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Teorías generales sobre el aprendizaje y la adquisición de una lengua extranjera.  
El concepto de interlengua.  
El tratamiento del error



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## 1. GENERAL PERSPECTIVES ON SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Initial second language acquisition (SLA) studies were based on a variety of perspectives: linguistic, sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, neurolinguistic, educational, from cognitive psychology... all of them contending that an adequate model of SLA was impossible without a coherent theory from these sources.

More recently second language research has developed into an independent nonapplied discipline: focus on learners' hypotheses, stages in language acquisition, characterization of language proficiency... (Gass & Schachter 1989)

Contributions from other disciplines:

### A. Linguistics

Bloomfield's work *Language* (1933) had stated that:

- Language consists of externally conditioned habits, so learning a language consists of the acquisition of a new set of habits.
- Habits are acquired through a formation paradigm of response conditioned to a particular stimulus and then generalized to other similar stimuli. (Behaviorism).
- Learning a second language means displacing one set of habits/ linguistic structure and replacing it with a new one.

Lado's work *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957) introduced a new line of research based on structural contrast between languages:

- Similar linguistic structures imply learning facility due to transfer from one system to the other, while differences imply learning difficulty due to contrast between two different habits.

This was the origin of contrastive analysis (CA).

Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* (1957) supported language creativity against behaviourist positions. He developed a transformational-generative grammar and introduced new concepts in language structure and language development:

- The distinction between infinite external behavior (performance) and finite internal set of rules (competence).
- The existence of a specific cognitive mechanism for language acquisition (LAD).
- The presence of capabilities (rules) that are shared by all languages and consist of a set of limitations or parameters. This set of parameters constitutes a model of Universal Grammar (UG).

### B. Psycholinguistics

Corder's article «The significance of learners' errors» (1967) introduced the study of systematic errors –error analysis (EA)– in order to define the process of language learning. He developed the concept of **transitional competence**:

- L2 learners develop a dynamic knowledge system.
- This system is constantly changing as new L2 knowledge is added.
- This addition requires adjustment in the competence already acquired.

Nemser's article «Approximative systems of foreign language learners» (1971) offered some insights of this process of acquiring language competence:

- L2 learners progress along a continuum.
- This continuum runs from zero knowledge to a level close to a native speaker's linguistic proficiency.
- L2 learners progress in their task by means of «**approximative systems**».

Selinker's article «Interlanguage» (1972) attempted to define the notion of stages in language learning. He introduced the term **interlanguage** to describe the set of rules that a particular learner has acquired at a particular stage of learning. His main points are:

- Learners develop an interlanguage (IL) system.
- This IL system is a unique grammar not belonging to either the source language or the target language, and containing rules found only in systems from second language learning contexts.
- A particular learner's IL system is formed by the L2 rules he has already acquired and the rules he is checking for validation or rejection.

Within the tradition of process analysis (PA), Selinker also identified five central processes that exist in a latent psychological structure for second language learning. These processes are responsible for the development of interlanguage systems:

- Language transfer.
- Transfer of training.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> lang. learning strategies.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> lang. communication strategies.
- Generalization.

Finally, the term «**fossilization**» emerged in order to explain the process of deviation from native speakers' proficiency. This term is used to describe the set of linguistic structures that are deviant from the TL and remain so no matter the length or type of exposure or explicit correction.

### **C. Sociolinguistics**

Three approaches to Sociolinguistics must be considered here:

#### *The Labovian paradigm*

William Labov (1972) *has arguably been more influential than any other researcher in establishing the notion that language varies systematically in accordance with social characteristics of the speaker.*

*(Beebe 1987:45)*

Labov's theories are based on five axioms:

- Style shifting: speakers are able to shift their style in order to converge or diverge with their interlocutors.
- Attention to style shifting is necessary to achieve the goals of convergence or divergence.

- The vernacular (default style) is the style a speaker turns to when he is not paying attention to style shifting.
- Formality is a determinant factor in style shifting.
- Good amount of data is necessary in order to establish relevant style shifting.

L. Dickerson (1975) extends Labov's claims for L1 to the L2 situation. She claimed that:

- «There are no single style speakers» (p.201).
- «The dimension of attention operates whether the language is native or non-native.» (P.202).
- «The style where there is the least amount of attention to speech is the vernacular. When attention is focused on speech, we get the superordinate style. The vernacular is the most regular and systematic style, the superordinate the least regular and systematic.»

