Inter language: an interim circumstance in second language learning process

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Abstract

Inter language is the period for a dynamic linguistic structure that has been initiated by a learner of a second language (or L2) who has not become fully proficient yet but is approximating the target language, such as; preserving some features of their first language (or L1), or over generalizing second language rules in speaking or writing the target language and creating innovations. An inter language is generally reasoned for the learners' experiences with the L2. It can fossilize, or cease developing, in any of its developmental stages. The inter language rules are claimed to be shaped by several factors. Inter language is based on the theory that, there is a "psychological structure latent in the brain" which is activated when one attempts to learn a second language. Thus this article studies the various aspects of inter language in second language learning process.

Keywords: Universal Grammar, Fossilization, Pidginization.

Introduction

In second language (L2) learning process learners have to go through so many difficulties of mental barriers. As the second language learners are having the influence of their first language (L1), they have to face some impacts in their L2 learning process. Some times for lack of proper time, sufficient exposure and sufficient use of L2 in communication, a temporary blocked state can be occurred, which is called inter language. Inter language is the study in which non-native speakers acquire, comprehend, and use linguistic patterns or speech acts in a second language. Inter language theory is generally attributed to Larry Selinker, an American professor of applied linguistics.

"The process of learning a second language (L2) is characteristically non-linear and fragmentary, marked by a mixed landscape of rapid progression in certain areas but slow movement, incubation or even permanent stagnation in others. Such a process results in a linguistic system known as 'inter language' (Selinker, 1972), which, to varying degrees, approximates that of the second language.

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In the earliest conception (Corder, 1967; Nemser, 1971; Selinker, 1972), inter language is metaphorically a halfway house between the L1 and the L2. 'The L1 is purportedly the source language that provides the initial building materials to be gradually blended with materials taken from the L2, resulting in new forms that are neither in the L1, nor in the L2. This conception, though lacking in sophistication in the view of many contemporary L2 researchers, identifies a defining characteristic of L2 learning, initially known as 'fossilization' (Selinker, 1972) and later on broadly referred to as 'incompleteness' (Schachter, 1988), relative to the ideal version of a monolingual native speaker. It has been claimed that the notion of fossilization usually 'spurs' the field of second language acquisition (SLA) into existence (Han and Selinker, 2005; Long, 2003).

Inter language reflects the learner's evolving system of rules, and results from a variety of processes, including the influence of the first language ('transfer'), contrastive interference from the second language, and the overgeneralization of newly encountered rules."(David Crystal, 1997). "Thus, a fundamental concern regarding L2 research has been that learners typically stop short of target-like attainment, i.e., the monolingual native speaker's competence, in some or all linguistic domains, even in environments where input seems abundant, motivation appears strong, and opportunity for communicative practice is plentiful." (ZhaoHong Han, 2009).

Reasons of Inter language:

- Language transfer - the learner uses her/his L1 as a resource. This used to be looked upon as a mistake, but it is now recognized that all learners fall back on their mother tongues, particularly in the early stages of language acquisition, and that this is a necessary process

- Overgeneralization - the learner takes resort to an L2 rule in situations in which a native speaker would not. This can occur at a number of levels:

  o Thus at the phonetic level, for example, learners of English, after having learnt to master the English 'r', may take to placing it at the end of words, whereas in RP it is not pronounced.

  o At the grammatical level, a learner in the early stages may use nothing but the present tense. Later, there may be extensive, non-native use of 'be - ing' forms of the verb.

  o At the lexical level - learners tend to use base terms and to stretch them - thus a 'goose' might be referred to as a 'chicken', or a teaspoon may be a 'little spoon'.

  o At the level of discourse, lexical items and expressions may be used in inappropriate social contexts. Someone learning English as an L2, staying in an environment with other L2 learners, may have the impact of the errors, others are making frequently.

- Simplification - both syntactic and semantic - the learner uses speech that resembles that of very young children or of pidgins. This may be either because they cannot, in fact, as yet produce the target forms, or because they do not feel sure of them.

