

An Investigation of One Aspect of a Learner's Second Language Development: The Use of the Past Tense in Learner's Production

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Abstract. This paper aims to explore how a Chinese girl majoring in Bio-informatics in Leeds University, performed in the target language, English. By means of analyzing the language she was called on to produce both learners and teachers will benefit from this investigation in their future language learning and language teaching. The writer interviewed her subject and recorded their talks and then did the transcription. After transcribing Task 1 and Task 2 of their talks, the writer would analyze them to see the difference of her performance in these two talks as she was using the target language. The main focus of the analysis was on a single subsystem of grammar: the error analysis in her use of the past tense form in Task 1 and Task 2.

Keywords: Investigation; language development; SLA; error analysis; past tense; implications.

1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) took place around the end of the 1960s. Since then, it has developed rapidly and has continued to do so. Why does SLA research attract so many attentions? Because the main goal of SLA research is to describe and explain how learners acquire a second language. The research can help both teachers and learners with language teaching and language learning. An important starting point in the study of SLA is the study of the language that learners produce. The study of learner language can provide researchers with insights into the process of acquisition. This paper is aimed to undertake a systematic investigation on how a language learner performs in the use of the target language, English. By comparison and contrast of the language(Task 1 and Task 2) the learner produce in the interview in terms of a specific grammar feature: the use of the past tense form, the writer will find out the strengths and weaknesses in her performance and the implications for the learner's continuing language development and implications for English language teachers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Error Analysis.

One of the first ways in which researchers try to investigate L2 is through the analysis of learner errors. As Corder (1967) puts teachers, learners and researchers can benefit from error analysis. Through error analysis, researchers can get information about how language is learnt. After analyzing errors, learners can understand what the rules of the target language are and what the sources of the errors they make are. Thus learners can benefit from it and then can improve their language proficiency better. According to behaviorist theories, errors are viewed as the result of the negative transfer of learners' L1 habits. In other words, L1 is the cause of the learners' error. Although the study of learners' error shows that many errors are caused by L1 interference, many more do not result from it. There may be some intralingua errors, which 'reflect the general characteristics of the rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply' and development errors too. (Rechards, 1971b).

But researchers find that just focus on error analysis can't help much to have a full understanding of SLA, so it is necessary to think about the whole picture of learner language in order to reveal the system of rules that learners construct at different stages of development. They find L2 acquisition proceeds in a regular and systematic way. Almost all learners have experienced stages of a silent

period, the use of formulaic speech and structural and semantic simplification which is very common in the unplanned or spontaneous speech. (Ellis 1994)

2.2 Language Variability.

Another important characteristic of learner language is its variability. Learners sometimes make an error in the use of a specific target-language structure, and sometimes so not, because variability is one of the features of learner language. The variability can be influenced by three kinds of context: the linguistic context, the situational context and psycholinguistic context. (Ellis, 1994) Ellis says the psycholinguistic context refers to the extent to which the type of language use affords time for planning and encourages or discourages monitoring. Ochs found that in unplanned discourse “speakers rely more on the immediate context to help them convey their message, make use of syntactic structures that tend to emerge early during acquisition” (cited from Ellis 1994). For example, when learners are called to produce a spontaneous speech, it is very likely that they prefer to use the present tense rather than the past tense, even when they are telling a story happened a long time ago because they learn the present tense before the past tense. In one of his studies Ellis also found that the availability of planning time systematically affected the accuracy with which at least some target variants are performed. Different tasks have an influence on learners’ performance.

3. Investigation

3.1 A Brief Account of the Task.

In order to have a better investigation of how my subject acquires English and how the investigation conducted in this paper benefits both teachers and the learner, I would interview her informally and then transcribe the two talks in our interview. In Task 1, she is supposed to tell why and when she decided to learn English and her experiences of interacting with English speaking people and the problems she encountered. In Task 2, she would retell a story, one of her memorable journeys traveling from China to UK.

3.2 Description.

The data of the interview was transcribed in normal orthography. Some verbs, which could not be clearly transcribed, were excluded from the analysis. Each verb was scored as correct or deviant in context requiring the use of past tense. When there was the exact repetition of any verbs in a single sentence which was very common in oral speech, only once was counted. However, in cases where the first attempt was deviant and the second attempt was correct, only the second correct attempt was included in the scoring. Look at the table 1 and table 2.

Table 1 Analysis result of the use of the past tense

	The number of correct past tense form used	The number of the non-use past tense form when necessary	The total number of the past tense form needed
Task 1	6	2	8
Task 2	21	23	44

Table 2 Percentage of correct and deviant forms for past the tense

	% correct	% deviant
Task 1	75	25
Task 2	247.7	52.3

Table 1 shows in Task 1 there are 8 occasions which the past tense form is needed. Among these, the subject used the correct past tense form 6 times and didn’t use it for twice when necessary. In Task 2, there are 44 occasions which the past tense form is demanded, but the subject only used the correct past tense form 21 times and misused the tense 23 times. Table 2 shows the percentage of correct and deviant past tense form in Task 1 and Task 2. Both tables show that the subject did a much better job in Task 1 than in Task 2. Why are there big differences in the subject’s performance in Task 1 and Task 2. What are the sources of these errors? A detailed discussion of the results follows.

