



On Linguistic Environment for Foreign Language Acquisition

Chengjun Wang

School of Foreign Languages

Yangtze Normal University

98 Julong Road, Lidu, Fuling, Chongqing 408100, China

Tel: 86-23-7279-0023 E-mail: clay1860@yahoo.com.cn

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Abstract

It is clear that children acquire their first language without explicit learning. A foreign or second language is usually learned but to some degree may also be acquired or “picked up” depending on the environmental setting. So, this article mainly discusses the linguistic environmental setting for foreign language acquisition. It suggested that we should make an effective linguistic environment for foreign language acquisition in foreign language classroom.

Keywords: Acquisition, Linguistic environment, Linguistic input, Foreign language teaching

1. Introduction

Language acquisition refers to the learning and development of a person’s language. The learning of a native or first language is called first Language Acquisition, and of a second or foreign language, Second Language Acquisition (Richards Jack C. John Platt and Heidi Platt, 2000). The term “acquisition” is often preferred to “learning” because the latter term is sometimes linked to a behaviorist theory of learning. Language acquisition is studied by linguists, psychologists and applied linguists to enable them to understand the process used in learning a language, to help identify stages in the developmental process, and to give a better understand of the nature of language. Techniques used include longitudinal studies of language learners as well as experimental approaches, and focus on the study of the development of phonology, grammar, vocabulary, and communicative competence.

Here, we pay more attention to discussing the communicative language of foreign language acquisition related to linguistic environment. That is to say, the effects of linguistic environment related to that we learn or acquire language is to communicate with others who speak non-native language.

2. The effects of linguistic environment in society

Are there any effects of linguistic environment on learning or acquiring a foreign language? Most of us know or know of people who have learnt to speak a foreign language quite fluently without any teaching at all: people who travel and work abroad a lot; people who stay in their own country but who mix with speakers of another language. Even quite young children, who drop out of school, often classed as “unteachable”, become unofficial tourist guides and end up managing to communicate in several foreign languages. They are not always totally accurate, but they achieve a level of language ability that is entirely adequate for their needs. There is another case that many young children whose parents speak different languages (first language and foreign language) can acquire a second language in circumstances similar to those of first language acquisition, the vast majority of people are not exposed to a second language until much later.

What is it that helps people like these to learn? The linguistic environment for language acquisition is very important. For the children, they often exposure to the different language and speak in different languages. They not only acquire their first language but also can acquire the foreign language. For those abroad or mix with speakers of another language, they are usually very motivated—they have a pressing desire to communicate and to get their meaning across. They receive a lot exposure—they hear the language in use and pick up expressions they need. And they have many opportunities to speak and experiment with the language. Their interlocutors do not expect them to be perfect, and will often support their attempts to communicate by suggesting words and phrases.

3. The linguistic environment in the classroom

Today, in language schools all over the world the largest group of students consists of people who have studied English at school but feel they know nothing and want to start again. Many Chinese school learners (especially non-English majors) have failed to learn English in much the same way. (Wang Cheng-jun. 2004) They have a small battery of formulaic phrases, but are unable or too shy to put them to use. Although many of them pass their examinations successfully, they find they cannot cope in conversation with a fluent speaker. One reason why this happens is because much of their exposure consists of written language at sentence level: they are used to reading textbook exercises and hearing carefully scripted dialogues. Many have been exposed to little real spoken interaction other than instruction-focused teacher talk.

We can say therefore that some people learn a language naturally without classroom instruction. On the other hand, many people do not learn one in spite of being taught. This is not to say that classroom instruction is useless; indeed there is evidence to suggest that instruction does help. For example, learners who have had formal instruction and who then spent time in the country concerned are likely to achieve a higher degree of accuracy than those who have not had formal instruction. But language lessons on their own bring no guarantee of success. Formal instruction is rarely a sufficient condition for learning a language.

What is it that prevents students learning or acquiring foreign language which in order to communicate with speakers of non-native language? In our Chinese classroom (especially non-English major class), they are often large classes. So, in large classes, learners feel shy about talking in front of the class. Speaking is rarely tested, and exams based on grammar often result in a lot of direct grammar teaching with focus on form rather than meaning. At present, China's textbooks pay more attention to listening and speaking activities, but learners (non-English majors) fail to use foreign language correctly and freely when expressing themselves. (Wang Cheng-jun. 2004) There are many more reasons that learners learn foreign language cannot express themselves freely and correctly. Linguistic environment for language acquisition is one of the most important reasons. In spite of it is not the only reason for language acquisition.

