CHAPTER 4: LEARNER LANGUAGE

PART I

Content adapted from Lightbown and Spada (2006)
In this chapter, we are going to:

• focus on second language learners' developing knowledge and use of their new language.

• examine some of the errors that learners make

• discuss what errors can tell us about their knowledge of the language and their ability to use that knowledge.

• look at stages and sequences in the acquisition of some syntactic and morphological features in the second language.

• review some aspects of learners' development of vocabulary, pragmatics, and phonology
STUDYING THE LANGUAGE OF L2 LEARNERS

• An increase in error may actually be an indication of progress.

For example,

• like first language learners, second language learners usually learn the irregular past tense forms of certain common verbs before they learn to apply the regular simple past -ed marker:

• a learner who says 'I buyed a bus ticket' may know more about English grammar than one who says 'I bought a bus ticket'.

• The one who says 'buyed' knows a rule for forming the past tense and has applied it to an irregular verb.

• Without further information, we cannot conclude that the one who says 'bought' would use the regular past -ed marker where it is appropriate, but the learner who says 'buyed' has provided evidence of developing knowledge of a systematic aspect of English.
In Chapter 1 we saw that children's knowledge of the grammatical system is built up in predictable sequences.

For instance, grammatical morphemes such as -ing or -ed are not acquired at the same time, but in sequence.

As children continue to hear and use their language, they revise these systems so that they increasingly resemble the language spoken in their environment.
In chapter 4, 5, and 6, we discuss the following questions:

• Are there developmental sequences for second language acquisition?

• How does the prior knowledge of the first language affect the acquisition of the second language?

• How does instruction affect second language acquisition?

• Are there differences between learners whose only contact with the new language is in a language course and those who use the language in daily life?
What is CAH?

According to the CAH, errors were often assumed to be the result of transfer from learners' first language.

As we saw in Chapter 2, however, not all errors made by second language learners can be explained in terms of first language transfer alone.

Some of the errors are similar to those made by young first language learners (e.g. the use of a regular -ed past tense ending on an irregular verb)

Eric Kellerman (1986) observed that learners have intuitions about which language features they can transfer from their first language to the target language and which are less likely to be transferable.

- e.g. most learners believe that idiomatic or metaphorical expressions cannot simply be translated word for word
As a result of the finding that many aspects of learners' language could not be explained by the CAH, a number of researchers began to take a different approach to analysing learners' errors.

This approach, which developed during the 1970s, became known as 'error analysis'.

Error analysis involved detailed description and analysis of the kinds of errors second language learners make.

'Error analysis' differed from contrastive analysis in that it doesn't aim at predicting errors, but at discovering and describing them.
Larry Selinker (1972) gave the name INTERLANGUAGE to learners' developing second language knowledge.

Analysis of a learner's interlanguage shows that it has:

- some characteristics influenced by previously learned languages,
- some characteristics of the second language,
- and some characteristics that seem to be general and to occur in almost interlanguage systems (e.g. the omission of function words and grammatical morphemes)

Interlanguages have been found to be systematic, but they are also dynamic, continually evolving as learners receive more input and revise their hypotheses about the second language.
Selinker also coined the term **FOSSILIZATION** to refer to the fact that, some features in a learner's language may stop changing.

This may be especially true for learners whose exposure to the second language does not include instruction or the kind of feedback that would help them to recognize differences between their interlanguage and the target language.
The texts in page 80-81 were written by two learners of English,

• **Learner 1:** a French-speaking secondary school student,

• **Learner 2:** a Chinese-speaking adult learner

Both learners were describing a cartoon film entitled *The Great Toy Robbery.*

After viewing the film, they were asked to retell the story in writing, as if they were telling it to someone who had not seen the film.

Read the texts and examine the errors made by each learner:

• Do they make the same kinds of errors?

• In what ways do the two interlanguages differ?
ANALYSING LEARNER LANGUAGE

- Many error types are common to both learners.

- Both make errors of spelling and punctuation that can be found in the writing of a young native speaker of English.

