Chapter 14

Second language acquisition/ learning

LANE 321: Introduction to Linguistics
Introduction

- Children acquire their 1\textsuperscript{st} language really fast and without any effort.
- All children develop language at roughly the same age.
- The question is: if 1\textsuperscript{st} language acquisition is so straightforward, why is learning a 2\textsuperscript{nd} language so difficult?
- Think about a baby acquiring his first language.
- Think about a person acquiring a second language.
- What similarities and differences are there in the two processes?
Second language learning

• The distinction between
  • ‘Foreign language learning’: “learning a language that is not generally spoken in the surrounding community.”
    • e.g. a Saudi student learning English in Saudi Arabia. (EFL)
  • ‘Second language learning’: “learning a language that is spoken in the surrounding community.”
    • e.g. a Saudi student leaning English in the USA. (ESL)
  • The expression second language learning is used more generally to describe both situations.
Acquisition and learning

- **Acquisition**: the gradual development of ability in a language by using it naturally in communicative situations with others who know the language.

- **Learning**: a more conscious process of accumulating knowledge of the features of a language (e.g. vocabulary & grammar) in institutional setting.
Acquisition and learning

• Activities associated with **learning**:  
  - used in schools  
  - result in more knowledge “about” the language (as demonstrated in tests) than fluency in using the language (as demonstrated in social interaction).

• Activities associated with **acquisition**:  
  - experienced by young children  
  - experienced by those who pick up L2 from long periods of interaction with native speakers.

• Those individuals whose L2 exposure is primarily a **learning** type of experience tend not to develop the same kind of general proficiency as those who have had more of an **acquisition** type of experience.
The Critical Period Hypothesis

The critical period hypothesis (CPH) as proposed by Lenneberg (1967) holds that primary language acquisition must occur during a critical period which ends at about the age of puberty with the establishment of cerebral lateralization of function.
The Critical Period Hypothesis

• The processes involved in any language acquisition which takes place after the age of puberty will be qualitatively different from those involved in first language acquisition.

• Any language learning which occurs after the age of puberty will be slower and less successful than normal first language learning (Krashen 1975; Lenneberg 1967, 1969; Scovel 1969).
Acquisition barriers

- Why is learning an L2 different from acquiring an L1?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>L2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>childhood</td>
<td>teenage or adult years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction time</td>
<td>constant interaction</td>
<td>a few hours each week of school time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities</td>
<td>Little to do</td>
<td>a lot of other things going on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another language?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acquisition barriers

• Many adults manage to overcome the difficulties and develop an ability to use the L2 effectively—though not usually sounding like native speakers.

• e.g Arnold Schwarzenegger, actor/Governor of California, whose accent is clearly noticeable yet who is as linguistically proficient as any native speaker of American English.

• This provides evidence for the Critical Period Hypothesis
Acquisition barriers

- However, even in ideal acquisition situations, very few adults seem to reach native-like proficiency in using an L2.
- There are individuals who can achieve great expertise in the written language, but not the spoken language.
- e.g. Joseph Conrad:
  - wrote novels in English that became classics of English literature
  - his English speech retained the strong Polish accent of his L1
- This suggests that some features of an L2 (e.g. vocabulary and grammar) are easier to learn than others (e.g. pronunciation)
Acquisition barriers

- Against this view, it has been demonstrated that students in their early teens are quicker and more effective L2 learners in the classroom than seven-year-olds.
- The optimum age for learning may be during the years from about 10 to 16 when:
  - the flexibility of our inherent capacity for language has not been completely lost
  - the maturation of cognitive skills allows a more effective analysis of the regular features of the L2 being learned
Affective factors

- Affective (not effective) = Affections/ feelings

Affective Factors: Emotional reactions such as self-consciousness or negative feelings that may influence learning

- Affective factors are among the types of acquisition barriers that might inhibit the learning process. For example:
  - Self-consciousness
  - Unwillingness
  - Embarrassment
  - Lack of empathy with the other culture.
  - Dull textbooks, unpleasant classrooms, an exhausting schedule of study or work, etc.
- Basically, if we are stressed, uncomfortable, self-conscious or unmotivated, we are unlikely to learn very much.
Affective factors

• Children may overcome such factors quickly.
• Studies have shown that children quickly overcome their inhibitions as they try to use new words and phrases.
• Adults can sometimes overcome their inhibitions too.

