

China-Oriented Second Language Learning and Acquisition

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Abstract: This paper first glances at the remarkable phenomenon of second language learning home and abroad, and raises the unsettling issue of many learners eventually getting unsuccessful or unsatisfactory learning results. With the aim of presenting whoever concerned, especially second language teachers, basic and professional knowledge and helping give them good insights into the issue and more, it purposefully provides certain practical knowledge of language and its properties, and also second language acquisition theories from mainly behaviorist, innatist, and interactionist perspectives, which are particularly seen in regard to those on second language teaching and learning in China. It then progresses to considerable variables or characteristics that greatly influence the success of language learning before it finally arrives at the conclusion of the paper.

Keywords: Language learning; Language teaching; Second language acquisition

English Gaining the knowledge of language plus second language learning and acquisition can be tremendously beneficial for second language teachers and for the students consequently, which a vast number of stakeholders in the field may have longed for or have not been aware of. This paper is aimed at serving the purposes of both spreading briefly some rudimentary practical knowledge of language and second language acquisition and enlightening second language teachers on perspectives pertaining to second language teaching and learning in China.

1. Second language learning globally and domestically

It is truly incredible that many people, nevertheless from different age groups and from different parts of the globe, are doing the same thing - learning a second language - at this every moment, and this phenomenon has been increasingly widespread and common. Universally, people may learn a language, such as English, French, Chinese, or Spanish, as a second language for many and various intentions, including fulfilling job requirements, sitting language exams, travelling, or simply pursuing interests and enhancing personal development. And based on the level of their language proficiency, second language learners may be broadly categorized into basic learners, intermediate learners, and advanced learners.

Thanks to the low threshold, it is rather easy to start the journey of learning a second language. Yet, to master the language fully is admittedly highly demanding. This explains that although the number of second language learners internationally might be astonishing, the number of successful second language learners may be astounding, given that only a really small portion of the second language learners ultimately manage to acquire the proficiency of the language in general.

Because of China's opening-up and the increasing globalization of the world economy, education, and culture, more and more Chinese people jump on the bandwagon of learning a second language. The English language, which has obtained recognition as the lingua franca worldwide, has long been the first choice for second language learners in China for cogent and apparent reasons. Notably, English, like Chinese or mathematics, has been included as a core subject on the curriculum at school throughout China for decades. Meanwhile, learning English has remarkably enjoyed growing popularity across the nation among non-school goers young and old. However, considering millions of school students taking English as a core subject from primary school to high school in China, only a mere fraction of them attain the mastery of the language upon high school graduation. Among the other learners, only a small part of them may succeed whereas the majority may fail generally. In other words, language learners do not succeed in learning a certain language equally (Brown, 2000). And, there are contributing or complicating elements such as beliefs in the society that need to be taken into account when it comes to language learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2018). What are the vital factors behind success or failure in second language learning? What are the special ingredients that are essential for success? Let us endeavour to find the answers by looking slightly closer at language, language acquisition theories, and other factors particularly relevant to second language teaching and learning.

2. Language and its components

Having a rudimentary knowledge of language is highly helpful and useful for language teaching. It is commonly acknowledged that effective teaching not only greatly facilitates learning, but also significantly improves learning experience and outcome. However, there is certainly no lack of unfortunate incidents in which language learners are unsuccessful because of incapable language teachers or poor language teaching, and vice versa. Brown (2000) indicates that it is particularly essential for language teachers to have

knowledge of language in order to be able to teach effectively because how a language teacher teaches a language is greatly determined by his or her understanding of the components and system of the language. There are a host of different or similar definitions of language available. Brown (2000) presents a composite of language definitions as follows:

- (1) Language is systematic.
- (2) Language is a set of arbitrary symbols.
- (3) Those symbols are primarily vocal, but may also be visual.
- (4) The symbols have conventionalized meanings to which they refer.
- (5) Language is used for communication.
- (6) Language operates in a speech community or culture.
- (7) Language is essentially human, although possibly not limited to humans.
- (8) Language is acquired by all people in much the same way; language and language learning both have universal characteristics.

