Global Journal of Arts Education

Volume 04, Issue 2, (2014) 82-87

www.awer-center/gjae

Applications of second language acquisition theory: Two case studies

Ruby Parker *, English Language Institute, Post University, Waterbury, Connecticut, USA.

Suggested Citation:
Parker, R. (2014). Applications of second language acquisition theory: Two case studies. *Global Journal of Arts Education*. *4*(2), 82-87.

Received 22 September, 2014; revised 28 October, 2014; accepted 30 October, 2014.
Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Ayse Cakir Ilhan, Ankara University, Turkey
©2014 SPROC LTD. Academic World Education & Research Center. All rights reserved.

Abstract

This case study discusses applications of various theories on second language acquisition in an analysis of the linguistic competence and linguistic performance of two college students, a Chinese student whose L1 is Mandarin, and a Colombian student whose L1 is Spanish. The paper discusses the linguistic, psychological, and social contexts of these students as they study English as a second language. Based on the data collected for the study, the students show signs of first language interference in their L2, but also show signs of more advanced competencies in English despite still struggling with some basic errors. The study concludes by making recommendations as to next steps in the teaching of students like them who possess intermediate to advanced language skills.

Keywords: second language acquisition, error analysis, interlanguage, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics.

*ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Ruby Parker,** English Language Institute, Post University, 800 Country Club Road, Waterbury, Connecticut, USA, *E-mail address:* rparker@post.edu

1. Introduction

This study covers applications of second language acquisition theory focused on two college level students, a Chinese male student, Yubo Pang, whose first language (L1) is Mandarin, and a Colombian student, Alejandro Kowoll, whose first language (L1) is Spanish. This paper will analyse the linguistic and psycho-social contexts that surround their learning of English as a second language (L2) as they prepare to take higher level classes in their respective majors.

Nomenclature
A radius of
B position of
C further nomenclature continues down the page inside the text box

1.1. What is Second Language Acquisition

Second Language Acquisition theory is primarily concerned with finding out how a learner acquires a second language (L2). According to Saville-Troike (2012), interest in SLA theory dates back hundreds of years, but only recently in the 1960s did bodies of knowledge become more formalized and systematic in order to explain second language learning phenomena. There are different approaches to the study of SLA, but they can be categorized into three major areas – linguistic, psychological, and social contexts. This will be the framework for the closer look into the processes involved in both Yubo's and Alejandro's learning of the English language.

2. Analysis

2.1. Linguistic Context

Yubo and Alejandro use distinct interlanguages (a variety of the target language that is constantly changing as they refine their knowledge of the grammar and rules of the language) as they each seek to leverage their L1 or native language competence into building their new L2 knowledge of the target language English.

- Linguistic Characteristics of Yubo's interlanguage

Singular/Plural confusion – since Mandarin does not have singular and plural inflections of nouns, he exhibits some confusion as to when to correctly use the –s plural form.

e.g. One years ago, I came to post university and study here. . .

Subject-verb agreement – since Mandarin does not have a 3rd person singular verb conjugation, Yubo does not consistently conjugate verbs paired with 3rd person nouns or pronouns

e.g. It make me feel happy. hat's because the author want to use another side to describe Shangri-La . . .

Verb tense confusion – since Mandarin does not conjugate verbs for tense and depends heavily on context, this is one area of great difficulty for Yubo

e.g. The people who live in Shangri-La are used to feed pigs or another working, but more and more tourists coming has changing their life.

Omitting articles or oversimplification – since Mandarin does not use articles before nouns, this is also a difficult concept to master

e.g. We can take away (the) car, (the) house, or money, except health, never take away health. If you were up in creek because of (a) bad physical condition, money couldn't lend you a hand.

Trying think, if you have a lot of money, you could buy everything you want except the health, the time. (Oversimplification by adding "the" where it is not needed)

Confusing prepositions – since Mandarin does not make such a fine distinction among prepositions, this is another challenge for Yubo to master

e.g. That is a really funny experience in my life and this is the main reason of i fell in love with music.

For example, more and more cars driving on the road, it's comfortable way to go out but at same time it bring people more and more air pollution, it's a big problem in Beijing, people do not even see the building 200 meters from.

