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English 679

September 15, 2016

Experiments: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

I am going to talk about First Language Acquisition, and the theories surrounding it, framed by the experiments that have been done concerning it. What questions have they started to answer and what further questions do these experiments raise?

There is still debate among scientists in many fields on whether humans become what they are because of nature or nurture. It's the age-old question. Some people are very firmly one way or the other, Skinner with his *Verbal Behavior* and Chomsky with his language acquisition device, the little black box that holds the universal grammar. I think many people, myself included, believe it is more a mix of the two. How do you separate them? Without the innate ability to learn language, we simply would not. Experiments with primates have repeatedly failed to yield comparable results to human language learning. No matter how much they are taught and exposed to language, it simply does not connect. On the flip side, this innate capacity for human speech can be lost or severely hindered without sufficient nurturing and exposure to language, as we see in the case of feral children.

Feral children, while unfortunately sometimes treated as circus freaks, can help us learn much about how language works in the human brain. The first documented case was Victor, in Aveyron, France, in the early 1800s. A young doctor, Jean Itard, was convinced that he could civilize this 'wild child' with exposure to the norms of society. He took very detailed scientific notes on his experiments with Victor, so we know a good deal of his struggles to teach Victor

language. I say struggles, because as far as we know, Victor never did produce any kind of language. He did, however, seem to exhibit comprehension performance and competence.

Genie, the child discovered in Los Angeles in 1970, also showed more ability for comprehension than production. Though Susan Curtiss, an avid Chomskyan, believed Genie could develop full language capacity, Genie never moved beyond three-word telegraphese. She could understand a great deal of language, but the production, especially of syntax, was beyond her. She could recognize patterns in other ways, as was shown by her ability to sort fictional characters with the correct story. This seems to be evidence that even though syntax does involve recognizing and creating patterns, there must be more to it than that.

Even though these and other cases of feral children seem to point toward certain linguistic answers, the question still remains, how can you separate what is caused by abuse and what is caused by isolation? The idea of the critical period indicates that the isolation, or lack of exposure to sources of language, are enough of a factor to prevent full language production and competence from ever happening. However, we also know that neglect and abuse change the shape and size of the brain in children, thus hindering their capability of ever fully developing. This is where the idea of a trigger for language comes in, that there are sections of the brain that need to be activated by a certain age or they never will be. This is the critical period.

Learning about the critical period, and that the age is much lower than previously thought, still did not answer the question, how do children normally acquire language? Deb Roy, a scientist at MIT, is using his own son's language learning to help answer this question. He collected

massive amounts of data that still has to be fully catalogued and analysed. My questions for this experiment were, did his son ever get to leave the house? If so, how did they capture that exposure? Were people allowed to visit or was it only the parents he was exposed to? How is this representative of most infants' real-life situations? If he controlled for his son to only hear his mother and father, then this is not how most children are exposed to language. They mostly hear their parents, but they also hear other relatives, strangers in the park, clerks at the grocery store, etc.

As many issues in science often do, these experiments leave us with more questions than answers. We still do not know why exactly children are such a sponge for language. As long as they are exposed to language, they will be able to speak it. Like walking, it does not need to be taught. Children will do it on their own. The question this raises is why is that not the case with second language acquisition? Explicit instruction in a second language is usually required. I am sure we will learn much more about that as this course progresses.

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English 679

October 06, 2016

Personal observations of pronunciation in SLA

I am going to put the readings and lectures in the context of my own experiences of learning and teaching other languages. This is a strategy I often use to remember key concepts and perhaps my particular stories will assist my classmates in committing the information we have learned thus far to memory.

While it is true that observations alone are not going to lead to a scientific maxim, they are the initial catalyst toward forming hypotheses. Just as a language learner must recognize similarities or differences between their native language and a target language in order to transfer that knowledge, so too must linguists notice a phenomenon before they can study it. This is just the first step. Chapelle & Duff provide an excellent description of how to design experiments to systematically test the hypotheses that are formed based on observations (2003). This article and the lecture on qualitative versus quantitative research helped me understand the differences so much better than I ever have before. I feel like this is going to be such an advantage going forward in my research. That being said, I'm not sure how any of my observations could be applied to specific research questions.

I have always been very attuned to differences in sounds. I am not sure I would describe this as an advantage; it is often highly frustrating to notice things no one else seems to notice. I now attribute this high aptitude of hearing or processing to my ability to sound like a native speaker

in other languages. Before I knew more about linguistics, most people, including me, thought it was because of my age when I first learned Italian. I was seven years old and was often told that this was the critical age for acquiring a new language. I am not sure where everyone was getting that specific age. My sister had just turned ten and, while she learned Italian very well, including her pronunciation, no one ever thought she sounded native. However, all the Italians raved about my native pronunciation.

Lippi-Green calls this an ephemeral “ear for languages” that she rightly asserts would be very difficult to study (2012). She likens it to the probability of someone having a photographic memory, a rare occurrence. Brown cites Muñoz and Singleton’s 2011 critical review of fifty years of research, saying that their conclusion is that all the research shows the statistical probability of achieving “scientifically verifiable authentic *native* accent are slim” (2014).

