

## Second Language Acquisition: An Overview and Theoretical Background

Ayman Hamid AL-Takhayinh<sup>1</sup>, corresponding author

Othman Aref Al-Dala'ien<sup>2</sup>

Badri Abdulhakim D.M. Mudhsh<sup>3</sup>

<sup>123</sup>Research scholars, Linguistics department, Aligarh Muslim University

**Abstract:** *This paper discusses the most important theoretical background and the relevant literature on the acquisition of second language, and it traces the historical background of second language acquisition as a branch of applied linguistics and its being as one of the most important areas to research particularly in latest decades. Additionally it is an attempt to find out some solutions for the controversial issues of the first language transfer on second language in the process of acquisition and its role to hinder the process of acquisition. This paper also takes a glimpse at the order and stages of acquisition. It recommends the coming researchers to find out more about the relation of Applied Linguistics and Psychology to gain more results which could be more beneficiary for this area (SLA). Eventually, this study shows that second language acquisition process is still a little bit ambiguous and unclear in different kind of SLA aspects, and all theories of second language acquisition don't have a comprehensive and complete explanation yet.*

**Key words:** *acquisition, second language, language transfer, morpheme order.*

### Introduction

Many scholars have researched about second language acquisition particularly in latest decades, SLA has been started through two papers to develop this modern study, most of these scholars defined SLA as one of the linguistics' branches and it deals with how people acquire the second language. Hence, they state obstacles and difficulties which can be occurred during acquisition process, and the stages or order of acquisition. Krashen, Stephen (1982) said that Second language acquisition can be defined as language that is acquired after a complete of first language acquisition. In other words it means to learn any other languages in addition to the native language. The concept second language acquisition has been used for unconscious learning process, but recently it can be considered as a synonymous of the term (learning), as well it is used as heritage language learning. In actuality there is a little bit difference between of them; second language learning means to learn language in classroom, while second language acquisition means to acquire language either in classroom or through the interaction with native speakers in somewhere else. Hence, second language learning and second language acquisition interface each other as an exact synonymous in classroom learning or acquisition process. Gass, Susan; Selinker, Larry (2008) claimed that language acquisition differs in a number of ways from the bilingualism which is the end result to the learning process, not learning a language itself. The researchers stated that bilingualism can include Second language acquisition,

acquisition of foreign language, second language learning, and learning of foreign language, which can be involved with the same fundamental processes but in different situations. Ellis, Rod (1997). Many issues are still unresolved after a lot of debates have been held about how language is learned; all of the theories about second language acquisition were not accepted as a complete explanation for second language acquisition.

### Literature review

Gass, Susan; Selinker, Larry (2008). Second language acquisition can be considered as a discipline in applied linguistics as well it is closely related to psychology, cognitive psychology, and education. Ellis, Rod (2008) stated that Some errors and mistakes could be committed by adults as a result of their first language effect and this kind of the influence of the first language on the second language is known as a negative language transfer, and this phenomena can be occurred as a result of interaction between the linguistic knowledge which is already existed to the learner with the input of target language. Lightbown, Patsy. M, Spada, Nina (2006) said that Language transfer can be occurred not only by native or first language, but it also can be by second, third or subsequent languages in different types of categories such as (pronunciation, grammar, discourse, vocabulary, and reading).

Elley, W. B. (1991), Krashen, Stephen (1981a). Krashen, Stephen (1981b). According to Stephen Krashen the primary factor that affects on the acquisition of second language is the input that learners receive, and the length of time that learners spend in foreign country depends on his or her level of acquisition, as well the reading skill can be considered as the most useful skill to learn vocabulary, grammar, and writing. On other hand Krashen's theory claimed that input should not be grammatically sequenced, and what happen in classroom where teaching (a structure of the day) is not useful and it may even be harmful.

Skehan, Peter (1998) said that some other researchers say that output can help learners to provide feedback which makes them concentrate on what they are saying and to use the knowledge of language habitually. According to Long. M's (1996) interaction hypothesis, the interaction with a second language is specially a very good condition for acquisition.

Ellis, Rod; Barkhuizen, Patrick (2005) said in their study that much research concerned with the internal representations which are available in the mind of learner in the acquisition of second language and how those representations change over time, it is not possible to check those representations directly with some techniques, so researchers concerned with rules of learners' speaking or writing. This process is called learner language, but it was not able to get all the errors that can be committed by learners in the acquisition of second language.

