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CONTRIBUTING FACTORS FOR L2 GRAMMAR DEVELOPMENT
ON EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The development of grammatical knowledge is at the core of learning and teaching a second language (L2). Different explanations have been proposed for how this process happens. These include, but are not limited to, the Universal Grammar approach, the Cognitivist approach, and an Interactionist approach. Based on these theories, this article discusses the contributing factors for L2 grammar development in the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Some of the issues on the relationship between grammatical knowledge and the overall ability to use the L2, the external conditions needed for grammatical knowledge to develop, and the role of instruction in grammatical development are reviewed and further discussed on how they facilitate the development of L2 grammar knowledge of EFL learners.

Keywords: *Grammar, second language (l2), EFL, ESL*

INTRODUCTION

The development of grammatical knowledge is at the core of learning and teaching a second language (L2). From the perspective of Universal Grammar (UG), Chomsky (1965) depicts grammar as a static object that fully presents at all times in the mind of the speaker. In a more interactionist position, Paul Hopper (1988:118) sees grammar as a phenomenon "whose status is constantly being renegotiated in speech and which cannot be distinguished in principle from strategies for building discourses". A number of different explanations have been proposed for the development of L2 grammar. These include, but are not limited to, the Universal Grammar approach (Chomsky, 1968), the Cognitivist approach (Selinker, 1972), and an Interactionist approach (Long, 1980). Considering these many different theories account for L2 learning, language practitioners are expected to know the different views underlying these theories, and be able to see how they reflect the development of L2 learners' second language grammar. Due to the fact that second language learners experience various contexts when learning a second language, and end up at different level of acquisition, language teachers need to be able to identify what it is that the learner learns and how this knowledge relates to other aspects of L2 development (e.g., phonology, vocabulary). In order to do so, it is worth to look at the way grammatical knowledge relates to the overall ability to use the L2, as well as the contributing factors accounted for grammatical knowledge to develop.

Focusing on second language learning in a foreign language context, this article explores the knowledge of grammar from the second language (L2) point of view and argues that second language grammar is the manifestation of language form, meaning and use, where there is a close link between the language form and the meaning it represents. It then identifies the areas of knowledge that the learner learns and the way this knowledge links to other aspects of L2 development, as well as the way grammatical knowledge relates to the overall ability to use the L2. It also describes the external conditions needed for grammatical knowledge to develop, and identifies the kind of exposure and experience a learner needs to learn grammar. Finally, it explains the role of instruction in grammatical development and ends with a conclusion of the current state of affairs.

Grammar in Second Language Learning

In the field of language teaching, the word grammar is conventionally understood as a collection of arbitrary rules about language structure. People relate the term grammar with the knowledge about linguistic form of a language, which is closely associated with verb paradigms, morphological rules and syntactic rules. This includes studies on sentence and sub-sentence level of word endings (morphology) and word order (syntax). By this definition, the accuracy

of language structures is used as a standard measurement for utterances to be called grammatical.

However, the concept of grammar is far beyond what is called 'a collection of arbitrary rules'. Grammar in second language acquisition is defined as a mental configuration of learners' intra-language. Moreover, grammar knowledge is knowledge about the way a language is used, rather than just knowledge about the way language is formed (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). In other words, grammar is not simply about language form but more than that it is also about properness of use. For example, it is inaccurate for a learner of English to say *I have to go*, with the intended meaning *I would like to go*, because its meaning does not convey the learner's intended meaning. The statement with '*have to*' is used to show necessity whereas the sentence with '*would like to*' shows intention. It is then insufficient to say that grammar has to do only with accuracy of form, because indeed grammar relates to meaningfulness and appropriateness as well. Thus, grammaticality is about the choice of sentence structures based on the meaning one wants to convey and the proper circumstance of use. Thereby, it is more applicable to define grammar as a mental configuration of learners' intra-language that displayed itself within the linguistics (form), semantics (meaning) and pragmatics (use) properties of a language. The aspect of linguistics (form) includes knowledge of phonology, morphology, and syntax. Furthermore, the aspect of meaning involves the knowledge of semantics, and aspect of use involves the knowledge of language discourse and pragmatics.

