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Variability in Interlanguage

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Abstract
Interlanguage is a common phenomena in second language (L2) acquisition. In the process of L2 acquisition, variability, defined as the performance of L2 learners who use more than one variants of target language where native speakers of the target variety use only one (Towell and Hawkins 1994:142) frequently appears. This paper is to review and examine explanations of the nature of variability in interlanguage. The paper begins with the distinctions of two sources of linguistic knowledge proposed by Schwartz (1994). Next, Krashen's (1985) and Schwartz's (1993) view on the role of input in the development of L2 learning, and a modular view of the human mind are illustrated, followed by the proposal of parameter resetting and shallow structure hypothesis by Clahsen and Felser (2006). Finally, a number of conclusions are drawn with regard to the initial variation of interlanguage system.
Key words: variability, interlanguage, parameter resetting

1. Introduction

In L2 acquisition, there are two sources of knowledge, i.e. competence and learned linguistic knowledge L2 learners may draw on in interlanguage (Schwartz 1993), namely competence and learned linguistic knowledge as well as distinctions between performance and learned linguistic behavior. The different knowledge sources may result in corresponding differences in performance and learned linguistic behavior. As competence is the innate linguistic knowledge based on Universal Grammar, which can be acquired by triggering innately determined parameters through exposure to positive evidence, such knowledge is involved with Language Specific Module. Learned linguistic knowledge, on the other hand, is the mental conscious learned knowledge, which can be gained on the basis of explicit instruction and/or negative feedback (as there is a difference between implicit and explicit instruction instruction by Ellis (2005)). It is involved with general cognitive abilities (Towell and Hawkins 1994) and explicit language knowledge (Shin and Christianson 2012).

There is an obvious distinction between performance and learned linguistic behavior, according to Towell and Hawkins (1994), competence underlies performance, learned linguistic behavior is the expression of the learned linguistic knowledge; competence gives rise in a fairly direct manner to performance, which is therefore variable in accordance with the growth of positive evidence. The variety of learned linguistic behavior is displayed by the growth of explicit instruction and/or negative feedback. The issue of the criteria to judge performance vs learned linguistic behavior arises, since the distinctions between competence and learned linguistic knowledge help to judge whether an instance of linguistic behavior is an example of performance or learned linguistic behavior. If an instance of linguistic behavior is based on internal parameter setting and involved with Language Specific Module, the behavior is performance; if an instance of linguistic is resulted from apparent parameter setting, as opposed to the internal parameter setting, and concerned with general cognitive abilities, the behavior is learned linguistic behavior.

2. Linguistic input vs its role in L2 learning

The two sources of knowledge that underlie the behavior of L2 learners are derived from two kinds of linguistic input, namely the positive evidence and negative feedback, each kind of input as claimed by Krashen (1985) and Schwartz (1993) plays its unique role in L2 learning. *Positive evidence* refers to the data about what sorts of things L2 allows, such data are available only by actual exposure to grammatical utterances. While *negative feedback* is the data about the nonoccurrence of certain forms in the L2, such data are available either by being explicitly told what is ungrammatical or being inferred that it is ungrammatical on the basis of the fact that no one has ever said that (O'Grady 1997).

In Krashen's (1985) view the comprehensible input is useful in altering a L2 learner's grammar, other kinds of L2 input, e.g. formal instructions are in the building of learned linguistic knowledge. According to Schwartz (1993), positive evidence can only engage Universal Grammar, the grammatical knowledge that guides language

processing (VanPatten 2002), negative feedback not only can lead to the building of learned linguistic knowledge, but also can supplement the role of positive evidence in L2 learning.

3. Linguistic input vs its effects in mental module

The above mentioned two kinds of linguistic input from which competence and learned linguistic knowledge derived are processed by different mental systems, and thus have effects on interlanguage knowledge, which involves the modular view of human mind to be described below.

A modular view of the human mind by Fodor's (1983) Modularity of Mind maintains that there are limited numbers of modules within the human mind, say, among the human mind, there are language module, vision module and other modules as well. Each module is dedicated to a particular kind of processing on a particular kind of stimulation. Representations of what is perceived are ultimately accessible as input by computational analysis to the more global central processing systems, which are claimed to be the central processor in the actual language use (Ellis, 2005). Among which, Krashen's and Schwartz's views on input effects are noteworthy.