Selinker, L. (1972), and Gass, Susan, Selinker, Larry (2008) claimed that when the comparing different languages and analyzing learner's errors of second language were not able to explain the systematic errors, the term interlanguage was emerged. Interlanguage concerns with the language

system which is existed in the mind of learner of second language acquisition, and it is not a language full with errors, but it is a language with it is own rules and structure.

VanPatten, Bill; Benati, Alessandro G. (2010) pointed out three processes that influence the creation of interlanguage:

- 1) Language transfer: learners acquire second language by help of first language system. It can be positive or negative.
- 2) Generalization: it means learners use the common rules of second language to all structures, which leads to commit some errors with deviations of norm.
- 3) Simplification: in the acquisition of second language, learners tend to use a simple language such as children or pidgins.

Ling.P (2004) claimed that two kinds of errors in the acquisition of 12 by ESL learners are there, first, the learner showed a distinct accuracy order for the morphemes. Second, learners showed variability and produced overgeneralization in the 12 utterances. So the acquisition of –s morpheme was staged and systematic. This paper is to examine the acquisition process of inflectional –s morpheme in English by Chinese learners in two primary schools.

However Lev Vygotsky and his followers considered the knowledge of language differs from any other knowledge, so they developed sociocultural theory which is a unique approach to SLA. Ellis, Rod (2008) said that the research can be identified in the linguistic tradition through two approaches; universal grammar and typological approaches.

*Universal grammar theory* was developed by Noam Chomsky in 1950s, it concentrates on the linguistic competence of individual, it states a set of principles are instant and universal, as well a set of parameters which differ among the languages.

VanPatten, Bill; Benati, Alessandro G. (2010). *Typological universals* are principles for all languages which can be found empirically, by gathering all of the aspects which are universal among all the world's languages.

Wei, L. (2000), his paper clarifies the exactness of morpheme orders according to morpheme classification. Myers-Scotton and Jake (2000) claimed 4-m model that states the morpheme order of second language acquisition is dictated by the way morphemes are anticipated from the mental lexicon. This paper distinguished four sorts of morphemes: two types of late system morphemes, content morphemes, early system morphemes. Simultaneously, the intention of the speaker directly chooses content morphemes, and it also indirectly chooses early system morphemes, through the production process, the late system morphemes are enacted which is needed by the grammar of second language. The auther of this paper claimed that the way of activation morphemes is the basic for the classification of morphemes. This study elucidated in a hierarchal way the effects of morpheme acquisition through interlanguage data from early adult Chinese

and Japanese learners of English as a second language which are: late system morphemes are acquired after early system morphemes, and early system morphemes are acquired after content morphemes. The 4-M model and the hypotheses of the study can get the statistical evidence through the accuracy/frequency count of the learners' acquisition for the types of morphemes.

### Objectives

1. To identify the most important concepts about the acquisition of second language.
2. To support the idea which may serve the acquisition of second language in next stages of researches
3. To develop the conceptual framework of second language acquisition.
4. To emphasize the importance of second language acquisition.
5. To highlight how second language acquisition is achieved.
6. Elucidate the role of second language acquisition in the improvement of applied linguistics and its concerns with problems related real life.

### A Glance at History of Second Language Acquisition

Applied linguistics means taking linguistic theories as the basis from which to address the real life concerns, language teaching and learning are included as applied linguistic concerns. It means the acquisition second language is one of applied linguistics' branches. Identifying a precise starting date to second language acquisition is difficult, so it began in interdisciplinary field. However second language acquisition has been started through two papers to develop this modern study (*significance of learner's errors*) and (Larry Selinker's article *Interlanguage*). In the 1960s applied linguistics was expanded to include second language acquisition, language assessment, and language policy. So Applied linguistics gets involved to achieve many aims and one of them is to explore how children acquire language and how the skills of second-language speakers develop. After that second language acquisition witnessed large developments in recent years. Since 1980s second language acquisition has been studied from different disciplines of linguistics (disciplinary perspectives, and theoretical perspective). VanPatten, Bill; Benati, Alessandro G. (2010) Then it got a great development in the recent years.

### Stages of Second Language Acquisition

Haynes, Judie (2007). There are five stages in the acquisition process of language, and they can be divided as below:

-Preproduction: in which learners work as a receiver of new vocabularies of up to 500 words, and this stage is called a silent period.