- Even though French uses grammatical morphemes to indicate person and number on verbs and Chinese does not, they both make errors of subject-verb agreement, leaving off the third person -s marker and overusing it when the subject is plural

  - 'a cowboy go' and 'three robbers in the mountain who sees' by Learner 1

  - 'Santa Claus ride' and 'they plays' by Learner 2
Such errors reflect learners' understanding of the second language system itself rather than an attempt to transfer characteristics of their first language.

These errors might be:

1. **Developmental errors** because they are similar to those made by children acquiring English as their L1

2. **Overgeneralization** (e.g. the -s ending on the verb in 'they plays')

3. **Simplification**, where elements of a sentence are left out or where all verbs have the same form regardless of person, number, or tense.
4. **Classroom influence:** especially in Learner 2’s text. For example:

- the use of formulaic expressions such as *one horse open sleigh* which is taken verbatim from a well-known Christmas song that had been taught and sung in his ESL class.

- *dashing through the town* probably comes from the same source

5. **Transfer/ interference:**

- For those who are familiar with the English spoken by native speakers of French, some of the errors (e.g. preposition choice *in the same time*) made by the first learner is probably based on French.

- Similarly, those familiar with the English of Chinese speakers may recognize some word order patterns (e.g. *on the back of his body has big packet*) as based on Chinese patterns.
Second language learners, like first language learners, pass through sequences of development: what is learned early by one is learned early by others.

In Chapter 1 we saw some developmental sequences for English child language acquisition of grammatical morphemes, negation, and questions.

Researchers in SLA have also examined these features, as well as others.
Some studies have examined the development of grammatical morphemes by learners of English as a second language in a variety of environments, at different ages, and from different first language backgrounds.

The overall results of the studies suggested an order which, while not identical to the developmental sequence found for first language learners, was similar among second language learners from different first language backgrounds.

For example, most studies showed a higher degree of accuracy for plural than for possessive, and for -ing than for regular past (-ed).
GRAMMATICAL MORPHEMES

• Stephen Krashen summarized the order as shown in this figure.

• Learners will produce the morphemes in higher boxes with higher accuracy than those in lower boxes.

• Within boxes, there is no clear pattern of difference.
The similarity among learners suggests that the accuracy order cannot be described or explained in terms of transfer from the learners' first language.

Some researchers saw this as strong evidence against the CAH.

However, a thorough review of all the 'morpheme acquisition' studies shows that the learners' first language does have an influence on acquisition sequences.

For example,

learners whose first language has a possessive form that resembles the English 's (such as German and Danish) seem to acquire the English possessive earlier than

Learners whose first language has a very different way of forming the possessive (such as French or Spanish)
Why are grammatical morphemes (or other language features) acquired in a particular order?

As with first language acquisition, researchers have not found a single simple explanation for the order.

Jennifer Goldschneider and Robert DeKeyser (2001) reviewed this research and identified a number of variables that contribute to the order:

1. **Salience** (how easy it is to notice the morpheme)

2. **Linguistic complexity** (e.g. how many elements you have to keep track of)

3. **Semantic transparency** (how clear the meaning is)

4. **Similarity to a first language form**

5. **Frequency in the input**
NEGATION

• The acquisition of negative sentences by second language learners follows a path that looks nearly identical to the stages we saw in Chapter 1 for first language acquisition.

• However, second language learners from different first language backgrounds behave somewhat differently within those stages.

• This was illustrated in

  • John Schumann's (1979) research with Spanish speakers learning English

  • Henning Wade's (1978) work on German speakers learning English.
NEGATION

Stage 1

- The negative element (usually 'no' or 'not') is typically placed before the verb or the element being negated.
  
  - I no like it/ Not my friend

- Often, it occurs as the first word in the sentence because the subject is not there.
  
  - No bicycle/ Not my friend.

- 'No' is preferred by most learners in this early stage, perhaps because it is the negative form that is easiest to hear and recognize in the speech they are exposed to.

- Italian- and Spanish-speaking learners may prefer 'no' because it corresponds to the negative form in Italian and Spanish (No tienen muchos libros = they don't have many books).

- They may continue to use Stage 1 negation longer than other learners because of the similarity to a pattern from their first language.

- Even when they produce negative sentences at more advanced stages, they may also use Stage 1 negatives in longer sentences or when they are under pressure.

