Research and Comparison on the Second Language Acquisition at Home and Abroad

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Abstract

After more than 30 years of developments, second language acquisition has developed into an independent discipline and is constantly expanding itself in the research field. Based on the introduction of Chinese development of second language acquisition, the essay also introduces the study of second language acquisition abroad, pointing out the deficiencies in the study of second language acquisition and accordingly poses recommendations on how to promote the combination of the study of second language acquisition and teaching practice.

Key words: Second language acquisition; Internal research; Studies abroad

INTRODUCTION

As a separate discipline, which originated in the late 1960s and early 1970s, second language acquisition has a history of more than 30 years, symbolized by the emergence of interlanguage. It was in 1970s that American linguist S.D. Krashen created the theory of "language acquisition". And the theories on second language acquisition were proposed based on the study of the second language acquisition process and its rules. Here, the second language acquisition process refers to "the process in which a learner with the mastery of his mother language learns another language without its social environment" (Li, 2009, p.57). In recent years, with the research fields of second language acquisition widened constantly and the research theories increasingly updated, the research methods have been more diversified and scientific than ever. "Second language acquisition (SLA) has been one of the central topics in cognitive science. Various theories regarding the SLA process have evolved and have been a subject of debate over the years" (Pang, 2001, p.238). But, among these methods, "one essential to develop such a skill is the ability to switch from one language to the other, as appropriate (Neil, 2000, p.5). It was not until in the mid 1980s that the research on the second language acquisition in China started. After more than 20 years of research, we should re-examine the development course and current situation of studying of second language acquisition, which not only helps us to deepen the understanding and awareness of the discipline, but also helps us to analyze and settle problems in language teaching, meanwhile, contributing great inspiration and guidance to teaching practice of language.

1. INTERNATIONAL HISTORICAL REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH ON SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Theoretic premises of studying second language acquisition are behavioristic psychology and structural linguistics. The behavioristic psychology prevalent in the mid-20th century deems it that learning is a process of behavior formation, and that verbal behavior is determined by the "stimulus-response" form. However, language is a kind of human behavior, rather than a thinking phenomenon, and the development of language is described as a series of formations of habits. Simultaneously, structural linguistics has a significant

impact on theories of language learning, whose core view is that all human languages are classified. It is the classification that is one of the essential attributes of language. Linguistics should focus on the study of structure and form of language. Organic combination of behavioristic psychology and structural Linguistics gives birth to the theory of the far-reaching contrastive analysis hypothesis, and the doctrine in the studying of second language acquisition is of great significance in the development process.

Originally Fries (1945) theoretically posed to apply comparative analysis to teaching, and he thought teaching materials should be based on scientific and meticulous comparison between the learner's mother tongue and the second language. Generally speaking, Lado's "Linguistics across Cultures" (1957) is the first work to explore the method of comparative analysis. Lado thinks the main stumbling block in foreign language learning is the difference between the mother tongue and target language, and believes that by comparing the similarities and differences in the structures of the two languages, researchers can predict EFL learners' verbal mistakes and difficulties. Lee (1968) further developed this hypothesis, adding that barriers in foreign language learning mainly or entirely arise from the mother-tongue interference.

But in the early 70s, the theory of comparative analysis entailed fierce criticism. One criticism came from suspicion of the predictive power in comparative analysis; another criticism was related to the feasibility of comparing the two languages. In addition, the criticism from teaching practice showed its face in the period. Vulnerability analyses on the theories and methods of comparative analysis can be summed up as: scholars of comparative analysis attempted to use simple linguistics to solve complex psychological issues, which were not to be trusted. Because the comparative analysis can not accurately predict verbal errors the learners may make in the process of second language acquisition. From the late 60s to early 70s, beginners of second language shifted research interests and the focus of linguistic analysis of the errors themselves.

Making mistakes is a necessary stage of language learning process, as well as an important feature and thus, error analysis enables the authors to shift the focus from avoiding errors to studying the errors themselves, which provides a more direct and effective method of learning a second language. Verbal errors can be divided into two categories: One is the effect of the mother tongue, and the other is the absence of the influence of mother tongue on second language acquisition. The two types of errors can also be divided into: The occasional and random errors (mistakes) in the process of language using and the regular errors reflecting the transitional language ability of learners. For teachers, errors are one of the most important sources of information in teaching and error analysis is an important means of teaching. Error analysis shows teachers what level learners already have got to in language skills and concludes what content the learners must also learn. In addition, our learners' verbal errors help us understand the way to grasp a language, such as the learner's learning strategies and programs and so on. These errors may also be used as a means to validate certain assumptions. The theory of error analysis explains the errors that occur when learners take advantage of certain communicative strategies (for example, avoiding communication).

However, error analysis still has a lot of limitations, Bley-Vorman (1983) argues that error analysis should not be described and analyzed only from the target language ,which may come to the conclusion with a great deal of one-sidedness ,which he calls comparative lapse. In other words, the theory of error analysis lays emphasis on errors that occur because of ignorance of the rules in a language to reveal the process of foreign language learning; The theory of Error analysis overemphasizes the material analysis of application of language, such as speaking and writing, and ignores the analysis of process material on language comprehension, such as listening and reading. In the process of language learning, comprehension and application are equally important.

