

The Role in SLA Played by Universal Grammar

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Abstract

One important issue in current language acquisition research is whether the acquisition of a second language is fundamentally different from that of the first language. Researchers approaching second language acquisition (SLA) from the linguistic perspective often relate this issue to the availability of Universal Grammar to second language acquisition. The main focus of this paper is to examine the role of Universal Grammar in the second language acquisition and to what extent it plays in the process. To illustrate this, the four access hypotheses or theories were given.

Keywords: Universal Grammar, Second Language Acquisition

INTRODUCTION

Language is a communication tool used by everyone in their daily life. However, how people acquire a language is still a mystery. Linguists discuss some issues of second language acquisition frequently, such as which is more important for acquiring language knowledge, talent or the accumulation in learning process? In recent years, the theories and methods of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) are developing, this is evident from the emergence of several theories put forward by experts that explain the process by which children learn to understand and speak a language. Noam Chomsky proposed the theory of Universal Grammar which produced a remarkable impact in the study of language acquisition both L1 and L2.

Universal Grammar (UG) is a theoretical concept proposed by Noam Chomsky (not without criticism or controversy from scholars in the scientific community) that the human brain contains an innate mental grammar that helps humans acquire language. Chomsky theorized that the brain contains a mechanism he referred to as a *language acquisition device* (LAD) and without this LAD, according to Chomsky, children would never be able to learn language from the input they receive. In an attempt to develop a theory of the dynamics of grammar acquisition, Nowak Komroga and Niyogi (2001) point out that children acquire their mental grammar spontaneously and without formal training. Children of the same speech community reliably learn the same grammar. Restriction is conditioned by the environment in which the child grows up and his contact with language. Therefore, the first language or languages (in the case of bilingual children) are determined by the environment in which she grows up.

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of Universal Grammar in the second language acquisition, serving, as the theoretical background, whether UG plays a major or minor role in acquiring a second language.

UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR AND FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

There is a theory called behaviourism pioneered by Skinner, Skinner theory said that our mind is like a blank slate. They believe that how a child learns by observing and then imitating parents or other people around them. But Noam Chomsky, said no. According to the founder of Universal Grammar (UG), Noam Chomsky, language as a skill consists of the initial state, which is genetically determined, which then goes through different stages until it becomes an acquired state. He believed that humans are born with an innate ability to learn languages. According to Chomsky's theory, the basic structures of language are already encoded in the human brain at birth. He found, through his studies, that humans have a « language acquisition device » that other animals do not have. Where this language acquisition device (LAD), is simply the function of our mind or brain that allows us to receive and produce language. Therefore, whoever is born in a certain human environment, they will acquire the language of that environment, regardless of their education and social level - as long as he does not experience any obstacles, such as mental or physical that prevent him from hearing, understanding and using it.

There are three important things when it comes Noam Chomsky's UG. First, every child knows basic grammar rules. When children interact with their parents or with elders, they actually learning vocabulary, but grammar, they already know. Second, all language follow the same grammar structure. In French, German, English, Hindi, all these languages are going to have certain nouns, certain verbs, certain objectives. For example: in English they say *noun*, in Hindi they say *carta*, in Indonesia we say *kata benda*. Another example is, in English they say *eating*, in Indonesia we say *makan*, in Mandarin they say *chī fān*. In short, the word can differ, but the concept remains the same. So, basic grammatical structure are same across all languages. Third, kids don't make expected grammatical errors, for example calling "cat" with "dog" or saying "I eated" instead "I ate" - but there's all sorts of mistakes that kids don't make that it seems like they should.

So, why does the child learn language so easily? Because they online need to pick up vocabulary words from their surroundings. They already know the basic grammar, but they just need to pick up words for water, pick up words for, table, pen and so on.

In fact, all babies, in whatever language will start getting their first words around 10-20 (ten until twenty) months old. By 18 (eighteen) months, they've got about 50 (fifty) words. And then they undergo a crazy vocabulary spurt, picking up hundreds of words over the next few months, so that by around 2, they will have about 500 (five hundred), and then they start going even faster. So the way that kids make sounds, the way they pick up words, it's all the same worldwide, in Chicago or Tokyo or Cairo or Bangkok. And since the language they're learning are all so different, this tell us something fundamental about the human brain. How babies learn language is biological - our brains are configured for language.

UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The question of how much UG plays a role in the acquisition of a second language has been controversial, especially after certain assumptions about the nature of the human linguistic faculty. However, in the case of second language acquisition, a question arises: if second language learning is achieved, does this have anything to do with UG?

