

Universal Grammar Plays a Minor Role in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract. Based on Chomsky, Universal Grammar (UG) refers to the common principles and features of human language. This essay aims to indicate that UG plays a minor role in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) through providing a series of supporting ideas. These ideas contain (1) the knowledge of second language was acquired through some other senses of human brains, which was not through language sense—Universal Grammar, (2) Native Language (NL) plays a major in SLA, and (3) Bley-Vorman's Fundamental Difference Hypothesis.

Keywords: Universal Grammar; Second Language Acquisition; foreign language learning.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the theories and methods of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) are developing. Linguists discuss some issues of SLA frequently, such as *which is more important for acquiring language knowledge, talent or the accumulation in learning process? Does Universal Grammar play a major or minor in Second Language Acquisition? Or how does Native Language (NL) effect Second Language Acquisition?*

Since Chomsky's idea Universal Grammar (UG) was came out in 1981, there have been more discussions about its effect to Second Language Acquisition. Chomsky's theory "Principles and Parameters" applied UG in the research of SLA, which aimed to indicate the common principles and features of human language (1981). Because of the differences of learner's first language (L1) and second language (L2), whether UG plays a major role in SLA or not is still a main issue for linguists. Based on the review and summary of some academic researches and experimental findings, I suppose that Universal Grammar plays a minor role in Second Language Acquisition. This essay aims to provide supporting ideas to UG playing a minor role in SLA. Generally, the body of the essay will be divided into two parts: the first part will have an overview of Universal Grammar including the relationships of UG and L1 acquisition and UG and SLA; in the second section, it will be concerned with some theories to be presented to support my argument, such as (1) L2 knowledge is not acquired through language function; (2) native language has large effect to SLA; (3) the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bley-Vorman, 1989 and 2009). In addition, there will be a conclusion of the ideas in the end of the essay.

2. A Brief Description of Universal Grammar

The Universal Grammar (UG) theory indicates that a series of general grammar principles consist in all human languages and human languages can be connected with each other (Chomsky, 1981). It aims to solve the logical problem in language acquisition. Chomsky's "Principles and Parameters" theory of UG (1981) stated general principles and parameters of UG.

2.1 UG in L1 Acquisition

First of all, Universal Grammar was pointed out for Native Language Acquisition. Lydia White (1989: 2) claimed "UG constitutes the child initial state (S0), the knowledge that child is equipped with in advance of input". A child's ability of first language acquisition is an innate talent, accumulated in the native language environment and need not be taught. It is a sort of "biological endowment" (Chomsky, 1986). Thus, L1 acquisition is constrained by UG largely (Chomsky, 1981). In this condition, the first language knowledge that children acquire is called "unconscious

knowledge”, which means that none of this knowledge appears to be taught (White, 1989). Therefore, Universal Grammar plays a major role in Native Language Acquisition.

2.2 UG and L2 Acquisition

Since UG is so important in L1 acquisition, the arguments *whether it is quite essential in L2 acquisition as well or does L2 acquisition also have logical problem* have been discussed warmly in recent years. Robert Bley-Vroman (1989) pointed out that the logical problem of SLA in adulthood was the same as that of child’s L1 acquisition while the problem was different as well. He claimed “Foreign language learning differs in the degree of success, in the character and uniformity of the resulting system, in its susceptibility factors such as motivation, and in the previous state of the organism...” (1989: 41). Therefore, UG can affect L2 acquisition in some ways, but it differs from that of L1 acquisition in some degrees.

3. Theories to Support the Argument that UG Plays a Minor Role in SLA

In the discussions of the effects of UG to Second Language Acquisition, the supporters of UG theory hold the opinion that it is the same as UG for L1 acquisition whereas others believe UG could not play a major role in L2 acquisition. Based on the researches and experimental findings, I think UG plays a minor role in SLA. There will be presented some theories that can provide support ideas to my argument in the following part.

