Observations on Language Learning: The Indian Context

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Abstract

This paper is an account of my observations on language learning in the bilingual and multilingual context prevalent in India. As a part of my profession, I had ample opportunities to observe how children learn English as a second language across a set of schools in Tamil Nadu. This experience led me to revisit Ray Jackendoff's chapter "How Children Learn Language", based on which I have attempted to draw a comparison between first and second language acquisition. Through this paper, I will share my notes and perspectives on the process of second language learning in primary school students.

Introduction

Between 2018–2019, I visited multiple schools in and around Tamil Nadu to implement an English reading program. The school children I observed during these visits were between the ages of 4 to 12 years, and mostly spoke Tamil, which was their first language. Interacting with them gave me some insights into how children learn a language in the classroom. In this study, I have used Jackendoff's approach (1994) to language acquisition as a framework to compare the acquisition of English as a first and a second language.

Comparing the Acquisition of English as a First and a Second Language

Grammatical Commonalities

Jackendoff posited,

"The real problem of language acquisition is not just to describe the child's behavior, but to induce from this behavior the nature of the unconscious grammar that guides it, and to discover how this grammar changes as the child matures." (1994, p. 104)

He proposed that language expressed the innate properties of the brain; his belief in the universality of language led to the emphasis on grammatical commonalities across languages. This hypothesis has two implications for language acquisition; (a) acquiring English as a second language is similar to acquiring it as the first language, with a few minor differences (which will be discussed later), and (b) the nature of errors committed in English as first and as second languages are similar.

Jackendoff claimed that children who were exposed to a second language while learning their first language found little difficulty in learning it. They picked up the grammar of both languages quickly and learnt to speak the second language. By the age of two years, native English speakers speak two-word utterances. Children in India learn English as a second language in school around three or four years of age. We see evidence of the two-word utterance stage among Learners of English as a second language in India in Grade 1 or Grade 2 children, which is approximately around 6 to 8 years old. They learn the sounds of the language through the alphabets and learn 3-letter words, 4-letter words, and so on. They eventually pick up its underlying grammatical structure by the age of ten to twelve years. This process is very similar to the one followed by any person learning English as their first language. Children brought up in a bilingual environment learn English as their third language. These children make the same errors as children learning English as their second language.

Jackendoff claimed that comprehension of speech is greater than its production. Children understand the adult language and its sound system, but they often cannot map the sounds to the right organs and also cannot form complete or grammatical sentences. They confuse the /g/ sound with the /k/ sound (like native English speaking children) and utter words such as "guck" or "gug". Sometimes, they also substitute "s" for "th-",and "th-" for "f" in words such as "sick" and "thick".

Similarities in Errors

Based on various experiments and observations, Jackendoff strongly

asserted his argument that there exists an underlying mental grammar that is universal to all humans. Children's utterances with consistent systematic mistakes cannot be a coincidence. This underlying mental grammar gives each person an inherent capacity to learn any language. The stages of development in "wh-" questions, in negative and past tense sentences are the same between children learning English as their first language and those learning it as their second language; and the mistakes are also the same. Jackendoff (1994) summarises the following stages in the development of 'wh' questions, negation and the past tense.

"Wh-" questions

1. Non-use of an auxiliary verb before the subject. (For example, "What book name?", "Why you smiling?", "Why soldier marching?").
2. Use of auxiliary verb without an awareness of its position. The sentences so formed are similar to declarative sentences with the intonation of a question. (For example, "What he can ride in?", "Which way they should go?", "Why kitty can't stand up?").
3. Achieve the adult order. (For example, "Where will you go?", "Why can't kitty see?", "Why don't you know?").

Negation

1. Use "no" to indicate negation.(for example, "No the sun shining", "No a boy bed", "No sit there").
2. Use "no" but inappropriately and without an auxiliary verb such as "did". (for example, "He no bite you", "I no want envelope", "I no taste them").
3. Use auxiliary appropriately, but still donot use the un-tensed forms "do" (for instance, "I didn't did it", "You didn't caught me").

The Past Tense

1. Do not show knowledge of the relation between "walk" and "walked", or "go" and "went". For them, these words are as different as "sit" and "Gary". They learn such words—"walked", "played", "came", "went"—as individual and separate words.
2. Become conscious of the past-tense patterns of regular verbs ending in "-ed" and apply them to every verb.
3. Recognize that irregular verbs are exceptions and something different is to be done to form its past tense.
4. By the fourth stage, they figure out the complex pattern completely.

These common errors that Jackendoff observed are also seen in Indian children learning English as their second language. In the Indian context, we often hear children saying "putted" for "put" and "eated" for "eat". In addition to passing through the stages of acquiring negatives, "wh-" questions or past tense, Indian children have to become aware that the language structure of English is different from their first language. Through my school visits in Tamil Nadu, I observed that children reached the third stage by the age of 10 years on average.

Growing up surrounded by regional tongues, some children speak impeccable English, while others find it difficult to speak the language. This is because English proficiency depends on several factors such as the age when they start learning English, the consistency of interaction, exposure to English, the source of learning, their motivation and the resources available to them. Adding on to these factors, the knowledge of their first language formally also influences the acquisition of English as a second language. The language that they end up

learning is most often dependent on their environment and exposure. Second language learners of English use their first language as an operational framework for acquiring English. The next section discusses the differences in first and second language acquisition.

