

STUDYING LANGUAGE AS THE SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract

In this article we focus on second language learners' developing knowledge and use of their new language. We examine some of the mistakes that learners make and discuss what mistakes can tell us about their knowledge of the language and their ability to use that knowledge. We look at stages and sequences in the acquisition of some syntactic and morphological features in the second language. We also review some aspects of learners' development of vocabulary, pragmatics and phonology.

Key words: Morphological features, language acquisition, target language, interlanguage, design procedures, to analyzing learners' errors, simplification, contrastive analysis, irregular verb, learners' development of vocabulary, grammatical morphemes, article, probably, contrastive analysis.

In this article we focus on second language learners' developing knowledge and use of their new language. We examine some of the mistakes that learners make and discuss what mistakes can tell us about their knowledge of the language and their ability to use that knowledge. We look at stages and sequences in the acquisition of some syntactic and morphological features in the second language. We also review some aspects of learners' development of vocabulary, pragmatics and phonology. Knowing more about the development of learner language helps teachers to assess teaching procedures in the light of what they can reasonably expect to accomplish in the classroom. As we will see, some characteristics of learner language can be quite perplexing if one does not have an overall picture of the steps learners go through in acquiring features of the second language¹ In presenting some of the findings of second language research, we have included a number of examples of learner language as well as some additional samples to give you an opportunity to practice analyzing learner language. Of course, teachers analyze learner language all the time. They try to determine whether students have learned what has been taught and how closely their language matches the target language. But progress cannot be always measured in these terms. Sometimes language acquisition is reflected in a decrease in the use of correct form that was based on rote memorization or chunk learning. New errors may be based on an emerging ability to extend a particular grammatical form beyond the specific items with which it was first learned. In this sense, an increase in error may be an indication of progress. For example, like first language learners, second language learners usually learn the irregular past tense forms of certain common verbs before they learn to apply the regular simple past *-ed* marker. That means that a learner who says "I *buyed* a bus ticket" may know more about English grammar than one who says "I *bought* a bus ticket". The one who says "buyed" knows a rule for forming the past tense and has applied it to an irregular verb. Without further information, we cannot conclude that the one who says "bought" would use the regular past *-ed* marker where it is appropriate, but the learner who says "buyed" has provided evidence of developing knowledge of a systematic aspect of English. Teachers and researches cannot read learners' minds, so they must infer what learners know by observing what they do. We observe their spontaneous language use, but we also design procedures that help to reveal more about the knowledge underlying their observable use of language. Without these procedures, it is often difficult to determine whether a particular behavior is representative of something systematic in a learner's

¹Patsy M. Zightbown and N.Spada. 2006. How language are learned. Oxford University Press.

current language knowledge or simply an isolated item, learned as a chunk. Like first language learners, second language learners do not learn language simply through imitation and practice. They produce sentences that are not exactly like those they have heard. These new sentences appear to be based on internal cognitive processes and prior knowledge that interact with the language they hear around them. Both first and second language acquisition are best described as developing systems with their own evolving rules and patterns, not as imperfect versions of the target language. Children's knowledge of the grammatical system is built up in predictable sequences. For instance, grammatical morphemes such as the *-ing* of the present progressive or the *-ed* of the simple past are not acquired at the same time, but in sequence. Furthermore, the acquisition of certain grammatical features is similar for children in different environments. As children continue to hear and use their language, they are able to revise these systems so that they increasingly resemble the language spoken in their environment. Are there developmental sequences for second language acquisition? How does the prior knowledge of the first language affect the acquisition of the second (or third) language? How does instruction affect second language acquisition? Are there differences between learners whose only contact with the new language is in a language course and those who use the language in daily life? These are some of the questions researchers have sought to answer, and we will address them in this research work. A simplified version of the CAH would predict that, where differences exist, errors would be bi-directional, that is, for example, French speakers learning English and English speakers learning French would make errors on parallel linguistic features. Helmut Zobl (1980)² observed that this is not always the case. For example, in English, direct objects, whether nouns or pronouns, come after the verb ('The dog eats the cookie. The dog eats it.'). In French, direct objects that are nouns follow the verb (Le chien mange le biscuit – literally, 'The dog eats the cookie'). However, direct object pronouns precede the verb (Le chien le mange – literally, 'The dog it eats'). The CAH would predict that a native speaker of English might make an error of saying: *Le chien mange le* when learning French, and that a native speaker of French might say 'The dog it ate' when learning English. In fact, English speakers learning French are more likely to make the predicted error than French speakers learning English. This may be due to the fact that English speakers learning French hear many examples of sentences with subject – verb – object word order (for example, Le chien mange le biscuit) and make the incorrect generalization – based on both the word order of their first language and evidence from the second language – that all direct

²Zobl H. 1980. The formal and developmental selectivity of Z₁ influence on Z₂ acquisition. Language learning. 30/1 : 43-57

objects come after the verb. French-speaking learners of English, on the other hand hearing and seeing no evidence that English direct object pronouns precede verbs, do not tend to use this pattern from their first language. Eric Kellerman (1986)³ and others also observed that learners have intuitions about which language features they can transfer from their first language to the target language and which are less likely to be transferable. For example, most learners believe that idiomatic or metaphorical expressions cannot simply be translated word for word. As a result of the finding that many aspects of learners' language could not be explained by the CAH, a number of researchers began to take a different approach to analyzing learners' mistakes. This approach, which developed during the 1970s, became known as 'mistake analysis' and involved detailed description and analysis of the kinds of mistakes second language learners make. The goal of this research was to discover what learners really know about the language. As Pit Carder said in a famous article published in 1967⁶ when learners produce 'correct' sentences, they may simply be repeating something they have already heard; when they produce sentences that differ from the target language, we may assume that these sentences reflect the learners' current understanding of the rules and patterns of that language. 'Error analysis' differed from contrastive analysis in that it did not set out to predict errors. Rather, it sought to discover and describe different kinds of mistakes in an effort to understand how learners process second language data. Error analysis was based on the hypothesis that, like child language, second language learner language is a system in its own right – one that is rule-governed and predictable.

Larry Selinker (1972) gave the name INTERLANGUAGE to learners' developing second language knowledge. Analysis of a learner's interlanguage shows that it has some characteristics influenced by previously learned languages, some characteristics of the second language, and some characteristics, such as the omission of function words and grammatical morphemes, that seem to be general and to occur in all or most interlanguage systems. Interlanguages have been found to be systematic, but they are also dynamic, continually evolving as learners receive more input and revise their hypotheses about second language. The path through language acquisition is not necessarily smooth and even. Learners have bursts of progress, then seem to reach a plateau for a while before something stimulates further progress. Selinker also coined the term FOSSILIZATION to refer to the fact that, some features in a learner's language may stop changing. This may be especially true for learners whose exposure to the second language does not include instruction or the kind of feedback

³ Kellerman E. 1986. An eye for an eye: Cross linguistic constraints on the development of the Z₂ lexicon. New York: Pergamon, pp.35-48

that would help them to recognize differences between their interlanguage and the target language. The following texts were written by two learners of English, one a French-speaking secondary school student, the other a Chinese-speaking adult learner. Both learners were describing a cartoon film entitled *The Great Toy Robbery* (National Film Board of Canada). After viewing the film, they were asked to retell the story in writing, as if they were telling it to someone who had not seen the film. Read the texts and examine the errors made by each learner. Do they make the same kinds of mistakes? In what ways do the two interlanguages differ?

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