(Beebe 1987:52)

Criticism to Labov's paradigm:

- E. Tarone (1985) stated that variability in interlanguage is not only related to attention to the form. She predicted that the type of discourse and the level of cohesiveness required by that discourse might also affect accuracy.
- Beebe (1980) supported the fact that high attention to speech is not always consistently correlated with higher accuracy rates.
- E. Gatbonton (1978) proposed a *dynamic paradigm*, as opposed to Labov's quantitative paradigm, where IL variation reflects IL progression according to feelings of ethnic group affiliation. She identified two phases in SLA: acquisition of language structure and replacement due to social factors.

### *Speech accommodation theory*

Giles & Smith (1979) attempted to explain the process of SLA on the basis of sociolinguistic implications. They developed a speech accommodation theory that is based on the following points:

- Speakers adjust their speech to accommodate it to the speech of their interlocutors: *convergence*.
- Speakers adjust their speech to become less similar to the speech of their interlocutors: *divergence*.

The characteristics of speech shifts are as follows:

- a) Speech accommodation can involve shifts in all linguistic levels: phonology, syntax, vocabulary....
- b) Both convergence and divergence can be seen as upward or downward.
- c) Convergence is related to a similarity attraction theory and need for approval.
- d) Convergence and divergence are related to a social exchange theory.
- e) Convergence can lead to casual attribution.
- f) Convergence and divergence are variants in intergroup distinctiveness.

## *Attitudes and motivation*

**Attitude** is generally linked to motivation because they form a complex of interrelated factors that jointly operate in second language learning.

Gardner & Lambert identified two **types** of attitude that corresponded to two types of orientation towards learning:

- Integrative with respect of the community of second language speakers.
- Oriented to attaining instrumental goals (Gardner & Lambert 1972).

Stern (1983) has identified three **types** of attitudes related to:

- a) The community of L2 speakers.
- b) The learning of the L2.
- c) The learning of a second language in general.

Lambert & Lambert (1964) described the **components** of attitude. This factor has:

- A cognitive component referred to one's belief about the object.
- An affective component referred to the amount of positive and negative feeling towards the object.
- A conative component referred to one's behavioural intentions towards the object.

In their study of the good language learner, Naiman et al. (1978) conclude that attitude plays a more important role in language learning than Gardner & Lambert's (1972) integrative and instrumental orientations. They also claim that a positive attitude is a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for success, being the most important condition at early stages.

**Motivation**, on the other hand, is accepted as the most powerful predictor of high proficiency measures in second language learning. Many researchers have offered empirical support for this idea:

Gardner (1980) has reported on the positive correlation between a single index of motivation derived from measures of affective responses and measures of second language proficiency.

Brown alluded directly to the importance of the context to determine a type of motivation:

*... some learners in some contexts are more successful in learning a language if they are integratively oriented, and others in different contexts benefit from an instrumental orientation.*

*(Brown 1987:116)*

Gardner (1979), in a revision of the work elaborated with Lambert, developed a «socio-educational model» of second language acquisition which identified four variables explaining individual differences:

- Intelligence.
- Language aptitude.
- Motivation.
- Situational anxiety.

In this model, motivation has three **components**:

- Attitude to second language learning.
- Desire to learn the second language.
- Amount of effort put in the task of second language learning.

Spolsky (1989) also agrees that attitude does not lead directly to proficiency, but through its influence on motivation. He claims that individual's achievement in learning is determined by the following factors:

- Motivation.
- General intelligence.
- Language aptitude.
- Situational anxiety.

In the literature on school motivation, different **types** have been identified:

- Integrative motivation is described as the interest in L2 culture. This is opposed to instrumental motivation, which reflects an interest in the goals that can be achieved by means of L2.
- *Intrinsic* motivation reveals an interest for the language itself, while *Extrinsic* motivation is very similar to instrumental motivation.
- *Need for achievement* –also related to hope for success– is a powerful type of motivation in academic environment. It is balanced by *fear of failure* –also related to fear of punishment and critics–, which is rooted in general anxiety.