3.1 The Other Senses of the Brains for SLA

What part of brain senses do learners use to acquire second language knowledge? Clashes and Muiyken (1986) indicated that UG could not influence L2 acquisition. They said that the knowledge of second language was acquired through some other senses of human brains, which was not through language sense—Universal Grammar. This theory denied the effects of UG to SLA fundamentally. The other researchers who agreed with this theory like Rod Ellis (1994: 454) presented two points of view: (a) there were extremely differences between adult’s L2 acquisition and L1 acquisition; (b) the reasons of the differences were that L2 learners acquired language knowledge through learning strategies and instructions while L1 learners learned their native language by language sense—UG. Therefore, UG has little effect to L2 acquisition.

3.2 Native Language’S Direct Effect to SLA

Generally, there are two ways that L2 learners acquire second language knowledge, which are Native Language (NL) and Universal Grammar (UG). Which one is more important? There is a point of view that the initial state of second language learning is the grammar of native language. Clashes and Muiyken (1989) and Schachter (1989) pointed out the unconscious knowledge that the second language learners learned could not be acquired through UG directly, but got from NL grammar. In other words, the UG cannot act on SLA directly, but L2 acquisition can be affected largely by L1 knowledge that is constrained by UG. The reason why the L2 knowledge that the L2 learners acquire can reflect some principles of UG is that they have learned these principles when they acquired L1 knowledge that was constrained by UG. Thus, this theory supports that NL plays a major role in SLA.

3.3 Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bley-Vorman, 1989 and 2009)

It can be proved that adult foreign language learning (L2 acquisition) is quite different from child language development (child’s first language acquisition) by the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bley-Vorman, 1989). Thus, the role that UG plays in SLA cannot be the same as UG in L1 acquisition.

Firstly, in 1989, Robert Bley-Vorman stated the fundamental characteristics of foreign language learning (L2 acquisition), which are lack of success (the most striking one), general failure (the rareness of complete success), variation in success, course and strategy, variation in goals, fossilization, indeterminate intuitions, importance of instruction, negative evidence and role of

affective factor. Basically, the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bley-Vorman, 1989) indicates that differences exist in child's language acquisition and adult foreign language learning; the child learns language knowledge in two ways mainly: "Universal Grammar" and "domain-specific learning procedures" while the adult acquires a second language based on "native language knowledge" and "general problem-solving systems". And he said "the nature of the difference is internal, linguistic, and qualitative" (1989). Moreover, since twenty years has passed, there are some advances of this hypothesis (Bley-Vorman, 2009): (1) both L1 and L2 grammars make use of patches, but in different degrees; (2) non-domain-specific procedures also develops into L1 acquisition, not only in SLA; (3) both L1 and L2 processing can use shallow phrases, in different degrees (L1 slightly while L2 heavily). Due to the differences of the approaches of L1 and L2 acquisition, UG does not play the same role as that in L1 learning in SLA, which is a minor role.

These are some theories that support my argument UG plays a minor role in Second Language Acquisition. There must be any other hypothesis and will be more support ideas to research for this argument in the future.

4. Summary

To sum up, Universal Grammar (UG) refers to a set of general principles of all the human language and I argue that it plays a minor role in Second Language Acquisition. Firstly, in L1 acquisition, UG plays a major role that it constrains native language learning. But in L2 acquisition, although UG also influences it, there is no doubt that the function of UG in SLA is quite less than that in L1 learning. Secondly, some theories are stated to support the idea that is the minor position of UG in SLA. The first one is that some researchers pointed out that L2 knowledge was acquired by some other senses of human brains, which was learned by language sense—Universal Grammar. That denied the influence of UG to SLA fundamentally. The second theory is that some researches illustrate that comparing with UG, Native Language (NL) plays a major in SLA. That theory shows that UG affects L2 acquisition through learner's first language. The last theory is Bley-Vorman's Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (1989, 2009). This hypothesis indicated the differences between child's first language acquisition (through UG and domain-specific learning procedures) and adult's L2 acquisition (through native language knowledge and general problem-solving systems), which confirmed the minor effect of UG to SLA. These are some theories that I stated to support the argument that Universal Grammar plays a minor role in Second Language Acquisition.

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