By this definition, the study of grammar links learners in understanding the aspects of form, meaning and use of a language because grammar has an interconnected relationship with other areas of knowledge of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Hypothetically, grammar exists in each of these areas represented the structural characteristics of a language. This link is quite similar in the way vocabulary relates to the aspects of language form, meaning and use, where these areas of knowledge are also involved (Nation, 2001). Vocabulary knowledge comprises knowledge of the arbitrary sound-meaning pairing, which is encoded by a phonological symbols and some meaning representation. The connection of grammar and vocabulary lies in the way that vocabulary consists of different aspects of form, meaning and pragmatics of a given structure (grammar). As grammar relates to every area of knowledge within a language, it becomes the most important entity or the core of language learning, and that to learn grammar means to study the whole aspects of a language. In short, the overall ability to use the L2 is determined by learners' development and acquisition of L2 grammatical knowledge.

Input and Output of the Target Language

It is believed that the development of grammatical knowledge can be influenced by several factors. The most important of all is the availability of input. *Input* is known as the linguistic forms to which learners are exposed to (from reading or listening) (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Exposure to input is essential for second language learners in order to master the syntax, morphology, phonology, and semantics of the target language. In fact, learners must get a great amount of exposures of the target language to be used to communicate information (VanPatten, 1996). In a quite similar position, interactionists see input as providing positive evidence, meaning information about what is possible within a language (Long, 1980).

Considering the effect that input might bring to the development of L2 grammar, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have sought how input needs of L2 learners can be met. According to Krashen (1985), the only way for students to acquire a language is to get exposure to comprehensible input (language that is understandable) in the target language, finely associate to their level of proficiency. Krashen believes that if input is understood and there is enough of it, the necessity grammar will automatically be acquired. In a different view, White (1987) counters Krashen's proposal that incomprehensible input may also trigger the acquisition of some aspects of the grammar. When the learner cannot parse the input, a restructuring of the grammar to account for the input is motivated. In this case, both comprehensible and incomprehensible inputs have role in the development of L2 grammar.

While this proposal represented a major step in finding the relationship between input and acquisition, researchers (Swain, 1985; Swain & Lapkin, 2002) have pointed out that input itself is insufficient for acquiring an L2. What learners really need for their grammatical

development is not simply comprehensible input, but more importantly, comprehensible output, meaning language production that requires learners to move just one step ahead their current proficiency level (Swain, 1985). Comprehensible output is essential to provide opportunity for learners to actively test and refine their knowledge of the target language. According to Swain (1985, 1995), learner's output has a number of benefits, including (a) promoting fluency (automatization), (b) drawing learner's attention to their linguistic problems in the L2, (c) encouraging the processing of the L2 syntactically (in terms of linguistic form) rather than simply for meaning, and (d) testing hypotheses about the structure of the target language. Swain further maintained that learners need to produce the language in order to notice the form of their utterances. In doing so, they will recognize the areas where they have problems and will find out relevant input. Based on this theory, the opportunities to produce comprehensible output which might force while at the same time facilitate the learner to move from semantic processing to the syntactic processing are needed in production (Swain and Lapkin, 1995).

THE ROLE OF INTERACTION

In order for input and output to contribute in the development of learners' grammar, learners need to be conditioned in an experience that allows them to produce the target language whilst at the same time to get exposure to input. The interaction hypothesis (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994) suggests that second language development is facilitated when learners interact with other speakers. In this sense, the nature of interaction comes to be the best experience for learners to get exposed to the target language input and experienced on language production to develop their language grammar. Interaction refers to the conversations that learners participate in. As Hatch (1978) contended that interaction allows a person to learn the way to converse and to verbally connect for syntactic structure to develop.

