Variables that Promote Mental Fluency in Second Langauge Learning: The Concern of Automaticity and Proficiency.

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ABSTRACT

A second language is a foreign language which has become domesticated in a country outside its place of origin and functions as a lingua franca of the new country. Our focus is not on teaching methods but on the general principles through which teaching is carried out in the classroom. Also our concern is not on the external variables that promote or inhibit learning, but on the mental processes that enhance learning from explicit knowledge to the development of implicit automatic procedural knowledge. The terminal goal of second language learning is the gaining of proficiency in language use to the point of automaticity. We have chosen the learning of English as a second Language in a non-native culture where English performs the official function as a language of government, Education and Commerce. We have also taken this context because it has so much satisfied the proficiency of spoken and written English irrespective of the method of teaching advanced. To achieve the expected proficiency, we tend to satisfy the following conditions: awareness, input, intake, Output, and Corrective feedback. We achieved this by employing the skills of interaction and practice between the teacher and the learner.

Key Words: Awareness, Input, Output, Automaticity and Proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

1. It presupposes that one who wishes to have a second language must have gotten the first one that is the base. The mother tongue is the first language contact an individual experiences after birth, irrespective of biological origin. The first language, a native language, or mother tongue is the first language or dialect that a person has been exposed to from birth or within the critical period.

First language is the language, which all human beings acquire naturally after birth. It does not require any formal teaching to enable the user to speak it. But it requires formal teaching to learn to read, understand and write it. The teaching goal is to make native speakers literate in their language. For instance, native speakers of either English or Igbo do not go to school to learn how to speak the language. However they learn to read and write the languages at school.

Second Language (L$_2$) can be understood from the following features:

- It has to be learned by the members of the country where it is imported.
- It performs an official language of government business and commerce, education and law etc.
- The learning is usually formal via school environment.
- It is a foreign language.

Going by the above points, a second language is a foreign language which has become domesticated in a country outside its place of origin and functions as a lingua franca of the new country.

In spite of the innovations in methods, language learning in Second Language situation cannot be effective

if the learner is not adequately motivated to do so. The motivation may be socially induced, (integrative motivation). A second language learner is integratively motivated if he is favourably disposed towards the members of the importing community and their culture, in order to make him acculturated. Second language English Learning in Nigeria is not integratively motivated rather, it is (instrumental motivated). The aim is in satisfying communicative needs, that is, to use the language to benefit economically and politically. In Nigerian setting, most parents sacrifice whatever they have to ensure that they send their children to school, to study English language. The objective is that at the end of the programme, the Children will get good jobs, and that will make them to contribute favourably to the economic lots of the families.

French Language is a foreign language in Nigeria. It is commonly studies in secondary schools and Universities in Nigeria. Brown (2000, 2007) and Gass and Selinker (2008) state that Foreign Language Teaching (FL) share the same features with L_2 in the following respects among which include:

- Being imported
- Methodology of teaching remain the same
- The skills of learning are taught
- Learning is essentially organized and formalized etc.

The variables that promote mental processes are briefly summarized and details will follow below hereafter, one after the other. Pre-input awareness has first and second phases. The first is the pinning device for the reception and processing input. A need is noticed and this is essential for learning. The second part of awareness is termed part in-puts, it is awareness through attention and it involves noticing a mismatch in the learners output and the target language form. In-put also is the teaching of facts of the language and the other is drawing the learners attention using various techniques to the learners deviance performance. The learners language intake is the form of instructional in-put. Out-put on its own is the venue through which learners not only produce language but gain attention on certain aspect of their production. Swain and Lapin (1998).

The terminal goal of second language learning is the gaining of proficiency in language use to the point of automaticity. The goal of this work is to map the path through which such proficiency is possible. We have chosen this context because, it is the least studied in literature and because it has proved effective in gaining proficiency in spoken and written English regardless of the teaching method involved. And for such proficiency to be achieved, the following conditions must be satisfied: awareness to learn, an input, an intake, an output and corrective feedback. We shall discuss each of the conditions in turn:

AWARENESS

Dought (2005) claims that learning cannot take place without an awareness of the need to learn and that is known as pre-input awareness that sensitizes the learner of the need to learn. Pre-input awareness is an essential step in the progression to gain automaticity in language use. Pre-input awareness is a pinning device for the reception and processing input. A need is noticed and this is essential for learning (Schmidt, 1990, 1994 Gas and Selinker, 2008).

