

Running Head: HOW SOCIAL AND CULTURE INFLUENCES THE PROCESS OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION.

Title: Social and Cultural Influences on Second Language Acquisition.

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Introduction

Language plays an important role in communication and it is not limited to the boundaries of animated things because even inanimate things like computers have a language of their own. The recent advance in communication technology has greatly impacted and revolutionized the way we learn or acquire secondary languages. In any given society setting, it's the depth of understanding of language that one possesses which sets them apart on individual basis because language is the main tool that enables one to express themselves in the most clear manner. This academic paper shall describe what is language and how it relates to social and cultural groups, what acquiring a secondary language involves, then finally how social and cultural factors influences how an individual acquires a secondary language with respect to three theories of secondary language acquisition. This paper mainly focuses on subconscious language (acquisition) instead of conscious language (learning).

Discussion

How Language is related to Social and Cultural Groups

Language may be defined in many aspects by virtue of it being extensively diversified by many academic disciplines and different school of thoughts but this paper shall define language as the ability of humans to acquire or learn different ways of generating simple or even complex but sensible ideas then conveying these ideas in the form of comprehensible information to a recipient who will be able to decipher and understand that information (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). In other words language is an integral part of communicating. As this definition suggest, language can either be learnt or acquired. Language acquisition is similar to the process involving a child being accustomed to a set of words and sentences and eventually being able to fully communicate using the verbal or written form of a language (Fromkin, V, et al, 2007)). Language acquisition requires one to fully interact with native speakers of a target language and emphasis should be focused on the message and information being conveyed, thus it is not necessary for one to observe all the regulation of the target language. On the other hand, leaning a language demands more than the ability of an individual to know how to speak a language, rather one not only has to convey the information but the language user should also be able to do so in a proper grammatical manner. Thus for an individual to learn a language, they need to be conscious of the manner in which they are communicating (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

On the other hand culture can be defined as the way of life with respect to ideology, art, and traditions that are specific to a group of individuals who are cotemporaries of each other. This way of life usually arises from the instinctive nature of humans to preserve their beliefs and

norms and the need to be unique form each other. Language plays an important role in this preservation of way of life because it is used as a media to transmit this rich heritage information from one generation to the other (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Thus the two cannot be separated from each other. The same can be said about social groups because these groups are the building blocks of cultures; in this case language connects separate social groups into one homogenous cultural group.

What is involved in Second Language Acquisition

Acquiring a second language actually requires an individual to be competently able to use the acquired language at a verbal or written capacity in any situation ranging from an informal social or cultural setting to a complicated formal setting like academic or professional institutions. Also an individual who has fully acquired a second language should not only be able to use the language but one should also be able to understand the socio-cultural background of the native speakers of the target language they have acquired. In most languages the social context greatly influences how people communicate and consequently the out come of any conversation, this reason emphasizes the need for one to fully understand the socio-cultural background of a language they intend to acquire (Ellis, 1997). A good example of how crucial this is occurs when an individual who has acquired a second language tries to use figurative language in a dialogue because in most cases figures of speech are specific to cultural groups and it is only when one understands the culture of a language that they can fully utilize these intricate symbols of speech (Brown, 2002).

Social and cultural influences with respect to theories and models of Secondary Language Acquisition.

Although most theories, models and hypotheses have been postulated as probable causes as to why one acquires a second language, it still remains unclear as to what exactly determines the rate and depth of acquiring a secondary language as suggested by the multiple rationales at hand. This academic paper shall only examine three most notable hypotheses and theories and how a socio-cultural factor affects them.

The first theory is the Acculturation Theory. This theory is the brain child of John Schumann who in 1978 proposed that for an individual to acquire a second language one has to fully integrate with target socio-cultural group. According to this theory, one of the factors that affects second language acquisition are the psychological variables which include language shock, culture shock, and motivation including ego boundaries (Johnson,2004). Social variables encountered by an individual can also influence the rate of second language acquisition. Some of these social variables may include:

- Political and economical variables which may greatly limit the exposure which an individual can access in relation to a specific social or cultural group (Hall & Eggington, 2000).
- The ease of adaptation which an individual has towards a social setting of target language can also influence how they acquire the language. Slow adaptation and assimilation directly relates to slow acquisition of a secondary language (Hinkel, 2005).