Furthermore, Socio Cultural Theory (SCT), which has had increasing influence on SLA research, is even more explicit about the essential role of interaction, more specifically 'social interaction'. Sociocultural theory (SCT) has its origins in the writings of the Russian Psychologist L. S. Vygotsky and his colleagues. SCT argues that human mental functioning is fundamentally a mediated process that is organized by cultural artifacts, activities, and concepts (Ratner, 2002). Vygotsky (1989;61) also asserts that "social interaction actually produces new, elaborate, advanced psychological processes that are unavailable to the organisms working in isolation". Within this framework, it can be inferred that grammatical developmental processes take place through participation in cultural, linguistic, and historically formed settings such as family life and peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts like schooling, organized sports activities, and work places, to name only few.

In second language classroom setting, the term 'scaffolding' is more specifically used by which knowledgeable participants (teachers or fellow students) can create supportive conditions where students of lesser proficiency can participate or even solve the problem that they could not solve on their own through social interaction with their peers. Through their participation in a scaffolded interaction, students of lesser proficiency can extend their current skills and knowledge to higher competence (Donato, 1994). In other words, they can jointly construct with their more knowledgeable partner in a zone of proximal development (ZPD), "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86).

In terms of making the process of scaffolded interaction more accessible to learners, Long (1981, 1983a, 1983b) maintains that the structure of interaction should be modified to make input more comprehensible for non-native speakers. In particular, Long (1981) focused on the effect of one type of interaction, *negotiation of meaning* on L2 comprehension and development. Negotiation of meaning refers to the effort learners and their interlocutors make to restructure interaction in order to avoid or overcome difficulties in input comprehensibility (Long, 1981). According to Long, negotiation of meaning includes comprehension and confirmation checks (utterances used to determine whether the interlocutor has understood utterances, e.g., *what do you mean?*). It has been suggested that by using this particular discourse strategy, learners can receive input that is more comprehensible and uniquely suited to their particular developmental needs (Pica, 1994). Long (1996) states that "negotiation work

that triggers interactional adjustments by the NS (native speaker) or more competent interlocutor facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, and output in productive ways" (p.451-452). Thus, language teachers can take this lesson learned to facilitate L2 learners to be involved in negotiated interaction as a medium for learners to access input and produce output, as one of the conditions needed to support the development of L2 grammar.

Another important aspect of interaction that needs to be considered is the possibility for learners to get feedback. *Feedback* refers to information learners receive in response to their communicative efforts (Mackey & Abbuhl, 2005). Feedback may be explicit (direct corrections of nontargetlike utterances, such as the addition of –s to *make* when using it in the third person) or implicit (indirect correction such as clarification that indirectly indicates that a learner's production was problematic). Researchers and language practitioners believe that feedback is an important element in the process of learning an L2. Researchers have argued that certain aspects of the non-native grammar cannot be acquired from positive evidence alone (White, 1991). In recent years, several studies have investigated the link between oral feedback, especially implicit negative feedback and SLA, and have proven that feedback plays at least a facilitative role in L2 development (Braidi, 2002; Iwashita, 2003). For the development of L2 grammar, feedback complements the internalization process of input to be better accepted by learners, which is prominent in co-constructing learners' L2 grammar knowledge.

The nature of second language acquisition in EFL context is known to be limited exposure to target language input, the condition that makes English language learning different from learning English as a Second Language (ESL) context (the language is spoken in everyday conversation). Based on this condition, it can be implied that input or exposure alone does not account for the development of L2 grammar. As has already been investigated in many instructional studies, more importantly learners need explicit pedagogical practices as well. The value of instruction in grammar teaching should look at the necessity to gain learners' awareness to encompass exposure to grammatical phenomena and explicit pedagogical rule articulation. Thus, explicit grammatical instruction is needed to draw learners' attention to focus on form in order to heighten the saliency of some grammatical feature. Grammar instruction can be made *explicit* or *implicit* (Adringa, 2005). The terms *explicit instruction* and *implicit instruction* are used to refer to two types of instruction in which attention to form is either overt or covert (Adringa, 2005). When the instruction involves explanation of rules, or if learners are asked to discover rules, the instruction must be considered explicit. Conversely, when rules are not discussed and learners are not asked to attend to rules during L2 tasks, the instruction is implicit (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Explicit instruction was designed to provide the language learners with conscious knowledge of the targeted grammar structures, whilst the implicit instruction was designed to expose the language learners to the target structure. Thus, both types of instructions are pivotal in the development of L2 grammar, as MacWhinney (1997) pointed out:

> Students who receive explicit instruction as well as implicit exposure to forms, would seem to have the best of both worlds. They can use explicit instruction to allocate attention to specific types of input…, narrow their hypothesis space…, tune the weights in their neural networks, … or consolidate their memory traces. …From the viewpoint of the psycholinguistic theory, providing learners with explicit instruction along with standard implicit exposure would seem to be a no-lose proposition.
>
> (MacWhinney, 1997, p.278)

The most typical example of explicit instruction is traditional teacher-fronted rule explanation. Research (Adringa, 2005) has proven that form-focus instruction is needed to draw learners' attention to focus on form in order to heighten the saliency of some grammatical feature. Another example of explicit instruction that has been investigated quite frequently is input processing and practise, which consists of tasks designed to promote or practise forms and their meanings (VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993).

Research on input processing (VanPatten, 1996) stresses that *Processing Instruction (PI)* is the key to development of learners' IL systems. In input processing, learners are guided to pay attention to a particular feature in a target language input that is likely to cause a processing problem to increase the chances of the feature's becoming *intake*, "that subset input

that the learner actually processes and holds in working memory during on-line comprehension." (VanPatten, 2002:761). Since humans are limited in their processing capacity, and since, according to VanPatten (2002), learners cannot attend to the content and the form of a message simultaneously, they need assistance in attending to a selective subset of the input. PI is one of the few pedagogical interventions that are based on psycholinguistic processes occurring during learner comprehension of second language (L2) input. PI is a type of explicit instruction or focus on form derived from the insights of input processing. Thus, focusing on form may benefit learners, because it helps guiding learners to covert input into intake in order for learning to take place (Schmidt, 1990). Unlike text enhancement, recasts, and other input oriented techniques, PI considers the nature of real time input processing and the ways in which learners make form-meaning connections during comprehension. In short, PI appears to be a plausible option among the many emerging approaches to focus-on form and explicit instruction and is likely to delineate the learning and processing mechanisms that come into play during comprehension. Pedagogically, the theory of PI can be implemented in the classroom in the ways in which learners make form-meaning connections during reading or listening comprehension.

Based on the foregoing, the necessary ingredient for presenting a grammatical structure is then by having some language samples which illustrate the teaching point. In the audiolingual method for example, grammar points are introduced via dialogue where students listen to and memorize. When presenting an inductive approach, students would be presented with the language sample, and then would be encouraged to make their own observations about the form. On the other hand, if practicing deductive approach, the teacher would present the generalization and then ask students to apply it to the language sample. Overall, during the pedagogical practice, teacher focuses on error corrections to provide both positive evidence and negative evidence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion to the preceding discussion, grammar knowledge is accepted to be the core of second language learning as it creates links to other aspects of language form (linguistics), meaning (semantics), and use (pragmatics). As a result, the development of L2 grammar is pivotal for learners' overall ability to use the language. For L2 grammar to develop, learners need to be conditioned in a way that they can get exposed to input and at the same time have the opportunity to produce output. To complement their grammar development process, L2 learners need the positive and negative feedbacks to co-construct their grammatical knowledge. Furthermore, this development process should be accelerated by the role of interaction for negotiation of meaning and the role of instruction for focusing learners' attention on particular form for learning to take place. In short, as far as the grammatical knowledge is concerned, instruction should be provided for L2 learners in EFL context to link the form-meaning connection while processing the given target language.

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