

A REFLECTION ON THEORIES OF FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

by:

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Language is one of the most significant mechanisms for communication to happen among humans (Castello, 2016). Many theorists have recognized the crucial part played by language in our lives. Not only it is an instrument for communication to occur, but also, it helps humans to socially survive as members of the society. However, linguists came up with several fragments tackling about how humans acquire language from the very beginning of their lives. Paradoxical as it may seem, some theories show observable contradictions stating on the first hand that language is innately acquired through nature and on the other hand, humans only learn language from the environment that nurtures them. In this reflection paper, I will focus on discussing studies related to nurture, and its vital role to the first language acquisition (L1) of children or young language learners.

The depth of language acquisition a child achieves was established significantly by the first language that he acquired during an essential timeframe. Lightbown and Spada (2001) stated that in a formative years of one's life, language acquisition usually commence in early childhood before the age of three and that it is learned, as part of growing up, from other people who already speak the language fluently. In contrast, learning is differentiated as a more conscious and explicitly sequenced process of accumulating knowledge of linguistic features such as vocabulary, sentence structure and grammar, typically in an institutional setting (Yule 1985:163). Contradicting thought processes and theories that have been introduced also provide paradigms in explaining the holistic course of human's first language acquisition (L1) and it includes the

behavioristic approach, the nativist approach, cognitive theory, the functional approaches, and stages in child language acquisition.

To emphasize the learning that I had about the first theory namely the behavioristic approach, it believes that “infants learn oral language from other human role models through a process involving imitation, rewards, and practice. Human role models in an infant’s environment provide the stimuli and rewards,” (Cooter & Reutzell, 2004). It explains that a child learns his first language through imitating and repeating what they hear from people that surround them. These people can refer to family, peers, and others that contribute to the development of a child throughout his childhood. It also emphasized the concept of rewards and practice wherein these significant people give the child a certain feedback or praise which motivates him to imitate the patterns of words being uttered by them. Through these repeated actions, the child is able to acquire the language and use it as his means to communicate.

Consequently, behaviorist theory shows that nurture is what determines the child’s first language acquisition. However, there are inquiries which scrutinize how the factors of nurture affects the language development of a child. These factors include that parental assistance that the child receives which differs with regards to how parents prefer to reward or respond to their child. Also, the type of peers that the child is involved with is relevant to be taken into account as they also contribute a big part into forming the linguistic schema of the child. To encapsulate, the behaviorist theory further elaborated the concept of reward as it is said to be evidently connected to the language development of a child.

According to some linguists, language acquisition is one of the highly debatable topics in linguistic study. Thereupon, several dichotomies of fragments arose presenting concepts with regards to how the language is acquired, in the first place. According to Lenneberg’s Critical Period Hypothesis (1987), there is an exact period in human lives when it is possible to acquire language smoothly. Additionally, it is only in the years

before puberty that a child can master morphology, phonology, and syntax which are the basic elements of linguistic that play an important role to the child's language acquisition.

In accord with Richards et al. (1989:143), the language that a child hears or receives contributes something to his learning, and this process is what he called 'input'. This one can relate to the concept of nurture as it encompass the ways on how a certain language becomes an integral part of an individual's life through what his auditory sense encounters. Howbeit, both O'Neill (1998) and Brown (2007) believes that 'in determining one's language acquisition, the quantity of input is not the most dominant basis, itself'. Thereupon, environment is what dominates the ways on how a child acquires a certain language throughout his lifetime. As estimated by Although Chenu and Jisa (2009), there are between 5000 and 7,000 utterances a day that a toddler in a Englishspeaking community is exposed to. Thus, in terms of environment, there should be parental or other social interactions together with frequent exposure to practical language in use as these can greatly help the child develop language learning which can positively lead him to become a profound language speaker in later life (Krashen and Terrell 1983; Kuhl 2004).

I also learned that environment has three types of exposure which allows the learner to acquire language. According to Lightbown and Spada (2013), these are natural interaction (e.g. in work or a social forum), traditional acquisition (e.g. conventional EFL/ESL classrooms, where form, grammar and vocabulary are emphasized), and communicative teaching environments (where interaction is emphasized over form). In regards to the Interaction Hypothesis of Krashen (1981), both in natural and communicative environment, the collaborative and social efforts in the target language facilitates the successful transition from exposure.

I have been enlightened that, as per Castello (2016), there should be varieties of ways to develop language learning as it is too intricate and complex. In a nutshell, teachers should provide different learning strategies that will make the students be familiarized with their individual way to learn a certain language. It is their ways to make

learning easier for them to accomplish. According to Castello (2016), Classroom learning is more syntactic in nature than L1 acquisition, and requires a more conscious and sustained effort. Thus, it is time for teachers to focus on how the students acquire a certain language as it is believed to be the cause of proficient learning in other subject areas relevant to the educational success of the children as their students.

References:

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