverse nature of ESL and EFL contexts to ensure the validity of their studies.

7. Conclusion

All SLA theories and hypotheses, such as behaviorism, interactionism, sociocultural, universal grammar, and comprehension theory, showed how language researchers attempt to understand language learning and acquisition processes and help facilitate them. It might be true that SLA should not happen in classrooms but rather in natural settings. However, since not all people worldwide have the opportunity to acquire languages in natural settings, language researchers should investigate SLA in language classes to make the SLA process more effective.

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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