CHAPTER 4: LEARNER LANGUAGE

Content adapted from Lightbown and Spada (2006)
INTRODUCTION

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.
STUDYING THE LANGUAGE
OF L2 LEARNERS

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 L1 affect the acquisition of the L2?

• 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.
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 analyzing 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) coined the term **INTERLANGUAGE**.

**What is interlanguage?**

It is a learners' developing second language knowledge, and it has:

- characteristics of the learner's first language,
- some characteristics of the second language,
- and some characteristics that seem to be general and to occur in all or most interlanguage systems (e.g. the omission of function words and grammatical morphemes).
Is it systematic or dynamic?

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**.

**What is Fossilization?**

It is a persistence lack of change in interlanguage patterns, even after extended exposure to or instruction in the target language.

- 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 pages 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.
ANALYSING LEARNER LANGUAGE

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?
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 the French language uses grammatical morphemes to indicate person and number on verbs and the Chinese language does not, both speakers 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 ESL 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).
• **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)
What are the factors that make 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**
THANK YOU