In the Lancaster Inventory of motivation and study habits, four main **types of students** were identified according to the type of motivation they exhibit:

- a) Stable and with achievement motivation.
- b) Anxious and with fear of failure.
- c) Extraverted, syllabus-free, with extrinsic motivation.
- d) Idle and unmotivated (Entwistle 1981).

H.D. Brown (1987) distinguished three **levels** of motivation:

- a) *Global*: towards learning a particular second language.
- b) *Situational*: related to the context of learning.
- c) *Task-oriented*: related to specific learning activities.

He concluded that the three of them must be present for efficient second language learning.

Entwistle (1987) also quotes a research in Hungary by Béla Kozéki (1985) where distinctive **styles** of motivation are described according to the type of reward the individual seeks:

- *Affective* motivation requires an affective reward by relevant 'others'.
- *Cognitive* motivation is favoured by academic success.
- *Moral* motivation requires a balanced personality with clear moral values.

A combination of cognitive motivation with either affective or moral domains is seen as the way to a balanced academic success. A recommendation is made for parents and educators not to encourage an exclusive cognitive motivation that might foment cold, aloof and possibly amoral individuals.

Resume:

The role of motivation in second language learning:

1	It is recognised as the most powerful predictor of achievement in learning.
2	One of its main components is attitude, which is influenced by the social context and determines the type, level and style of motivation.
3	Types, levels and styles of motivation then are not stable characteristics of learners, but are bounded by a number of individual, educational and sociocultural factors.
4	The influence of motivation on proficiency also flows in the reverse direction, although the first is considered the original orientation.

### ***D. Neurolinguistics***

The most interesting lines of research in this field are based on clinical examinations of aphasics. The most important objectives have been the establishment of hemisphere dominance and finding a critical age in language learning.

#### *Hemisphere dominance*

Early research currents attempted to offer support for hemisphere dominance:

- Dax was the first who established the left-hemisphere dominance for language.
- Broca's area and Wernicke's area were identified.
- Vildomec (1963) defended that the left hemisphere is specialised for FLA, whereas the right hemisphere is specialised for SLA.

More current thinking focuses on differences in modes of processing, not in types of stimuli, e.g. analytic vs. holistic. Research supports that:

- Some language components are processed by the left hemisphere, while other components are processed by the right hemisphere.
- Language learning strategies determine right or left hemisphere processing.

Research on bilingualism has offered interesting results. Two types of bilinguals have been identified:

- Compound bilingualism: left hemisphere dominance.
- Co-ordinate bilingualism: left and right hemisphere are balanced.

In Second language learning, during the first phases of the process, children have shown right hemisphere dominance, while adults have shown more left hemisphere activity.

According to the manner of SLA, informal learning is related to right hemisphere activity, while the left hemisphere is more active in formal learning, e.g. school learning.

## Age hypothesis

Neuropsychologists Penfield and Roberts (1959) related FLA to the development of the brain in childhood. They suggested that there is a **critical period**, which terminates around 9 to 12 years of age, and it is characterised by neural plasticity. After this neural plasticity is lost, the functions of the different parts of the brain cannot be rearranged.

Lennenberg's work *Biological Foundations of Language* (1967) set the critical period for language learning from 2 years of age to puberty. He hypothesised the hemispheric specialisation of functions in the brain, maintaining that lateralization of language functions in the left hemisphere was completed before puberty. Language learning was very difficult after this age.

Krashen (1974) evidenced that left-hemispheric specialisation for language is present by 5 years of age.

Walsh & Diller (1981) distinguished two types of neurones as responsible for different learning functions:

- *Macroneurons* are fully mature and functional early in development. They allow for lower order language processes.
- *Local-circuit neurons* connect to macroneurons and slowly develop into adulthood. They keep neural plasticity and allow higher order language processes.

### Empirical evidence also supports that:

- Older learners achieve higher levels of language proficiency than younger learners (Genesee 1981) in both naturalistic and school setting and during the initial stages of learning.
- Phonology is acquired by adults to a nativelike proficiency (Neufeld & Schneiderman 1980).
- Time –and the variables associated to it– seems to be the only factor that favours an early start in language learning.

## E. Cognitive psychology

### Language as a Complex Cognitive Skills

The mechanisms for language comprehension and production are governed by the same rules controlling other cognitive skills, such as storing knowledge, coding for retrieval, or logical reasoning. Research on this field is based on information processing aspects of computer sciences.

