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Key issues in Second Language Acquisition

by

Submission date: 28-Apr-2023 10:01AM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 2077835147

File name: Key_issues_in_Second_Language_Acquisition_2.pdf (257.81K)

Word count: 3723

Character count: 20746

KEY ISSUES IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Ridha Fadillah*

Abstract

This article is presenting the seven key issues in second language acquisition. The issues are recognized to be able to influence the learner's linguistic output. Also, the article is discussing and stressing on the role of teacher as part of external factor in acquiring a second language. Teacher's role is very important for the learners to rise up their motivation in learning a second language. Further, this article discusses the language anxiety that needs to do research on it. It is described that student's motivation and language anxiety are included in individual learner differences as part of internal factor in acquiring a second language.

Key words: *key issues, motivation, language anxiety, and second language*

1. INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition is subconscious or conscious processes in picking up other language beside the mother tongue. The processes can be in a natural or a tutored setting. It covers the development of phonology, lexis, grammar, and pragmatic knowledge. It has been limited to morphosyntax. Second language acquisition is the product of many factors pertaining to the learner (internal factor) on the one hand and learning situation (external factor) on the other.

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Ellis (1989) raises seven key issues in second language acquisition, they are:

1. The role of first language

Assumption that there were differences between first language and second language, the learner's first language knowledge would interfere with the second language. And first language and second language were similar; the first language would actively aid second language learning. It can be called as positive transfer (first language and second language are similar) and negative transfer for first language and second language are different. Negative transfer creates the areas of difficulty. To identify the areas of difficulty, Contrastive Analysis was developed. By comparing learner's first language and second language on linguistic differences, it predicts the learner's difficulty. Contrastive Analysis assumes that first language interfere second language.

Smith (1994) states "...to identify points of similarity and difference between particular native language and target languages, believing that a more effective pedagogy would result when these were taken into consideration".

The statement shows that Contrastive Analysis is used by the teacher to identify the language learner's problem for effectiveness in directing teaching and learning.

Based on Contrastive Analysis, it raises Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis that states first language transfer affects second language acquisition.

Many researchers disagree with Contrastive Analysis, many studies were conducted to reject and argue Contrastive Analysis.

2. The “Natural” route of development

Ellis (1989) writes a key issue was whether there was a ‘natural’ route of development and if so what it consisted of. A related issue was whether the route of development in first language acquisition matched that of second language acquisition. This issue became known as the L2=L1 hypothesis. This states that the processes of second language acquisition and first language acquisition are very similar as a result of the strategies learners employ.

He pointed out that the L2=L1 hypothesis was investigated in two different ways. One was through the analysis of learner errors known as Error Analysis. It is assumed that structures in which errors were very common were learnt later than structures containing few errors, and then it was possible to work out an order of development based on error frequencies. For example, if a large proportion of errors occurred in the use of plurals than in the use of pronouns, then it could be assumed that plurals were acquired later than pronoun.

Krashen (1982) writes “acquires of a given language tend to acquire certain grammatical structures early, and others later”. It shows that the difficulty order is similar to the acquisition order. Brown (1973) cited in Krashen (1982) reports that children acquiring English as a first language tended to acquire certain grammatical morphemes, or functions words, earlier than others.

The second way in which the L2=L1 hypothesis was examined was in longitudinal studies of second language learners. A number of longitudinal studies of first language acquisition had already taken place, so there was as basis for comparison with the number of longitudinal studies of second language acquisition.

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Both Error Analysis and the longitudinal studies show that there are striking similarities in the ways in which different second language learners learn a second language.

This issue has emerged many studies, comparing children first language natural order and second language natural order, and also adult second language natural order.

Brown (1973) cited in Towell and Hawkins (1994) states on the first language acquisition of English grammatical morphology, and focus on second language morphology. It was found that different groups of first language speakers of different ages displayed 'accuracy orders' which were highly similar, suggesting to researchers that second language morphology is acquired in a 'natural order'.

