Foreign Language Acquisition: Where the Real Problems Lie

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In the last twenty years we have seen a shift of emphasis in Linguistics from a predominant interest in phonology and morphology, and later syntax, to a lively concern with semantics and pragmatics. This has been paralleled in psychology by a move from the consideration of language as an accumulation of discrete elements in associative chains to the study of human conceptual and perceptual systems and a growing interest in the pragmatics of language in situations of use.

This direction of change can be observed in first-language acquisition studies. We see the move from the view of such psychologists as Skinner (1957), Mowrer (1960), and Staats (1911) that the acquisition of a language is a matter of conditioned habit formation (a position easier to demonstrate with examples drawn from phonology and morphology), to the interest of McNeill (1970) in an innate language acquisition device programmed to identify the form of the grammar to which it is attending. Bever (1910) turns our attention to the perceptual and semantic strategies which facilitate language acquisition. In the later work of Brown (1913) we find the emphasis has also moved to a consideration of semantic as well as grammatical relations. Semantic complexity has now become an important consideration in studying the order of acquisition of linguistic forms in the early stages.

As early as 1910, Bloom drew attention to the intersections of cognitive-perceptual development, linguistic experience, and non-linguistic experience in the language development of children. "Induction of underlying structure" she says, "is intimately related to the development of cognition" (1910:232), and further, "children's speech is very much tied to context and behavior...children learn to identify certain grammatical relationships and syntactic structures with the environmental and behavioral contexts in which they are perceived and then progress to reproducing approximations of heard structures in similar, recurring contexts" (1910:233).

With a similar appreciation of the importance of context, Bruner (1974/75) and Halliday (1913) have sought to identify the communicative needs of infants as revealed in their prelinguistic and early linguistic behavior. In this behavior they find early indications of the functions of language in use in speech acts (see Rivers 1976b). "Use," as Bruner has said, "is a powerful determinant of rule structure" (1974/75:263). Bruner prefers to turn his attention to the role played in the development of syntactic competence by the uses to which language is put in different contexts. "Initial language at least," he says, "has a pragmatic base structure" (Bruner 1974/75:261).

As infants grow in experience in social interaction, they gain insight into linguistic ways of expressing ideas they previously held by other than linguistic means; in other words, they learn who is doing what...
with what object toward whom in whose possession and in what location and often by what instrumentality (Bruner 1974/75:271).

Semantically based relations such as these, which derive from the work of Fillmore (1968) and Chafe (1970), have been found useful in the study of child language by researchers other than Bruner. Brown (1973) and Schlesinger (1977) have also found them more descriptive of what the child is acquiring than the syntactic relations basic to the now classical form of transformational-generative grammar. Once the notion that the child's first linguistic task is the acquisition of an abstract system of syntactic relations is rejected in favor of an acquisition based on the functions of language in use, the theoretical assumptions are more easily aligned with the stages of cognitive development from infancy to maturity postulated by Piaget (1958) and with his emphasis on the operative aspect of the symbol (Furth 1969:99-185). Giving orders, asking for things, stating who does what to whom, and expressing needs and wishes are all possible at the stage when language is being acquired, whereas ability to recognize and express abstract relations comes nearer puberty.

Research in first-language acquisition has always held great appeal for foreign-language teachers. Parents are bemused as they watch their young children acquire with ease and rapidity a level of operation in a language which they themselves took years to achieve. Teachers become wistful as they compare this apparently effortless learning with the struggles of their adolescent/adult students. It is inevitable, then, that we yearn to find immediate answers to our problems in this fascinating first-language acquisition research.