Chomsky's (1965) description for the essence of first language acquisition provides a new theoretical foundation for the research in second language acquisition in the early 1970s. Chomsky believes that perspective of behaviorism fails to explain two basic facts in language acquisition: (a) children can use language creatively and they are able to understand and use languages that they have never heard of or come across before. (b) Even in a flawed language environment, children can acquire language systematically. In his view, creativity is one of the natures of language, and this characteristic of human language can not be acquired in any form of the learning approach of "stimulus-response". Human's language ability can only come from the brain itself, instead of the result of effect from external factors. Because of the flaws in contrastive analysis and error analysis exist theoretically and practically in language, people start shifting the research focus from the analysis of the similarities and differences between the two languages and the analysis of language learners' errors to language learners and their language gradually.

Selinker published a famous article (1972), introducing the concept of interlanguage. Selinker believes that the second language that learners have mastered in a particular period is different from the mother tongue, as well as the second language, which is a system independent of the language, that is, interlanguage system. Selinker believes that the main difference between the first and second language acquisition is that most of second language learners meet with what is called fossilization of interlanguage in a certain stage of the process of development (fossilization), and only about 5%

can reach the terminal. Slinker gives the reason why these people have succeeded is that they take advantage of the brain's underlying language mechanisms (latent language structure), one, similar to the concept of Chomsky's language acquisition mechanism (the language acquisition device).

Yip (1995) believes that research is supported by the development of error analysis of interlanguage, but its concern lies in not only language mistakes, but also the entire system of language knowledge. Ellis (1994) pointed out in the early evaluation of interlanguage theory: interlanguage theory is an appropriate starting point for studying second language acquisition, which for the first time provided explanations for the theory of second language. Therefore, the concept of interlanguage endowed second language acquisition with its own independent research direction, marking the beginning of second language acquisition research as an independent discipline.

2. REVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION RESEARCH IN CHINA

Research and development of second language acquisition theory in China are more than 10 years later than abroad. Since China started to research the theory in second language acquisition, researchers have brought great inspiration to language and language teaching. As we can see, the research of second language acquisition in western countries is mainly based on indo-European language. Although these hypothesis and modes are endowed with certain general meanings, Chinese is a different voice from European language ,which necessarily in voice text, syntax vocabulary and features reflected by the culture-loaded aspects brings natives of language learning and those who take Chinese as second language special problems. Second language acquisition in domestic research has much more practical and important significance. Domestic development in studies of second language acquisition can be divided into two phases.

2.1 Phase I (1984-1993): Introduction, Discussion and Preliminary Application of Theory

During this period, the main contents related to domestic and foreign language and linguistics as well as published translations in Chinese core journals, essays and book reviews are as follows: Theory and research, such as the translation theories of second language acquisition, summary of the research language acquisition and review of development; interlanguage studies are mainly related to error analysis, development process, and the acquisition order of interlanguage pragmatics; factors affecting language acquisition and language input are external

ones in second language acquisition; Studying of second language learners' cognitive mechanisms, such as the role of mother tongue, knowledge of the language; Studying of second language learners' individual differences, in which process, "The individual differences, viz., age, sex, aptitude, motivation, cognitive style, learning strategies, and personality are defined and classified" (Shahila, 2012, p.640); Studying of classroom teaching and second language acquisition, such as the basic characteristics, strategies and role in class teaching.

2.2 Phase II (1994-2004): The Study's Deep Development and Gradual Maturity

In this period, originals in the study of second language acquisition abroad benefit from the introduction of systems. The scholars at home introduced some theoretical and thematic research works in this field abroad in the form of articles or book reviews. Meanwhile, monographs and essays written by a group of domestic scholars on the research of second language acquisition have been published in succession; The number of national research projects about the research of second language acquisition has significantly increased, and a total of 12 related subjects has become planning projects only in terms of "nine five" and "ten five" projects of national social sciences; Some Chinese and English interlanguage corpuses have been established. Many colleges and universities have begun cultivating talents oriented towards the research of second language acquisition.

Eleven years from 1994 to 2004 witnessed the study of second language acquisition at home gradually step into a mature stage, where the research results emerged in large numbers, studying fields widened, research level further developed, skills of research improved continuously, the research team expanded, fully demonstrating the vitality of the domestic research on the subject.

3. DEFECTS OF THE RESEARCH OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN OUR COUNTRY

Compared with foreign countries, the research of second language acquisition starts late in China, and has different emphasis on research methods and content. The related study of second language acquisition appearing from the 1980s is mainly based on the presentation, introduction and review of viewpoints from western scholars and research results. After entering the 1990s, China's input in second language acquisition research is systematically introduced, digested and absorbed, combined with China's actual situation. Empirical studies aimed at the features that Chinese English learners perform are countless in English acquisition, and all the studies are based on objective facts and data rather than subjective judgment. Reviewing the course of studying second language

acquisition in China, domestic study of second language acquisition also has the following disadvantages:

First of all, the domestic study of second language acquisition is mostly static synchronic study. Since the late 1990s, foreign countries have attached importance to the dynamic study of the formation and development of second language ability, posing a strong challenge to Chinese researchers still in the static phase. Secondly, judging from the literature readings, the study of second language acquisition in China mostly focuses on oral input, while the study of written input is specifically deficient; In the process of second language learning in many countries, written input focused on reading is an indispensable way of learning a second language, meanwhile the most practical way. Finally, among the objects of study in the past, most of them are beginners, for whom the language learning content they are exposed to is relatively simple, but in fact, in second language learning there are many intermediate and advanced learners, so selecting beginners as the objects of study is not enough to reflect the overall status of second language acquisition.

