Review of the Influence of L1 in L2 Acquisition

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Abstract

L1 has a significant influence on second language study. However, how L1 influence L2 is very complicated and abstract. But to study the mechanism of how L1 influence L2 is significant because L2 acquisition is making contribution on many fields like education and psychology. L1 is one of the central elements influencing SLA. In this course paper, we are going to overview what linguists have done about L1 and L2 and what approaches and theories they have made.

Key words: L1 transfer; Second language acquisition; Universal grammar

INTRODUCTION

The process of second language acquisition, or L2, has been influenced by so many factors, and the first language, or L1, maybe the one of the greatest factors. So many linguists have researched the relationship between L1 and L2 acquisition, and they also have proposed many reconcilable and irreconcilable opinions. On the basis, this paper mainly focuses on some factors of the influence of L1 in L2 acquisition. In the first part, the definition of L1 and L2 acquisition will be given. In the second part, the L1 transfer will be mainly discussed. While in the third part, we can see the role of L1 from the historical and modern view. Then move to the fourth part, which is the progress of universal grammar. And in the fifth part, also a very important part, the interlanguage theory will be introduced. At last is the list of references.

1. L1 AND L2 ACQUISITION

1.1 Definition

What is L1 acquisition? The L1 acquisition, according to Susan Gass and Larry Selinker, is the process a child learns his or her first language. While SLA refers to the process of learning another language after the native language has been learned. (Gass & Selinker, 2008) It is not just the second language one learns, even the process of third, fourth, and fifth language one learns, are all called SLA. Second language acquisition is different form foreign language learning. The latter refers to the process one learns a nonnative language in the place of his or her native environment. For example, a Chinese person learns English in China. While, second language acquisition, on the other hand, refers to learning one learns a nonnative language in that nonnative environment. For example, that Chinese person we mentioned just now, learns English in the USA. The point of both the L1 and L2 acquisition, is the word acquisition. People acquire the first or second language, not just learn them consciously.

1.2 Process of L1 Acquisition

The significance of studying the process of L1 acquisition is great. Because much SLA research parallels L1 acquisition especially in the 1960s and 1970s. To study one acquire his or her first language is to study a child's behavior. Language is a form of communication, but children communicate long before they have language— at least in the way we normally think of language. Anyone who has lived in a household with an infant is aware of the various means that infants have at their disposal to communicate their needs. The most efficient of these is crying, but there are other more pleasant means as well.

Some of these include smiling and cooing. Coos are not precisely like the regular speech sounds of language, but they do suggest that infants are aware of sounds and their potential significance. For example, from approximately four to seven months, infants use these cooing sounds to play with such language-related phenomena as loudness and pitch (Foster-Cohen, 1999). The most widely accepted process of L1 has those elements. They are bablling, words, sounds and pronunciation, syntax, and morphology.

In this chapter, we have discussed what is L1 and L2, the difference between SLA and foreign language learning, and the process of L1 acquisition. The last part, L1 acquisition, has strongly influenced the whole study of SLA. Because linguists cannot just study the process of L2 acquisition alone without any reference system. The study of L1 acquisition is a very good reference system for the study of SLA. Linguists have made many conclusions through comparing L1 and L2 acquisition. However, SLA is not just the same with L1 acquisition. It has its own feathers and when a person acquires L2, he or she will be influenced by his or her L1. We will further discuss the influence in the following chapters.

2. TRANSFER

2.1 Definition

The word *transfer* was first being used a century ago. Whitney first used this word in linguistics to describe the influence of cross-language. However, till 1950s and 1960s, this word became popular in linguistics. In 1986, Sajavaara proposed that in psychology, transfer is a kind of influence from old knowledge to new knowledge. That is to say, when a person studies new knowledge, his old knowledge will influence the process of his new knowledge learning, and the whole influence is called transfer. Fries and Lado later, introduce the word *transfer* to the study of SLA. Corder (1973) claimed that SLA is the accumulation of action. Everyone can master a language if he or she wants to. So the mistakes made in SLA are explained as a kind of interference of L1 when the learners are learning the target language. And this kind of interference is called negative transfer. The similarities between L1 and L2 are thought to help the SLA. So that is positive transfer. In other words, the distinctions between L1 and L2 cause difficulties and mistakes in SLA, while the similarities promote it. However, Chomsky (1959), Selinker (1972) and Ellis (1985) emphasized the inner elements of human's brain and they contended that there is something in mind which can help the language acquisition. Now, it is commonly believe that it is biased to conclude that the habit of using L1 can influence SLA.