Here we touch on the most ancient and vigorous controversy in the whole area of language-related studies. Is the process of learning a second language similar to or even the same process as learning a first language? In discussing this question people become dogmatic on what is for the most part anecdotal evidence or analogizing. The apparent insolubility of the controversy can, to some extent, be traced to the differing levels of generality at which the various disputants are developing their arguments. Do they mean, for instance, that adolescent/adult students of English learn to use the copula "is" in English in exactly the same progression, making the same errors along the way, as do children growing up in English-speaking families? Or, on the other hand, are they maintaining that adolescent/adult students learn to use a new language through practice in its use in the normal functions of communication, as do young children, rather than through detailed explanations of the rule system? That the acquisition of precise structures runs parallel in first and second language learning has yet to be conclusively demonstrated. The second position, that we learn a language by using it rather than by studying it, is overly simplified and dichotomous. To some extent a further extension of the old educational adage: "We learn what we do," ignores the varying linguistic capabilities and experiences, the learning preferences, and the individual motives and goals of mature students in widely diverse circumstances. Unfortunately, the "language-learning situation" at all levels and in all circumstances cannot be simplified and unified to this degree, as all experienced teachers are aware.
Until we can agree on what is meant by the similarity or identity of first and second language learning processes, we shall probably continue quite happily to extrapolate or to refuse to extrapolate from first-language acquisition studies. The answer must be found elsewhere. Research into the process of acquiring or learning a second language is urgent and important. But again, we must be cautious. Much of the second-language acquisition research to date has been directed to the understanding of the process of acquisition of a second language by young children in informal settings or bilingual classes. The same caveat applies here. Should we expect these findings to cast much light on the learning of new languages by adolescent/adult students in formal instructional settings: the most usual settings for foreign-language learning. We need more studies of actual foreign-language learners, like the avoidance studies of Schachter (1974). These provide a useful complement, if not corrective, to the general preoccupations of most contemporary second-language acquisition research.

The earliest second-language acquisition studies of the recent cycle focused to a great extent on the plausibility of the notion of transfer, particularly negative transfer or interference, from what we learned in the first language. This was to some extent a reaction to the overly optimistic emphasis on transfer in the preceding decades that had led to, or paralleled, a plethora of contrastive studies of pairs of languages which, in some cases, attempted to predict problem areas for the learners of these languages. Without wishing to cover the ground already comprehensively covered in the very thorough evaluative review of "Trends in second-language acquisition research" by Hakuta and Cancino (1977), I shall make here certain personal observations on the directions and implications of this research and indicate where I feel energy might more fruitfully be expended, if improvement of foreign-language learning is the goal.

Controversy has raged on whether errors made by second-language learners represent negative transfer (interference) from first-language habits of use or are really developmental errors of a universal character, since they often seem similar to those made by first-language learners at a comparable stage in their control of a language (Dulay and Burt 1975:24-25). Even errors which seem to provide clear evidence of the use of first-language grammatical rules in the second language have been taken by some writers to be the result of the active process of testing the hypothesis that the second language operates on similar principles to the first language, rather than as the transfer of first-language habits (Corder 1967). This parallels the theoretical position (derived from Chomsky 1965:30), that first-language learners are testing hypotheses as to the nature of the language they are learning.

Corder's hypothesis-testing assumption attempts to provide an alternative explanation for the same observable phenomenon which others have been calling transfer, but an explanation based on a different theoretical orientation. It is of interest, before we reject one view and accept another, to look more closely at the basic theory (in this case, hypothesis-testing in general) in relation to those aspects of foreign-language learning and use which the
supporters of transfer theory were trying to explain, to see whether the hypothesis-testing view can deal more convincingly with the empirical data.

One important fact about hypothesis-testing is relevant in this regard. When one is testing a hypothesis, a serious disconfirmation makes one seek immediately another hypothesis which seems to fit the facts. In using a foreign language, however, one often continues to make the same error, even when one knows that the foreign and native languages operate differently for expressing this particular meaning. The notion that repeated errors of this type can result from the learner testing the hypothesis that the two languages operate in a parallel fashion at this point (the usual explanation of the hypothesis-testing theorist) is difficult to sustain in light of the fact (frequently observed and experienced) that one is constantly repeating the same error and then immediately correcting oneself, often with a sense of mortification and exasperation at one's inability to perform according to foreign-language rules one has studied and feels one "knows". (Transfer theorists, of course, have no problem with this phenomenon, since they consider it to be due to interference from the habits of use of another language or from earlier imperfect learning, based sometimes on defective materials.) For those interested in foreign-language learning and teaching, this is a most persistent problem and one which must be adequately accounted for in any theory which purports to explain foreign-language learning and use.

