Key Issues in Second Language Acquisition since the 1990s

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Abstract—**The research field of the second language acquisition has been increasingly widened in recent years, and emerged various kinds of new theories. This thesis summarizes foreign and domestic researches' key issues in this field since the 1990s according to theoretical framework of the second language research, then sorts out relative achievements from respective points of sociocultural theory; input, interaction and output in SLA; learner differences; external elements of learners, tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge and universal grammar and interlanguage representations, and looks into the future development, so as to make domestic learners better understand the current researches of this field and increase the general level of our foreign language education and teaching.**

Index Terms—**key issues, SLA, since the 1990s**

I. INTRODUCTION

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to a field of research which aims to make its own distinctive contribution to fundamental understandings and to study the workings of the human mind or the nature of language. It also has potential to inform the improvement of social practice in some other fields, most obviously in language learning and teaching. The second language acquisition research mainly focuses on the process and principles of second language acquisition after one has acquired the second language. Being an independent subject, the second language acquisition rises during the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s with the promotion of interlanguage theory, and boasts a history of more than 30 years. Ellis (1994) has categorized the research into four parts: what will second language learners get; how to acquire the second language; what the differences of this acquisition between different persons; how the class teaching influences the second language acquisition. On the broad sense this research covers not only the second language acquisition or the loss of children and adults in the natural or teaching environment, but it also covers dialect's acquisition and loss. And at the same time, they also believe the language learning is a very complex cognitive process which is unique to human being and this research can help to reveal the working principles of human's brain and characteristics of its intellectual activities. In recent years, its field has been constantly enlarged, emerged various theories and doctrines, and got more and more scientific and diversified research methods and means. Since we get the chance to view its developing process and current conditions again, it will be significant for us to not only deepen our recognition to the feature of this subject, but also scientifically analyze the problems encountered in the language teaching practice as well as make decisions.

II. KEY ISSUES

A. Studies on External Factors of Learners

External factors of learners mainly refer to the environment that can influence the second language learning. It includes the social environment, home environment, school environment, class environment, and so on. Siegel generalizes five kinds of social environment of second language learning: a. two language dominance (such as Turkish learn German in Germany); b. foreign language (such as Japanese learn English in Japan); c. multi-language existence (such as German learn French in Switzerland); d. institution (such as the use of English in India) e. minority language (such as English speakers learn Welsh). Researchers are interested in external factors and they want to dig out how the social environment influences the motivation of learners. In terms of teaching environment, Krashen's non-intervention position believes that the second language learning is an unconscious process. Formal teaching plays a limited role in second language learning, which just provides understandable language input.

In recent years, one of the heated topics that the researchers focus on is language socialization. This concept originated in the study on children language learning in the 1960s and 1970s. Language socialization regards language, cultural connotation and social behaviors as a three-in-one continuous process. Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen (2003) summarize the latest developments of language socialization since the 90's, such as theories and methods of language socialization, the phenomenon of language socialization and problems or shortcomings in these studies. Besides, they also look ahead the future of language socialization in 10 years.

At present, another tendency of second language learning is research on sociocultural theory, which is a theory about human cultural psychology and proposed by a psychologist named Vygosky of the former Soviet Union. Some scholars

such as Lantolf (2000) discuss the problem that the learners in the zone of proximal development through some auxiliary work such as scaffolding to learn language and develop cognition. Johnson (2004) believes that Vygotsky's social cultural theory provides theoretical support to widen the field of second language learning and he also believes that cognition and society construct the new mode for the second language learning.

B. Sociocutural Theory

1. Mediation

The core concept of Vygotsky's sociocutural theory is that human's advanced cognitive function mediates the relationship between individuals and social material world by symbols which are products of social culture. The symbols include figures, computing system, music, artistic achievements as well as literary works, especially language. Through social interactions, the language symbols begin to play a role as mental tools in behaviors. Therefore, the sociocutural theory believes that the biological function that constitutes the basis of human thinking can not explain our ability about regulating of mental activities consciously. The gaining of this kind of ability is a product of cultural construction, especially a result of language internalization.