Here we divided L2 transfer into four levels: sounds transfer, words transfer, syntax transfer and culture transfer.

2.2 Sounds Transfer

The most enduring and prominent phenomenon in L1 transfer is sounds transfer. In the SLA, it is widely found that L2 learners' pronunciation is deeply influenced by their L1 and deviate the pronunciation of the native speakers. So the function of L1 transfer plays a very important role in SLA of sounds.

2.3 Words Transfer

Some linguists found that if there are many similarities of words between L1 and L2, learners feel easier to learn the target language and vice versa. This is why French students feel easier than Chinese students when both of them are studying English. For the reason that in English, there are many words borrowed from French. When French students come across those words, they feel no difficulties remembering them. While Chinese and English belong to different language systems. There are few similar words between the two languages. So Chinese students feel more difficult to learn English than French students do.

2.4 Syntax Transfer

The syntax transfer contains syntax structure, such as word order, negative sentence, interrogative and relative clause and so on. The positive and negative transfer are existent at the same time. According to behaviorism theories, when the sentence pattern of L1 and L2 is different, the mistake will come into being. According to contrastive analysis hypothesis, when L1 is different from L2, L1 will interference the SLA. In other words, all the L1 transfer in SLA is negative transfer. When the mode is the same of L1 and L2, the positive transfer comes into being.

2.5 Culture Transfer

Culture transfer is a kind of influence made by the difference between L1 and L2. L2 learners tern to express themselves in their own habit from their culture.

In this chapter, we discuss the L1 transfer in SLA. It is obvious that L1 transfer exists in all the language structure level. And we have analyzed the transfer from the aspect of sounds, words, syntax and culture. We found that L1 plays a very complicated role in SLA. Zobl asserted that there is a projection phenomenon is language acquisition. Ringborn (1987) made the point that the level of L2 is a key factor of transfer degree. And Odlin (1989) put forward that just as the using of cognate words, positive transfer happens on the basis of highly proficiency. Too many linguists proposed too many opinions. This area is waiting for more linguist to study.

3. ROLE OF L1 FROM THE HISTORICAL AND MODERN VIEW

In the second page of Lado's book, *Linguistics Across Cultures*, he stated that individuals tend to transfer the

forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture—both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives.

3.1 Behaviorism

3.1.1 Linguistic Background

In Bloomfield's classic work, *Language* (1933), he provides a very elaborate description of how those behaviorists conceive language.

The most basic position of behaviorist is that language is speech rather than writing. That is to say, speech comes first, then comes writing. The reason why they hold this idea is that firstly, most of the children learn to speak before they learn to write. Secondly, there are many areas have no written language, but they have oral language.

3.1.2 Psychological Background

Learning is a cumulative process. The more knowledge and skills an individual acquires, the more likely it becomes that his new learning will be shaped by his past experiences and activities. An adult rarely, if ever, learns anything completely new; however unfamiliar the task that confronts him, the information and habits he has built up in the past will be his point of departure. Thus transfer of training from old to new situations is part and parcel of most, if not all, learning. In this sense the study of transfer is coextensive with the investigation of learning (Postman, 1971).

3.2 Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

Contrastive analysis is a way of comparing language in order to determine potential errors for the ultimate purpose of isolating what needs to be learned and what does not need to be learned in a second-language-learning situation (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

Duskova (1984) once conducted an experiment and got some data which showed that when Czech learn English and Russian, they will transfer bound morphemes to Russian but they will not transfer them to English. Another example is also worth attention. Zobl (1980) once found according to the data of an experiment that when French learners learn English, they never make mistake about the word order of object pronouns and verb. For the fact that in French, object pronouns precede the verb, but in English, object pronouns follow the verb. The result of the experiment is interesting because French learners never made mistake about the word order when they made English sentence. However, English learners always put the object pronouns after the verb when they made French sentence, just as they made they NL sentence. This result showed that the habit of L1 maybe transfer to the target language, but it maybe not.