Krashen's (1985) view on the effects of input to the mental module of the human kind is known as Input Hypothesis. Krashen claims that there is an innate mental structure capable of handling language acquisition, the very specific comprehensible input (i+1) comes into the mental structure through affective filter, where the learners' L2 grammar is acquired. The other kinds of input are inhibited by the filter from reaching mental structure and the learned linguistic knowledge is gained. Schwartz's (1993) information encapsulation holds that feedback and/or information that is not part of the language module is unavailable for its computational operation. Positive evidence as the appropriate part goes through the language module to get to the central processing systems, and has effects on Universal Grammar-based competence. In contrast, negative data as the inappropriate part are disallowed to feed into the language module and result in learned linguistic knowledge.

Although positive evidence plays the central role in the building of competence knowledge, the role of negative data also seems to be necessary. As negative data can provide the learner with the right data to ultimately create the desired system of L2 knowledge, without such data, L2 learner will not discover an incorrect system, that is to say, negative data enable the learners to reset parameters to their correct values. However, the studies by Towell and Hawkins (1994) suggest that parameter resetting is unlikely to take place with L2 learners whose exposure to L2 is through explicit instruction and negative feedback, the learners behaved in one context *as if* the parameter had been reset.

4. Parameter resetting vs variable behavior

Parameter settings of the L2 learner are changed by different evidence and represent different source of knowledge, the behavior in Towell's study is the controlled processing from the source of learned linguistic knowledge, where two factors are involved in parameter resetting, which involves two kinds of evidence, one is positive evidence that can directly cause the parameter resetting, which represents competence knowledge that plays a vital role in language processing (Spada 2010). Another one, i.e. negative feedback which indirectly cause the parameter resetting, represents the learned linguistic knowledge (Gass and Selinker 1994), which can be seen form the variable behavior in Towell's study.
In the study of Towell and Hawkins a group of French-speaking learners of English came to know the correct adverb placement in English after being exposed to explicit instruction and negative feedback, but they reverted to using the incorrect orders in the one year later follow-up-test. That is to say, explicit instruction and negative feedback fail to reset the parameter to the level of L2. Such behavior took place in this context that the learners' internal parameter settings still kept intact, learned linguistic knowledge served as the source of their behavior. This type of behavior involves controlled processing which requires that "the subject pay attention to the processing while it is happening" (Towell and Hawkins 1994:163).

The initial controlled processing in real-time context is expressed in nonsystematic variability. Nonsystematic variability occurs where a learner uses two or more variants apparently interchangeably in a given context under the same condition (Towell and Hawkins 1994:144). Such variable behavior is either from the source of learned linguistic knowledge or competence and characterized with the controlled occurrence of free alternative variants in the initial stage.

As nonsystematic variability is from the source of learned linguistic knowledge, however, because of its nature, such knowledge should not be able to bring about a change in parameter setting. Since parameter values are part

of competence knowledge, i.e. of the language module. The language module cannot access information from other cognitive systems. As such, learned linguistic knowledge is computed and stored in the central processing systems, and results in the apparent parameter resetting (Towell and Hawkins 1994).

Towell's study the nonsystematic variability from which apparent parameter setting is resulted can be interpreted from shallow structure hypothesis (Clahsen and Felser 2006), which involves learners' ability to process the linguistic input in real time. According to which, the representations adults L2 learners compute during processing contain less syntactic detail than those of child and adult native speakers, resulting the variability happening that is apparent in grammatical processing.

5. Conclusions

To sum, the initial variable performance of L2 learner in interlanguage, namely nonsystematic variability is attributable to the source of learned linguistic knowledge and which is constructed on the basis of negative data (explicit instruction) and processed by general cognitive abilities, at this level the value of internal parameter setting still keeps intact. Moreover, the related processing knowledge in the real-time situation the learners behave may serve as supplement role in L2 performance.

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