Krashen (1978) considers this phenomenon to be indicative of the operation of two separate systems: language acquisition and language learning. Language acquisition is considered to be implicit, subconscious learning which develops from natural communication; it follows a fairly stable order of acquisition of structures. This acquired system is the initiator of performance, which may be self-corrected on the basis of "feel" for grammaticality. Language learning is explicit, conscious learning which is helped by error correction and the presentation of explicit rules. It does not contribute directly to acquisition of the language or to performance, since utterances are initiated by the acquired system. Conscious learning is available to the learner only through a Monitor which operates to improve accuracy through self-correction. Conscious learning of this type, according to Krashen, is possibly unnecessary for most language acquirers, except for certain aspects of language use, such as formal speaking or writing, since, to operate, the Monitor needs time that is not available in normal communication, which is focused on meaning not form.

Personally, despite my years of fluency in French and my many close personal and informal relationships, I find myself conducting a rapid monitoring during normal communicative speech (and I speak fast). I become conscious of this monitoring especially at problem points where I know the rules are "tricky" for me as a native speaker of English. I find myself, at these choice points, running through the rules, even lengthening a syllable ever so slightly as I select the correct morphological segment or syntactic arrangement (for a gender agreement, for instance, or the position of an adverb in a multi-segment verbal group). According to Krashen, I am, as an individual, presumably
"focused on form or correctness"; my French friends, however, consider me "completely involved" with my message (Krashen 1978:2).

The Monitor Model, at this stage of its development, provides a novel attempt at describing what foreign-language learners experience and foreign-language teachers observe, but it cannot be considered explanatory. Explanations given by Krashen are tied directly to the developmental, "creative construction" position theoretically, a position still to be satisfactorily validated empirically. (For "creative construction," see Dulay and Burt, 1975).

For the psychological point of view it is difficult to distinguish between self-correction by "feel" and "rule," in the sense in which Krashen uses these terms. McLaughlin (1978) points out that at least some of the students in the Krashen, Butler, Birnbaum, and Robertson study (in press), who claimed to be self-correcting by "feel" rather than "rule," may have felt uncertain about how to verbalize the "rule" as their self-correction device. It is difficult to take this introspective report of acting by "feel" or "rule" as indicative of the kind of difference which Krashen makes basic to his model, until we are sure of the psychological difference between the two. This problem is reminiscent of Carroll's 1971 discussion of the distinction between "habits" and the "internalized rules" of "rule-governed" behavior. Carroll maintained that a "rule" was a construct independent of actual behavior, whereas a "habit" was what the person had actually learned, that is, the behavioral manifestation of the internalization of the rule (Carroll 1971:104). An extension of Carroll's approach might well apply to Krashen's "feel" and "rule".

From the psychological point of view it also seems highly improbable that acquisition and conscious learning, as Krashen describes them, could be non-interactive, totally separate systems, separate not only from each other but apparently from any previous learning. Such a model simply does not tally with the great body of recent research in cognitive processing. Until we can find psychological support for these basic elements of the theory, it remains an interesting, carefully elaborated metaphor of limited scope.

McLaughlin (1978) proposes that we substitute for conscious learning and acquisition the terms (and concepts) of controlled and automatic processes, which have been developed in recent information-processing theories, with the changes in implications these require, since "a model that focuses on behavioral acts is falsifiable--a property that is unfortunately lacking in models that depend on appeals to conscious experience" (1978:330). Furthermore, we do have considerable knowledge of the operation of these processes. In 1968, Chomsky claimed for the study of language a central place in general psychology (1968:84). Since then, language-related studies have proliferated. This is hardly the moment for second-language acquisition researchers to cut themselves off from the intense research into cognitive processes, which are surely highly relevant to any consideration of language acquisition and use.