3. Contextual variation in language-learner language

In producing language, learner language contains errors. It means utterances produced by learners are not well formed according to the rules of the adult grammar.

Errors show that learners do not simply memorize target language rules and then reproduce them in their own utterances, and the rules differ from the target language. It is rare that a learner produces the same error in all contexts of use. Learner produces an error in some contexts but not in others.

Ellis (1989) divides contextual variation into two types. They are:

a. Situational context

Learners use their knowledge of the second language differently in different situations, for example: learner produces errors when learner communicate directly, she or he does not have time to monitor the output, compared with if she or he has opportunity to monitor in producing language, she or he will not produce errors.

b. Linguistic context

Learners produce errors in one type of sentence but not in another, for example: errors in the third person singular of the English simple present tense may not occur regularly in the second clause of complex sentences.

In my opinion, the errors produced by learners are not solely view of contextual variation in language-learner language, the errors occur because of role of first language (negative transfer) and also the route of development. So I assume that the errors produced by learners are influenced by these three first issues.

4. Individual learner differences

Five general factors that contribute to individual learner differences, they are age, aptitude, cognitive style, motivation, and personality.

a. Age

Adult and child second language acquisition are not the same. Adult have a greater memory capacity and are also able to focus more easily on the purely formal features of a language. But comparison of child and adult second language acquisition needs to be done in two parts. First, it needs to be shown whether the learning route differs. Second, the rate at which adults and children learn needs to be investigated. It is possible that no significant differences exist in either route and rate.

b. Aptitude

It refers to the special ability involved in language learning. It is a major factor determining the level of success of classroom language learning. It is one of the strongest predictors of success in language learning.

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c. Motivation and needs

Learners who have high motivation and needs in learning target language, will be successful than learners who have low motivation and needs in learning target language.

The learner has a 'socioaffective filter' which governs how much of the input gets through to the language processing mechanisms. As a result of conscious or unconscious motives or needs, attitudes or emotional states the learner is 'open' or 'close' to the second language. Thus once learners have obtained sufficient second language knowledge to meet their communicative and emotional needs, they may stop learning. It is called fossilization.

Aptitude and motivation correlate positively with achievement (outcome); it means the higher the aptitude and motivation, the higher achievement (outcome).

d. Personality and cognitive style

Little is known about how personality and cognitive style influence second language acquisition, although there is a general conviction that both are potentially extremely important.

Anxiety as one part of personality plays an important role in language achievement (outcome). Anxiety correlates negatively with achievement (outcome); it means the higher the anxiety, the lower the achievement (outcome).

5. The role of the input

Ellis (1289) writes 'it is self-evident that second language acquisition can take place only when the learner has access to second language input. This input may be in the form of exposure in natural settings or formal instruction. It may be spoken or written. A central issue in second language acquisition is what role the input plays'.

It shows that input plays a very important role in second language acquisition. Many researches have been done by linguist in term of role of input. The role of input in the process of second language remains one of the most controversial issues in current research.

Krashen proposes that second language acquisition is based on comprehensible input. Krashen (1985) cited in Mitchell and Myles (1998) defines comprehensible input as second language input just beyond the learner's current second language competence, in term of its syntactic complexity. It is known as $i + 1$. Acquisition takes place if the learner receives comprehensible input, and comprehensible input is claimed to have been provided if acquisition takes place.

6. Learner process

Learners need to sift the input they receive and relate it to their existing knowledge.

Tarone (1980) cited in Ellis (1989) divides three sets of learner strategies.

a. Learning strategies

Learner processes the second language input in order to develop linguistic knowledge. Learning strategies can be conscious and behavioral or they can be subconscious and psycholinguistic.

b. Production strategies

These involve learners' attempts to use the second language knowledge they have already acquired efficiently, clearly, and with minimum effort.

c. Communication strategies

They consist of learners' attempts to communicate meanings for which they lack the requisite linguistic knowledge. Learners,

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particularly in natural settings, constantly need to express ideas which are beyond their linguistic resources. They can either give up and so avoid the problem, or try to find some way around it.

