Language Exposure and Second Language Learning[1]

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Exposure and First Language Acquisition

There is no doubt that, apart from biological factors, exposure[2] is of crucial importance in enhancing first language (L1) acquisition. According to Kennedy (1973), a child who begins to acquire his L1 is normally exposed to a rich linguistic environment, consisting of a range of unsimplified adult grammatical and lexical items, many of which are incomprehensible to the child. He says:

> 'No two children are exposed to the same primary linguistic data, or the same amount of such data, and yet despite such different experience and wide differences in intelligence, almost all children are able to crack the code of the linguistic system of their culture and learn to understand and produce sentences' (ibid.: 68-69).

The acquisition of the L1 takes place within the context of a long period of physical and cognitive development and of socialization. The language is acquired in the context of a community of speakers.

In emphasizing the importance of exposure in L1 acquisition Steinberg (1982) says:

> ...the nature of the speech and environment input which children receive is especially contrived to assist language learning and that unfortunate children who have been exposed to language mainly through television or by overhearing adults' conversation do not acquire significant language knowledge' (ibid.: 157).

Exposure and Second Language Learning

Exposure as one of the conditions for L1 acquisition holds equally true for second language (L2) learning. If children are exposed to the L2 in the same way as they are exposed to the L1, greater success will be achieved. This is because in the 'natural' L2 learning situation, the pressure to acquire the TL in order to control the environment is indeed tremendous (Wilkins 1972). Unfortunately, according to Ravem (1974), the learner is very often not `...exposed to "primary linguistic data" in the sense that an L1 learner is, but rather to carefully graded language items presented in small doses for a few hours a week' (ibid.: 132).

Similarly, in Kennedy's opinion (Kennedy 1973), the amount of exposure to the TL that an L2 learner receives in class is certainly generally much less than the amount he receives in acquiring the L1. The L2 learner is typically a part-time learner. Apart from the limited amount of time he is exposed to the L2, how the time is spent is also critical. Instead of having a rich linguistic environment, the L2 learner is usually exposed to selected phonological, syntactical, lexical, and thematic items. It is the teacher who decides and arranges the sequence of the presentation of these items to the learner.

Clearly, even though there is a similar condition between L1 acquisition and L2 learning, i.e. exposure, the amount of exposure itself is, indeed, different. The amount received by those learning the L2 is far more limited than that received by children acquiring the L1. Secondly, in L2 learning the learner has the choice of whether or not, and to what extent, to expose himself to the TL, while in L1 acquisition exposure is automatic and one can hardly imagine a normal child retreating from language interaction.

Language Environment

According to Dulay et al. (1982), language environment `...encompasses everything the language learner hears and sees in the new language. It may include a wide variety of situations — exchanges in restaurants and stores, conversations with friends, watching television, reading street signs and newspapers, as well as classroom activities — or it may be very sparse, including only language classroom activities and a few books and records' (ibid.: 13).

And, in stressing the importance of language environment, they say:

> `The quality of the language environment is of paramount importance to success in learning a new language. If students are exposed to a list of words and their translations, together with a few simple readings in the new language, they will perhaps be able to attain some degree of reading skill in language, but listening and speaking skills will remain fallow....If one is exposed only to classroom drills and dialogues, one may acquire substantial mastery of classroom communication skills but still remain at a loss in other areas of social discourse. And of course, with no exposure at all, no learning can take place' (ibid.).

The above quotation indicates the importance of exposure and at the same time it implies the importance of practice in L2 learning.

Practice

Practice is defined by Seliger as `...any verbal interaction between the learner and others in his environment. Usually such interaction consists of an output speech act by the learner and an input speech act from some other speaker....Practice also consists of covert activity such as listening to the radio, watching television and reading' (Seliger 1977: 265).

There is a consensus of opinion among language learning theorists and practising language teachers that, in L2 learning, the amount of practice that a learner is willing to put in is crucial in determining success. Language is learned through use in that the learner must be actively involved in trying to communicate in real situations; rich experience of the language is essential (Ingram 1978). Perhaps the following points by Politzer (1965) would sufficiently support this claim:

(1) irrespective of the teaching methods used, language learning needs a tremendous amount of practice and perseverance. It is impossible for one to understand a language without listening to it a great deal and impossible for one to learn to speak a language without speaking it.

(2) Whatever the disadvantage of lower language aptitude may be, it can be overcome by sufficient practice and exposure.

Language Contacts

The degree of exposure to the TL could be determined by the nature of contact that takes place between two social groups, referred to by Schumann (1978) as the L2 learning group and the TL group, who are in a contact situation, but who speak different languages. Certain social factors can either promote or inhibit contact between the two groups and thus affect the degree to which the L2 group learns the TL. Among the factors proposed by Schumann are:

(1) Social dominance patterns: If the L2 learning group is politically, culturally, technically, or economically superior (dominant) to the TL group, it will tend not to learn the TL. If the L2 learning group is inferior (subordinate) to the TL group, there will also be social distance between the two groups, and the L2 group will tend to resist learning the TL. If the L2 learning group and the TL group are roughly equal politically, culturally, technically, and economically, then there is the likelihood of a more extensive contact between the two groups, and the acquisition of TL by the L2 learning group will be enhanced.

