

Literature Review of Theories of Second Language Acquisition

Douglas Broad *

M.A., T.E.S.L., Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada

Abstract

In Theories of Second Language Acquisition, the Behaviorist theory of second language acquisition proposes that children imitate language by people around them and accurate attempts will be followed by reinforcement. The quality and quantity of reinforcements molds the language behavior. Habits learning the first language interfere with new habits needed for second language learning is called the contrastive analyst hypothesis. Errors are caused by transfer from the first language. Innatist theory states that humans are born with biological mental structures for language acquisition and discover language rules based on common universal grammar principal (U.G.) Interactionist/ Developmental theory examines the interplay between children's innate learning ability and the environment they develop in. J. Piaget believed children's language is built on their cognitive development within their play and interaction with objects and people. Communicative theory assumes second language learning is made up of knowledge of language structure and its functions in communicative settings. S. Krashen's five hypothesis Monitor Model is presented and critiqued by contrastive analysis, error analysis, error treatment, inter-language, fossilization, and comprehensible output hypothesis.

Keywords: second language acquisition, theories

MAJOR THEORIES FOR SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: BEHAVIORIST, INNATIST, INTERACTIONIST AND COMMUNICATIVE

The Behaviorist theory

The Behaviorist theory for second language acquisition comes from the behaviorist theory in the 1940's -50's by B.F. Skinner that proposed that children imitating language by people around them, accurate attempts would be followed by positive reinforcement of praise or successful communication (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.12). Since children were encouraged by their surrounding environment they would continue to imitate and practice these sounds and patterns until the children used 'habits' of correct language use. The quality and quantity of heard language in conjunction with the consistency of reinforcement by others will shape the child's language behavior. The environment is the source of everything the child needs to learn.

Behaviorism also influenced second language teaching and learning from the 1940's to 1970's where students learned dialogues and sentence patterns through mimicry and memorization (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.103). It was assumed that a person attempting to learn a second language would use the habits from the learning of the first language and these would interfere with new habits needed for second language learning. This was called the contrastive analyst hypothesis (CAH) and errors were believed to be caused by the transfer from the first language (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 41).

The Innatist theory

The Innatist theory of second language acquisition is based on Chomsky's hypothesis that human beings are born with biological mental structures designed for language acquisition. Humans discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system based on the sample of languages they are exposed to (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.20). The universal grammar [(U.G) innate linguistic knowledge hypothesized to have a set of principles common to all languages] would stop the child from seeking an incorrect hypothesis about how the language systems might work. This hypothesis is emphasized by the fact that almost all children will successfully learn their native language and its patterns. Similarly, profoundly deaf children will learn sign language if they are exposed to it in infancy. Input is the language the learner is exposed to (either written or spoken) in the environment. Critiques of this is that what is innate is the ability to learn and not knowledge of the principles (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.29)

Interactionist/Development

Developmental and cognitive psychologists have focused on the interplay between the innate learning ability of children and the environment they develop in. These psychologists refute the innatists who place too much emphasis on the 'final state' the competence of adult native speakers and not enough on the developmental aspects of language acquisition; acquisition is just one example of the human child's ability to learn from experience. What children need to know is available in the language exposure in the thousands of hours of interaction with people and objects around them.

Jean Piaget (1951), the Swiss psychologist, believed that children's language is built on their cognitive development as evidence within their play and interaction with objects and people. For example, he traced the development of cognitive understanding of things as object permanence (knowing that things hidden from sight are still present), stability of quantities irrespective of changes in appearance (knowing 10 pennies spread out to form a long line are not more numerous than 10 pennies in a tightly squeezed line), and logical inferencing (solving which properties of a set of rods (their size, weight, material, etc.) cause some rods to sink and others to float on water. Children's language is one of a number of symbol systems that are developed in childhood (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.24). Vygotsky (1978) viewed language developing from social interaction as he observed interactions among themselves and between children and adults in the 1920's and 30's. He believed that in a supportive interactive environment, children are able to achieve higher levels of knowledge and performance. He coined this metaphorical place

with its interlocutor (a participant in a conversation) as the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Those conversations provide a kind of supportive structure that helps them make the most of the knowledge they have and to acquire new knowledge called scaffolding (The language an interlocutor uses to support the communicative success of another speaker). It may include missing vocabulary or expanding a speaker's incomplete sentence.