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An optimal input is one that learners can handle by means of learning strategies. Learners adjust the strategies they use to suit the type of input they are getting. Learners can also attempt to control the type of input they are exposed to through the use of production and communication strategies. Input, learner strategies, and output are all interrelated in a highly complex manner.

Chomsky (1965, 1980) cited in Ellis (1989) states that language learning is mentalist, it means learner processing is stressed on the learner rather than the environment. Chomsky states that learner has Language Acquisition Device, input will process in it.

7. The role of formal instruction

Formal instruction can influence the order in which the grammar of a second language is acquired. Formal instruction can take many different forms and it is possible that the route of development is amenable to influence by certain methods but not by others. Formal instruction may help learners to perform in some types of situation but not in others. Learners who receive formal instruction may learn more rapidly than those who do not and formal instruction speeds up second language acquisition.

From key issues in second language acquisition that Ellis elaborates, he concludes them to be five factors that drawn in framework. They are:

1. Situational factors

Situational factors influence both the nature of the linguistic input and the strategies used by the learner. The situation and the input together constitute the linguistic environment in which learning takes place.

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2. Linguistic input

The central issue here is the extent to which the input determines the process of second language acquisition.

3. Learner differences

They are age, aptitude and intelligence, motivation and needs, personality and cognitive style, and the learner's first language.

4. Learner processes

The three sets of learner strategies: learning strategies, production strategies, and communication strategies.

5. The linguistic output

It is the main source of information about how a learner acquires a second language.

The five factors are all interrelated. A theory of second language acquisition is an attempt to show how input, internal processing and linguistic output are related.

Situational factors influence input and the use of learner processes. Learner differences help to determine the quantity and quality of the input and affect the operation of learner strategies. Input constitutes the data upon which the learner strategies work, but also the input is itself in part determined by the learner's use of communication strategies. The relation between input and learner process is interactive one. The linguistic output is a result of learner processes.

2. OTHER ISSUES WHICH NEED TO BE CONSIDERED

Based on my particular second language acquisition in formal instruction, *external factor* that can influence learner's second language acquisition in formal instruction is *the role of teacher*. Teacher as transmitter and facilitator can influence

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learner's motivation. Motivation correlates with achievement. It is assumed that learner with high motivation will acquired the target language better than learner with low motivation.

Brophy (1987) cited in Brewer & Burgess (2005) suggested that teachers viewed themselves as active socialization agents who were capable of stimulating students' motivation to learn. Wilkenson (1992) cited in Brewer & Burgess (2005) stated that a dictionary definition¹⁵ for "teach" was "to cause to know a subject." Wilkenson believed that whereas students were responsible for learning material in a class, the teacher was responsible for causing the student to know the material. In addition, Wilkenson believed that teachers should judge their success by the success of their students and that the purpose for teachers was to serve students. Additional studies have supported Wilkenson's strong views on the responsibility of the teacher to motivate students to learn. Small (1996) cited in Brewer & Burgess (2005) found that instructors were perceived by students as having the prime responsibility for learners' interest or boredom. The statements show that the role of teacher is very important in teaching and learning, in this case is to acquire second language. They suggested that teachers are assumed as motivator and stimulator in motivating students.

⁴ Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) cited in Mitchell and Myles (1998) states that the motivated individual is one who wants to achieve a particular goal, devotes considerable effort to achieve this goal, and experiences satisfaction in the activities associated with achieving this goal. The learner's motivation can be high³ can be low. So when the learners' motivation seen low in teaching and learning process in the classroom, the teacher needs to create a teaching and learning environment that will help students relate the success back to their original

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motivation for being in school and re-energize them to learn the material.