(2) Three integration strategies — assimilation, preservation and acculturation: If the L2 learning group assimilates, i.e. gives up its own life style and values and adopts those of the TL group, contact between the two groups is maximized, thus enhancing acquisition of the TL. If the L2 learning group chooses preservation as its integration strategy, i.e. maintains its own life style and values and rejects those of the TL group, social distance between the two groups is created, making it unlikely that the L2 learning group will acquire the TL. If the L2 learning group acculturates, i.e. adapts to the life style of the TL group but maintains its own life style and values for intragroup use, acquisition of the TL will take place at varying degrees.

(3) Enclosure: If the two groups share the same churches, schools, clubs, recreational facilities, crafts, professions, and

trades, enclosure will be low, contact between the two groups is enhanced, thus acquisition of the TL by the L2 learning group is facilitated. If it is the contrary, enclosure will be high, contact between the groups is limited, thereby opportunities to acquire the TL is reduced.

(4) Cohesiveness and size: If the L2 learning group is cohesive, its members will tend to remain separate from the TL group, and if the L2 learning group is large, intragroup contact will be more frequent than intergroup contact. Such situations will reduce the opportunities for acquisition of the TL.

(5) Congruence or similarity: If the cultures of the L2 learning group and the TL group are similar, social contact is more likely and second language learning will be facilitated.

(6) Intended length of residence: If the L2 learning group intends to remain for a long time in the TL area, contacts between the two groups are likely to develop extensively, thus promoting the L2 learning.

Language Policy

Apart from contacts, exposure to a particular TL is also determined by language policy. Observation has shown that the spread and recession of a particular L2 in a particular country are the result of its language policy. This is the case of, to quote a few examples, Dutch in Indonesia (Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana 1974) and English in India (Fasold 1984; Dakin 1968) and Malaysia (Asmah Haji Omar 1982), and English and French in some African countries (Tiffen 1968). Society would provide the teaching of a particular L2 whenever the need arises. As stated by Wilkins (1972), usually the need for the L2 exists in multilingual countries wherein there is no sufficiently dominant language to be made the national language. There may be one but there is political resistance to its acceptance or that the language itself has not yet evolved into a satisfactory tool for the expression of modern scientific needs. Normally, the chosen L2 has some historical connection within the country as in the case of former colonies. The scale and variety of use of the L2 differs enormously - it can encompass part or all of government administration, education,

and commerce. The L2 situation will not exist if the local language can be used in almost all activities. This being the case, the L2 will at the very least be taught as a subject in schools. Subsequently, there would then be a steady drop in the standard of L2 proficiency.

Research Findings

Studies cited below serve to indicate the importance of exposure in language learning — the higher the exposure, the better the learner performs in the TL.

An observation by Lambert et al. (cited in Kennedy 1973) indicated that using the TL as a medium of instruction increased proficiency in the language. In a research programme conducted by him and his associates at McGill University in Montreal, children who began elementary school as monolingual speakers of English were being taught at school as if they were monolingual speakers of French, from the time they began kindergarten through the primary classes. The programme attempts to achieve bilingualism through 'a home-school language switch'. By exposing them to French through the teaching of several subjects in the language, their control of spoken French developed rapidly. At the fifth year, the children became very fluent, although their production of French was still not equal to that of the native speakers. Nevertheless, they had learned far more than they would have through typical FL learning classes, and without any adverse effect on their English language abilities, or their academic achievement.

In another study by Briere (1978), it was observed that, among Native Mexican children learning Spanish as L2, environmental variables (such as whether the parents and siblings spoke Spanish, amount of attendance at school, and need for the parents to speak Spanish to travel for work) enhanced proficiency in the TL. It was further observed that the children who scored the highest on the test of Spanish were those whose community was the closest to a Spanish-speaking community. 'Apparently, the closer to a Spanish speaking community a Native Mexican community is, the greater is the exposure to and the need for Spanish as a second language' (ibid.: 171). And their study revealed that boys who normally spent most of the time with their fathers tended to be more proficient in Spanish (since, in a community of high

unemployment, their fathers must know some Spanish in order to obtain jobs outside the community).

Briere's finding reflects the role of language contact in determining the success of L2 learning. This being the case, L2 learners learning the TL in the TL community are at the advantage of being substantially exposed to the language whereas a great majority of L2 learners learning the TL outside the TL community are not. As observed by Politzer (1965), all immigrants coming to the United States eventually learn to speak English – no matter what their educational level or language aptitude – so long as they continue to expose themselves to the TL environment.

Exposure to a given language environment provides the learner opportunities to practise the TL. Rajagopal (1976), in a survey among Malay-medium pupils in selected schools in Selangor, observed that pupils who were less competent in English were those handicapped by their environment. They received less opportunity and encouragement to practise speaking English at home. Even their contacts outside the home did not provide them with situations in which they could practise speaking the language.