4. THE COMBINATION OF THE STUDY OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND TEACHING PRACTICE

In a sense, the teaching practice is a main application direction of second language acquisition, and meanwhile, the research of second language acquisition and language teaching practice is complementary to each other. The second language acquisition provides principles and theories for language teaching, and is the source of teaching advice. First, the research of second language acquisition helps grasp teaching strategies, including working out teaching plans, selecting teaching materials, clarifying teachers' role, responsibility and teaching attitude. Language teaching, at the same time, provides practical field and solid evidence for the action research of second language acquisition, finally propelling it to march towards more scientific research results of the second language acquisition. The vast majority of foreign language teachers at home still adopt traditional methods: grammar teaching as the main content, the teachers' explanation as the center of the classroom teaching, the acquisition of language knowledge in teaching language as learning purpose, and as for students at home, they are stuck in narrow knowledge domain, unable to walk out of the thinking box, all of which makes it clear that the combination between teaching practice and the study of second language acquisition is incisively significant. The two ways of second language acquisition reflected on teaching practice include classroom learning and natural acquisition. Of the two ways, classroom learning has developed itself into the limelight to the fullest. In other words, how to make the classroom teaching conform to the regularity of second language acquisition becomes the key to studying the effect of classroom teaching. The research of Second language acquisition provides the hypothesis of relationship between classroom teaching and second language acquisition for us. The role of classroom teaching in the process of second language acquisition is embodied in two aspects: on one hand, the effect of class teaching on language learning route, on the other hand, its effect on the language learning efficiency. Taking classroom teaching, a concentrated reflection of teaching practice, for example, it benefits a lot from the theories of second language acquisition.

Input hypothesis (input content): "Input plays a significant role in second language acquisition; some researchers classify input into conscious and unconscious" (Wang, 2010, p.283). Input refers to the information learners receive in language environment. This kind of information is comprehensible or not to language learners. Krashen (1982) poses the Input Hypothesis in order to explain the emergence of second language acquisition. Besides, input hypothesis is significant for practical teaching and textbook compilation. Besides, in order to enhance comprehensible language information, we need to create authentic, diversified language materials or a realistic learning environment.

Absorption theory (intake content): Ellis (1994) calls the part that the learners temporarily stores into the brain absorption (intake). It helps teachers to select materials, design classroom activities, and decide the attitude to learners.

Output hypothesis (the output content): the concept is associated with the input hypothesis. Classroom interaction plays a role of the bridge between the input and output. Classroom interaction emphasizes the combined effect of the language environment and the inner mechanism of learners in language acquisition. Wells (1981) defines interaction as a collaborative activity of trilateral relation made up of information receiver, information sender and language environment. Classroom interaction is composed of teachers' expression, errors' handling, teachers' questioning, learners' participation, task-based interaction and group activities, etc.. Classroom interaction is aimed at social communication.

The acquisition of internal syllabus: The research of second language acquisition also argues that the learners have an internal syllabus of language acquisition, that is to say, the learners' learning cannot happen overnight, but has its phases of development. This process shows that the learners themselves have a studying schedule, which is inherent, natural and inevitable. Birdsong, David ever delved the existence of critical period of the study of second language acquisition, and the result is if there is any truth in the critical period hypothesis then there may be different critical periods for different language skills, different types of change at different ages. (Birdsong,

2001, p.435) Thus the internal syllabus will meet with various changes. Learners' subjective efforts can speed up the process, rather than leap over this process.

In view of the present teaching situation of foreign language in our country, we should take our teaching methods, teaching strategies, teaching objectives seriously, and pondering over our teaching efficiency, chewing over how to absorb advanced experience of foreign language teaching in order to make our country's foreign language teaching conform to the regularity of second language acquisition more scientifically and more effectively.

CONCLUSION

The research in second language acquisition in China after a course of more than 20 years has made considerable progress, and has a far-reaching effect on language teaching, also leaving us pondering and enlightened.

First of all, in the research process of second language acquisition, foreign theories should be constantly verified in the learning environment in our country in conjunction with the actual situation of Chinese language learners in foreign languages. Second, we should be soberly aware of the gap and insufficiency of related research between at home and abroad. Closely combining the characteristics of the Chinese learners with the research of second language acquisition will contribute to understanding the objective

laws of foreign language learning of Chinese students, revealing cognitive mental process, helping us to set up the correct guiding ideology, accordingly, helping solve common problems in foreign language teaching in China, overall improving the level of foreign language teaching in China ,and finally , developing teaching and learning theories of China's foreign language.

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