

TEMA 2. TEORÍAS GENERALES DEL APRENDIZAJE Y ADQUISICIÓN DE LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS. EL CONCEPTO DE INTERLENGUA. EL TRATAMIENTO DE LOS ERRORES.

UNIT 2. GENERAL THEORIES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ACQUISITION. THE ITERLANGUAGE CONCEPT. ERROR TREATMENT

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I. INTRODUCTION

This unit points out the most outstanding theories about how languages are learnt.

It is well known that many languages theories have appeared in the history of second language acquisition (SLA). These researches have been focused on two points of view. On the one hand, there is the study of how general learning theories have been applied to a specific type of learning that is to say, the learning of a second language. It is here at this point where we can pay attention to the BEHAVIOURIST, MENTALIST AND INTERACTIONIST language learning theories.

On the other hand, we will see through specific theories of SLA. One of them is Krashen's monitor model which concentrates on the importance of comprehensible input. But we should not forget about Schumann's Acculturation Model, Giles and Byrne's Intergroup Model, and Gardner's socio-educational model which seem to agree with the idea that a successful language acquisition depends on the social factors.

Our first issue will be the analysis of general learning theories that we mentioned above, BEHAVIOURISM, MENTALISM AND INTERACTIONISM. We will follow with the analysis of Inter-language Theory. Finally, we will talk about the main findings of research on error treatment.

II. GENERAL THEORIES OF SLA.

We can distinguish three outstanding theories that differ one from each other because of the importance they give to internal and external factors in the process of language learning. Thus, we have the BEHAVIOURIST theories which focus on the importance of the environment when learning a second language. Second, MENTALIST or COGNITIVIST theories emphasize the importance of the learner's innate abilities. Third, INTERACTIONIST THEORIES, which defend the learner's abilities and environmental factors in acquiring a second language.

II.1 BEHAVIOURIST LEARNING THEORIES AND THEIR APPLICATION TO SLA.

According to the behaviourists, the process of learning, verbal or non-verbal, depends entirely on the habit formation. Learners receive linguistic input from speakers in their environment and positive reinforcement for their correct repetitions and imitations. As a result habits are formed. In this sense we must understand that a person learning a second language finds a

helpful item in the habits of their first language. But these habits are not the most appropriate for second language production and this forces the learner to produce new ones.

As for the errors, behaviourists believe they are an evidence of non-learning since they are seen as first habits interfering with the acquisition of second language habits. This theory has been linked to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado 1957) (CAH). They claim that the learner will not have any difficulties when there are similarities between L1 and L2. On the contrary, the learner will have difficulties when differences between the two languages appear. This will provoke errors. As they are seen as a sign of non-learning they must be avoided. Contrastive Analysis was a procedure based on comparing L1 and L2 linguistic and cultural patterns in order to predict errors. Soon this theory was criticized due to the fact that not all errors predicted by CAH are actually made and also that some errors that learners do cannot be predicted following this theory. Besides, there was the belief that there are errors which are common to learners from different language backgrounds which can be also compared to those made by children when learning their mother tongue.

This explanation leads to the conclusion that behaviourist learning theories of SLA seem to be incomplete and poor. This has led to researchers to look for more complex learning theories.

II.2 MENTALIST THEORIES OF SLA: THE CONCEPT OF INTERLANGUAGE

Mentalist theories are based on Chomsky's innate theories on First Language Acquisition (FLA). Chomsky claimed that we are born with a language faculty called Universal Grammar that helps us to learn the language of the environment easily. This language faculty will work if the child is in touch with a rich linguistic environment. Thus, the child forms his own grammar of the language through a process of hypothesis formation and hypothesis testing. These two concepts differ from imitation and reinforcement, explained by the behaviourists. In mentalist theories, the child has an active role in the process of language acquisition, in which the environment is a mere helper of his innate abilities, whereas in behaviourist learning theories the environment is the engine in language acquisition.

These innatist theory proposed by Chomsky has led to the concept of INTERLANGUAGE theory which we will explain with more details in the next chapter. This theory was born in the late 60's and 70's when it was believed that behaviourist theories of L2 learning were inadequate. L2 learners, like L1 learners were provided with a built-in syllabus which guided their process of learning (Corder 1967). Selinker created the term inter-language to refer to the special mental grammars that learners constructed during the process of learning. This theory claimed that learners had an active role when constructing these grammars. Their

behaviour and errors were self-controlled. The learners produced strategies that helped them to create new grammar rules which would be modified later. Inter-language theory supports the concept of hypothesis testing, that is to say, like in FLA, L2 learners form hypotheses about what the rules of the target language are and testing them in the sense that they confirm them if they find clear evidence in the input and rejecting them if they get negative evidence. This process occurs in a subconscious level. There are other processes such as overgeneralization, that is the extension of an L2 rule to a context in which does not apply to the target language; and simplification which stands for the reduction of the target language system to a simpler form.