Rajagopal's finding strengthens the assumption that Malay-medium learners of ESL are insufficiently exposed to English; hence their poor performance in the language (Balaetham 1982; Omar Mohd Hashim 1982). And the reason for this lack of exposure to the TL is due to the fact that English is not the medium of instruction anymore but is merely a subject taught in schools. As stated by Habibah Salleh:

> 'With its status as a second language, being taught as one of the subjects in the school curriculum, English language teaching has been stripped of all the back-up it once had. This means a drastic reduction in contact hours, in exposure to the language, and in actual use of the language' (Habibah Salleh 1979: 3).

The assumption that the more the learner practises the more competent he is in the TL was confirmed by Seliger (1977) who worked among a sample of adult learners of ESL in an intensive programme. He observed that, given the time constraint, formal instruction did not permit much practice in the TL. Therefore, additional practice outside class was of vital importance in acquiring L2 competence. This means that, given an optimal

teaching system, much of what must be learned must be acquired outside class hours built on what was acquired within a formal instructional framework. Seliger points out:

> '...that some learners, because of some cognitive or affective characteristics, are able to exploit formal learning environments for extensive practice while others derive only limited benefit from formal instruction. It also appears...that those who are capable of deriving the most benefit from formal learning environments may be the most likely to use this formally acquired base for further language development in informal or naturalistic learning environments' (ibid.: 264).

Based on the intensity of practice, Seliger classified the subjects into two categories: (1) high input generators, i.e. learners who interacted intensively, who seek out opportunities to use an L2 and who caused others to direct language at them, and (2) low input generators, i.e. those who either avoided interacting or played relatively passive roles in language interaction situations. Seliger's result showed that the former were more successful in acquiring L2 proficiency than the latter.

Hamayan et al. (1977) examined the constellation of personality and language exposure factors associated with learning French as an L2 among three groups of students: (1) early French immersion group and (2) late French immersion group, both wherein the students received instruction in most subjects in French, and (3) English controlled group wherein the students learnt French only as a subject while instructions in other subjects were in English. They observed that, regardless of the nature of the French programmes, those learners who consistently used English and less French when communicating with acquaintances were less proficient in both oral and written French than learners who reported less consistent use of English. Similarly, students who reported a high degree of shyness performed less well on French reading comprehension than did students who reported a low degree of shyness. Thus, it is apparent that learning an L2 is more effective when there is sufficient practice and, insofar as shy students may be less likely to practise it, less proficiency will be attained.

But, the sufficiency of practice is dependent upon the availability of opportunity to practise. In the school context, the sources of opportunity to practise speaking in the TL are the

teachers and peers. Chesterfield et al. (1983), studying the influence of teachers and peers in L2 acquisition among pre-school learners of English, observed that in classrooms where English-preferring children (i.e. those who speak English most of the time) predominated, those children who used relatively more English with peers and who increased their English usage over time generally showed the greatest increase in English proficiency. In classrooms where the majority of students were Spanish-preferring (i.e those who speak Spanish most of the time), children who showed the greatest increase in English proficiency were those who used relatively more English over time with the teacher. The finding served to imply that learners who were highly exposed to the TL and who took this opportunity to interact in the language were more successful in attaining proficiency. And the teachers and peers were the sources for exposure to the TL and, in turn, for increasing proficiency.

Chandrasegaran (1979), in a study among Malay-medium learners of ESL in Johor, noticed a definite link between degree of exposure to English and competence in the language. She found that urban pupils tended to be better at English than rural pupils but she ruled out the factor of socioeconomic status as the reason since 90% of the pupils in her sample, both rural and urban, came from working class families. She also dismissed the factor of quality of instructions in rural schools as being inferior since all government schools followed the same curriculum and were staffed by teachers of similar qualifications. Nor were urban students more strongly motivated or more favourable in attitude towards English than rural pupils. The possibility was that urban pupils, by living in an environment where the opportunity for hearing and reading English was more readily available, experienced wider contact with English and so became more competent in the language.

Lieberson (1972) provided an example of the importance of exposure to the TL in the wider context of society i.e. English in French-speaking Canada, where the language was taught as a subject in French-medium schools attended by almost all French-speaking children. It was observed that not all L2 learning, however, took place in the classrooms. A lot of competence in English would be gained as young people found it necessary to participate in society, where English was used in the domain of employment. Thus competence in English increased due to the increase in exposure

Conclusion

Thus, from the findings outlined above, exposure apparently enhances language learning. The more the learner listens to the TL, and the more he reads and speaks in the language – i.e. the higher the degree of contact to the TL he receives – the more competent he is likely to become in the language.

End Note

[1] In this paper exposure refers to the sum total of contacts with a target language (TL) that a learner receives, both in verbal and written forms. The higher the exposure to the TL that the learner receives, the more competent he would be in the language.

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