Experiment:
• In one interesting study, a group of adult L2 learners volunteered to have their self-consciousness levels reduced by having their alcohol levels gradually increased
• Up to a certain point, the pronunciation of the L2 noticeably improved
• After a certain number of drinks, pronunciations deteriorated rapidly
Focus on method

• More recent approaches designed to promote L2 learning have tended to reflect different theoretical views on how an L2 might best be learned.
• The grammar-translation method
• The audiolingual method
• Communicative approaches
The grammar-translation method

Characteristics:

• Treating L2 as any other academic subject
• Use of vocabulary lists and sets of grammar rules
• Memorization is encouraged
• Written language rather than spoken language is emphasized
• Translation to the mother tongue
The grammar-translation method

• Produced many successful L2 users

Criticism:

• does not focus on how language is used in everyday conversation
• Saudi students can leave school, having achieved high grades in English, yet find themselves at loss when confronted by the way English native speakers actually use their language.
The audiolingual method

Characteristics:

• Emphasizes spoken language
• Systematic presentation of the L2 structure, moving from the simple to the more complex, in the form of drills – repetition.
• The use of language is a ‘habit’ that needs a lot of practice.
• Dialogue form, mimicry, set phrases, drills, memorization, tapes, language labs.

Criticism:

• boring
• not like the interactional nature of actual spoken language use.
Communicative approaches

• Communicative approaches are partially a reaction against:
  • the artificiality of “pattern-practice”
  • the belief that learning the grammar rules of a language will result in an ability to use the language.
• Based on the belief that the functions of a language (what it is used for) should be emphasized rather than the forms of the language (correct grammatical or phonological structures).
• A shift from concern with the teacher, the textbook, and the method to an interest in the learner and the acquisition process.
Focus on the learner

• One of the radical features of the communicative approach is the toleration of ‘errors’ produced by students.

• Traditionally, “errors” were regarded negatively and had to be avoided or eradicated.

• An “error,” then, is not something that hinders a student’s progress, but is probably a clue to the active learning progress being made by the student as he or she tries out ways of communicating in the new language.

• Just as children acquiring their L1 produce certain types of ungrammatical forms (e.g. overgeneralization) at times, so we might expect the L2 learner to produce similar forms at certain stages.
Transfer

- Some errors may be due to “transfer” (also called “crosslinguistic influence”).

Transfer: Using sounds, expressions or structures from the L1 when performing in the L2.

- e.g. an Arabic speaker may say: “open the lights?”
Transfer

Two types:

• **Positive transfer**: If the L1 & L2 have similar features, then the learner may benefit from positive transfer. *(e.g. I wish I travel tomorrow/أتمنى أسافر بكرة)*

| Positive Transfer: The use of a feature from the L1 that is similar to the L2 while performing in the L2, in contrast to negative transfer |

• **Negative transfer** *(interference)*: transferring an L1 feature that is really different from the L2 *(e.g. putting n. before adj: the girl beautiful)* results in negative transfer.

| Negative Transfer: The use of a feature from the L1 (that is really different from the L2) while performing in the L2, in contrast to positive transfer |

• We should remember that negative transfer is more common in the early stages of L2 learning and often decreases as the learner develops familiarity with the L2.
**Interlanguage**

**Interlanguage**: An in-between system of L2 learners, which has some features of the L1 and L2 plus some independent of the L1 and L2.

- e.g. the Spanish L1 speaker who says in English *She name is Maria* is producing a form that is:
  - not used by adult speakers of English,
  - does not occur in English L1 acquisition by children,
  - and is not based on a structure in Spanish.
Interlanguage

• If some learners develop fixed repertoire of L2 expressions, containing many forms that do not match the target language and seem not to be progressing any further, their interlanguage is said to have ‘fossilized’.

• ‘fossilization’ in L2 pronunciation = foreign accent.

Fossilization: The process whereby an interlanguage, containing many non-L2 features, stops developing toward more accurate forms of the L2
Motivation

• Very important in language learning.