Lack of motivation may cause learners to be less successful in learning a foreign language.

6 Chan (2004) suggests that teachers can motivate students by:

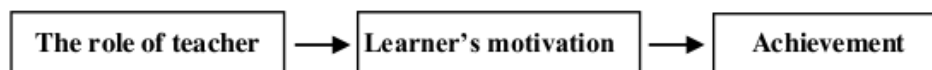
- Communicating clearly.
- Setting tasks that encourage active engagement with the material.
- Creating situations that allow students to make and correct mistakes without undue penalty.
- Displaying enthusiasm for the subject matter.

It shows that the role of teacher is very important for the learners to increase the learners' motivation in order to achieve a success in learning a second language. Therefore, external factor, it is the role of teacher, is other issue which need to be consider in second language acquisition context.

External Factor

Internal Factor

Output (Outcome)



The role of teacher influences learner's motivation, and motivation influences learner's achievement (successful) in acquiring second language.

3. ASPECT OF ELLIS' FRAMEWORK SHOULD BE GIVEN PRIORITY AS AN AREA OF RESEARCH

Besides being taught in the countries where the English is used as first language (for native speakers), it is also taught all over the world where English is not used as second language (for non-native speakers). This is known as Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) or Teaching English as Foreign

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Language (TEFL). It is difficult to master English for the students where live in the country that does not use English for daily communication as many factors influence it. Hence, teaching English sometimes will be fail in the country that does not use English as the first language.

Anxiety as one part of learner differences; is one aspect that should be given priority in research area because in learning language as second language or foreign language, in this case is English, non native speaker students have difficulties to master that particular language. One factor that influences the success and failure in learning and teaching language is anxiety.

Anxiety plays an important role in foreign language students' classroom performance. Elkhafafi (2005), quoting Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986), determines that anxiety plays an important role in determining students' success or failure in foreign language classes.

Anxiety is a problem for many foreign language students. There are many studies connected with anxiety and students' achievements that have been conducted by many educators, language teachers, experts in education and researchers. They have been interested in the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety for a number of years.

From the researcher's literature review, in Indonesia, until now there has been no study on the students' anxiety and students' achievement in English as a foreign language. But there were many researches had been conducted in Western languages and countries and Non-Western languages and countries all over the world.

Wörde (2003) writes that research had consistently revealed that anxiety could impede foreign language production and achievement. Language anxiety is experienced by learners

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of both foreign and second language and poses potential problems "because it can interfere with the acquisition, retention and production of the new language" (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, p. 86).

There is ¹ negative correlation between students' anxiety and students' achievement in a foreign language. That is, students with high anxiety will gain low achievement; on the contrary, students with low anxiety will gain high achievement.

English and Mathematics are supposed as the most difficult subject for all students in Indonesia. The subjects always make the students feeling anxious, of course, it will affect the students' achievement.

Because of that phenomenon, anxiety as one part of learner differences; is one aspect that should be given priority in research area in my particular second language acquisition context.

4. CONCLUSION

From discussion above, the seven key ²¹ issues in second language acquisition are: the role of first language, the "Natural" route of development, contextual variation in language-learner language, individual learner differences, the role of the input, learner process, and the role of formal instruction

And these seven key issues in second language acquisition that Ellis elaborates, it is ²¹ concluded to be five factors that drawn in framework. They are: situational factors, linguistic input, learner differences, learner processes, and the linguistic output

The five factors ² are all interrelated. A theory of second language acquisition is an attempt to show how input, internal processing and linguistic output are related.

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External factor, it is the role of teacher influences learner's motivation, and motivation influences learner's achievement (successful) in acquiring second language.

Beside that, anxiety as one part of learner differences; is one aspect that should be given priority in research area because in learning language as second language or foreign language, in this case is English, non native speaker students have difficulties to master that particular language. One factor that influences the success and failure in learning and teaching language is anxiety.

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