Systematic Errors in Second Language Acquisition: Review and Empirical Insights

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Abstract: *Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research examines how learners develop language proficiency beyond their native tongue. This paper reviews literature and empirical studies on interlanguage theory, focusing on the presence of systematic errors in SLA. Interlanguage, an intermediary language system, displays consistent deviations from both native and target languages. The review highlights the systematic nature of interlanguage errors, influenced by factors such as language transfer and learning strategies. Empirical findings support the existence of interlanguage across diverse language contexts, indicating its role in learners' developmental stages. Understanding interlanguage is crucial for informing language teaching methods and facilitating effective language acquisition.*

Keywords: *Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Interlanguage, Systematic Errors, Language Transfer, Language Teaching*

Chapter I: Introduction

Background

Second language acquisition (SLA) has always been a matter of central concern over the last few decades. It is defined as "the learning of another language […] after the acquisition of one's mother tongue is complete" (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 3). This definition implies the differences between SLA and acquiring first language, in the sense that L2 learners have already successfully acquired at least one tongue. Such prior knowledge can be positive since it assists learners with understanding of language system, but at the same time, can act as a hindrance as it may "lead learners to make incorrect guesses about how the second language works" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 36), thus results in the errors that would not be made by first language learners.

The study of errors has always been of special interest to international scholars, despite the changes in the attitudes towards errors in SLA. While some past theories considered errors unwanted and must be eliminated, later theories believed that errors were the positive signs that learners were making efforts (Ellis, 1994), seeing the importance of errors as a channel to inform teachers/ researchers of students' developmental stage in language acquisition.

Statement of the problem and research aims

Proper understanding of SLA is of great importance as it gives researchers the insights into how people learn a language, thus conclusions can be reached regarding the adjustment of teaching approaches to best suit learners' developmental process. This involves the understanding of the learners' language, or interlanguage and the nature of it. However, the question is whether there is any "interlanguage" period in which learners develop their own system with consistent set of deviations.

This paper aims at reviewing theoretical literature and revisiting empirical studies to prove the existence of systematic errors in the acquisition of second language, thus proves that there is interlanguage in SLA.

Chapter II: Literature review

Key concepts

Interlanguage

The term "interlanguage" was first introduced by Selinker (1972), meaning the language produced by second language (L2) or foreign language (FL) learners in the process of target language (TL) acquisition. According to Lennon (2008), although interlanguage is influenced by both the first language and the target one, it is, however, an language independent of either of the two systems. Instead, interlanguage is defined as the language "intermediate between the native and the target language" (Lennon, 2008, p. 5).

As for the nature of interlanguage, Maier (2010) believed that interlanguage is "internally consistent

and rule governed" (p. 10). The systematicity of interlanguage is observed in the stability of systematic erroneous linguistic forms, which can be evidenced in both fossilization and backsliding (Maier, 2010). Fossilization is when the L2 acquisition process stops before the learners can master the target language features, which can be seen as an error; meanwhile, backsliding is viewed as the case when "learners have an alternative active rule in their competence" (Maier, 2010, p. 11).

At the same time, Ellis (2005) stated that learners do not simply develop their perfect proficiency in the target language from zero understanding of the target forms, but instead, complete their language through a series of developmental stages. This explains the dynamic nature of interlanguage, which is described by scholars as "permeable, […] changing and yet systematic" (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972 as cited in Duran, 1994, p. 2).

Selinker (1972) specified the underlying processes that make interlanguage different from L1 acquisition:

Language transfer: the errors resulting from the transfer of rules in the first language or the previous attempt to learn L2

Transfer of training: errors resulting from the materials used in L2 training, for example, the overuse of one single language item in all contexts may lead to learners' faulty use of that item in L2 production.

Strategies of L2 learning: the process in which learners try to simplify the L2 rules that they have difficulty learning. This is one strategy to "avoid cognitive overload" (Lennon, 2008, p. 6) by simply ignoring the complex rules and replacing them with the most basic elements. One typical example of this is the use of present simple tense in talking about past events.

Strategies of L2 communication: the process in which learners attempt to achieve communication purposes by adopting a variety of strategies such as avoidance, code switching or paraphrasing (Lennon, 2008).

Overgeneralization of L2 rules: learners generalize the target language rules to an extent that they overlook all exceptions.