Another experiment is about the difficulty. If L1 has one form but L2 has two, it is comparatively difficult for learners to figure out the difference. Stockwell, Bowen and Martin once conducted a form about hierarchy of difficulty.

Table 1
Category and Example

Category	Example
Differentiation	English L1, Italian L2: *To know* versus *sapere/ conoscere*
New category	Japanese L1, English L2: Article system
Absent category	English L1, Japanese L2: Article system
Coalescing	Italian L1, English L2: The verb *to know*
Correspondence	English L1, Italian L2: Plurality

3.3 Error Analysis

Error analysis is a kind of linguistic analysis which focuses on the errors learners make when they produce the target language. The main distinction between error analysis and contrastive analysis is that the former compares the target language form with the target language made by learners, while the latter studies the differences between L1 and L2. Error analysis was first studied for education during 1950s and 1960s. When the article titled "The significance of learners' errors" written by Corder (1967) came, things changed. In this article, he held the idea that errors are not just errors made by language learners. They have some significance. Through those errors, we can find some kind of system of how learners learn L2, and by studying this system, error analysis can not only use for education, but also for psychology and linguistics. He also distinguished, in his article, between errors and mistakes. Mistakes are made by learners just by chance, and learners can recognize what mistakes they have made and correct them. However, errors are systematic. Every time learners come across this form, they will make mistakes and they cannot recognize them. That is to say, mistakes are accidental and can be recognized while errors are systematic and unconscious.

3.4 Modern View on the Role of L1

3.4.1 Child Second Language Morpheme Order Studies

Around 1970s, morpheme order studies became popular in SLA. The most popular study at that time is L1 = L2 Hypothesis, which propos by Dulay and Burt (1974a, 1974b, 1975). This hypothesis mainly means that children's SLA is similar to their L1 acquisition. Chomsky (1959) was once against Skinner's idea on behaviorism for SLA. The former's position indicated that L1 transfer is not the most important thing influencing the SLA. In order to challenge the transfer theory, George (1972) once conducted a experiment which showed that one third of the errors were attributable to the NL, while Dulay and Burt (1975) also got some data which showed that less than 5% were so attributable. And they developed a theory which called creative construction.

The process in which children gradually reconstruct rules for speech they hear, guided by universal innate mechanisms which cause them to formulate certain types of hypotheses about the language system being acquired, until the mismatch between what they are exposed to and what they produce is resolved Dulay and Burt (1974a). Lakshmanan (1995) asserted that according to his research, children may have a universal principle which constrains their SLA, not because of L1 transfer.

3.5.2 Adult Second Language Morpheme Order Studies

We have discussed many linguists finds of the morpheme order, but they are all about children. Bailey, Madden, and Krashen (1974) conducted a study about the morpheme order on adults' SLA. They use the study of Dulay and Burt by adding a group of adults. The result is similar to Dulay and Burt's. Larsen-Freeman (1975a, 1975b) found that Japanese learners had lower scores of English article than other countries' learners. Meanwhile, Hakuta (1974b) found that Japanese learners' morpheme order is different from other countries' learners.

In this chapter we have discussed a historical overview of the role of L1 in SLA and modern view of SLA. There are so many linguists have made effort on it. However, their ideas are different. This field needs more freshmen to study.

4. UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR

Universal Grammar approach, or UG approach is a very revolutionary approach. The point is that despite of countries, all human beings have the same abstract principales of language and core grammar have been rooted in our mind before we are born. Cook, in 1997, has given this conclusion.

4.1 UG Principles

Otsu and Naoi (1986) once proposed that the notion of structural dependency makes the system of language different from other systems. Schachter (1989) conducted some experiments to support this approach.

4.2 UG Parameters

UG parameters are sets of options for syntax set up the generalized principales of UG.

It is of interest that some recent proposals suggest that the possibility of VS word order is not, in fact, part of the pro-drop parameter, but derives from other principles of grammar (Chao, 1981; Safir, 1982; Hyams, 1983), a position that these results would be consistent with (White, 1985).

SUMMARY

All in all, in the process of SLA, the way of thinking of L1 is very common. It promotes the study of L2 and it also constrains the study of L2. In the process of SLA, L1 is an important basis for language study. It can help learners to classify the language input, and help learner improve their language learning ability. But its negative influence can not be neglected. To study the L1 and L2 acquisition is to figure out the difference between them.

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