(p.17)

Moreover, the functional modular properties of language that language learners need to acquire are primarily composed of phonology (the sound system), syntax (the combination of words into phrases and then into sentences), morphology (the structure and form of words), semantics (the meaning of words), and pragmatics (the way in which language is used) of language (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Gass, Behney, & Plonsky, 2020; Slabakova, 2016; Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2018). Also, the creativity nature of language suggests the creative process of language acquisition (VanPatten, & Williams, 2015; Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

3. Second language acquisition theories

The connection between Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and language pedagogy is prominent (Ellis, 2010). The history of second language learning in China closely relates to the development of SLA theories, which have an important influence on teaching instructions and thus play a fundamental and vital role in second language learning and teaching in China due to the prevailing instructed nature of second language learning nationwide. Correspondingly, the success or failure of second language learning can directly or indirectly be attributed to the influences of SLA theories, which mainly consist of three theoretical perspectives - behaviorist, innatist, and interactionist (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Klein, 2014)

Behaviorist. In the 1940s and 1950s, behaviorism predominated and was hugely influential. Lightbown and Spada (2013) state that imitation and practice were viewed as primary processes in developing language by the behaviorist (e.g., B.F. Skinner). Behaviorism deems that all learning is "...the acquisition of a new behavior. The environment is the most important factor in learning." "One must imitate correct models repeatedly" (VanPatten, & Williams, 2015, p.19). The drill-and-skill practice is the established norm in class. Errors are often directly rectified without delay. Stimulus, response, and reinforcement are emphasized according to behaviorism. The audiolingual method is employed in second language learning classrooms widely (Klein, 2014).

Behaviorism gained a foothold in China initially, and has been influencing second language learning in the country ever since. Due to its popularity in China, usually, where there is second language teaching and learning, there is behaviorism, which to a certain extent undeniably helps build up learners' language ability and their self-confidence in the language through plenty of good imitation and reinforcement. Take learning English as a second language, there is a lot of learning vocabulary and texts by rote, and grammar is seriously emphasized in teaching and learning. Nonetheless, the learners are typically strong and competent in reading and writing, but weak and incompetent in listening and speaking. *Ya ba ying yu*, or *mute English* literally, is a special term that is used to describe the English learners' English as they simply can not use English to converse with somebody, which might seem disheartening and frustrating. The learners usually shy away from speaking with others in English. Learners are often able to do well on paper, but unable to use the language in real ordinary daily conversation. The key concept among teachers and learners is that second language is taught and learned. The concept of *acquiring* language outside the classrooms or in social context might be vague or alien to them. Whatever is learned might be forgotten easily and quickly without acquisition. As a result, learners are not fully proficient in the language ultimately.

Innatist. In disagreement with the behaviorist, the innatist (e.g. Noam Chomsky) argued that language acquisition was attributed to some innate universal principles. Language acquisition device (LAD), universal grammar (UG), and the critical period hypothesis (CPH) all help account for language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Klein, 2014). Succeeding the innatist perspectives, Krashen (1982) presents five hypotheses about SLA that have been influencing second language teaching practices vastly in spite of some unfavorable relevant critiques. The five hypotheses are:

(1)The acquisition-learning hypothesis, which draws distinction between language learning and language acquisition. Learning is explicit and conscious, and takes place in formal situations, whereas acquisition is implicit and subconscious, and takes place in informal situations; learning focuses on form and grammar and depends on aptitude while acquisition focuses on needs and interests and depends on attitude; learning follows simple to complex order of learning, but acquisition follows stable order of acquisition. Based on the distinction, it can be said that language learning has been taking the center stage in China. While learning may help language learners become competent in especially linguistic accuracy development; acquisition can help them achieve proper communicative proficiency. With the advent of the Internet and advancement of technology in addition to reforms of English syllabuses at school and changes of teachers' and students' perceptions, acquisition will hopefully gain increasing attention and emphasis in China.

(2)The monitor hypothesis, which means that internalized grammar rules developed via explicit language learning serve as an editor or a monitor. Because only acquisition accounts for natural, easy, and comfortable communication, acquisition is primary while learning is secondary. Errors are not necessarily immediately corrected. Over time, Self-correction takes place which helps build up learners' language competence. Second language learners in China these days are often encouraged to open their mouth to speak and not to be afraid to make mistakes. They are constantly imparted words of wisdom such as *Practice makes perfect*.

(3)The natural order hypothesis, which implies that grammatical features are acquired in a predictable order despite the existence of possible individual variations. This applies to both first and second language acquisition. However, the hypothesis is not always agreed upon at least in China. For instance, according to the hypothesis, *-ing* verb ending is acquired early while *-s/* possessive is acquired late, which is not necessarily the fact. It really varies in different contexts.

