

Native-like English Speaking Proficiency: A Dream Come True?

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Introduction

Most teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL, hereafter) in Thailand who have seen their students struggle through the painstaking process of learning English must be startled by a claim made by some language schools that through the schools' teaching method of natural approach, EFL adult learners can become near native when speaking English. With this claim, EFL teachers, as well as adult learners, would probably like to know if it is possible to achieve native-like English proficiency, or at least to become near native when speaking English. This paper attempts to address this issue by looking at similarities and differences between first language acquisition (FLA, hereafter), which is the acquisition of native speakers, and second language acquisition (SLA, hereafter), which is the acquisition of adult L2 learners, as well as to provide some evidence supporting each position.

First Hypothesis Regarding SLA and FLA

So far there have been two strong hypotheses with regard to SLA. The first holds that SLA is like FLA (Corder, 1967; Ervin-Tripp, 1974; Dulay and Burt, 1974; among others). The second states that SLA is different from FLA (Selinker, 1972). The first hypothesis comes from the underlying assumption that the innate and universal structural properties of the mind still operate in SLA, like they do in FLA. Dulay and Burt (1974a), among advocates of this hypothesis, claimed that when learning L2, learners go through a process called "Creative Construction." That is, like L1, L2 learners reconstruct rules for the

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speech they hear, guided by strategies that derive from certain innate mechanisms that cause them to formulate certain types of hypotheses about the language system being acquired, until the mismatch between what they are exposed to and what they produce is resolved.

Corder (1967) also supported this argument. He stated that the hypothesis of FLA -- that a child is born with an innate predisposition to acquire language and that he possesses an internal mechanism of unknown nature which enables him to construct a grammar of a particular language from the limited data available to him -- is also applicable to SLA. Corder further cited Palmer who maintained that human beings are all equipped by nature with the capacity for assimilating language and that this capacity remains available to him in a latent state after acquisition of L1. He, then, postulated that the procedures or strategies adopted by the L2 learner are similar to those adopted by the L1 learner.

Evidence which supports the first hypothesis mostly comes from morpheme studies in SLA. For instance, Dulay and Burt's (1974b) study revealed that Chinese- and Spanish-speaking children acquired English morphemes in the same sequence. So they concluded that universal cognitive mechanisms were the basis for the child's organization of L2 as there seemed to be a universal order in acquiring certain language structures. A similar result was also reported in adult L2 learners Fathman (1979), who found that regardless of different L1 backgrounds, adult L2 learners acquired English morphemes in the same order as that of L1 learners.

Second Hypothesis Regarding SLA and FLA

The second hypothesis postulates that SLA is different from FLA. This hypothesis can be discussed from the perspective of the Critical Period hypothesis. Lenneberg (in Brown, 1980) posited that natural language acquisition by mere exposure can take place only during the critical period which he believed to last from the age of two to puberty. This is a period after which language is increasingly difficult to acquire as, after puberty, the brain will lose its cerebral plasticity because of the completion of the process of cerebral dominance or the lateralization of the language function. Thus, most adult L2 learners may learn L2 with difficulty and will not be able to overcome non-native accent.

The theory of contrastive analysis also reflects the idea that SLA and FLA are not identical (Flynn, 1987). This theory is based on the underlying assumption that difficulty in language learning comes from the differences between L1 and L2. The major barrier to SLA comes from the interference of L1 system with the L2 system. By comparing certain systems of L1 and L2, areas of difficulty which will be problematic for L2 learners can be predictable (Sridhar, 1980). Supporting evidence often cited to illustrate this point are examples of interference of L1 with L2 learning; for example, Japanese speakers hardly distinguish between /r/ and /l/ simply because these two sounds are not phonemic in their L1 (Flynn, 1987).

Another theory in favor of the differences between SLA and FLA is the interlanguage theory as proposed by Selinker (1972), who took a psycholinguistic view towards language acquisition. He advocated a model called "Interlanguage." This model is based on the concept of latent psychological structure which is assumed to be latent in the brain and activated when one attempts to learn L2. Latent psychological structure consists of five central processes -- language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of L2 learning, strategies of L2 communication and overgeneralization of the target language linguistic material. When learning L2, the learner progresses through successive stages at which he tries to construct some linguistic systems on his way to the mastery of L2. These stages are referred to as stages of interlanguage, which are independent from L1 and L2. Perhaps, only 5% can achieve native speaker's competence as most learners will end up with the interlanguage which is closest to but not the same as L2. Another mechanism which is also included in the latent psychological structure is fossilization. Fossilizable linguistic phenomena are "linguistic items, rules, and sub-systems which speakers of a particular native language will tend to keep in their interlanguage relative to a particular target language, no matter what the age of the learner or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the target language" (Selinker, 1972, p. 177). Therefore, the interlanguage theory also supports the differences between SLA and FLA since there will always be differences between the performance of most adults L2 learners and native speakers.

Evidence of interlanguage is cited in Sridhar (1980). Nemser, for instance, found that Hungarian-speaking learners when acquiring English phonology exhibited frequent and systematic occurrence of element deriving from neither Hungarian, nor English. Richards finds from the results of error analysis in various L2 learning situations that many of the errors produced by learners can be accounted for in terms of one or more of the central processes proposed by Selinker.

Moreover, differences between SLA and FLA can be accounted for by sociocultural factors, psychological factors and learning styles (Kachru, 1988). Brown (1980), for example, stated that adult L2 learners have already built up a culture-bound world view and view of himself and thus, they learn L2 at a slow progress. Unlike adult L2 learners, children naturally acquire their L1 with hardly any difficulty. Regarding psychological factors, Krashen (1981) argued that the affective filter also places constraints on SLA. When adult L2 learners lack confidence or are unmotivated, their affective filter is up, which means they will not successfully learn a language. However, when they are not anxious and want to be part of L2 speaking group, then their filter is down, which means they will successfully learn a language.

Conclusion

Therefore, judging from the two hypotheses and research evidence in favor of each position mentioned above, one can see that the second hypothesis is more tenable. Apparently the first hypothesis cannot account for the following facts that most EFL teachers usually notice especially in adult SLA: Not all L2 learners are able to acquire L2; i.e. they may have learned L2 for 10 or more years, but they still make mistakes in L2; and most adults end up with a marked non-native accent. So SLA is not the same as FLA. And as a result, it can be concluded that adult L2 learners or non-native English speaking students can hardly achieve native-like speaking proficiency. EFL teachers should be aware of the differences between SLA and FLA because not only will such awareness provide them with a more profound knowledge in SLA, but it will also help them set teaching goals which can be realized, thereby leading to success in second language teaching and learning in the future.

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