Theories of Second Language Learning

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Questions

- How are languages learned?

Some beliefs

- Behaviorism: the second language view
- Cognitive theory: a new psychological approach
- Creative construction theory
- The second language interactionist view
- Output hypothesis

Behaviorism: the second language view

● All learning takes place through habit formation.

● Learners receive linguistics input from speakers in their environment, and positive reinforcement for their correct repetitions and imitations. As a result, habits are formed. (Lado 1964)

Errors are seen as first language habits interfering with the acquisition of second language habits.

The contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH)

CAH predicts that
a) similarities => acquire target language
structure with ease
differences => ... with difficulty

b) Errors "Le chien le mange."
French studies English = the dog it eats.
English studies French = le chien mange le.

Cognitive theory:
a new psychological approach

● Language acquisition = the building up of knowledge systems that can eventually be called on automatically for speaking and understanding. (McLaughlin 1987)

● At first, learners have to pay attention to any aspect of the language which they are trying to understand or produce.

● Gradually, through experience and practice, learners become able to use certain parts of their knowledge so quickly and automatically.

Criticisms

- It has not yet been widely tested empirically.
- Application for classroom is premature.
- It is hard to predict
  - what kinds of structures will be automatized through practice.
  - which L1 structures can be transferred

Creative construction theory

- Learners are thought to "construct" internal representations (mental pictures) of the language being learned in predictable stages. (Krashen 1982)

The acquisition-learning hypothesis

- Acquisition (a subconscious 'picking up' pf rules characteristics of the L1 acquisition process), not learning (a conscious focus on knowing and applying rules), leads to spontaneous, unplanned communication.

- Ellis (1994), Bialystok (1982), Tarone (1983) proposed that learners use a mix of conscious (planned discourse) and unconscious (unplanned discourse) processes to produce language.

The monitor hypothesis

- The consciousness of rules prompts the action of an 'editor' or 'monitor' that checks, edits and polishes language output.
- It is used only when the language user has sufficient time, attends to linguistics form, and knows the rule being applied.

The natural hypothesis

- It is believed that we acquire the rules of a language in a predictable sequence, in a way that is independent of the order in which rules may have been taught.
- However, some research has shown that learners learned rules taught in a prescribed order.
- Still remained to be clarified.

The input hypothesis

- Acquisition occurs only when learners receive optimal comprehensible input that is interesting, a little beyond their current level of competence ($i + 1$), and not grammatically sequenced, but understandable through their background knowledge, their use of context, and other linguistic cues such as gestures and intonation.

Input processing

- To convert input into intake, VanPatten (1993) suggests the following guidelines.
  1. present one thing at a time
  2. keep meaning in focus
  3. move from sentences to connected discourse
  4. use both oral and written input
  5. have the learner 'do something' with the input
  6. keep the learner's processing strategies in mind.

The affective filter hypothesis

- Language learning must take place in an environment where learners are "off the defensive" and the affective filter (anxiety) is low in order for the input to be noticed and gain access to the learners' thinking.

The second language interactionist view

- Long's interaction Hypothesis (1983)

Input can be made comprehensible in 3 ways

1. By simplifying the input, i.e., using familiar structures and vocabulary
2. By using linguistic and extralinguistic features, i.e., familiar structures, background knowledge, gestures; and
3. By modifying the interactional structure of the conversation.

Sociocultural Theory

- Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (1978)

  Definition: the distance between the actual developmental level (currently existing) as the level of potential development (learner should be able to do) which can be bridged by interacting with others such as adult guidance and more capable peers.

Swain's Output Hypothesis

- According to Swain (1995), output facilitates acquisition, as it

  1. help learners to discover that there are gaps between what they want to say and what they can say.

  2. provide the ways to try out new rules.

  3. help learners to reflect of what they know about the target system.

Error Correction

- Tends to be limited to corrections of meaning – including errors in vocabulary choice – in first language acquisition.
- Errors which do not interfere with meaning (grammar and pronunciation) are usually overlooked.
- The only place where error correction is commonly found is ...
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