3.3 Discussion.

Table 1 and Table 2 above show that the subject spoke more fluently and more accurately in Task 1 than in Task 2. According to Ellis's variability theory, we know that learner language is characterized by its variability. Skehan & Forster explored the impact of two things on fluency, accuracy and complexity: task type and presence /absence of planning (from Martin Bygate's handouts 2004). Dickerson's study also shows second language learners perform variably on different task. (cited from Ellis 1987)

There are three reasons why the subject performed better in Task 1. First, the subject was guided to talk according to the questions the interviewer asked and these questions may help to give the subject a hint of which tense should be used. Second, all the questions the interviewer asked were about the subject's own personal information, which was quite familiar to her. Third, some of the questions in Task 1 need to be answered in the simple present tense, which the subject had little difficulties in using, especially when there was no third singular subject appeared. Therefore, she produced a more fluent and more accurate language in this task. On the other hand, in Task 2, the subject was asked to retell a story, which involved a sequencing and/or interpretation problem. Although she may be a little familiar with the content of the story she was going to tell, she still needed to recall the story and organize how to tell in a sequential way because the story happened sometime ago. There was no guidance from the interviewer this time and she had to retell the whole story all by herself. In Task 2, she had no time to pay attention both to the content and sequence of the story and the means of expression at the same time. The result helps to further prove that both task types and presence/absence of planning will have a great influence on how learners perform when they use the target language.

Risk-taking is one of the characteristics she has in her speech, which is necessary for progress in language learning. She felt free to speak English without worrying that there might be mistakes or errors in her speech, which is very important to build her confidence in learning. She used many communicative strategies in her speech, which made the language she produced sounded very fluent. For example, she used various kinds of hesitation, (repetition, pauses, ellipses ,etc) which can slow down output and create planning time for her to think about what to say next. When she realized she made errors, she could self-correct them immediately. Some formulaic expressions also helped her speech be fluent. When some messages produced by the interlocutor were misunderstood or partially understood by her, she used one of the interactional modifications, the discourse repair, to help to achieve the understanding.

Although she could communicate with others in English successfully, there are some weak points in her performance. First, there are some grammatical errors which are greatly influenced by her first language, Chinese, such as "half is because you have to, half is because..." and "I like here people." All these grammatical errors make her speech lack of accuracy. Second, the sentence structure and the vocabulary she used are too simple. There are only one or two compound sentences and there isn't any relative clause used in her speech. It means her speech lacks complexity. Because of the lack of accuracy and complexity in her speech, she could not be said to be a very advanced and successful learner. In order to be able to communicate perfectly, she needs to do more in her future learning.

3.4 Implications.

Implications for her continuing language development

Since she already has an important characteristic which is necessary for progress in language learning, risk-learning, being a successful and advanced learner is not far from her. But she needs to take the following suggestions: First, seek more opportunity to interact with native speakers. Foreign talk can help to promote communication and even teach the language implicitly (Rod Ellis 1994). Native speakers can also provide learners with the accurate input both in terms of grammar and correct means of expressing ideas. Second, in order to improve her language complexity, she can take advantage of authentic materials in UK, for example, listening to the radio, watching TV programme and reading newspapers. As she accepts the input, if she could consciously pay attention to how others are using the real language, it can help her language become real too. Excluding these, she

even can tape record what she says and then analyze it to see what problems are there. By doing so, she may not make same errors next time.

Implications for teachers

Teachers should balance form-focused and meaning-focused instruction because only instruction which focuses primarily on meaning, but allows for a focus in grammar at the same time can work best (Lightbown, 1994). Teachers should tell students how a particular structure in a learner's first language differs from the target language. This is a crucial point since if students know the difference between L1 and L2, there would be less possibility that the language they produce is interfered by their first language. In the process of teaching, teachers should adopt Ellis' theory of developmental patterns of second language: order and sequence in SLA. Some features of the target language are acquired before others. Only when students are developmentally ready to learn some linguistic features, can they learn well. It means the knowledge teachers impart to students should be from simplicity to complexity. If the input students receive is far beyond their reach, they may fail, thus lose confidence and interest in learning English.

4. Summary

The research method used in this paper is highly recommendable: interview, transcription, description and discussion. The systematic investigation of one aspect of a learner's second language development: the use of the past tense in learner's production conducted here will benefit both learners and teachers with their future language learning and language learning. This investigation can also provide researchers with insights into the process of acquisition in SLA.

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