One common error that native Mandarin speakers make when learning English is a lack of distinction of gender, particularly in pronouns. This was evidenced more when Yubo spoke rather than when he wrote something. It may be possible that he would avoid particular structures which he knew were difficult for him, thus the gender distinctions between him and her, and his and hers were not evident in samples of his writing. To be sure, after one year of study in an American university, Yubo has progressed from a beginner level to an intermediate-advanced level at the time of this study. The length of his sentences were sufficiently expanded to allow for coordination and subordination. He used possessives and contractions well despite these being later morphological structures that a learner acquired after mastering plurals and tenses (Brown, 1973; Dulay & Burt, 1974). And though his grasp of advanced level vocabulary was still shaky, he displayed no inherent hesitation to formulate his ideas in English, pointing to a communicative confidence that most intermediate to advanced level ESL students possess.

- Linguistic characteristics of Alejandro's interlanguage

No subject – Spanish speakers do not always need to place a subject at the beginning of their sentences

e.g. Therefore (it) is worth to say that the human intelligence along the times have been lofty despite of nowadays we found many things they had not.

No helping verbs – Spanish speakers find difficulty using auxiliary and helping verbs like "do"

e.g. Based on the information that we reviewed in the first two weeks I begin to think that for me the most important culture is the Angkor because I liked the way in which they (were) established and the complex architecture of their buildings.

Phrasal verb confusion – Spanish speakers tend to struggle with 2-word verbs

e.g. Other important aspect, which I would like to talk (about), is the space, time and population that one time reached.

Finally, worth saying that the fact of stay healthy not only depends strictly of how much sport I am doing for down the calories that I ate.

Negation – Spanish speakers use a very simple form of negation by attaching the word "no" to the desired function word or phrase, thus Alejandro tends to get confused as to the proper form and placement of negatives

e.g. Even I did not hear nothing about this wonderful culture before of read and discuss in class, I thought that despite of they were for minus time of the Angkor culture, figured out to live in harsh conditions having large droughts, dry seasons, and constantly lack of water. (Double negation)

Moreover, I would like to say that stay healthy not is an issue of want to do exercise or not, if not as well influence factors as the amount of calories eating by the people diary and if they use drugs or not.

Prepositions – specificity of prepositional meanings is not as detailed in Spanish as it is in English

e.g. Based in I have learned from the reading I am able to say that its systems of supply water to the people, as obtain water underground, I mean from subterranean sources and obtain it from the river manually but not less complex.

Some common errors that native Spanish speakers display when learning English that Alejandro does not consistently produce include noun adjective positioning, pluralisation of article+adjective+noun combinations, or possessive inflections of article noun combinations. Instead, his writing displays more

advanced levels of problematic construction, including subject-verb agreement, verb tense, modification, and subordination.

e.g. Verb tense

. . . when the tourists arrive to the airports and go out, they will found the reality of the country before of arrive to the hotels of the destinations that they desire.

Subject-verb agreement

. . . because they do not have the time and their occupied diary don't let them do exercise.

Modification

However, the mainly weakness that brings this type of energy . . .

This also confirms that, like Yubo, Alejandro is capable of writing longer discourse despite the possibility of more errors, and is able to confidently convey his point more effectively during oral discussions in class. For intermediate-advanced students like them, the focus now shifts away from general structures known to be problematic to their native L1 groups, and to center on specific interlanguage and intralanguage difficulties that their speech and writing evidence.

2.2. Psychological Context

Both Yubo and Alejandro took the Felder Inventory of Learning Styles test administered by North Carolina State University. They both tested with similar results as balanced or moderately reflective, visual, sensing, and sequential. The one exception was, for Yubo, his visual score was a 9, which placed him as heavily favouring visual over verbal learning all the time. In class, they both work well with textbooks, readings, written or blackboard activities, and oral presentations. Though testing more as reflective learners, they work well together during discussions and are enthusiastic about hands-on activities like reports and presentations. Both have an extrovert personality and seem highly motivated to come to class, learn the material, and practice what they learn. As more proficient speakers according to the Information Processing theory (DeKeyser, 1998), they both use strings of words that typically occur together, instead of focusing on single words and meanings. Their writing evidences this, where they use expressions like "Based on my opinion", or "In order to answer this question", or "Up to this day" which are reproductions of high frequency phrases they have been exposed to and that they now regularly use in their everyday academic discourse. In terms of the Interaction Hypothesis (Long,1983) that postulates modified interaction to make input more comprehensible for the less able learner and thus both interlocutors engage in a negotiation for meaning, both students display competence at modified interaction, using expressions to check comprehension, request for clarification, or engage in self-repetition and paraphrase.

e.g. Yubo: Hmm, I can't find the HD one (looking for a video clip) so . . .

