

Second Language Acquisition- A Critical Overview Of Various Theories

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Abstract

Language is a complex phenomenon. Humans have been endowed with this capability which is used by them to communicate with each other. Quite a number of people are monolingual, a substantial number of speakers are bilingual, and yet others are multilingual who know more than two languages. *Motivation* of a learner as well as *the learning environment* available to a learner are the two prime factors which decide the success rate of the learner in learning the target language. Studies by linguists have shown that *age* also is a major deciding factor as far as the proficiency of the target language is concerned. *Second Language Acquisition* (SLA) has been a matter of debate and discussion since the last century. Various linguists have tried to figure out the exact blueprint of the process behind second language acquisition. Some have given prominence to the language environment available to the language learners. Others have brought to the fore an *innate* capacity in human beings to acquire language through complex cognitive activity. Still others have given importance to a filter and monitoring process in language learning. All said and done, language learning is a highly complex phenomenon amongst humans. It is a precious gift to humankind. Linguists are still on the lookout for a psychologically optimal syllabus of SLA which would result in one hundred percent language proficiency as is the case in First Language Acquisition. In this paper I have tried to provide a critical overview of the various theories surrounding SLA.

Key Words: behaviourism, mentalist, critical period hypothesis, inter language, universal grammar, acculturation

Introduction

Second Language Acquisition pertains to the learning of a new language after the mother tongue (L1) has been mastered. By the time the child or the learner is five years old, he has internalised the system of his mother tongue or native language and is ready to learn another language. Not all the native speakers learn a second language (L2). Quite a number of people are monolingual, a substantial number of speakers are bilingual, and yet others are multilingual who know more than two languages. *Motivation* of a learner as well as the learning environment available to a learner are the two prime factors which decide the success rate of the learner in learning the target language. Studies by linguists have shown that *age* also is a major deciding factor as far as the proficiency of the target language is concerned.

Behaviourist Approach

This approach was particularly dominant during the middle of the twentieth century. It basically entered into the field of language from the field of psychology. The main proponents of behaviourism were psychologists and linguists like **Skinner, Watson, Lado** and **Bloomfield**. The behaviourists opined that language learning takes place as a result of habit-formation and operant conditioning. The learners receive stimuli from the environment

and respond to these stimuli. In due course of time they are conditioned to give correct responses. Learners learn through observation and imitation.

STIMULUS → RESPONSE → (REPETITION) → CONDITIONING → (REPETITION) →
REINFORCEMENT

The language learners, opine the behaviourists, learn on a trial and error basis. Learning takes place, owing to the presence of external stimuli, which the learner continues to receive from the language environment he is subjected to.

Mentalist Approach

In the 1950s **Noam Chomsky** came up with his *nativist* theory which suggested the presence of an *innate* capacity in human beings to acquire language as opposed to the behaviourist approach which imparted prominence to *nurture* rather than *nature*. He said that human beings are genetically endowed with language learning capability and endorsed the presence of a *Language Acquisition Device* (LAD) in the language faculty of their brain. Learners use their language sensibility in acquiring language which involves their cognitive faculty.

INPUT → LANGUAGE ACQUISITION DEVICE → OUTPUT

According to the mentalists, learners receive input from the outside environment, send it to their LAD and then use their cognitive faculty to process that input and come up with the answer, that is, output. Learners gain proficiency in the target language (L2) through use and practice.

Critical Period Hypothesis

Penfield and Roberts (1959) first mentioned *Critical Period Hypothesis* which was later popularised by **Eric Lenneberg** in 1967. Lenneberg in his groundbreaking treatise, suggested that the ability to acquire language varies with age. In the initial period of life, language is better acquired. The stimuli are maximally responded to upto the age of 12 years, after which the language learning prowess of an individual declines. But if we consider that children are quick learners, adult learners have their own advantages. It is difficult to generalize.

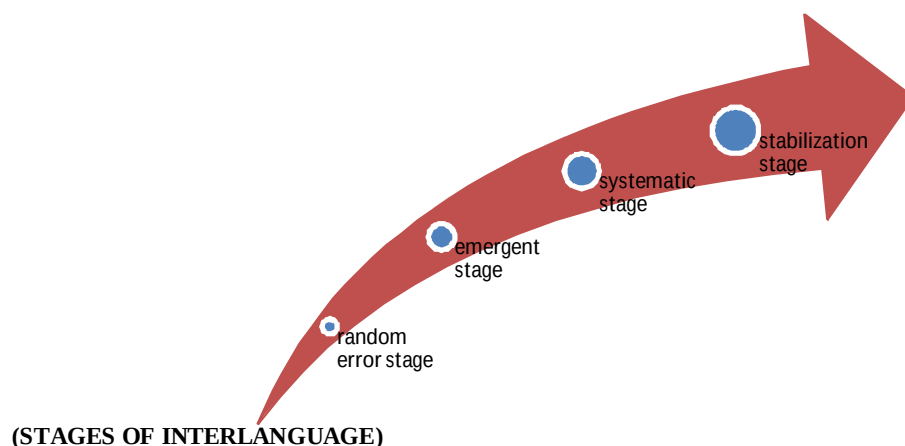
Interlanguage

The term *Interlanguage* was coined by **Larry Selinker** in 1972. Selinker talked of an intermediate system of language which develops in every learner as he gains proficiency in the target language. The L2 learner who has already mastered his L1 continuously advances towards the *interlanguage continuum* till he gains closer and closer approximations to the L2 system.