Since UG is so important in L1 acquisition, the arguments whether it is quite essential in L2 acquisition as well or does L2 acquisition also have logical problem have been discussed warmly in recent years. Robert Bley-Vroman (1989) pointed out that the logical problem of SLA in adulthood was the same as that of child's L1 acquisition while the problem was different as well. He claimed "Foreign language learning differs in the degree of success, in the character and uniformity of the resulting system, in its susceptibility factors such as motivation, and in the previous state of the organism..." (1989: 41). To support this claim, he reports nine areas of learning difficulties among adults, such as lack of success, common failure, variation in success, fossilization, which make the acquisition of adult second language learning more akin to general problem solving. children's language development. . Therefore, UG may affect L2 acquisition in some respects, but differ from L1 acquisition in several degrees.

THEORIES TO SUPPORT THE ARGUMENT THAT UG PLAYS A MINOR ROLE IN SLA

Lakshmanan (1994) provides three possible answers to the question of whether children learning a second language have access to the parameters and principles of UG during the L2 learning process. First, children learn a second language in the same way as they learn their first language, therefore they have "direct access" to UG. According to the second possibility, access is "indirect", which means that the child is limited by UG unlike in the first possibility as some principles of UG are acquired while learning the first language. In the third case, since we have a direct transfer of L1 circumstances for L2 acquisition, UG is no longer functional, unless we have L2 circumstances similar to those of L1. After a critical observation and analysis of studies conducted on the role of UG, the influence of L1 and the nature of interlanguage, White concludes that the process of second language acquisition is different from first language acquisition and that the grammar of interlanguage differs from that of the mother tongue. Since UG plays a role in shaping interlinguistic grammar, UG-based approaches to second language acquisition largely depend on how UG is conceived and defined (White, 2003b). As a result, the language faculty is innate and depending on the circumstances in which a person is born, they learn a particular language. This faculty also enables and contributes to second language learning, but in particular circumstances L1 principles can affect the level of L2 acquisition. Instruction should facilitate the process of perception and subsequent application of these principles.

What part of brain senses do learners use to acquire second language knowledge? Clashen and Muyken (1986) indicated that UG could not influence L2 acquisition. They said that the knowledge of second language was acquired through some other senses of human brains, which was not through language sense – Universal Grammar. This theory denied the effects of UG to SLA fundamentally. The other researchers who agreed with this theory like Rod Ellis (1994: 454) presented two points of view: (a) there were

extremely differences between adult's L2 acquisition and L1 acquisition; (b) the reasons of the differences were that L2 learners acquired language knowledge through learning strategies and instructions while L1 learners learned their native language by language sense – UG. Therefore, UG has little effect to L2 acquisition.

Although Cook and Newson (1996) admit that L2 learning is more complex than that of L1 since it happens at a later stage of cognitive development suggesting that the weaker relationship between language and cognition, they believe in innateness extending from Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar. However, if it is true that the role stays the same in L2 learning, why a majority of people is less efficient in their second language than in their first language? Therefore, Universal Grammar, which is an innate biologically endowed language faculty, seems to play not enough role, if at all, in second language acquisition suggesting that L2 is acquired with domain-general mechanism. Domain-general learning capacities propose that different domains are utilized for an individual to acquire a language, in this case, L2. Second language learners intuitively depend on other various cues (e.g., social cues, acoustic cues, visual cues, and etc.) due to the inactivation of UG. As a result, they develop unique habits for the learning to progress. For example, many language learners write down the sound of pronunciation of a L2 word in their native language to remember better. The use of other mental faculties in second language acquisition suggests that it is different from first language acquisition.

Is it possible to become fluent in a second language? According to Chomsky, yes. But motivation plays a big factor. He once gave an example of his two children. He went to Italy once for a few months, and his young boy picked up the language without even trying. However, his older daughter, who was highly motivated to learn Italian, had to work hard at it. Poverty of the stimulus does exist in a second language, according to Chomsky. L2 learners can also potentially attain the kind of complex and subtle awareness of language which is attributed to UG in L1 learning. One cannot truly teach language but can only present conditions for the learner to develop it in his or her own mind.

7 FACTORS INFLUENCING SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

There are many general factors that influence second language learning such as age, aptitude, intelligence, cognitive style, attitudes, motivation and personality (Ellis, 1985). The factors described below will show no relation between UG and second language acquisition.

1. MOTIVATION

Motivation is one of the most important factors in second language acquisition. Richards (1985, p. 185) believes motivation as a factor that determines a person's desire to do something. It is obvious that learners who want to learn are likely to achieve more than those who do not.