Teacher: There's no . . . It's fine even if it isn't HD, we can take a short section

Yubo: Short one? (Paraphrase, clarification)

Teacher: I can . . . um I can take that, and then I can cut it to only, like, 10 or 15 seconds.

Yubo: And uh . . . oh, 15 seconds, uh, okay I think this is better (chooses another video clip), it

sounds better. (Repetition of "15 seconds")

Teacher: It sounds better?

2.3. Social Context

Variability in Alejandro's language is evidenced by a noticeable lack of the article "a" in some of his sentences, this despite the fact that his L1 Spanish does use articles to limit nouns. When asked why he didn't put an article in his sentence "Water is (a) kind of renewable energy" he responded that he would hear his classmates and friends say "Kind of. . ." and thought this was the correct structure. Still new to the country (at the time of this writing, only about 4 months have passed since he arrived in the United States), he was still trying to differentiate between academic and colloquial language. This type of variability will continue until he has more exposure to both formal and informal situations and expressions, and will be able to tell which expressions situate them selves in formal, academic discourse, and which ones are used in informal, social settings. In terms of Long's characteristics of foreign talk Long (1996), both students evidence less of these hallmarks and more advanced learning benchmarks, such as use of more advanced vocabulary and phrases, faster rates of speech with shorter pauses, more complicated grammatical structures, no topicalization, and more syntactic variety. A review of their writing samples in section 1.2 will support these observations. Finally, despite the fact that both studentscome from different ethnic backgrounds, there are no noticeable boundaries between them in terms of global status or ethnic identity. While gender plays no part in their classroom where they are both male, age does work to their advantage. The fact that they are both young adults allows them to draw logical interlingual connections between their L1 and English, and also allows them to make intralingual connections within their understanding of the rules of their target language as well. Previous circumstances of learning also place them equally in terms of linguistic competence, where Yubo has had the benefit of one year of ESL training at the university, while Alejandro studied for a year with a TOEFL tutor in Colombia prior to coming to the United States.

3. Recommendations

Teaching to upper level ESL students is both a privilege and a challenge. As the instructor takes the students to more advanced levels of language study, the object will be to make sure the foundational knowledge of the students is sound, while progressing through more complicated subject matter. The comprehensible input hypothesis of Stephen Krashen's Monitor Model (Lightbrown & Spada, 2013) provides some guidance as to how to take the next steps in the language students' learning. The i+1 concept of providing just enough challenging material to your students while kicking it up a notch would certainly work in a class of students like Yubo and Alejandro. Both can write basic sentences and have begun to practice the rudiments of coordination and subordination. Both have well populated vocabulary lists and can branch out into more. Both are motivated and open to learning well.

To supplement comprehensible input, Ellis' (2002) focus on usage-based learning, and Bates and McWhinney's (1981) competition model should be undertaken as well. Emphasis now should be on both a formal instruction and drilling on the rudiments of grammar, as well as an increased exposure to readings, activities, films, and other resources, in order to subject the students to as many multi-varied brushes with the target language as possible.

References

Bates, E., A. & MacWhinney, B. (1981). Second-language acquisition from a functionalist perspective: Pragmatic, semantic, and perceptual strategies in H. Winitz (ed.): Native language and Foreign Language Acquisition. Annals of the New York Academy of Science. New York: *New York Academy of Science, 379,* 190-214.

Brown, R. (1973). *A First Language: The Early Stages*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

DeKeyser, R., M. (1998). Beyond focus on form: Cognitive perspectives on learning and practicing second language grammar' in C.J. Doughty and J. William (eds.): Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 42-63.

Dulay, H., & Burt, M. (1974). A new perspective on the creative construction process in child second language acquisition. *Working Papers on Bilingualism, 4*, 71-98.

Ellis, N., C. (2002). Frequency effects in language acquisition: A review with implications for theories of implicit and explicit language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 24*(2), 143-188.

Lightbrown, P., M., & Spada, N. (2003). *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Long, M., H. (1983). Native speaker/non-native speaker conversation and the negotiation of comprehensible input. *Applied Linguistics, 4*(2), 126-41.

Long, M., H. (1996). The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition' in W. Ritchie and T. Bhatia (eds.): Handbook of Second Language Acquisition. New York: Academic Press. 413-68.

Saville-Troike, M. (2012). *Introducing second language acquisition.* New York: Cambridge University Press.