(4)The input hypothesis, which suggests that input should be comprehensible and at the level of $i+1$ (i = a learner's current language level; $+1$ = the challenging level which is a little beyond i). Language is only acquired through comprehensible input. Output plays little role in language acquisition. A silent period is allowed when obtaining comprehensible input. Krashen (2003) promotes free voluntary reading. He claims that free voluntary reading is powerful, effective, enjoyable for developing literacy and second language competence because of comprehensible input received in a low anxiety milieu. A significant number of language teachers in China nowadays acknowledge not only the importance of comprehensible input, but also the importance of comprehensible output in SLA. They deem that input and output complement each other in complete language acquisition.

(5)The affective filter hypothesis, which suggests filtering affective variables that may affect language acquisition. Some helpful affective variables include low anxiety, high motivation, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Affective variables are usually self-controllable. They vary from learner to learner, which to a large degree have a major impact on the success or failure in language acquisition. There is a well-known saying in China which depicts the magnitude of attitude. That is "Attitude is everything". More often than not, it is also true in SLA.

Interactionist. In recognition of innate learning mechanisms such as comprehensible input, the interactionist focuses on the interplay between the innate learning and acquiring capacities and the environment, especially including the influence of natural conversations during social interactions. In addition to the descriptions of significant roles and practices of interaction in the language classroom (Richard-Amato, 1988), researchers Loewen and Sato (2018) stress the indispensability of interaction in SLA, and elucidate the key components of interaction, which comprise input, negotiation, and output. Gestures, paraphrases, repetitions, or adapted speech for helping comprehension may take place in conversations between native and non-native speakers (Klein, 2014). Interaction with the environment is indispensable in language development and language acquisition. Yet, this might be quite challenging for second language learners in China considering the generally large class size at school and a Chinese-speaking society. It is less ideal for natural social interactions with native speakers to take place easily and frequently. Therefore, they may have to create or seek favorable environment for themselves. For example, they may use the Internet to talk to native speakers online, or take the initiative to speak with native speakers around them. Alternatively, they may watch movies and documentaries in the target language to explore and immerse themselves in the virtually authentic environment.

Furthermore, there are many other perspectives related to SLA. For example, Lightbown and Spada (2013) include that the cognitive perspective finds further evidence which suggests language acquisition is usage-based. The usage-based hypothesis argues that when children connect the language they hear with what they experience in their environment with their cognitive abilities, language acquisition takes place. This perspective emphasizes on children's creation of connections which depend on children's learning abilities and the environment. The connections also extend to collocations and grammatical expressions. Owing to the high exposure to tremendous learning opportunities, language acquisition occurs. Some language teachers are in favor of the usage-based perspective in China. They claim that there is considerable, genuine, steady, and progressive improvement in the learners' language competence through constant use of the language for academic, professional, and daily purposes. The perception of "learning is for use" is widely-held in China, especially when it comes to learning a skill. Lightbown and Spada (2013) also contain the sociocultural perspective, which basically suggests learning by talking with people from other cultures in social context. Indeed, learning a new language signifies leaning a new culture. Besides, globalization brings people around the world closer to one another, and good cross-cultural communication is crucial.

4. Language acquisition in general

It is generally acknowledged that language acquisition is a complex and enduring process. Brown (2000) shows that the success of language acquisition is influenced by many variables, including learner characteristics (e.g., education, intellectual capacities, abilities, personality, life experience), linguistic factors (e.g., first language, second language, language system), learning processes (e.g., cognitive processes, strategies, attention to form and meaning, memory and storage), age, context, and purposes. Lightbown and Spada (2013), Dörnyei (2014), Ortega (2014), and Saville-Troike and Barto (2016) similarly elaborate on more or less of these learners' individual distinct differences in second language learning. Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons (2004) also find that successful language learners among some Chinese university students tend to have positive attitude, strong determination, clear learning goals, viable and better-used strategies, active use of resources, efficient self-management, constructive internal and external motivation, favorable engagement with learning activities and social interaction, good rapport with the teachers, and incremental as well as integrative views of language and language learning.

5. Conclusion

Finally, it can be concluded that having knowledge of second language learning and acquisition is eminently practical, and that successful second language learning and acquisition is an epic achievement. It takes right ingredients, from the knowledge of the language to the knowledge of second language acquisition theories and practices; from individual language learners to relevant contexts; from input to output; and from internal factors to external factors. The fruit of the undertaking is appreciated and enjoyed by those who are willing to devote sustained physical and intellectual effort plus reasonable and precious time.

And above all, hopefully, the paper serves its prime purposes well.

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