- Thus, similarity to the first language may slow down a learner’s progress through a particular developmental stage.
Stage 2

- At this stage, 'no' and 'not' may alternate with 'don't'.
- However, 'don't' is not marked for person, number, or tense
  - He don't like it
- 'don't' may even be used before modals like 'can' and 'should'
  - I don't can sing
NEGATION

Stage 3

• Learners begin to place the negative element after auxiliary verbs like 'are', 'is', and 'can'.

  • You can not go there. He was not happy.

• But at this stage, the 'don't' form is still not fully analysed (e.g. She don't like rice.)

• At this stage, German speakers, whose first language has a structure that places the negative after the verb may generalize the auxiliary-negative (e.g. can not) pattern to verb-negative (e.g. play not) and produce sentences such as:

  • They come not [to] home. (sie kommen nicht nach Hause)
NEGATION

Stage 4

- In this stage, 'do' is marked for tense, person, and number
- Most interlanguage sentences appear to be just like those of the target language
  - It doesn't work. We didn't have supper.
- However, some learners continue to mark tense, person, and number on both the auxiliary and the verb
  - I didn't went there. He doesn't goes to school.
In the 1980s, Manfred Pienemann and his colleagues undertook studies that related the SLA of German and English.

Pienemann, Johnston, and Brindley (1988) described a sequence in the acquisition of questions by learners of English from a variety of first language backgrounds.
An adapted version of the sequence is shown in Stages 1-6.

The examples come from French speakers who were playing a game in which they had to ask questions in order to find out which picture the other player was holding.

As we saw for negation, the overall sequence is similar to the one observed in first language acquisition.

And again, there are some differences that are attributable to first language influence.
QUESTIONS

Stage 1

• Single words, formulae, or sentence fragments.

  • Dog?

  • Four children?
QUESTIONS

Stage 2

• Declarative word order, no inversion, no fronting.
  • It's a monster in the right corner?
  • The boys throw the shoes?

• Declarative order with rising intonation is common in yes/no questions in informal spoken French.

• French speakers may hypothesize that in English, as in French, inversion is optional.
QUESTIONS

Stage 3

• Fronting: do-fronting/ wh-fronting, no inversion/ other fronting.
  
  • Do you have a shoes on your picture? (do fronting)

  • Where the children are playing? (wh- fronting but with no inversion)

  • Does in this picture there is four astronauts? (do fronting)

  • Is the picture has two planets on top? (other fronting)

• French has an invariant form 'est-ce que = is it that' that can be placed before a declarative sentence to make a question

  • e.g. Jean aime le cinéma becomes Est-ce que Jean aime le cinema? = is it that John likes movies?

• Therefore, French speakers may think that 'do' or 'does' is such an invariant form and continue to produce Stage 3 questions for some time.
QUESTIONS

Stage 4

• Inversion in wh- + copula (be= is, are, am, etc)
  • Where is the sun?

• Inversion in yes/no' questions with other auxiliaries (be, have, will, do, etc).
  • Is there a fish in the water?
  • Will I go?

• At Stage 4, German speakers may infer that if English uses subject-auxiliary inversion, it may also permit inversion with full verbs, as German does, leading them to produce questions such as 'Like you baseball?'- Magst du baseball?
Stage 5

• Inversion in wh- questions with both an auxiliary and a main verb.
  
  • How do you say proche?

  • What's the boy doing?

• French-speaking learners may have difficulty using Stage 5 questions in which the subject is a noun rather than a pronoun.

  • They may say (and accept as grammatical) 'Why do you like chocolate?' but not 'Why do children like chocolate?' In this, they are drawing on French, where it is often ungrammatical to use inversion with a noun subject.
Stage 6

• Complex questions.

• Question tags: (e.g. *It's better, isn't it?*)

• Negative question: (e.g. *Why can't you go?*)

• Embedded question: (e.g. *Can you tell me what the date is today?*)
• Pienemann's developmental sequence for questions has been the basis for a number of studies.

• Alison Mackey and her colleagues have done a number of these studies, and she provided the data in Table 4.1, p. 88.

• These examples come from three adult Japanese learners of English as a second language who were interacting with a native speaker in a 'spot the differences' task.

• In this task, learners have similar but not identical pictures and they have to ask questions until they work out how the picture they can see is different from the one their interlocutor has.