- Similarities of social institutions that an individual has as compared to the target language group also may possibly hinder or promote second language acquisition (Hall & Eggington, 2000).
- How cohesive is the individual towards the target language group. If there are a lot of socio-cultural barriers, then secondary language acquisition becomes difficult. The size of this group may also affect the rate of second language acquisition (Hall & Eggington, 2000).
- Correspondence variables may also affect the rate of second language acquisition through increasing or reducing of distances between an individual and the target language social or cultural groups (Hall & Eggington, 2000).
- Another variable is the attitude one has towards the target language group (Johnson, 2004).
- Finally the time one had to interact with the target language social and cultural group also determines how fluent one will be in second language acquisition. This relationship is directly related to the proficiency level of an individual (Johnson, 2004).

The second theory is the Krashen's Hypotheses. In 1982 Stephen Krashen proposed five hypotheses which aimed at describing how one acquires a second language, these sets of hypotheses are sometimes referred to as the Monitor model (Van Patten & Williams 2007).

Krashen's five hypotheses are as follows:

- Acquisition-learning hypothesis – Krashen made attempts to differentiate between acquiring and learning a new language. According to Krashen, acquisition is an automatic and natural process which occurs when an individual intensively interacts with a target language social or cultural group, whereas learning (as the name suggests) is a process that involves a formal session in a language class and a general acknowledgement and observance of all the rules relating to the target language (Van Patten & Williams 2007).
- Monitor hypothesis – According to this hypothesis Krashen introduced the notion of special internal “controllers” which an acquirer of a secondary language gradually develops as time progresses on. These “controllers” which he termed as monitors are responsible for checking and correcting any grammatical errors. For these monitors to be effective the acquirer of a second language must have spent sufficient time with the target language social or cultural group must be exposed to the purest grammatical form of the second language and finally an individual has to be aware of cultural and social rules of the second language (Van Patten & Williams 2007).
- The Natural order hypothesis – This hypothesis proposes that secondary language acquisition is a systematic process which runs on a predictable pattern. This is according to the fact that some language features are initially acquired and others are later on others are “picked” up as competence gradually increases (White, 2003).
- The Input Hypothesis - This hypothesis is based on the fact that second language acquisition is directly proportional to an individual ability to perfectly communicate using the target language in the most natural manner. What this hypothesis suggests is that the development level of the target language must be a bit grammatically advanced

than the current proficiency an individual has in that language of interest ($i+1$, where i represents the acquirer's language proficiency level and 1 represents the advanced language development level). This competence level is one which is most conducive for second language acquisition. Thus an individual needs to be fully integrated with the target language social and cultural groups for them to fully grasp all the grammatical, vocabulary and gestures related to the target language (White, 2003).

- The Affective Filter Hypothesis – Finally Krashen concludes his Monitor model by suggesting that a second language is quickly acquired if socio-emotional filters are removed or kept at a minimum level. He also insisted an individual acquires a language more freely if they operate in a stress free environment which fosters motivation and self esteem. Thus for one to acquire a language they have to be given a silent period to figuratively “sink” and be completely “absorbed” in the target language (White, 2003).

The third and final theory is the Accommodation Theory. This theory of second language acquisition was pioneered by Giles and it mainly focuses on intergroup relations (both the in group and out group) and the social and psychological roles they possess in second language acquisition at an interethnic language setting. The extent of these inter relations is what determines how much of the target language can an individual acquire. Another major factor suggested by this theory is the ethnic identity factor, because the strongly one identify themselves with their group greatly affects the proficiency in language acquisition (Parker & Riley, 2000). According to Giles' second language acquisition theory there are five variables which affect second language acquisition, and they are listed below:

- As previously mentioned the degree an individual identifies with their social or cultural group can minimize or maximize the rate of language acquisition. This is because a high degree of identity slows the rate of language acquisition (Parker & Riley, 2000).
- Also the attitudes and comparisons which two group's possess may affect how members of a language acquiring social group will ultimately acquire a language.
- The general perception and prejudices that the two groups have towards each other can either limit or promote their interactions consequently affecting the rate of second language acquisition (Parker & Riley, 2000).
- Apart from intergroup perception, another factor that can affect the rate of second language acquisition is intra group relations. This involves how individual members relate to each other and boundaries the set between each other (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).
- In most cases most groups have sub groups among them so the extent which an individual relates to these sub groups can increase or decrease their competence in a second language (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Conclusion

In short, it is evident that social and culture factors can positively or negatively affect the process of secondary language acquisition. According to the accommodation theory second language acquisition is promoted through weak social and cultural identity an individual possesses. On the other hand Schuman based the acculturation theory on the premise that second language acquisition is greatly enhanced when social and psychological distances are kept at the minimum. Finally, Krashen postulated the five hypotheses of language acquisition on the basis

that a language is best acquired if an individual does not block the comprehensible input of a language by keeping the socio-emotional filters at a minimum.

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