We also have the second type of awareness which is termed part-input awareness. It is awareness through attention and it involves noticing a mismatch in the learners output and target language form. A corrective feedback is needed for the learner to restructure his out put to match the target language (L_2). This type of awareness is commonly researched into the literature. The central issue in such researchers is whether or not learners should focus on conscious awareness of forms. According to Brown (2007:293) "It seems advantageous for learners to become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and to consciously hold strategic options in their acquisition process".

Brown however, is referring to mismatches which characterize the output of the learner in the context of the

L_2. Awareness is needed for the learner "to consciously weld strategic options" to remedy the mismatches which are noticed through awareness.

We also have input awareness as the third type. It is the explicit instructional input that characterized by the use of positive evidence or well-formed sentences. Schidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis is informed, according to the hypothesis, awareness attracts focal attention which makes it possible for learners to notice language input. (See Robinson, 2055: Ellis, 1997). Learners become aware of explicit instructional input in the form of positive evidence. Awareness attracts attention in the form of noticing to enable the instructional input to be converted into intake.

Awareness to learn and the awareness to what to learn is therefore paramount in the learner's consciousness control of their attention of needs, input and output.

IN-PUT

Input is the learners information either by the teacher or the course book on what is being studied in other to help him learn. Broadly speaking there are two types of such information. One is the teaching of the fact of the language and the other is drawing the learners attention, using various techniques, to the learners deviant performance. Comprehensiveness is the common feature of the two types of input. According to Rost (1990) "some type of comprehension must take place before we can talk of intake and learning".

Comprehension in Rost (1990), may range from understanding of instructional cues to a detailed understanding of linguistics cultures, Gas and Schinker (2008) posit that, there are two processes by which understanding takes place.

- Top Bottom process in which the learner uses prior knowledge (knowledge of L_i) and contextual cues.
- Bottom-up process in which the learner focuses attention on the form of the language. In what we may term as comprehension Hypothesis, it is stated that sematic comprehension is the bedrock of syntactic comprehension and the syntactic comprehension leads to learning, this means, therefore, that, without comprehension of the input, learning cannot occur, (Gass and Schriker (2008)

Comprehension may be defined to mean the learners ability to understanding messages in the language and respond appropriately.

- Speaking is as a result of acquisition and not its cause. Speech cannot be taught directly but "emerges" on its own as a result of building competence via comprehensible input.
- Input is understood and there is enough of it, the necessary grammar is automatically provided. The language teacher needs not to attempt deliberately to teach the next structure along the natural order – it will be provided in just the right quantities and automatically reviewed if the student receives a sufficient amonut of comprehensible input, Gas and Selinker (2008:309).

Our stake therefore is that any second language teaching irrespective of whatever method that is used, that does not invoke explicit instruction and instructional intervention (Corrective feedback) will not succeed.

Instructional Input

Instructional input is graded based on perceived level of complexity. The rule of thumbs is to progress from the simple to the complex. Teachers or course books use various techniques to enhance input in order to draw the learners' attention to salient points in the input. In literature, it is termed input enhancement. See Polio (2007). Input enhancement is not concerned with linguistics processing. It deals with the manipulation of the input by the teacher, the course books in order to provide various shades of explicitness in the input to

ensure comprehension.

Drawing attention to salient points in input enhancement is noticing. Attention of the learner is drawn in other to enable him notice what is to be learnt. This means that noticing is a prerequisite of the input: Sharwood Schmidt (1993). Some examples of the instructional prompts are:

- Repetition of salient points
- Emphasizing a salient point using such cues as
    - Take note
    - This is important etc
- Is this clear?
- Do you understand?

We therefore conclude here that an instructional input that is explicit, comprehensible, graded and enhanced, prepares the learner very well for the next stage of learning.

INTAKE

The learners' language intake is the form that has become internalized by him as a result of instructional input. The fundamental question is: how does it occur? The tax of this work therefore is to explore the means through which learners internalize language forms.