4. Linguistic environment for foreign language acquisition

Environmental theories of learning hold that an organism's nurture, or experience, are of more important to development than its nature, or innate contributions. Indeed, they will typically deny that innate contributions play any role at all other than that of providing the animal with the internal structure that environmental forces can proceed to shape. The best-known examples are the various forms of behaviorist and neo-behaviorist stimulus-response learning theories, such as those of Skinner (1957), but such positions have had little impact since Chomsky's (1959) famous review of Skinner's verbal Behavior, and subsequent writings by Chomsky and his followers, despite attempted rebuttals and serious problems with nativist alternatives. Neo-behaviorist learning theory was influential in language teaching circles; chiefly through the underpinnings it provided the Audio-Lingual Method in the work of Fries, Lado, Politzer, Prator and others (Larsen-Freeman Diane and Michael H-Long. 249-250).

In real life, it is clear that children acquire their first language without explicit learning. As we know, Creole languages are pidgins that have acquired native speakers. In linguistically mixed communities where a pidgin is used as the lingua franca, children may acquire it as their native language, particularly if their parents normally communicate in the pidgin. Where this occurs the language will re-acquire all the characteristics of a full, non-pidgin language. As spoken by an adult native speaker the language will have, when compared vocabulary, a wider range of syntactic possibilities, and an increased stylistic repertoire. It will also, of course, be used for all purposes in a full range of social situations. That is, the reduction that occurred during pidginization will be repaired, although the simplification and admixture will remain. This process whereby reduction is "repaired" by expansion is known as creolization and is one of the most fascinating processes of all in linguistic change. Children use a pidgin language as their native language and expand it in part by calling on the genetic mental resources all human beings are born with-the human language faculty-and that creolization thus provides us with an unusual and fascinating window into the human mind.

A foreign or second language is usually learned but to some degree may also be acquired or "picked up" depending on the environmental setting and the input received by the second-language learner. A pidgin language, then, is a lingua franca which has no native speakers. It is the product of a multilingual situation in which those who wish to communicate must find or improvise a simple language system that will enable them to do so. It is derived from a "normal" language through simplification, reduction and interference or admixture, often considerable, from the native language or language of those who use it, especially so far as pronunciation is concerned. The most likely setting for the crystallization of a true pidgin language is probably a contact situation of this limited type involving three or more language groups: one "dominant" language, and at least two "non-dominant" languages. If contact between the speakers of the dominant language and the others is minimal, and the imperfectly learned dominant language is then used as a lingua franca among the non-dominant groups, it is not difficult to see how a pidgin might arise.

The linguistic environment is great practical importance for educators of various kinds. As we are teaching foreign

language in the classroom, it is very important to create a real communicative environment. The learners communicate with each other in role-play, this can be use authentic materials or without using materials. That is to say, they can discuss a given topic using their own words. This needs learners have enough effective linguistic input for foreign language acquisition.

5. Linguistic input under the linguistic environment

The importance of input for learning came to the fore in the Input Hypothesis theory (Krashen1985,1994), perhaps the most widely know and controversial account of foreign language (or L2) acquisition. Its central claim is that language acquisition depends solely on “comprehensible input”-language which is slightly ahead of the learners’ current stage but which they can comprehend through means such as situational clues; language is acquired through trying to understand what people are saying. The evidence for this claim comes from the adaptations in speech to language learners, from the initial “silent period” during which many L2 learners prefer not to speak, and from the success of immersion and bilingual classrooms (Krashen1985). Fierce criticisms were made of Krashen’s model (Mclaughlin1987, Cook1993), in particular that learners need to speak as well as listen. The model has gone into abeyance rather than being abandoned but it is still extremely attractive to many language teachers, and indeed to many linguistics students, because of the intuitive commonsense of comprehensible input, and because of its brave attempt at an overall model of L2 learning (Aronoff Mark and Janie Rees-Miller,504).

Learners have few opportunities to communicate with non-native speakers in China’s classrooms, especially non-English major classrooms. So, it is difficult to exposure themselves to non-native speakers. In other words, teachers should offer them more effective linguistic input for foreign language acquisition. This might involve listening, or reading, or both. It may be a conscious process, or largely subconscious. It involves grappling with meaning and observing how others express the meanings that they want to be able to express. This leads on to noticing small chunks of language typically used in particular contexts, for example I have no idea; It doesn’t matter; What I think is --- It involves isolating particular words and phrase, discovering what they mean and noting how they are used. It is only when such features are noticed, processed in the learner’s mind and understood that they are likely to become part of their internalized language system.

Linguistic input for foreign language acquisition is very important. For beginners, rich input such as randomly chosen listening materials will just be noise. No matter how motivated, beginners are unlikely to be able to notice and pick out anything comprehensible, and therefore will not learn from them. If learners select a listening material of a familiar type on a familiar topic and can guess at the kinds of meanings that are likely to be expressed, and how the discourse will proceed, they will have a better chance of catching something they can understand and subsequently learn from. They are modifying their input by careful selection. However, if learners initiate a conversation, knowing what the topic and the purpose of the conversation are, the learners can make sensible predictions about meaning, and check anything they are not sure of having understood correctly. This modified exposure thus becomes comprehensible input and should help acquisition.