The communicative theory

The communicative theory of second language acquisition is grounded on the assumption that successful language learning is made up of knowledge of forms and structures of language in addition to the functions purposes a language function in various communicative settings. This model of second language acquisition stresses the communication of meaning in interaction instead of the emphasis on the practice in contrast of grammatical forms in isolation (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.215).

Krashen's Monitor Model (five hypothesis)

Stephan Krashen's Monitor Model of second language acquisition is as follows: In the acquisition/learning hypothesis learners acquire language as a result of being exposed to language samples in a similar manner children acquire their first language with conscious awareness to form. In contrast, we learn through conscious attention to form and rule learning; more language is acquired than learned (Lightbown & Spada, 2013 p.106).

The monitor hypothesis suggests that second language users access what they already have acquired when interacting in spontaneous communication. They can use learned rules and patterns as a 'monitor' or editor; this allows them to make minor changes and fine tune what the already acquired system produced. This monitoring occurs only when the speaker or writer has ample time, is diligent about producing correct language, and has learnt the rules. (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.106).

The natural order hypothesis states that, like first language acquisition, acquiring a second language unfolds in predictable sequences. Language rules easiest to state (and hence to learn) are not necessarily the first to be acquired. (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.106).

The comprehensible input hypothesis states that language acquisition happens when a learner is exposed to comprehensible language and contains [i+1]. The 'i' representing the language level already acquired. The '1' as a metaphor for language (Grammatical forms, aspects of pronunciation and words) that is a step beyond the learner's level (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.106). The affective filter hypothesis attempts to explain why some people who after being exposed to a large quantity of comprehensible input do not acquire language successfully. This 'affective filter' is a metaphorical barrier preventing learners from language acquisition when appropriate input is available. Affect refers to anxious feelings or negative attitude that may be associated with poor learning outcomes. An anxious, tense, or bored learner may filter out input, thereby making it unavailable for acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.106).

The Monitor Model has been criticized by other researchers because it is not possible to test Krashen's hypothesis empirically (Mchaughlin, 1987) or he has come to the wrong research conclusion (White, 1987).

A Contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH)

A Contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) assumes that errors were the results of transfers (the influence of a learners first language knowledge in the second language) (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.41). Analysis of learned errors show not all errors by second language learners is explained by first language transfer alone. Many errors can be explained better by a learners developing knowledge of the target language structure than their attempt to transfer patterns of their first language (Richards, 1979).

Some of the errors are very similar to young first language learners. For example, the use of regular – ed past tense ending on an irregular verb. Error analysis arose in the 1970's because aspects of a learner's language could not be explained by the CAH. Error analysis involved detailed descriptions of second language learner's mistakes to investigate what learners knew about the language. In Corder(1967), learners producing correct sentences may be repeating something already learned. When sentences are produced that differ from target language, he assumed that the sentences reflected the learners current understanding of verbs and patterns of the language. For example, the learner's who say 'buyed' instead of 'bought'. (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.42).

Error analysis was based on the hypothesis that, like young learners of language, second language learner language is a system in its own right that is rule governed and predictable.

Error treatment is a term made popular by D. Farris (2002) which refers to the approach by which teachers help learners with errors using multiple strategies such as error analysis, metalinguistic explanation such as the ability to treat language as an object. For example, defining a word to say sounds that make up that word (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.220) and error correction so that the latter can correct or even avoid errors by themselves. The goal is to self-edit and produce error free target language.

