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Similarities and Differences between First and Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

In order to understand and explain first language (L1) acquisition and second language (L2) acquisition, scholars have put forward many theories. Based on these theories, we can conclude that the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 can be found in the following four levels, i.e. age, environment, way and stage. Recognition of the similarities and differences between FLA (first language acquisition) and SLA (second language acquisition) can also aid language teachers to understand language learning and to assist students in their language learning process. The current thesis will first look at the similarities between the L1 and L2 acquisition. Then, the differences will be outlined. In the last part the implications of these findings for foreign language teachers will be discussed.

Keywords : First language acquisition, second language acquisition, similarities, differences

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1. Previous studies and hypothesis

Language learning is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language. Children usually go through the first language acquisition (FLA) quickly and effortlessly and process at similar rate. This is distinguished from second language acquisition (SLA), which deals with the systematic study of how a person acquires a L2 subsequent to his L1. In order to understand the nature of L1 and L2 language acquisition, various aspects were examined, compared, and contrasted, and various theories are put forward, which showcased both similarities and differences between FLA and SLA.

1.1 Studies and hypothesis related with similarities

Many morpheme studies were conducted in order to investigate the acquisition of grammatical functions such as articles or inflectional features and to find out the acquisition order in L1 and L2. Roger Brown (1973) found that there is a common-invariant-sequence of acquisition for at least 14 function words in English as a first language, i.e. noun and verb inflections, prepositions and articles. Based on these morpheme studies, a definite order in the acquisition of morphemes is pointed out. Krashen (1982) put forward the Natural Order Hypothesis which he developed to account for second language acquisition. He claimed that we acquire the rules of language in a predictable order. This acquisition order is not determined by simplicity or the order of rules taught in the class.

Developmental sequences (Ellis 1984) support another similarity between SLA and FLA. The first stage is the silent period. Both L1 and L2 learners pass through this stage, during which the child or the learner tries to discover what language is. Then, it is followed by formulaic speech. Formulaic speech is defined as expressions which are learnt as unanalyzable wholes and employed on particular occasions. Ellis points out that formulaic speech is not only present in both first and second language acquisition but also present in the speech of adult native speakers. Both L1 and L2 learners also apply structural and semantic simplifications to their language. Structural simplifications take the form of omitting grammatical functors (e.g. articles, auxiliary verbs) and semantic simplifications take the form of omitting content words (e. g. nouns, verbs).

Krashen (1982) has put forward the Input Hypothesis which emphasized the importance of input. He argues that comprehensible input is necessary for language acquisition, and supports that input should be slightly above the level of the L2 learner. In addition, second language learners should be exposed to the target language environment as much as possible to gain enough comprehensible input, in case lack of which would cause them to be held up in the language development.

1.2 Studies and hypothesis related with differences

On the other hand, Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (1982) highlights a major difference between SLA and FLA as FLA learners aren't subject to anxiety or ego in the same way as SLA students. Ungrammatical speech produced by FLA learners isn't subject to corrective feedback by parents, while adult SLA learners, are often unwilling to make mistakes in the second language classroom. Therefore, the affective filter is like a wall. Once "input" meets it, some of the input would be bounced back, failing to enter the language acquisition device of the learners' brain. In this way, the acquired competence of L2 learners would be weakened.

He has also claimed that there are two ways for adults to approach a second language, which is called the Acquisition/ Learning Hypothesis. These two ways refer to (1) "acquire" as how children get their L1 and (2) conscious learning, which cannot be turned into acquisition. The former is a subconscious process. It involves the innate ability of humans to acquire language and we are not aware it is happening. Language learning, in contrast, is a conscious process. Therefore, he sees first language acquisition and second language acquisition as two different phenomena.

The Critical Period Hypothesis, based on the ideas of Lenneberg, puts forward that there is "a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which time language is increasingly difficult to acquire" (Brown 1994). This biological period for language acquisition was applied to second language and was deemed to last from 2 to puberty.

Based on these previous studies and hypothesis, many features of FLA and SLA from different perspectives can be concluded, including both similarities and differences, which helps us understand the process and nature of language acquisition, and utilize the knowledge in the teaching practice.

2. Similarities in FLA and SLA

2.1 Age of acquisition

In both first and second language acquisition, age plays an important role, which is closely associated with the critical period. According to the critical period hypothesis mentioned before, both FLA and SLA should be influenced and limited by such a predetermined period in our brain, though the effects and time of occurrence may differ from each other in FLA and SLA.