The same kind of modifying can apply to reading too. By selecting a familiar genre and style of text on a familiar topic, and by reading and re-reading, parts of the input become comprehensible. Deciphering instructions given in a foreign language is a good example of this, especially if they are relevant to some task in hand.

6. An effective environment for foreign language acquisition

What is an effective environment for foreign language (or L2) acquisition? Some studies also test participants during their stay in the host country and are thereby able to inform on early and later changes in the learners’ pragmatic ability. Some studies include a control group of students who did not go abroad but continued to participate in foreign language classes at home, and can thus shed light on whether the gains that the study-abroad students made were in fact attributable to the study-abroad experience. Finally, some studies include native speakers of the target and /or the students’ first language in L1 transfer. Participants in study-abroad research with a focus on pragmatic abilities. It is very useful that achieve a foreign language in study-abroad. We have no many opportunities to achieve real fluency in a foreign language country where it is spoken. Our students just learn a foreign language in Chinese classroom, and some of them are taught by no-English English teachers. So, it is very important to discuss how to effectively learn or acquire a foreign language in the language classroom as a setting where the target language is taught. The target language is taught in the language classroom as a subject only and is not commonly used as a medium of communication outside the classroom. In this sense it includes both ‘foreign’ language classrooms and ‘second’ language classrooms where the learners have no contact with the target language outside the language classroom. Two contextual aspects are of potential importance in language classroom settings according to Gardner and Clement (1990). One concerns the learning situation to be found in the classroom. The other is the level of support which parents give to the foreign or second language program.

With regard to the classroom learning situation, the role relationship between teacher and student are likely to be crucial.

In the case of traditional approaches to language teaching, where the target language is perceived primarily as an “object” to be mastered by learning about its formal properties, the teacher typically acts as a “knower/informer” and the learner as an “information seeker” (Corder, 1997b in Ellis Rod, 1999). In the case of innovative approaches where the emphasis is on the use of the target language in “social behavior” a number of different role relationships are possible, depending on whether the participants are “playing at talk”, as in role play activities, or have a real-life purpose for communicating, as in information gap activities; the teacher can be “producer” or “referee” and the learner “actor” or “player”. Corder notes, however, that in real-life situations outside the classroom, a somewhat different role relationship arises (“mentor” and “apprentice”). Thus, even “information learning” inside the classroom may differ from that found in natural setting.

As we know, it is very important that give learners opportunities for participating in the classroom. So, we should consider that the quantity of participation. There is no clear evidence that the extent to which learners participate productively in the classroom affects their rate of development. We believe that practice does not make perfect, in the other hand, we suggest that proficiency causes participation. That is, the more proficient the learners are, the more they get to participate. In order to acquire a foreign language effectively, quality of learner participating cannot be ignored. While the amount of participation may not be a key factor in foreign language (or L2) acquisition, a stronger case can be made for the importance of high-quality participation. One of the factors that seems to determine the quality of learner participation in classroom settings is the degree of control the learners exercise over the discourse. In cases where participation is strictly controlled, there may be few opportunities for learners to practise communicative strategies. This may be one of reason why many foreign language learners reliant on the classroom fail to develop much strategic competence.

Group work is often considered an essential feature of communicative language teaching. Long and Porter (1985) summarize the main pedagogic arguments in favor of it (Ellis Rod,1999). It increases language practice opportunities, it improves the quality of student talk, it helps to individualize instruction, it promotes a positive affective climate, and it motivates learners to learn. In addition to these pedagogic arguments, a psycholinguistic justification has been advanced: group work provides the kind of input and opportunities for output that promote rapid foreign language (or L2) acquisition. It is a good way to learn or acquire foreign in classroom that group work based on tasks. In practice task refers to the idea of some kind of activity designed to engage the learner in using the language communicatively or reflectively in order to arrive at an outcome other than that of learning a specified feature of the foreign language (or L2). The study of “tasks” has proved to be of the most productive seams of foreign language (or L2) classroom research. It has been motivated in part by proposals for “task-based syllabuses” (see Long, 1985b; Prabha, 1987; Long and Crookes, 1992) (Ellis Rod, 1999). These attempt to specify the content to be taught in terms of a series of activities to be performed by the students, either with the teacher or in small group work.

In considering what kinds of activity, situation and role are best suited to a specific learning group, the teacher must consider a number of factors. Teacher should engage his students’ learning or acquisition in a large proportion of situations where they will later need to use their communicative language. In this way, he can be confident that most aspect of the language practised (functions, structures, vocabulary and interpersonal skills) are relevant to learners’ need. Learners are more likely to feel involved in situations where they can see the relevance of what they are doing and learning. If simulation is used, they may be role-playing activities based on their familiar realms of experience. So, the situations must be capable of stimulating learners to a high degree of communicative involvement.

In a word, the linguistic environmental setting is great practical importance for educators of various kinds. As we are teaching foreign language in the classroom, it is very important to create a real communicative environment. and offer students enough effective linguistic environment to exposure to the foreign language and speak in foreign language.

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