Anderson's (1983; 1985) representation of the competence underlying performance of a complex cognitive skill by means of **production systems** has proved to be very useful to provide a detailed view of the process in S.L.A.

The distinction between *static* and *dynamic* information in memory -the things and the things we know how to do- constitutes the basis of a theory that attempts to explain different types of knowledge as well as the stages of skill acquisition.

### Types of knowledge

a) **Declarative knowledge**. It comprises all we are able to talk about, analyse, transfer, explain ... It is stored in LTM in terms of images, temporal strings and **propositional representation**.

Each proposition is denoted by a **relation** followed by an ordered list of **arguments**. Relations correspond to verbs, adjectives, or other relational terms, while the arguments correspond to the nouns.

- b) Procedural knowledge.** It comprises what we are able to perform even though we are not able to explain how we do it. It is represented in memory by *production systems*.

All complex cognitive skills can be represented as production systems. Production systems have been identified from studies on artificial intelligence. In its most basic form a production system is formed by a *condition* and an *action*. The condition contains a set of clauses preceded by IF, and the action preceded by THEN.

Propositional representations can be gradually compiled, through practice, into a production system and then fine-tuned for automatic execution.

### *Stages of skill acquisition*

**a) Cognitive Stage:**

This is the first stage. It involves conscious activity to acquire the skill. The acquired knowledge is typically declarative. Basic connections among the elements of the skill are established.

**b) Associative Stage:**

During this stage connections among the various components of the skill are strengthened. Declarative knowledge is turned into its procedural form. Basic routines are established here.

**c) Autonomous Stage:**

Performance becomes increasingly fine-tuned. Automatic execution of subskills is possible. The skill can be executed effortlessly and there is much less demand on working memory or consciousness. It makes use entirely of procedural knowledge.

**From a linguistic point of view:**

Declarative knowledge consists of internalised L2 rules and memorised chunks of language, while procedural knowledge consists of the strategies and other procedures employed by learners to process L2 data.

Faerch & Kasper (1985) indicate that declarative knowledge is formed by different types of rules:

- a) «Interlanguage» rule knowledge, such as rules for phonology, graphology, morphology and syntax.
- b) Rules for pragmatics and discourse knowledge.
- c) Rules for social interaction.

This knowledge tends to be static and is increased through learning. Procedural knowledge activates and transforms this declarative information into automatic processing.

McLaughlin (1987) also views second language learning as the acquisition of a complex cognitive skill, i.e. an integration of subskills, some of them requiring a gradual and controlled processing capacity, is necessary for both language production and comprehension. Once a subskill can be performed without a conscious effort, attention can be dedicated to other aspects of the process.

Language is learned by making use of automatic processing, while dedicating conscious attention to create new associations and formulate, and check new hypotheses, which once validated and practised, will form part of a new subskill operating automatically.

## F. A theory of SLA

Stephen D. Krashen (1982) presented a series of hypothesis that make up a coherent theory of SLA. The five hypotheses that constitute the pillars of his theory are next:

### 1. The acquisition/learning hypothesis (Krashen 1981).

Krashen claims that there are two ways for adult learners to gain proficiency in a second language: subconscious acquisition and conscious learning. He considers **acquisition** by far the more important of the two.

He defines acquisition as the process children use when developing skills in their mother tongue. It is based on meaningful and purposeful communication with speakers of the TL in which the learner is concerned not with the form of the language but with the message he is conveying through language, remaining unaware of the linguistic rules and structures used in the process. Error correction and explicit teaching of grammar are not relevant to language acquisition.

**Learning** consists of the internalisation of explicit rules under conscious control. It is the result of formal instruction about language and is based on conscious knowledge of L2:

- Knowing the rules.
- Being aware of their use.
- and being able to talk about them.

Learning does not turn into acquisition.

### 2. The monitor hypothesis (Krashen 1978).

Conscious learning that results from formal instruction is available to the learner only as a **monitor**. This is a language device that controls the output -and the input- for self-correction.

Learning acts upon the monitor by planning, checking and correcting the acquired system. It is used to improve accuracy, but it becomes effective only if all three conditions are fulfilled.