Continuing with our search for enlightenment with regard to the persistent problems foreign-language learners face, we may question the level at
which evidence for "interference" or transfer is sought by investigators in error analysis studies. ("Transfer" is the preferable term, since it includes positive, or facilitative, transfer as well as negative transfer, or interference. Without including positive transfer in examinations of data, any conclusions as to the amount of transfer rest moot.)

The investigator may be looking for evidence of transfer at the morphological level, as some have done. Let us consider the situation of an English speaker learning a Romance language. In the subject's first language, in this case English, the third person singular of the present tense of most verbs takes an ending which is not used for the other persons for which an unmarked form is used. In the second language, the student does not attempt to add an ending to the third person of the verb while continuing to use the unmarked form for the other persons. As a result, it may be asserted by some that there is no evidence of transfer from first-language habits of use.

The discussion may, however, be conducted at a higher level of conceptualization. The subject, we may say, is not accustomed to using in the first language, forms of the verb which are marked for person, number, and tense, except in one or two very frequent positions which have been learned through constant use as exceptions to general rule. In a foreign language the student therefore finds it difficult to develop an awareness of the necessity to attach a variety of endings to verb stems to make these distinctions. As a result, when trying to communicate in the new language, the student tends to use unmarked forms as he or she would usually do in the native language. (This tendency is regarded in many current studies as simplification of the type used by children learning their first language.)

To take a further example, other second-language learners may have developed, while learning their first language, the concept that gender makes a clear semantic distinction, with rare exceptions, as in English. When these learners find that grammatical gender distinctions, apparently unmotivated, pervade the second language, they may find it hard to conceive of these distinctions as important enough to affect practically every part of speech—nouns, adjectives, articles, pronouns, and even some forms of the verb. Although this has been explained to them, they still have to make a conscious mental effort to keep this all-pervading concept in mind when applying lower-level rules of agreement in all kinds of positions and relationships. Specific errors these learners make in omitting the morphemes indicating such agreement may be interpreted as intralingual, as simplification, or as overgeneralization errors, whereas the basic problem is an interlingual conceptual contrast. (For terminology, see Selinker 1972.)

To my mind, much more attention should be paid in classroom teaching to the comprehension and thorough assimilation of these fundamental conceptual differences between languages, so that students are learning to operate within the total language system, rather than picking up minor skills in its application. In the same vein, it is essential that the student acquire an understanding of the different way a new language sees and expresses temporal relationships across the language
system, rather than concentrating exclusively on particular uses of specific tenses and the correct forms for these uses (see Rivers 1968). Without a conceptual grasp of such overriding interlingual contrasts, the second-language learner will be unable to use effectively the lower-level knowledge of paradigms and rules which have strictly limited application.

A similar psychological problem is demonstrated in the common phenomenon of English-speaking students of French who find it hard to comprehend what the use of the subjunctive rather than the indicative conveys to a native speaker of French. They have never internalized the overriding concept that the subjunctive mood in French usage conveys a subjective view of the situation (that is, a personal opinion) as opposed to the objective view of the indicative. Thus, je ne pense pas qu'il soit parti implies that I am not giving factual information, but my own assessment of the situation, whereas je pense qu'il est déjà parti is based on some objective clues and may well be followed by an explanation like parce que la porte de son bureau est fermée.

Because they lack this conceptual understanding of its use, English-speaking students of French tend to spatter subjunctive forms everywhere in the hope that some will stick in the right places. This insecurity and uncertainty about the extent of applicability of new rules, because of a lack of knowledge of how they fit into the meaning system of the new language, is a distinctly different psychological phenomenon from that of over-generalization, which is described by Selinker (1972:218) as the extension of a newly acquired second-language rule "to an environment in which, to the learner, it could logically apply, but just does not." "Selinker would categorize as over-generalization the extension of the use of the past tense of walk/walked to go/went: an error commonly made by English-speaking children, even though they may previously have known and used went.) Psychologically, the phenomenon I am discussing seems to share some of the features of the native-language phenomenon of hyper-correction and may perhaps be better described as overcompensation: an attitude of better more than less. The reader will think of many other cross-linguistic conceptual problems like those of aspect in Chinese and Russian, and the problems Japanese speakers have with the use of the definite and indefinite articles in English (although the actual forms in this case are simple).