Fossilisation:

However, it is extremely rare for the learner of an L2 to achieve full native-like competence, Selinker coined the term 'Fossilization' to refer to this phenomenon - non-target forms become fixed in the inter language. Many examples can be found - Mukkatesh, looking at the written production of 80 students at a Jordanian university, found that after 11 years instruction in learning English, they continued making errors such as the use of simple past instead of simple present - no amount of grammatical explanation or of error correction had any effect.

Fossilization may simply affect certain structures. In Bangladesh we sometime generalise some English words with others for simplification, as we use 'er' with almost all the verbs to make it noun.

That is why Selinker says, "Fossilizable linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules and subsystems which speakers of a particular NL will tend to keep in their IL relative to a particular TL, no matter what the age of the learner or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the TL." (NL - Native Language; IL – Inter language; TL - Target Language)

As this implies, a student may continue to make progress in certain areas, and yet return again and again to the same error. Thus, for example, we find advanced students who communicate with great skill and who make very few errors, but still do not master the faultless aspect of the verb in English.

Inter language and Universal Grammar:

"A number of researchers pointed out quite early on the need to consider inter language grammars in their own right with respect to principles and parameters of Universal Grammar, arguing that one should not compare L2 learners to native speakers, but instead consider whether inter language grammars are natural language systems (duPlessis et al., 1987; Finer and Broselow, 1986; Liceras, 1983; Martohardjono and Gair, 1993; Schwartz and Sprouse, 1994; White, 1992b). These authors have shown that L2 learners may arrive at representations which indeed account for the L2 input, though not in the same way as the grammar of a native speaker. The issue, then, is whether the inter language representation is a possible grammar, not whether it is identical to the L2 grammar (Lydia White, 2003).

Inter language Theory and Psycholinguistics:

"The significance of inter language theory lies in the fact that it is the first attempt to take into account the possibility of learners' conscious attempts to control their learning. It was this view that initiated an expansion of research into psychological processes in inter language development whose aim was to determine what learners do in order to help facilitate their own learning (Griffiths & Parr, 2001). It seems, however, that the research of Selinker's learning strategies, with the exception of transfer, has not been taken up by other researchers (Višnja Pavičić Takač, 2008).

Development as an error:

According to the theory, by using different strategies, learners build up mental grammars of the L2. As these grammars are provisional heuristic constructions, the rules can be seen as hypotheses. At any one time, the inter language may include several competing hypotheses, so that the speaker's language is, in fact, variable, as he tries out first one and then another. According to Pitt Corder, the learner begins not with her/his own L1, but with a highly simplified version of it, which is, as it were, a memory of one of the early stages of L1 learning. This 'stripped down' or basic system gives the learner the first hypotheses. Some linguists claim that it may be universal - that is, these are the rules that are at the basis of all languages. The learner then builds up from the stripped down form to greater complexity. This may remind of what was said about the relationship between Pidgin and Creole.

Pidginization:

However, fossilization may set in once and for all, and the student simply gets stuck at a plateau, never to go any further. One of the most well known examples of fossilisation is that of Alberto, a 33-year-old Costa Rican who had lived in Massachusetts for four months when his language progress first began to be investigated. Along with five other Spanish-speaking immigrants, (two five-year-old children, two adolescents and one other adult), his speech was monitored over a period of 10 months, by a variety of means, including free expression in natural settings to pencil and paper tests in the classroom. While the other five all made progress, Alberto quickly fossilized. He underwent through a process similar to 'pidginization' - that is, he constructed a basic lingua franca for the limited social purposes that brought him into contact with English speakers.

- Thus, for negation, Alberto only used the two earliest stages
- 'no' + V - I no understand good
- 'don't' + V - don't know" using the first of these most often.
- For interrogatives, Alberto inverted subject and auxiliary in only 5% of cases, reserving the correct form for only certain verbs - 'say' and 'like'. Occasionally he would produce full verb movement - 'What are doing these people?"
- Although he achieved 85% accuracy for plural 's', he got the possessive 's' right in only 9% of obligatory contexts, regular past tense in 7% and irregular past in 65%

Use and Acquisition:

According to Tarone, we should recognise that the learner is not simply a language learning machine - that is, s/he does not simply absorb syntax, phonology and lexicon – s/he is an actor in the social world and is therefore concerned with the pragmatic aspect of language - how to do what , and when. S/he quickly becomes aware of register, and knows that s/he cannot speak in the same way to everyone, that s/he cannot use the same language in all situations.