Interlanguage

Interlanguage refers to a learner's developing second language knowledge (Selinken, 1972). Interlanguage has some characteristics that are influenced by the learners previous languages; qualities of the second language, and some that are generated and occur in all interlanguage systems as evidenced by omitting function words and grammatical morphemes. Interlanguages are systematic and dynamic by always evolving by learners having more input and adapting their hypothesis regarding the second language (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.43). The progress of language acquisition may not be smoother because learners may have bursts of progress and reach a plateau before new learning stimulates progress.

Fossilization

Fossilization refers to students that keep repeating the same mistake; some characteristic in a learner's language seems to stop changing and students plateau. This may be apparent for those students who second language does not include instruction or feedback to recognize the difference between their interlanguage and target language (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.43,) Students may not necessarily stay the same because through a teacher's guidance and error feedback students will progress.

The comprehensible output hypothesis

The comprehensible output hypothesis has evolved from the interaction hypothesis which states that conversational interaction is an essential condition for second language acquisition (Hotch, 1978, p.401-35). Long (1983) concurred with Krashen that comprehensible input is required for language acquisition but stated that modified interaction is necessary for making language comprehensible. Interactions are adopted conversation patterns proficient speakers use to address learners so learners will understand through a negotiation for meaning. These adopted conversation patterns include comprehension checks, clarification requests, and self-repetitions or paraphrasing (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.114). Swain's (1985) comprehensible output hypothesis is a hypothesis in response to Krashen's (1985) comprehensible input hypothesis. Swain proposes that second language acquisition is contingent on learners producing oral or written language the speakers can understand.

Speakers are then able to see their second language ability limits and the need for a better way to convey their meaning. Their demand for comprehension pushes learners forward in development.

Form-focused instruction (FFI)

Form Focused instruction draws learners attention to language forms and structures of a language within the context of communicative interaction. FFI can be done through giving metalinguistic information, highlighting the form in question, or providing corrective feedback (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.218). Corrective feedback tells the learner that his or her use of the target language is wrong.

A suggested method for TESL/TEFL

I think the best method for TESL/TEFL is to find a balance for students to create, express and understand meaningful language coupled with form-focused instruction and corrective feedback. The right balance will be adjusted to the learner's age. For example, more meaning-based activities in the primary years (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.196). The right balance is also determined by the learners' metalinguistic maturity, prior educational experiences, motivation, goals and similarity of the target language to an already known language. I would also support learners to create activities that focus on forms used in communicative activities such as Reader's Theatre. Students could also provide feedback to each other and encourage question asking about language (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.196-197).

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The following open – access websites I consider worthy of teaching and learning are as follows:

1. The website www.rong-chang.com is a website for ESL teachers and students. It has exercises for easy to intermediate learners ranging from easy conversation, grammar exercises, sentence structure, dictation, and short stories. For example, easy conversations focus on daily life, dating, eating out, etc. This website is very interactive and easy to navigate.
2. The website www.EnglishClub.com is a website for English learners and teachers. For learners, it has lessons, games and videos. The lessons include listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. There are English lessons for business, ESL exams, jokes, forums and articles. Quizzes are for grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, general knowledge, idioms, and phrasal verbs.
3. The website www.daily.com gives students and teachers access to 60,000 famous quotations, aphorisms and proverbs for learners and teachers on the following

subjects: politics, education, freedom, power, money, death, etc. The authors range from Shakespeare, Frost, Jefferson, Plato, Martin Luther, etc.

4. The website www.wikipedia.com is an online encyclopedia that can be translated into 52 languages. Subjects are typed in with up to 500 subsequent web pages on the topics appearing.
5. The <http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/tresors/immigration/imf0302e.shtml> website is a website explaining immigration and settling in Canada. It is from the Canadian Museum of History and is an informative website for people from kindergarten to teachers and anyone with an interest in Canadian immigration and history.
6. The website www.AussieChildcareNetwork.com is a website for children and teachers that highlight topics of ADHD behavior management, printables, artwork and work templates, learning story bubbles printables and worksheets.