-Early production: in which the learners start to speak short phrases of one or two words, in this stage learners work as an active and receptive of new vocabularies of up to 1000 words, and grammatical mistakes can be committed in this stage.

-Speech emergence: in which vocabularies are increased to around 3000 words, and learners can communicate with phrases, simple sentences and questions, some mistakes can be committed in this stage.

-intermediate fluency: in which learners can use more complicated sentences structures, the words increase to around 6000, the errors in this stage can be also committed in more complicated sentences

-Advanced fluency: in which learners need between five and ten years of learning language, finally learners can reach the level of function of native speaker.

### **Differences between First and Second Language Acquisition**

Cook, Vivian (2008). There are three differences between children who learn the first language and adults who acquire the second language, the brain of children are still developing whereas adults have conscious mind, adults have at least their first language which enable them to think and speak. On other hand, even if adults get a high level of proficiency, their pronunciation would be still tended to non-native. Which means adults reached a fossilization stage. Language transfer is the effects of first language on the second language through the process of second language acquisition, and this kind of problems should be bear in mind in the teaching process of second language for those whose first language is different.

### **Order of Second Language Acquisition**

There were several studies about the order of how the grammatical structure can be acquired by learners; these studies showed the order of acquisition among learners with different first languages was about to be the same order, and this little change of order will not be at all if learners have a language lessons, it means language transfer is not the main factor that affect on the acquisition of second language, which support the concept of interlanguage.

Only in learning second language grammar there were observed similarities of order in the second language acquisition, but it doesn't mean that there is no some exceptions among very few learners with different first languages, as well there is no exact time to the grammatical structure learning process, and students in some situations may use the structure correctly but some students in other situations don't do so. All of these things lead and confirm that the sequence of second language acquisition is there, and some language features can be acquired before some other features.

- 1- Plural-s.
- 2- Progressive-ing.
- 3- Copula forms of be.
- 4- Auxiliary forms of be.
- 5- Definite and indefinite articles the – a- an.
- 6- Irregular past tense.
- 7- Third person -s.
- 8- Possessive -'s.

Vivian cook's (2008) book (Second language learning and language teaching), the typical order of acquisition for English.

According to Guirora, A.Z (2006) said that Pronunciation is considered as a hardest part in the acquisition of second language. Eckman, F. R.; Elreyes, A.; Iverson, G. K. (2003) claimed some viewpoints attributed the difficulty of pronunciation to the transfer between first and second language which can be occurred due to three possibilities:

- 1) Some phonemes are not available in first language, so these phonemes are new for the learners. For example, Arabic language doesn't have /P/ sound, and it would be completely new for the Arab learners of English.
- 2) The first language has one phoneme which encounters two phonemes in second language. For example, /b/ phoneme in Arabic encounters two phonemes in English /b/ and /p/.
- 3) Some allophones in first language stand with phonemes in second language. For example, /l/ and /r/ allophones in Japanese stand with /l/ and /r/ phonemes in English.

Sounds are not considered as a significant problem, and the most difficult task for learners is to distinguish between allophones of first language with the same phonemes of second language. Cook, Vivian (2008).

## Methodology

This study is constructed as a longitudinal study to identify features that could be useful for EFL learners. The qualitative method has been conducted in this study, which particularly depends on the collection of materials and results of previous studies such as researches, books, papers, articles, websites ... etc. This study is to make the opinions of previous scholars more overt to be distinguished.

## Conclusion

It is initiated with some definitions and suggestions about SLA, and some previous studies that dive deeper in this area. This paper shows that second language acquisition process is still a little bit ambiguous and unclear in different kind of SLA aspects, and all theories of second language acquisition don't have a comprehensive and complete explanation yet. As well as, it explains the most important terms which specifically related to second language acquisition and generally to

applied linguistics. This kind of ambiguity makes readers and those who are interested with SLA not completely satisfied.

### **Suggestions and Recommendations**

On other hand, this paper recommends to research about the process of SLA with the assistance of psychologists who have an excellent knowledge about the mind and how it works, linguists can provide the knowledge of language only. To explain how the mind deals with language; the role of psychologists must be emerged with linguists. So the studies about this kind of relation between psychology and linguistics are in dire need to access the righteous path in this area which is mixed in two fields, Applied Linguistics and Psychology.

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