While this may be helpful to me when I am learning a new language, it is actually quite counterproductive in teaching language to others. When I first started teaching, I could not understand why it was so difficult for learners not only to produce appropriate native-like pronunciation, but indeed for them to even hear it. Even when I study a language such as Arabic, where the sounds are more difficult for me to produce, I can hear myself not saying them correctly. I hear the differences when the native speaker says them, I just cannot produce them. I had to train myself to accept that many people have difficulties even noticing the mistakes they are making. They cannot magically produce the sound I am making, no matter how many times I repeat it.

I also find it somewhat more difficult to teach acquired language knowledge rather than learned language knowledge. Krashen explains this as two different knowledge types, akin to conscious and unconscious knowledge of the language rules (Gass 2013). It is easier for me to teach French rather than Italian. I attribute this to the fact that I acquired Italian more implicitly by attending Italian school, having Italian friends and living in Italian society. I started learning French as a foreign language while in Italian school, whereas my Italian learning was as a second language (though there was some language instruction in the Italian school I attended, of course.) What does it say about everyday language that I know the forms better in a language that I am not as *native* in?

Form is heavily focused on in language instruction, however communication and meaning are more useful for everyday use. When a language is acquired versus learned you recognize errors because they just *sound* or *feel* wrong. This explanation will not help students. However, we should develop pedagogies that are not only based on form. I remember taking a French conversation course where we basically had to unlearn many things we had learned about French pronunciation to sound more nativelike.

This is also true in English classes. I like to do lessons such as the ‘what’ pronunciations. I teach them variations such as [wʌdjə] and [wʌdʒə] and [wʌtʃə] for ‘what do you...’ I had a class of advanced English learners in Libreville, Gabon. Perhaps because they already had a pretty good grasp of English, their main concern was that they wanted to sound more like an American. Pronunciation improvements were very important to them.

I have focused mostly on pronunciation; however, we know that this is a very small aspect of linguistic competence. It is simply a very observable factor. A speaker can be very competent in all other aspects of a language and never manage to completely rid themselves of their foreign accent.

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November 18, 2016

Should SLA be applied to language teaching practices?

What is happening in the brain when we learn a language beyond our first language? This question is really just beginning to be answered. While the cognitive processes are certainly of importance to the application of second language acquisition research, they are not the only ones to consider in the pedagogical decisions of language teachers for classroom design. As this is a small space to address this, I will focus on questions of what to include in the classroom related to cultural and social instruction.

First off, these questions are related to an individual student's motivation and reasoning behind wanting to learn the language. Are they interested in English to get the job done, as Dr. Zareva always says, or are they wanting to learn about the culture of a specific place that speaks English? Do they want to be able to carry on a conversation for business or travel or do they need to develop academic fluency to attend school in an English-speaking country? Depending on the answer to these and many other questions, the structure and purpose of an English class would need to be adapted. When a class has mixed motivations for studying the language it is even more complicated deciding how much of culture to include in the classroom.

It also varies depending on the level that a student has reached in their language learning. For example, my advanced English course of mostly upper middle-class Gabonese businesspersons were very interested in American culture. The fact that it was being taught by an American instructor was a large part of the appeal. The students wanted to absorb as much about

American culture from me as they possibly could. They were already quite proficient in English for communicative purposes. Their main concern was sounding as American as possible. I even tried to give a lesson on the contrasts in American and British English, but they were not very interested. This differed from my colleague's class. He taught a very basic beginner class and he himself was Congolese.

There are not many native English speakers in Gabon, so many of the language learners there have learned all of their English from a non-native speaker. Since they are a former French colony, there are many white French speakers, but no real economic reasons for there to be a large English-speaking presence. Schools in the cities are taught in French and English is an offered course. However, there are many Gabonese who have learned French as a second language, let alone English as a second language, while some continue communicating only in their original languages. There are over forty languages used in Gabon, though French is the official language (Lewis).

Many of them use French as a lingua franca still, rather than English, while in Gabon, but they need English for some of their business outside of Africa. This brings us to the question of English as a lingua franca and the debate on whether English teaching resources and tests should be altered to reflect the rise of English for specific purposes. English is not only used in international business but also in many arenas of international academics such as conferences and journals (McKay). Added to the question of whether to orient English teaching toward ELF or ESP, is whether to add cultural and social elements to the instruction and if so, which ones.

Who decides which cultural and social truths are taught in the classroom? Even an adaptation for Halliday's functions of language for communication are subject to changes based on where the English is being spoken (Brown). In England, you might say, "Pardon?" whereas in the U.S. that is not the more common way to express that idea. While it is the same language of English, there are certain social rules that differ. The appropriateness of certain actions and language can vary depending on the country, but also among states and cities and communities.

I will leave you with this. Is it perhaps sufficient to point out to your students that there are many different correct ways of doing things and you can only share what you are familiar with? Or perhaps you can explore with your students some of the differences of what determines appropriateness for specific cultures.

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