II.3 THE SECOND LANGUAGE INTERACTIONIST VIEW.

This theory is based on the importance of the modified input that learners receive when interacting with native speakers. Michael Long and Krashen, supporters of this theory, claim that comprehensible input is essential for language acquisition. But to make input comprehensible there are some interactional modifications in a conversation between a native speaker and a non-native speaker. This could be summarized as follows:

1. Interactional modification makes input comprehensible.
2. Comprehensible input promotes acquisition.
3. Interactional modification promotes acquisition.

Krashen's theory of second language acquisition consists of five main hypotheses:

1. The Acquisition Learning hypothesis, which is the most fundamental of all Krashen's hypotheses and the most widely known among linguists. According to Krashen there are two independent systems of second language performance: the acquired system or acquisition and the learned system. The first one is the product of a subconscious process very similar to the process children undergo when they acquire their first language. It requires natural communication in which the speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances, but in the communicative act. The learned system or learning is the product of formal instruction and it comprises a conscious process which results in conscious knowledge about the language. For example, the knowledge of grammar rules. According to Krashen learning is less important than acquisition.
2. The monitor hypothesis explains the relationship between acquisition and learning and defines the influence of the latter on the former. The monitoring function is the practical result of the learned grammar. The acquisition system is utterance initiator,

while the learning system performs the role of the 'monitor' or the 'editor'. As the role of conscious learning is somewhat limited in L2, the role of the monitor should be minor, being used only to correct deviations from 'normal' speech and to give speech a more 'polished' appearance. According to Krashen, lack of self-confidence is frequently related to the over-use of the monitor.

3. The Natural Order hypothesis suggested that the acquisition of grammatical structures follows a natural order which is predictable. For a given language some grammatical structures tend to be acquired earlier than others. This seemed to be independent of the learner's age, L1 background, etc. This hypothesis rejects grammatical sequencing when the goal is language acquisition.
4. The Input hypothesis explains how the language acquires a second language. The input is only concerned with acquisition, not learning. The learner improves according to a natural order when he/she receives the L2 input.
5. Finally, the Affective Filter hypothesis, points out that a number of affective variables play a facilitative role in SLA. These variables include: motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. Learners with high motivation, self confidence, a good self-image and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in SLA.

According to Long, native speakers consistently modify their speech in conversation with non-native speakers. Some examples of these modifications are:

1. Comprehension check efforts made by the native speaker: *The bus leaves at 6.30. Do you understand?*
2. Clarification request-efforts. *Could you say that again? Sorry?*
3. Self-repetition or paraphrase. The native speaker repeats his or her sentence either partially or completely: *She got lost on her way home from school. She was walking home from school. She got lost.*

So, it has been demonstrated that conversational adjustments can aid comprehension. But there is no evidence that clarifies that comprehensible input causes acquisition.

III. INTERLANGUAGE THEORY

This term, created by Selinker, is used to refer to both the internal system or inter-language that a learner has built at a single point in time and the sets of interconnected systems that characterize the learner's progress over time, that is the inter-language continuum. This theory

was the first major attempt in explaining SLA and model of later theories such as Ellis' and Tarone.

The main points defended by this theory are:

1. What processes are responsible for inter-language construction?
2. What is the nature of inter-language continuum?
3. Is there an explanation for the fact that most learners do not achieve full target language competence?

Processes of inter-language construction.

Selinker distinguishes five cognitive processes in the L2 acquisition:

1. Language transfer (the learner's inter-language may contain some items rules and subsystems of his or her first language).
2. Strategies of second language learning, according to Selinker, an identifiable approach by the learner to the material to be learnt.
3. Strategies of second language communication, an approach by the learner to the material to communication with the native speaker of the TL.
4. Overgeneralization of the target language material, the extension of an L2 rule to a context in which does not apply to the target language.

Inter-language processes have also looked at the concept of hypothesis testing. Corder believed that learners form hypotheses about the structures of the target language using the input they get. It is at this point when they build their "hypothetical grammar". These hypotheses will be accepted if learners experience a good production and understanding. On the contrary, these processes will be rejected by the learners if they find their understanding is defective and as a result they fail in communicating. It is then when learners will modify their structures according to their level of motivation. But this hypothesis fails in the sense that it is not clear how learners obtain the linguistic information they need to modify hypotheses during communication.

Nature of inter-language continuum.

It is believed by cognitivists that with the assistance of learning strategies, learners construct mental grammars of the L2. These could be compared to native-speakers' grammars. Learners create rules and produce input according to them. Inter-language is systematic because learners obey their own grammars either they are wrong or not. These grammars are said to be

dynamic since they may change as far as learners find some revised rules. This is what is called a systematic variability in learner performance. This way, each grammar tends to be more complex than the previous one.