These conditions are:

- a) The learner knows the rule.
- b) The learner is concerned with correction.
- c) There is enough time to operate it.

### 3. The natural order hypothesis.

Studies on morpheme acquisition have proved that there is a natural order of acquisition, which is independent of:

- Learners' age.
- Learners' L1.
- Or subskills being acquired (Ellis 1986:57).

The average acquisition order for nine morphemes was calculated by Krashen (1982). The morphemes were not always acquired in the same order, but Krashen found that if they were put in four groups the acquisition order of the groups was the same for all the subjects.

#### Group 1:

- Present progressive (-ing).
- Plural form (-s).
- Copula (be).

**Group 2:**

- Auxiliary (be).
- Articles (the/a).

**Group 3:**

- Past forms (irregular).

**Group 4:**

- Past forms (-ed).
- 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular S. Present (-s).
- Possessives (-s).

**4. The input hypothesis.**

Acquisition is the consequence of receiving *comprehensible input*. This is defined as input that is one step beyond our current knowledge.

Learners acquire a second language by understanding messages containing forms that could not be understood in isolation. This is done with the help of context or extralinguistic information. This process is related to acquisition, not to learning. It is effective when some conditions are given. These conditions are:

- Communication is successful.
- Input is understood.
- There is enough of it.

**5. The affective filter hypothesis.**

This is the part of the internal processing system that subconsciously screens incoming language based on the learner's motives, attitudes and emotional states.

Krashen differentiates *low* affective filter, which allows in a great deal of the input, and *strong* affective filter, which filters out input language.

Adults acquire the second language in the same way that children acquire their first language. If they do not become so competent as children, it is because they have some kind of affective difficulty. Affective barriers prevent effective language acquisition.

**2. INTERLANGUAGE**

The concept of interlanguage is related to the theories of learner variety and hypothesis testing.

**A. Theory of learner variety**

The group of rules that the learner has acquired plus the *critical rules* constitute the learner's current repertoire and as such form a learner variety of the target language.

The main features are:

- Its systematicity and coherence.

*Any language variety, no matter how rudimentary, has, apart from some variable components, a certain intrinsic systematicity. Thus the function of any one word or construction within the given variety cannot be derived solely from the function of the corresponding word or construction in the target language. (Klein 1986:29).*

- It is related to the learning process.

*The process of language acquisition can be constructed as a series of transitions from one variety to the next, and these transitions again reveal an inherent systematicity. (Klein 1986:29).*

## ***B. Language learning process***

It is generally agreed that the central learning process for acquiring a language is **hypothesis testing**. This process follows some steps:

- Identifying a particular characteristic of TL, i.e., by transfer or generalisation.
- Forming a hypothesis based on that identification.
- Testing the hypothesis by means of the receptive skills.
- Receiving feedback by means of the productive skills.
- Delaying decision until more feedback is provided, or either accepting or rejecting the hypothesis.

Acquiring a TL linguistic rule is then only possible when that rule is *critical* (in conditions to be tested) for the learner. Linguistic instruction is dependent upon learners sensibility to explicit correction according to their stage of interlanguage. Rules become critical according to some logical sequencing (natural order of acquisition) which is not derived from L1 knowledge, but it is part of a *creative construction* of TL knowledge that seems to be controlled by universal cognitive principles, e.g. meaningful learning (Klein 1986).

## **3. THE TREATMENT OF ERRORS**

Errors must be differentiated from mistakes. An error is described as the misuse of a language rule due to lack of knowledge—either declarative or procedural—about that rule. A mistake is a misuse of a language rule when it is due to reasons other than lack of knowledge, i.e. a lapse, a slip of the tongue...

According to Behaviourist theories, language learning was a process of habit formation and, consequently, was based on repetition. Incorrect forms of the language should be avoided. Errors should be corrected as soon and efficiently as possible.

Under the Communicative approach, language learning efficiency is related to language use in communicative situations. The learning emphasis is placed on fluency not on accuracy. As a learner-centred methodology is proposed, learners must be involved in self-correction. Students learn more effectively if they can correct themselves rather than if they are given the correct version straight away.

Results from SLA research reveal that errors are:

- Inevitable as part of the learning process.
- Signal of progression.
- Importance of affective variables. Positive feedback.