2.2 Environment of acquisition

Both L1 acquisition and L2 acquisition require a language environment, in which learners acquire abundant language input, no matter it is the natural language environment for L1 speakers or the specialized teaching environment for L2 speakers. Input is defined as "language which a learner hears or receives and from which he or she can learn" (Richards et al., 1989, p. 143) and its importance is widely accepted,

without which, even L1 cannot be fully acquired, just like the case of Genie. Therefore, the environmental factor matters in both FLA and SLA, since it provides enough comprehensible language input to the learners. Whereas, a contradicting view to the importance of input is based from Chomsky, who argues that input alone cannot explain first language acquisition because it contains ungrammaticalities and disfluencies, though it is still essential.

Therefore, both input and the knowledge which children are equipped with are of great importance for acquisition.

2.3 Way of acquisition

Abundant repetitive practice is also required not only when children acquire their first language, but also when L2 speakers acquire their second language. Practice, whether in a natural language environment or in a teaching environment, allows learners to imitate and make errors.

Making errors is a part of learning in both L1 and L2 acquisition. Learners need to make and test hypotheses about language to build an internal representation of the language. In the initial stages of learning, learners may use chunks of language without breaking them down or processing them as independent units. In later stages, they may make new errors as they begin to process the parts of each chunk according to the rules of their language system.

Besides, both first language speakers and second language learners would use context clues and clues hidden in the sentences to decode, process and understand a sentence. According to the Unified Competition Model (UCM), when we are processing a sentence, we are actually processing the language clues in the sentence, although the first language speakers may parse a sentence more easily and effortlessly through these clues, while the L2 learners may not.

2.4 Stage of acquisition

There are several stages, which both L1 and L2 learners would go through during the acquisition. In the initial stages of learning, learners go through a silent period. Then, learners can often comprehend more complex language than they are able to produce, which shows the asymmetry of comprehension and production in both FLA and SLA.

Learners of both L1 and L2 acquire both languages in a similar natural acquisition order as well, i.e. phonological development, grammatical development, semantic development and pragmatic development. Taking different teaching methods of L2 out of consideration, children learn from a single sound to the pronunciation of a word or character, or from the rules for simple sentences to complex sentences. Besides, this similar process is also displayed in their development of linguistic competence from listening and understanding to speaking. The natural sequence for both L1 and L2 acquisition should be: listening, speaking, reading and writing, regardless of the teaching environment of L2.

During all these stages, we can also find some characteristics shared by both FLA and SLA. For example, the phenomenon of poverty of stimulus can be showed in both first and second language acquisition. Learners are able to comprehend and produce what they've never learned, which may be due to the existence of Universal Grammar.

They may also overgeneralize vocabulary or rules, using them in contexts broader than those in which they should be. For example, a child may say 'goed' instead of saying 'went' for past of 'go', and same thing may happen in second language acquisition an adult may say 'holded' instead of 'held' for past of 'hold'.

3. Differences between FLA and SLA

3.1 Age difference

From the perspective of the age of Acquisition (AoA), the second language is obviously acquired after L1 is acquired. Usually, L2 is acquired after the critical period, while the first language is acquired in the critical period. Therefore, L2 learners cannot learn the second language effortlessly the way children do, nor can they be indistinguishable from a native speaker. Based on age, there are three main changes one undergoes in regards to language acquisition.

Firstly, the critical period is linked to one's brain plasticity.

As mentioned before, critical period may exist in both FLA and SLA. Yet, in SLA Several different periods for different aspects of language may exist, and different aspects of language may be influenced differently. Birdsong (2004) asserted that a large number of cases of native-likeness have been found in several studies and more native-likeness is found in morphology and syntax but less is found in pronunciation. It seems that phonetics may be limited by a critical period, yet syntax and morphology are less influenced by the critical period. On the contrary, there is only one critical period in L1 acquisition affecting all aspects of language.

Evidence also indicates that old learners learn faster and more efficiently in initial stages of L2 learning thanks to their more developed cognitive and logic ability. Moreover, deterioration in the L2 learners' proficiency only happens after age 20, much later than puberty. Therefore, we can suggest that the critical period for SLA may exist but is much later than that for L1 acquisition.

Secondly, one would undergo several physical changes affecting the SLA. The first is muscular plasticity. A child's plasticity goes away at about the age of five. After this age it is very hard for a learner to fully master pronunciation of a second language. The second change is one's memorization capabilities. It is fairly well known that as a person grows older their ability to hold large amount of information reaches its peak fairly early in life, and then begins to decrease.