L1-----L2

I-----Interlanguage continuum-----I

Thus the learner may occupy any intermediate position at a given stage of language learning. This progress may halt at any time and might result in what is called as *fossilization*. However, after conscious efforts on the part of the learner, this condition may be revoked and the learner may progress further towards L2. Selinker enlisted four main stages of Interlanguage. In the first stage learner is a beginner and is new to target language. He is prone to random errors. In the second stage, the learner's speech starts emerging. By the third stage, the learner's position becomes systematic and he now makes relatively fewer errors. Moreover he can now recognise his errors. By the last stage, that is the stabilization stage, the learner internalizes the L2 system and achieves near-native fluency in it.



Acculturation

John Schumann (1978) enlisted eight *factors of psychological distance* and *four factors of sociological distance* which affect language learning. Schumann's acculturation model was based on the extent to which a second language learner adapted to the target language culture. The relationship of the *Language Learner Group* to the *Target Language Group* has many facets and depending upon that the learner's language proficiency, is greatly affected. Schuman's model reminds us of Gardner and Lambert's theory on *integrative* and *instrumental* orientation. Both Schumann and Gardner/Lambert preclude close first-hand interaction between LLG and TLG. The existing equations then are reassigned with changes on both sides. Schumann talks about the relative *social dominance*, *integrative pattern*, *size*, *enclosure*, *cohesiveness*, *cultural congruence*, and *attitude* of both groups as well as *intended length of residence* of the Language Learner Group in Target Language region. Under psychological factors, he presents *language shock*, *culture shock*, *motivation* and *ego* which affect a learner's language learning capability. Schumann has presented a comprehensive model of observation of SLA.

Krashen's Monitor Model

In his seminal work, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* (1982) Stephen Krashen came up with five hypotheses to explain the process behind SLA. Krashen was a nativist who believed in the role of the cognitive faculty of humans in learning the target language.

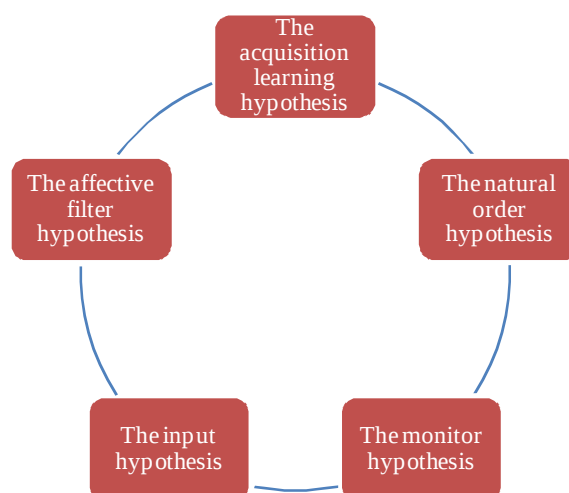
He stated a clear distinction between *acquisition* and *learning*. Acquisition takes place when the learning environment is informal and continuously rich in input. On the contrast, learning takes place in a formal manner when the learner gains particular elements and concepts of target language.

Under the *natural order hypothesis*, Krashen stresses on the fact that certain elements of language are imbibed faster than others by all learners. Hence, there prevails a natural order of learning things.

In *monitor hypothesis*, Krashen elucidates that the input is absorbed and monitored to the previously existing knowledge after which the optimal answer/response /output is generated.

The fourth hypothesis of Krashen is *input hypothesis* wherein he presses for the requirement of an input level of $i+1$ to a learner for learning to take place. He calls this *$i+1$ comprehensible input* where i represents the current level of the learner and $i+1$ means slightly higher than it.

Lastly, Krashen talked of an *affective filter* which plays a crucial role in sending or blocking the input from going across the learner's LAD. The working of this affective filter was subject to external conditions of the learner namely, stress, anxiety, illness, nervousness, divided attention etc. In any of the latter conditions, the filter may be raised so that language input, even if it is substantially comprehensible, may not reach the LAD.



(Krashen's Monitor Model)

Conclusion

During the last seventy odd years, more than forty theories of SLA have surfaced. Each of these presents a novel theory behind the acquisition of second language. One cannot afford to overlook the behaviourists' stance of viewing language as a habit-forming behaviour or the mentalists' innatist aspect of language. Eric Lenneberg's critical period hypothesis seems valid and true, but adult learners have their own advantages. Krashen's monitor model as well as Schumann's acculturation model are conceptually new ways of observing and describing the SLA process. All these theories have provided us with new insights about Second Language Acquisition. All said and done, language learning is a highly complex phenomenon amongst humans. It is a precious gift to humankind. Linguists are still on the lookout for a psychologically optimal syllabus of SLA which would result in one hundred percent language proficiency as is the case in First Language Acquisition.

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