2. ATTITUDE

Ellis (1985, p. 292) clarifies that attitude is sets of beliefs about factors as the target language culture, their own culture and, in case of classroom learning, of their teachers, and the learning task they are given. Language attitudes are the attitude which speakers of different languages have toward other's languages or to their own language.

3. AGE

Critical period hypothesis by Lenneberg proposes that in child development there is a period during which language can be acquired more easily than that at any other time. According to him the critical period lasts until puberty and is due to biological development. He adds that language learning may be more difficult after puberty because the brain lacks the ability and adaptation (Richards: 1985, p. 68).

4. INTELLIGENCE

Ellis (1985, p. 293) says that intelligence is general ability to master academic skills. Success in life and learning should correlate with high IQ (intelligence quotient) tests scores. The studies on intelligence show a strong relationship between intelligence and acquisition of a foreign language but only as far as academic skills are concerned. Learners with high IQ achieve better results on language tests. It is proved that intelligence can predict the rate and success of SLA in the formal language classroom.

5. APTITUDE

Aptitude refers to specific ability a learner has for learning a second language (Ellis, 1986, p. 293). Richards (1985, p. 154) explains that aptitude is natural ability to learn a language. Further he adds that language aptitude is thought to be a combination of various abilities, such as the ability to identify sound pattern in a new language, the ability to recognize the different of grammatical functions of words in sentences, etc. Students need aptitude - some specific abilities, which are responsible for learning languages.

6. LEARNING STYLES

Learning style is also called cognitive style. It is the particular way in which a learner tries to learn something. In L2 or foreign language learning, different learner may prefer different solution to learning problems.

Reid (1987) identified four learning modalities:

- visual (seeing), learn by visuals: pictures, wall displays, diagrams, videos.
- auditory (listening), they prefer verbal instructions, like dialogues, discussions and plays, solve problems by talking about them, use rhythm and sound as memory aids.
- kinesthetic (moving), they learn best when they are active. It is difficult for them to sit still for long periods.
- tactile (touching), tactile learners learn through touching. They use writing and drawing. They learn well in hands-on activities like projects and demonstrations.

7. PERSONALITY

Personality has been described as a set of features that characterize an individual. It has been stated that this concept is difficult to define and measure because of its complicated nature. Studies which investigate personality traits are based on the belief that learners bring to the classroom not only their cognitive abilities but also affective states which influence the way they acquire a language.

DISCUSSION

Clark & Clark (1977) questioned how many languages acquired at birth, and how many languages are mastered from studied. To answer this question they compared the two opposite opinion is the view of Chomsky above which is called nativism and the view of empiricism which says that language learned as a result of experience, the same as skills (such as walking, cycling, driving a car, politeness in society). The conclusions that can be drawn are by mediating the two opinions above, that there really is no need for a conflict between nativism and empiricism. It is not concerning the question of which party is right or wrong, but more is a matter of how much is brought from birth and how much many are not. Of course there are language tools that have been brought since born which helps if we learn something.

Even in the theory proposed by Ellis (1985), if students are aware of their learning style, are highly motivated and have positive attitudes, they are likely to succeed in SLA. This proves that the role of UG in SLA is minor.

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CONCLUSION (Level 1)

In Chomsky's Universal Grammar, Cook and Newson (1996) describe that the process of second language acquisition is similar to that of first language acquisition being applied to the Language Acquisition Device model, which is embedded with Universal Grammar. However, along with the compelling evidence of the critical period hypothesis, I argue that the role of Universal Grammar is limited in second language acquisition unlike in first language acquisition; second language acquisition behaves like an unnatural system because is not constrained by UG principles and parameters. In conclusion, the acquisition data can be interpreted as showing that children have access to the LAD while adults in L2 acquisition do not. There are a number of reasons why the LAD might not be involved in adult L2 acquisition. For example, the LAD may disappear in the process of maturation. An alternative, proposed by Krashen (1981) would be that the LAD could potentially operate with adults in the same way as with children, but is blocked by a number of emotional, social and attitudinal filters. We will not further speculate here on this very general problem, not yet having the decisive data on child second language acquisition necessary to gain a clearer understanding.

Several factors described in this paper influence second language acquisition variedly. It has to be said that individual differences are important factors in SLA. Those factors: motivation, attitude, age, intelligence, aptitude, learning style, and personality influence the way learners encounter language learning and may hinder or support them in their efforts to master L2. Moreover, these elements seem to be an essential part of the

learning process, which can contribute to the success or failure of a second language learner.

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