Experimentation conducted at this level of conceptualization, rather than at the level of the morpheme, might produce more interesting insights into the problems of adolescent/adult second-language learners. Whether one is referring here to habits of thought and approach to language use developed through using the first language or to hypotheses the second-language learner is making about the new language is difficult to say. Perhaps we should ask them, as is done in some other psychological experiments with mature subjects. (See Schacter, Tyson, and Diffley, 1976.) Until errors can be identified as interlingual (due to transfer from the first to the second language) or intralingual (deriving from elements within the second language itself) by some more clearly demonstrable psychological criteria, interpretation of research in this area will remain somewhat hazy. Once we can clarify what we are dealing with, we may find, as Hakuta and Cancino maintain, that "interference errors in second-language learning are fine examples of
language transfer and...strongly point to areas of dynamic interplay between the two languages" (1977:299).

Do we have any psychological justification for viewing the problems in this way? In other words, what can be the meaning of "conceptualization"? Several recent directions in cognitive research hint at an answer.

In his most recent work (1977), Schlesinger has hypothesized a model of speech comprehension and a model of speech production, both of which are comprised of three essential components: cognitive structures, semantic structures, and surface structures. Children develop cognitive structures, which consist largely of relations between aspects of the environment, through their experiences and also through the categorizations they acquire as they learn a language. They learn to categorize relations and concepts semantically as they learn a specific language. Through this language they learn to express their intentions in accordance with the restrictions, or realization rules, the language imposes. This implies that persons speaking different languages may share cognitive structures or notions yet "for the purposes of speaking, a given situation may be perceived differently by speakers of two languages" (1977-94), that is, they adopt a different point of view. This different point of view is expressed in the surface structure realization their language requires. According to Schlesinger, "each language prescribes which relations have to be mastered by the child" (1977:96). Non-linguistic concepts also occur in cognitive structure and to express these may involve a clumsy circumlocution.

In Schlesinger's model, then, learning another language means acquiring new categorizations of semantic relations in accordance with the realization rules of the new language. This can result in the development of new cognitive structures (new ways of perceiving relations) or the opportunity to express relations dimly perceived which could not be put into words in the native language.

Although the concepts are not identical with those of Schlesinger, work in semantic memory also lends support to the notion that it is conceptual differences which have to be mastered if one is to become fluent in expressing one's meaning in another language. According to these theorists, no word or group of words has a discrete meaning which can be attached like a label that one can learn to use. Neither do specific grammatical forms always convey one identifiable meaning. Words and grammatical structures all acquire meaning within networks of conceptual relations which have been built up through the experiences of life, including linguistic experiences, and these constitute our long-term memory. The networks consist of primitive meanings connected by relations and language forms become associated with these networks so that the use of words in context activates interrelated concepts to produce the intended meaning. (See Klatzky 1975, and Melvin 1977.)

In this paradigm, the problem of learning to operate within the system of a new language is one of developing new networks, or extensions and modifications of existing networks, to express the interrelationships
will not at first be independent of the conceptual networks already established. Some of the latter will be facilitative where the conceptualization of the two languages is reasonably similar (this constitutes positive transfer). When sufficient interconnections are established for the new language system, it may be expected to operate autonomously, although associations with the old system will remain, so that we are able to say: "Of course, in my first language the conceptualization of this set of meanings is different. It would be expressed thus and so."

Interconnections also remain for other languages we have learned and until the new system is firmly established these can be activated and expressed at unexpected times and in unexpected ways. The writer can remember producing on one occasion, when learning Spanish, the conglomeration "mais, aber, sed, pero" to the mystification of the listeners.