**Instrumental motivation:** The desire to learn an L2, not to join the community of L2-users, but to achieve some other goal, in contrast to *integrative motivation*

  • e.g.
    • Graduation requirement
    • Read scientific publications
    • Find a better job

**Integrative motivation:** The desire to learn an L2 in order to take part in the social life of the community of L2-users, in contrast to *instrumental motivation*

  • e.g. Become an accepted member in a community
Motivation

• Those who experience some success in L2 communication are among the most motivated to learn.
Input & output

**Input:** The language the learner is exposed to, in contrast to **output**

- To be beneficial for L2 learning, input has to be *comprehensible*.

**Foreigner Talk:** A way of using a language with non-native speakers that is simpler in structure and vocabulary.

- *How are you getting on in your studies?*
- *English class, you like it?*

- This type of foreigner talk may be beneficial at early stages. How?
- It is not only beneficial for immediate communicative success, but also for providing comprehensible examples of the basic structure of L2.
Input & output

- As the learner’s interlanguage develops, there is a need for more interaction — ‘negotiated input’.

Negotiated Input: L2 material that an acquirer/learner is exposed to when active attention is drawn to that material during interaction in the L2.

**NS:** like part of a triangle?
**NNS:** what is triangle?
**NS:** a triangle is a shape um it has three sides
**NNS:** a peak?
**NS:** three straight sides
**NNS:** a peak?
**NS:** yes it does look like a mountain peak, yes
**NNS:** only line only line?
**NS:** okay two of them, right? one on each side? a line on each side?
**NNS:** yes
**NS:** little lines on each side?
**NNS:** yes
**NS:** like a mountain?
**NNS:** yes
Input & output

Output: the language produced by an acquirer/learner, in contrast to input

- The opportunity to produce comprehensible output in meaningful interaction is another important element in the learner's development of L2 ability.
- Yet it is one of the most difficult things to provide in large L2 classes.
- One solution has been to create different types of tasks and activities in which learners have to interact with each other, usually in small groups or pairs, to exchange information or solve problems.
Input & output

• Despite fears that learners will simply learn each other’s “mistakes,” the results of such task-based learning provide overwhelming evidence of more and better L2 use by learners.

• The goal of such activities is not that the learners will know more about the L2, but that they will develop *communicative competence* in the L2
Communicative competence

Communicative Competence: The general ability to use language accurately, flexibly, and appropriately.

- It has different components:
  - Grammatical competence
  - Sociolinguistic competence
  - Strategic competence
Grammatical competence

• It involves the accurate use of words and structures.
• How to use the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language.
• What words do I use?
• How do I put them into phrases and sentences?
• Is it enough?
• No, concentration on grammatical competence only will not provide the learner with the ability to interpret or produce L2 expressions appropriately.
Sociolinguistic competence

• How to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating.
• Which words and phrases fit this setting and this topic?
• How can I express a specific attitude (courtesy, authority, friendliness, respect) when I need to?
• How do I know what attitude another person is expressing?
Strategic competence

• How to recognize and repair communication breakdowns
• How to work around gaps in one’s knowledge of the language
  • e.g. A Japanese speaker saying, "He is not telling the truth" instead of "He is a liar" to avoid pronouncing the initial [l] sound in 'liar'.
• How do I know when I’ve misunderstood or when someone has misunderstood me?
• What do I say then? How can I express my ideas if I don’t know the name of something or the right verb form to use?
  • e.g. a Dutch L1 speaker wanted to refer to *een hoefijzer* in English, but didn’t know the English word. So, she used a communication strategy.
    • *the things that horses wear under their feet, the iron things*
    • the listener understood immediately what she meant (horseshoes).
Applied Linguistics

• In attempting to investigate the complex nature of L2 learning, we have to appeal to ideas not only from linguistic analysis, but from other fields such as communication studies, education, psychology, sociology.

• Applied Linguistics

• Because it represents an attempt to deal with a large range of practical issues involving language (not only L2 learning), applied linguistics has created connections with fields as diverse as anthropology, neurolinguistics, social psychology, and sign language studies.
References


Thank you