Brown (2004) later proposed four main stages that are linked to the development of interlanguage:

Pre-systematic stage: Learners make random, unsystematic mistakes in the process of guessing and experimenting.

An emergent stage: This stage involve certain degree of "internalization of simple rules" (Lennon, 2008, p. 7), which may be similar or dissimilar to the target language rules. This is the stage when learners make systematic errors since they cannot self-correct when they are pointed out.

A systematic stage: At this stage, learners become more consistent with the rules and their interlanguage is more closely related to the target language.

A post-systematic stage: This is when learners have acquired a high level of stability when errors are rare and can be self-corrected.

Review of existing literature related to interlanguage shows that interlanguage is characterized by the nature of errors occurring during the acquisition of the target language, and thus can be identified by the existence of systematic errors.

Related empirical studies

A large body of research has been conducted to investigate the interlanguage periods and analyze the errors that language learners make in the process of language acquisition. The result so far has been highly consistent, in the sense that learners develop their own language system that is independent of both their tongues and the target language, and the erroneous structures used by the language learners were proved to be systematic, thus be typical of interlanguage.

Fauziati (2017) conducted a study to explore the interlanguage system used by Indonesian EFL learners. Specifically, the research focused on the learners' use of verb tense system to indicate events from the past, present and future. With the participation of 90 eleventh graders with similar backgrounds in language proficiency, nationality, level of education, age and language learning time, the research collected data from students' free writings on three familiar topics. The researcher then classify the errors into different categories, calculated the frequency and compared the structures used in students' writings with the target language to identify the interlanguage system.

The result was that students made systematic errors with verb structures. In fact, they created their own language rules that are dissimilar to both their first language (Indonesian) and the target language (English). This proved that there exists the interlanguage that is independent of both native and target ones that is rule-governed, or in other words,

has its own system of regulation. Another observation was some certain components of the interlanguage in use were nontarget-like, proving the "existence of competing rules in learners' competence" (Fauziati, 2017, p. 81).

Sharing the same conclusion, Ridha (2012) studied the writings by 80 third year Iraqi students who share similarities in age, background and level of English. The students' essays were interpreted to identify the errors in grammar, lexical/semantic use and word order as well as mechanical errors. The results showed that the most frequent types of mistakes in students' writing are grammar and mechanical ones, accounting for around 66% of the total errors. Regarding grammatical errors, it was observed that students tended to use present simple and past simple for all cases. One explanation was because there is no equivalent tense in Arabic language. Similarly, when it comes to the errors in the plural/ singular forms of nouns, the students seemed to simply translate the Arabic words into English. For example, the word "homework" in Arabic is plural, so when using that word in English, students used the plural form "homework-s."

Adopting error analysis approach, the researcher then concluded that students made systematic errors that made up a different system of language intermediary between the first language and the target language. Another important observation was that most of the students' errors in TL production was due to the transfer of mother tongue, which is competence errors and thus are the errors representative of interlanguage (Ridha, 2012).

Phocharoensil's study (2011), which aimed at investigating Thai EFL learners' collocation errors, also provided evidence about the existence of interlanguage among high-proficiency learners. Comparing the students' production of language with the first language and target language shows that most of the errors originated from the transfer of L1. For example, students make errors such as:

"I listen music all day […]"

In Thai language, the word "listen" requires no preposition after that, so when transferring to L2 language, Thai learners dropped the preposition "to" in a systematic manner. Further research into Thai learners' errors also revealed some strategies that the students adopted in producing L2, which are using synonym and overgeneralization of L2 rules as the

learners "extend the use of a grammatical rule of linguistic item beyond its accepted uses" (Richards, Schmitt, & Platt, 2002, p. 206). The findings were consistent with previous study by Abbasi (2011) and theoretical base by Corder (1982), Selinker (1972), Ellis (1994) and Saville-Troike (2006).

Chapter III: Conclusion

Over the last few decades, researchers have conducted a large number of studies related to interlanguage and its features. Empirical evidence has shown that during the acquisition of L2, learners develop a system of language that appears to be rule-governed and systematic, and at the same time, independent of either L1 or L2. Therefore, it can be concluded that in learning the target language, there exist interlanguage periods, in which learners make systematic deviations from the target language norms. Such systematic errors are usually competence errors, resulting from learners' transfer of L1, received instruction and/or language learning strategies such as overgeneralization of L2 rules.

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