• Note that progress to a higher stage does not always mean that learners produce fewer errors.
A number of researchers, including Jürgen Meisel (1987), have observed the developing ability to use language to locate events in time.

The research has shown that learners from different first language backgrounds and acquiring variety of second languages, acquire the language for referring to past events in a similar pattern.
REFERENCE TO PAST

• Like young children,

  • learners with limited language may simply refer to events in the order in which they occurred

    • My son come. He work in restaurant.

  • or mention a time or place to show that the event occurred in the past.

    • Viet Nam. We work too hard.

• Later, learners start to attach a grammatical morpheme marking the verb for past, although it may not be the one that the target language uses for that meaning.

  • Me working long time. Now stop.
REFERENCE TO PAST

• Past tense forms of irregular verbs may be used before the regular past is used.
  • We went to school every day. We spoke Spanish.

• After they begin marking past tense on regular verbs, learners may overgeneralize the regular -ed ending
  • My sister caught a big fish.
• Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig (2000) and others have found that learners are more likely to mark past tense on some verbs than on others.

• For example, learners are more likely to mark past tense in sentences such as 'I broke the vase' and 'My sister fixed it with glue' than in sentences such as 'She seemed happy last week' or 'My father swam in that lake'.

• These differences appear to be due to the 'lexical aspect', that is, the kinds of meanings expressed by the different verbs.

• Learners seem to find it easier to mark past tense on verbs that refer to something whose end point can easily be determined.

• These are referred to as 'accomplishments' and 'achievements' ('I ran three miles. My brother took an aspirin and went to bed').

• For 'activities' that may continue for some period ('I swam all afternoon') or 'states' that may be perceived as constants ('He seemed happy to sit by the lake'), learners use simple past markers less frequently.
First language can have an influence here too.

Laura Collins (2002) investigated the different English verb forms used by French speakers.

The past tense that is most commonly used in spoken French and that is usually a translation of a simple past form in English is a form that resembles the present perfect in English.

Thus, the equivalent of 'Yesterday he ate an apple' is Hier il a mangé une pomme- literally, 'Yesterday he has eaten an apple'.

Teachers often comment on French speakers' tendency to overuse the present perfect.

In Collins' study, learners completed passages by filling in blanks with the appropriate form of a verb. In places where English speakers would have used the simple past, French speakers did sometimes use the perfect (either present perfect or past perfect) forms.

Furthermore, they used them more frequently than a comparison group of Japanese speakers.

However, the French speakers were more likely to use perfect forms for achievement and accomplishment verbs than for the states and activities.

Collins observes, 'The first language influence does not appear to override the effect of lexical aspect; rather it occurs within it.'
• We have seen in this section that, as in first language acquisition, there are systematic and predictable developmental sequences in SLA.

• However, it is important to emphasize that developmental stages are not like closed rooms. Learners do not leave one behind when they enter another.

• In examining a language sample from an individual learner, one should not expect to find behaviours from only one stage.

• On the contrary, at a given point in time, learners may use sentences typical of several different stages.

• It is perhaps better to think of a stage as being characterized by the emergence and increasing frequency of new forms rather than by the complete disappearance of earlier ones.

• Even when a more advanced stage comes to dominate in a learner's speech, conditions of stress or complexity in a communicative interaction can cause the learner to slip back to an earlier stage.
MORE ABOUT FIRST LANGUAGE INFLUENCE

- Researchers rejected the interpretation of contrastive analysis that viewed transfer or interference as the explanation for all difficulties with the TL.

- Contrastive analysis was closely related to Behaviorism.

- In rejecting Behaviorism, some researchers also rejected contrastive analysis.
Researchers at the European Science Foundation carried out a number of studies to examine the influence of the 1st language.

They studied adult language learners (who had little or no formal 2nd language instruction) learning particular European languages.

For each TL (e.g. German), groups of learners from 2 different first language backgrounds (e.g. Arabic and Japanese) were compared.
MORE ABOUT FIRST LANGUAGE INFLUENCE

Findings:

According to Wolfgang Klein and Clive Perdue (1993),

• There were similarities in the interlanguage patterns of the learners.