Thirdly, L2 learners may have the advantage in their cognitive ability over children. Adults are better able to benefit from learning about structure and grammar. They are able to use more metacognitive processes in their learning. They can consciously analyse and manipulate grammatical structures, and explicitly describe how language works. This can actually speed the learning process.

3.2 Environmental difference

Although both FLA and SLA require a language environment, the environment for

the two languages are different. This is correspondent to Krashen's acquisition learning hypothesis, which suggests that children acquire L1 naturally while adults learn L2 through various classroom activities. For L1 speakers, they are exposed to an implicit language environment, i.e. natural language environment, where they use their L1 as the language in daily life.

However, for L2 learners, they acquire the second language mostly through input in classes, which put them in an explicit language environment. Thus, in second language learning, there may be less access to universal grammar. Their sensitivity to phonological distinctions which are absent in L1 will be reduced as well. They may not have the opportunity to practice extensively with native speakers as L1 speakers do.

3.3 Way difference

Children acquire their mother tongue with their psychological and physical development at the same time, while they need to use their native language as a medium to convert language code and language structure when learning a second language. According to VanPatten's theory of Processing Instruction (PI) the L1 speakers tend to pay attention to the meaning of the input information, rather than its structure or form (*The Primacy of Meaning Principle*). This may result from how they acquire L1 in childhood. Parents always show their children a material object and tell them what that is. Thus, children recognize the distinctions between things in the objective world. However, second language acquisition is different. At first, the learners use the concepts, the knowledge and the experience of their mother tongue to facilitate the learning of the second language. Therefore, they concern more about structure than meaning.

Another difference in the way of acquisition lies the language transfer from L1. In SLA, the knowledge of L1 can transfer to L2 learning both negatively and positively, and serve as a basis for L2 acquisition. On the other hand, the first language acquisition is only based on universal grammar alone.

3.4 Stage difference

Despite the similar stages FLA and SLA may both go through, fossilization often happens in L2 acquisition, while L1 acquisition is always uniform, effortless and rapid. Almost everyone acquires a first language, but not everyone acquires a second language. It ceases to develop at some point without full identity with the target language. Thus, the adult L2 learners can rarely fully acquire the second language, unlike children's success in acquiring their L1.

On the other hand, although the natural acquisition in both FLA and SLA should be from phonological to grammatical and semantic and end up in pragmatic development, the acquisition order of a second language is almost the opposite. When people start to learn a L2, they are always taught a plenty of skills of reading and writing rather than listening and speaking. Teachers tend to put more emphasis on students' writing and reading skills as well. In this way, many students are often unable to communicate with a foreign language after many years of learning.

4. Pedagogical Implication

First of all, we should recognize that L2 learners would also go through the silent period in the initial stage. Hence, it is not practical and effective to ask students start outputting L2 immediately, since in this stage, they haven't accumulated enough input from the environment yet. Therefore, we cannot expect in our teaching process too much in this perspective.

Secondly, one should always be positive and upbeat continuing to encourage learners to communicate in English even if they make mistakes. ProLiteracy's 2013 book said, "Be patient and understand that beginning ESL students move from zero ability to near native-fluency in stages clearly marked by a gradual progression from imprecise to accurate levels of English."

In addition, in our current teaching, too much emphasis is put on reading and writing. Students are taught how to read faster and write flawlessly without grammatical mistakes, which we invest great endeavour to correct as well. Yet, as mentioned above, this is a little off the track and also against the original acquisition order. After all, the goal to learn a second language is to enhance the practical communicative ability in L2.

Another prevalent phenomenon in L2 learning that children are sent to learn L2 at a increasingly younger age results from the thoughts that the earlier they get in touch with a L2, the better they will learn. This may be influenced by the Critical Period Hypothesis. However, it remains debating, how much the critical period plays a role in second language acquisition and whether it even exist at all. (Ioup, Boustagui, El Tigi & Moselle 1994) found that, adults who learn L2 after puberty can achieve a pre-native like level in L2. (Birdsong 1992) also suggests that L2 learner who start learning before and after puberty can perform as well as the other. On the other hand, if children learn a L2 at a too earl age, it may hinder their normal development of L1 to some extent. Normally the bilingual would develop their language 3 months later than monolingual. It may even cause linguistic disorders, affecting children's intelligence and mental development. Therefore, when we plan for the teaching or education of L2, we should be more rational and use for reference more relevant and latest theories and hypothesis.

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