Use of the First Language as an Operational Framework

In learning a second language, children often use their first language as an operational framework. The first language influences the second language. The word order of the small English phrases that children construct is governed by the structure of their first language. For example, a lot of children use direct translations from their first language to form sentences in English. Some examples of such translations are:"your name what?", "her/his give", "lunch eating", and so on. Simultaneously, they also miss out on the auxiliary verb just as English speakers commonly do while acquiring English as their first language. English follows a subject-verb-object word order while Tamil (and most Indian languages) follow a subject-object-verb word order. This difference in word order influences the phrase construction in these languages.

With my theoretical linguistic knowledge, I would like to add that it takes a long time for Indian children to learn tenses in English. This could stem from the differences in the system of person and number being distinctively used in Indian languages and English. Most Indian languages consist of words that either belong to masculine, feminine or neutral gender. More often, the verbs, pronouns and possessives have to agree with each other to be grammatically correct. The inter-relationship between the system of number and person is relatively more complex here than it is in English. For example, in the following sentences, notice the relationship between the pronouns/possessives and the verb/noun as translated from English to Hindi:

Set A
1. *They went* to Sara's house.
Wo Sara ke ghar *gaye*
[vo saɽaɽ keɽ gɽɽ r gɽ ɽ]
2. *He went* to Sara's house.
Wo Sara ke ghar *gaya*
[vo saɽaɽ keɽ gɽɽ r gɽ jaɽ]
3. *She went* to Sara's house.
Wo Sara ke ghar *gayi*.
[vo saɽaɽ keɽ gɽɽ r gɽ jiɽ]

Set B
1. His/her house.
Uska ghar.
[ɽ skaɽ gɽɽ r]
2. Their house.
Unka ghar.
[ɽ ŋkaɽ gɽɽ r]
3. His/her watch.
Uski ghadi.
[ɽ skiɽ gɽɽ .ɽlɽ]
4. Their watch.
Unki ghadi.
[ɽ ŋkiɽ gɽɽ .ɽiɽ]

In English, we have clear denominators of gender and number that are limited to pronouns and possessives and a few (modal) verbs. Whereas in Hindi, the gender is inflected in the verb while the pronoun is the same for all genders (Set A). Moreover, the possessives are determined by the gender of the noun and the inflection shows the agreement

between the two (Set B, where the noun 'house' or 'ghar' is masculine and 'watch' or 'ghadi' is feminine). Any sentence in Hindi demands the agreement of person and number in many different ways depending on the complexity of the sentence.

I assume this difference contributes to the challenges that one may encounter when learning English as a second language. Children have to first understand the differences before they can acquire them successfully. This needs added time and effort and explains the delay in children speaking Hindi acquiring the second language English.

Another source of difference is the accent. Since speakers are used to producing the sounds of their first language, the articulation of sounds in the second language is influenced by the first. For instance, Indian learners of the English language commonly pronounce /r/, /b/and /d/ sounds differently from native English speakers. We do not roll the /r/ sounds in words such as "cars", "bird", "jar", etc. Also, we often get confused while pronouncing sounds such as /b/, /p/(bilabial sounds), /d/ (alveolar sound) and in recognizing where they are aspirated or unaspirated. For example, "bear" sometimes gets mispronounced as "bhear" or "doll" as "dholl", and so on. This is influenced by the way we learn to pronounce these sounds in our first language. Acquiring the knowledge of acceptable articulatory combinations among sounds of the English language also takes time. I am speculating about this because the way Indian languages combine sounds to make a word is governed by a different system of rules from the English language. It is also a challenge to get acquainted with the number of exceptions that exist in English.

If one compares Indian languages, one sees similar patterns. For instance, In Hindi, gender is attached to nouns and verbs. Gaining this knowledge is a challenge for Tamil or Malayalam speakers. Despite these differences, the similarity across Indian languages outweighs the difference between them, owing to their common language structure. Hence, it makes the process of learning English as a second or third language almost the same for all Indian speakers.

The Universality principle highlights the similarity in the process of acquiring English as a first and second language. I have been able to account for these commonalities and differences in learning English as a first and second language through my professional experience. I believe that the influence of the first language—when used advantageously to promote learning a second language—can make the second language learning process more favourable and faster.

Conclusion

It would benefit us to conduct more research on the process of language learning and on how the first language interacts with the second or third language when a child is learning it. As educators, it becomes important to have this knowledge and accordingly create teaching strategies for better language learning outcomes. These strategies will leverage the knowledge of the first language and will use the similarities or differences in the grammatical structures between the first and the second language as scaffolds. Such scaffolds will give every learner an equal chance at becoming successful in learning a second language irrespective of the resources available to schools or children. Equipping

children with the knowledge and skills of English along with those of their first language, accompanied by well-designed language programmes will open up global opportunities to all.

References

Jackendoff, Ray. (1994). How children learn language. In *Patterns in the mind: Language and human nature* (pp. 101–111). Basic Books.