• The similarities were greatest in the earliest stages of SLA.
• Nevertheless, we have seen some ways in which the first language interacts with developmental sequences.

• When learners reach a certain stage and perceive a similarity to their first language,
  • they may remain longer at that stage (e.g. the extended use of preverbal 'no' by Spanish speakers)
  • they may add a substage to the sequence (e.g. the German speaker's inversion of subject and verbs in questions)
  • They may learn a second language rule but restrict its application (e.g. the French speaker's rejection of subject-auxiliary inversion with noun subjects)
The first language may influence learners' interlanguage in other ways as well.

- The phenomenon of 'avoidance' that Jacquelyn Schachter (1974) described appeared to be caused by learners' perception that a feature in the TL was so distant and different from their first language that they preferred not to try it.

  e.g. He is a liar - He is not telling the truth/ avoiding past perfect forms/ in the light of
Other researchers have also found evidence of learners' sensitivity to degrees of distance or difference and a reluctance to attempt a transfer a big distance. (an Arabic speaker speaking English vs a French speaker speaking English)

- In one revealing study, Hakan Ringbom (1986) found that the 'interference' errors made in English by both Finnish-Swedish and Swedish- Finnish bilinguals were most often traceable to Swedish, not Finnish.

- The fact that Swedish and English are closely related languages led learners to think that a word or a sentence structure that works in Swedish would have an English equivalent.

- Finnish, on the other hand, belongs to a completely different language family, and learners used Finnish as a source of possible transfer far less often, whether their own first language was Swedish or Finnish.
MORE ABOUT FIRST LANGUAGE INFLUENCE

• However, the risk-taking associated with this perception of similarity has its limits.

• As we noted earlier, learners seem to know that idiomatic or metaphorical uses of words are often unique to a particular language.

• Eric Kellerman (1986) found that Dutch learners of English were often reluctant to accept certain idiomatic expressions or unusual uses of words such as 'The wave broke on the shore' but accepted 'He broke the cup' even though both are straightforward translations of sentences with the Dutch verb breken. (like the in the light of/ by heart example)
MORE ABOUT FIRST LANGUAGE INFLUENCE

• 1st language can affect SLA by making it difficult for learners to notice that what they are saying is not a feature of the TL.

• Lydia White (1991) gave the example of adverb placement in French and English.
MORE ABOUT FIRST LANGUAGE INFLUENCE

• Both languages allow adverbs in several positions in simple sentences. However, as the examples in Table 4.3 show, there are some differences.

• English, but not French, allows SAVO order; French, but not English, allows SVAO order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S = Subject</th>
<th>V = Verb</th>
<th>O = Object</th>
<th>A = Adverb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASVO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often, Mary drinks tea.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Souvent, Marie boit du thé.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SVOA</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary drinks tea often.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie boit du thé souvent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAVO</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mary often drinks tea.</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Marie souvent boit du thé.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVAO</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Mary drinks often tea.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie boit souvent du thé.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The asterisk (*) means that the sentence is not grammatical.*
MORE ABOUT FIRST LANGUAGE INFLUENCE

- It seems fairly easy for
  - French-speaking learners of English to add SAVO (English) to their repertoire
  - English-speaking learners of French to add SVAO (French) to their repertoire

- However, both groups have difficulty getting rid of a form similar to a form in their first language that does not occur in the target language.
  - English-speaking learners of French accept SAVO as grammatical
  - French-speaking learners of English accept SVAO as grammatical

- As White points out, it is difficult to notice that something is not present in the TL, especially when its translation equivalent sounds perfectly all right and communication is not disrupted.
MORE ABOUT FIRST LANGUAGE INFLUENCE

• There are patterns in the development of syntax and morphology that are similar among learners from different language backgrounds.

• Evidence for these developmental patterns first came from studies of learners whose primary learning environment was outside the classroom (who had little or no instruction).

• Subsequent research has shown that learners who receive instruction exhibit similar developmental sequences and error patterns.
MORE ABOUT FIRST LANGUAGE INFLUENCE

• So far this chapter has focused on the acquisition of morphology and syntax in the second language.

• Next class, we are going to turn to the learning of other important components of COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: vocabulary, pragmatics, and pronunciation.