It is believed that implicit processing characterize language acquisition while explicit processing dominate language learning, even though there may be occasional switch to implicit processing. Dekeyser (2005) views that the goal of language learning is to "ensure the development of explicit knowledge into full implicit automatized procedural knowledge". The implication of this view is that learning involves both explicit and implicit processing. Also, Dekeyser (2005) makes a strong claim that the learning of abstract structure by adults process learning explicitly. See Bley – Vroman (1988) we do not share the view of exclusive use of explicit processing by adults, even though we do not have empirical support for our view. Our position is informed by the concept of automaticity which is essentially implicit. If language proficiency is attained through automaticity which involves implicit processing, then it means that adults learn second language both explicitly and implicitly. The implicit processing as Dekeyser (2005) puts it, is time consuming and gradual.

An understanding of the debate on implicit and explicit processing is fundamental to our discussion of intake. We have taken the position that learners process language both explicitly implicitly, but the questions are

- Are implicit and explicit processing independent of each other?Is there any interface between the two?
- Do they occur simultaneously?

The cognitive psychology view on the current issue are:

- Implicit and explicit learning occur simultaneously (Stadler and Frensch, 1998)
- Implicit and explicit learning can never be disentangled empirically, where the evidence of learning gathered is behavioral (Doughty 2005:293)

OUTPUT

According to Swain and Lapkin (1998), Output is the venue through which Learners not only produce

language but also gain feedback. The feedback enables the learner to focus attention on certain aspect of their production. This, inturn, helps the learner to notice either a mismatch between his production and that of target language (L_2) or a deficiency in his output. Swain and Lapkin, pair posit that; noticing leads to either on-the spot reassessment or a loan term intense thinking about the problem. The latter process may lead the curious learner in gathering of additional information from various sources such as direct questioning, consultation of grammar books and dictionaries.

Similarly, output as Swain (1985:128) puts it:

has the tendency of simulating learners to move from the semantic, open-ended, non-deterministic strategic processing prevalent in comprehension to the complex grammatical processing needed for accurate production. Output, thus, would have a potentially significant role in the development of synatax and morphology.

The implication of Swain position is that Output per se stimulates the learner into advancing to complex grammatical processing.

We maintain a chain, though not recognized in the literature. We posit that there are three forms of output – the first type of output, is output which is the output initiated by the processing of instructional input. It is thus output on which corrective input operates. The second form of output. This is equivalent to what is referred to uptake in the literature. It is activated by corrective input. Finally, the third form of output is the attainment of fluency by the learner out of the attainment of automaticity through prolonged or extended practice.

In Swains (1985) comprehensible output is synonymous with our third form output which anchored in automaticity and fluency. At the level of Swains, comprehensible output the learner has attained a certain level of fluency to be able to "modify a previous utterance or try out forms that they have not used before" Swaom (1985:249). It also takes a degree of fluency for the learner to deliver a message that is precise, coherent and appropriate. The above are the characteristics of comprehensible output.

CORRECTIVE INPUT

It is the output of the learner that initiates the interaction between the teacher and the learner from which corrective input derives. In other words corrective input is the various techniques which the teacher uses to draw the attention of the learner to the mismatches in his output. The major characteristics feature of corrective input is the use of negative evidence which has been various defined in the literature.

Pinker (1989) defined negative evidence as the inter language of the learner marked with mismatches with the L_2. In Pinkers view, negative evidence is synonymous with deviant forms from the learners output. There are two ways, teachers make use of negative evidence, depending on the technique or methodology.

- The teacher makes the learner aware of the error and corrects it for the learner who repeats after the teacher the correct form. He does it severally and it becomes part of them.
- The teacher helps the learner to discover the mismatch and makes the learner corrects it by himself through the use of prompts from the teacher. This is how negative evidence is used as a technique to effective learning in second language.

CONCLUSION

The basic concepts as input, intake, output are discussed not only in the context of the mental processes each attracts, but also from a new perspective. Our position is that second language learning cannot be initiated

unless there is an awareness to learn and awareness of what to learn. In this perspective, awareness is defined as the learners conscious control of their attention to some aspect of need, input and output. Brown (2000, 2007). It is the output of the learner that initiates the interaction between the teacher and the learner from which corrective input derives.

The goal of second language learning is the attainment of automaticity epitomized in fluency, practice becomes another form of processing of corrective input. The importance of practice that appeals to us is the practice that aids in understanding how information might become automatized. Fluency is promoted through the automatic execution of pronunciation, grammatical processing and word recognition. Fluency facilitates communication and increases motivation to use of language.

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