Adult learners are particularly conscious of deviations from the established networks and will seek to understand the nature of the system within which they should operate. If the teacher or teaching materials do not make this clear, the adult learner will seek a systematic explanation elsewhere—in an old textbook or from another person. (Rivers, forthcoming, and Fields 1978.)

Further evidence that the adolescent/adult learner is very conscious of the points where the rule system of the second language diverges from that of the first language is provided by Schacter's avoidance studies (1974). In an interesting investigation using written compositions in English, she found that while it appeared in quantitative data that a group with a contrasting relative pronoun rule system in their first language made fewer errors than a group whose first-language relative pronoun rule system was similar to that of English, another approach to the data revealed that the first group were avoiding the use of rules to which they were not accustomed and which they therefore found difficult, *Ipso facto*, fewer uses of relative pronouns by the subjects yielded fewer errors in their use. Schacter (1974:213) concluded that if students find particular constructions in the target language difficult to comprehend, it is very likely that they will try to avoid producing them.

Clearly we need to analyse much more comprehensively what may be considered transfer from first-language learning and use to second-language learning and use.

It is interesting to note that as with first-language acquisition studies, second-language acquisition research has been moving from an almost single-minded emphasis on the acquisition of the syntactic and morphological rules of the second language to strategies of language-in-use to meet the needs of communication. It is here that we can place Hakuta's prefabricated utterances, which are learned as units to be plugged into speech acts (Hakuta and Cancion 1977:309-310), and Hatch's discourse analysis (Hatch 1978) which examines, in second-language situations, communicative exchanges which recall the joint "action dialogue" of Bruner's studies (1974/75:283) and what Brown calls "episodes."
It must be emphasized that studies with very young children in bilingual situations do not produce particularly relevant insights into the strategies employed by linguistically and conceptually mature adolescent/adult foreign-language learners (see Rivers 1978). The input of the latter is determined by their textbooks and other learning materials and they have well-established patterns of interaction from much experience in communication in their first language. Research into strategies of language use within the corpus with which the student has become acquainted at a particular stage of classroom learning would be very interesting and enlightening for hard-pressed classroom teachers. A full-time teacher carrying the typical school teaching load and teaching the usual large group is far too busy interacting with many students during class hours to study the linguistic and pragmatic reactions of individuals analytically. What I am proposing here is not the study of the "interlanguage" of particular students at specific points in their acquisition of the foreign language (although this can be enlightening). I am referring rather to strategies foreign-language learner-users employ to make "infinite use of finite means" (Chomsky 1965:8, quoting Humboldt). When these strategies have been identified and described, they may be encouraged or even taught and incorporated into teaching materials.

This rapid survey demonstrates the interest of second-language acquisition studies for those of us who teach languages, yet far too little is known about them by language teachers, program designers and materials writers. Certainly this is a burgeoning field and much has been but sketchily researched at present; positions are taken and abandoned somewhat rapidly as experimental data are reexamined and reinterpreted. Yesterday's dogma may be devalued currency before it can receive serious applied consideration. Yet, as with all psychological research, much that is fundamental will be retained and recombined in the evolution of theory. As Neisser has expressed it: "the cognitive theorist...cannot make assumptions casually, for they must conform to the results of 100 years of experimentation" (Neisser 1967:4-5).

It is from solid research in this area and in related fields of cognition that we may hope to develop criteria by which to evaluate the appropriateness and potential effectiveness of the many techniques of language teaching which seem to rise and recede like the tide at regular intervals--serving their purpose of refreshing the scene, but often carrying away with them indiscriminately both useful and dispensable practices.

As teachers of second and third languages, we seek to provide for everyone who seeks such knowledge the most effective learning situation we can devise. For this, we need knowledge, not hunches. As in every other field of endeavor, nothing comes without effort and helping another person to acquire another language will never be easy.
Bibliography