Corder claimed that the learners' starting point was the same as in L1 acquisition: a simple system which consists of basic rules and lexis. This would be the initial hypothesis and may be universal. Thus the L2 acquisition is nothing but a recreation of the L1 rules clearly replaced by the new ones.

Fossilization.

It is strongly believed that L2 learners, unlike L1 learners, in general terms, do not achieve the same competence as native speakers. Their final grammar is not the same as the target language grammar. That is to say, some non-target norms become fixed in inter-language. This is because certain rules and items fossilize. These fossilized forms may disappear but they are always likely to reappear in productive language use. This is known as backsliding. There are some factors that may influence on fossilization:

✓ Internal factors:

1. Age: when learners reach a critical age their brain loses plasticity. As a result, certain linguistic features cannot be acquired.
2. Lack of motivation: several social and psychological factors may cause that learners make no effort to adopt target language cultural norms.

✓ External factors:

1. Communicative pressure. When learners feel the need of communicating ideas that require the use of language that exceeds the learners' linguistic competence.
2. Lack of learning opportunity.
3. The nature of the feedback. Positive feedback damages learners in the sense that provokes fossilization (i.e. *I understand you*); negative feedback (i.e. *I don't understand you*) helps avoid fossilization.

Subsequent development in Inter-language Theory.

Inter-language theory has contributed to the development of SLA research thanks to the idea that learners possess a separate grammar that use in L2 performance. Thus the concept of inter-language is now seen by theorists as the system of implicit L2 knowledge that the learner develops and systematically corrects over time. The idea of fossilization has also been accepted. However, Selinker's idea that there is an initial theory has not been taken by

theorists. Instead, later developments have concentrated on the role of linguistic universals in inter-language construction.

How does Spanish language interferes in the learning of English as a second language?

Let's see some common influences of the Spanish language:

1. False friends. (i.e. *carpet* ≠ *carpeta*)
2. Vowels and consonants (i.e. adding 'e' to English words beginning with 's': *estudent*)
3. Articles. In English the use of the definite article 'the' unlike in Spanish, is only used to refer to a specific thing. (i.e. *I like the white cats*.) We would never say *I like the cats* to talk about cats in general. This would be a usual mistake for a Spanish learner of English.
4. Adjectives. There is a tendency of placing the adjective after the noun specially at lower levels: *The car red is very beautiful*.

IV. ERROR TREATMENT

There is some research about when and how errors should be corrected and who should correct them. There have been a few studies of the effect of error treatment on acquisition which we will see in this chapter.

A number of terms have been used to refer to the general area of error treatment; these are feedback, repair and correction.

Feedback is understood as the information provided by listeners on the reception and comprehension of messages. There are two types of feedback: *cognitive* and *affective*. The first one refers to real understanding; the second one stands for the motivational support that interlocutors provide each other during a conversation.

As for repair we can say that refers to attempts to identify and amend communication problems.

The term correction deals with linguistic errors. It is a way of providing negative evidence in the form of feedback. As a result, learners pay attention to the errors they have made.

The term *treatment* (error treatment) has four types:

1. Treatment that results in learners "autonomous ability" to correct themselves.
2. Treatment that results in the motivation to create a correct response from a learner.
3. Any reaction by the teacher that clearly demands improvement.

4. Positive or negative reinforcement including expressions of approval and disapproval.

Most studies have examined types 2 and 3. Of considerable interest is the extent to which teachers should correct learners' errors. The main conclusions are that certain types of errors are much more likely to be treated than others. Discourse, content and lexical errors receive more attention than phonological or grammatical errors. Also, the more frequently an error is made, the less likely the teacher treats it. And there exist a certain variation among teachers concerning how often error treatment takes place.

It is quite difficult to make a decision concerning error treatment. Long claims that teachers provide more than one type of feedback simultaneously, but these types of feedbacks are often unnoticed by students. Teachers tend to correct one error in one lesson and ignore it in the other. They must give up if the correction of errors is not effective on learners.

Studies on error treatment have reached the conclusion that error treatment is not so successful immediately but it can be in a long term.

Nowadays there are two recommendations as for the error treatment. One would be the adaptations of error treatment to the development of the inter-language (i.e. correcting errors that learners are ready to eliminate). The other is that self-repair is more effective than other-repair as it is less likely to result in a negative affective response.

To sum up we can say that error treatment involves a greater difficulty than it is thought. Teachers do not correct all their learners' errors and learners often ignore the teacher's correction in their next responses.

V. CONCLUSION

We can say that this topic deals with the general theories of second language acquisition and how they have been applied to a classroom context in order to understand better the learning process and the possible errors that an L2 language is likely to make when acquiring a language. Also, we must not forget the various influences that a mother tongue has in the target language which can be helpful at lower levels, but they must be avoided in order to achieve a high linguistic competence.

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