Tarone holds that new language can enter the learner's system in one of two ways:

- o Directly into the informal style, from where it may spread to more formal styles. This may result in language being acquired in the 'natural' order
- o Into the most formal style, and only used when the learner is paying close attention to speech - then spreads into more informal styles

Ellis takes a similar position, only he insists on the distinction between 'planned' and 'unplanned' language. In unplanned discourse, the speaker uses automatic and unanalysed knowledge. In planned discourse, the speaker uses analysed knowledge - monitoring is an example of this. Development takes two forms:

- o Learners make knowledge that was at first available only for planned discourse available for unplanned discourse.
- o Learners acquire new L2 by participating in different types of discourse - they create new rules for themselves through discourse

The learner builds up a set of rules, some of which are in competition. To some extent, different rules are used in different contexts - different levels of discourse, for example. But the rules also may be used interchangeably - that is, in free variation, as Ellis puts it. It is where there is free variation that learning takes place, for it is uneconomical to have two forms for the same purpose - the learner either:

- o Replaces defective forms with more accurate forms. Thus at one stage in the acquisition of the negation, the learner may be producing both 'I no like it' and 'I don't like it'. Gradually s/he replaces the first with the second.
- o Learns to use one form in one context, and the other in another - thus using different forms for different functions.

A learner may have two request structures - "Would you mind passing the salt, please?" and 'Hey, pass the salt!". S/he comes to realise that one of these belongs to a more formal register.

Ellis and Tarone's approaches both imply that Krashen is wrong in believing that we learn a language simply by listening and reading. It is only through active participation that new items enter the different registers; it is only through discourse that we learn that some items are only to be used in certain settings. Krashen, leaning on Chomsky, has a tendency to see language learning as being mainly a question of syntactic development. But the pragmatic and, as we shall see, affective aspects of language are also important.

To sum up, we have been looking at Krashen's natural order hypothesis, which holds that the grammar of a second language is learnt in a specific order, whatever the learner's L1. We have seen that there is some reason to believe that intralinguistic effects do occur, and that there may well be some kind of a predictable sequence to the learning of a specific L2. However, we have also noted that L1 does have some effects upon the acquisition of the L2 - these effects are both positive and negative - some errors do arise from interference. We have looked at the concept of inter language, which sees learners as constructing their own grammatical systems. These systems are learner-driven rather than teacher-driven - the

learner progresses through employing a number of different strategies, some of which are based upon her/his L1, some of which are based upon her/his desire to communicate, and some of which may be rooted in the Universal Grammar.

We have also seen that learners of a second language tend to fossilize. They may be partially fossilized, retaining certain errors while progressing in other ways, or they may, like Alberto, get stuck upon a plateau. For some of us, like Alberto, the plateau is fairly close to sea level, others attain higher levels. But most of us, it appears to get stuck sooner or later.

We have seen that the sociological situation of the learner and of the learner's community in relation to the community that speaks the L2 can have a significant effect on language learning. There are also other factors which intervene in the process, and which may either induce fossilization or prevent it. Among the most important variables are:

- Affective factors
- Amount of exposure - input
- Opportunities for expression
- Negative feedback - (note - not correction, but signalling incomprehension)
- Absence or presence of pressure on communication

Through these processes the language learner passes from one inter language to another; in each case, the inter language is a little closer to native speaker competence. Thus it might seem that, with time, sufficient exposure, and communicative use of L2, the learner would normally achieve full bilingualism.

Conclusion:

In light of what we have known from the article, we must take into consideration the factors that impact negatively on the second language process. Hence, a roaster of those should be introduced in written and the issue should not be confined to English only. They should be extended to all other languages taught in our country to keep up with the faster pace of globalization, such as Chinese, Arabic and French etc.

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