2. Internalization

Another core concept of sociocutural theory is internalization. Internalization refers to a process that social members transform the symbol products into mind products to mediate their own psychological activities. Therefore, the language symbols have double functions, which can be regarded as communication unit as well as thinking unit. On this point, humans' communication and thinking round completeness through language symbols.

Vygotsky believes that the form of internalization is through imitation mechanism. Vygotsky points out that the key point of internalization is to possess the ability of imitating intentional activities. However, the imitation here is not the same as the concept in behavioristic psychology and methodology. It emphasizes the reasoning process of transforming from outside psychological platform to inside psychological platform actively and creatively on the initial basis.

3. Object-regulation, other-regulation and self-regulation.

Regulation is a form of mediation. When the children learn a language, the function of words is not just to isolate the concrete objects and actions, but to blend the feelings of creatures into cultural feelings and concepts. The development of thinking and actions in early childhood depend on the language of adults. Children can learn their language to mediate their behaviors through taking part in adults' or elder children's communication activities. This kind of development has three stages: Object-regulation, other-regulation and self-regulation. Object-regulation means that the individuals are in the direct control and influence of surroundings. Other-regulation means that children's thinking and behaviors depend on adults' language. Self-regulation means that children's thinking and behaviors rely on their own language. The social culture believes that, children's development of cognition goes through 3 stages: Object-regulation, other-regulation and self-regulation. In these three stages, the function of language goes through social language, self-centered language, individual utterance and intrinsic spoken language.

4. The Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding

The Zone of Proximal Development plays an important role in the development of psychology, pedagogy, applied linguistics and second language learning. It refers to the gap between the ability of solving problems independently and the potential ability of solving problems with the instruct of adults or the cooperation with a good companion.

About 30 years ago, the school of Vygotsky, such as Jerome Bruner develops the concept of scaffolding. It refers to the cooperation with any adults and children, experts and new hands. Donato also proposed furtherly that scaffolding can also be found between companions, such as learners. It shares the same way with scaffolding between experts and new hands (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). According to sociocultural theory, we study on how the new language internalizes in the social interactions such as scaffolding. Though the conversation of scaffolding among native speakers, experts and companions, people can have a master of new content, which will expose the subtle variations of two language system of the learners.

At present, there are a lot of abstracts which introduces and comments about the sociocultural theory from the perspective of psychology and pedagogy, but there are few abstracts which study on sociocultural theory and two languages learning from the perspective of second language learning. The abstracts mainly focus on the introduction and comment about the theory. On one hand, they lack a systematic and comprehensive elaboration and reflection about the core concept, related concepts, methodology, empirical study and second language teaching. On the other hand, there are few related empirical studies. The sociocultural theory also makes influence on the domestic second language learning, which undoubtly will provide a new perspective for the researchers and educators to know and think the language learning phenomenon. However, just as professor Wen Qiufang said, "Society is a new format for second language learning. We shall not pursue for the new blindly because the choice of the format should based on the research purposes." (Wen Qiufang, 2008b, p.18-25). Therefore, firstly, we should have a comprehensive and deep understanding of the intrinsic nature about the relationship between sociocultural theory and second language learning. We should also be critical to understand the innovation and shortage. Then, the research purposes should follow, not precede, research format, or it will put the cart before the horse. At last, we should carry out some empirical and practical studies based on the characteristics of domestic second language learning.

C. Input, Interaction and Output in SLA

Input refers to what is available to the learner, while intake refers to what is taken in by the learner. The precise developmental contribution of the language used to address L2 researchers on account of the Input Hypothesis which is proposed by Krashen. The Input Hypothesis holds the view that it is indeed necessary for the second language acquisition to exposure to comprehensible input. In early 1980s, Michael Long became the first person who proposed the theory. It is the Interaction Hypothesis. The Interaction Hypothesis is just an extension or supplement in the field of the second language acquisition as a part of the Input Hypothesis. Long's Interaction Hypothesis emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input but claims that it is most effective when it is modified through the negotiation of meanings (Ellis, 1994). In his view, Long holds that greater attention should be paid to the interaction in which learners are engaged so as to understand much more fully the nature and usefulness of input for second language acquisition. These interactions should not be seen simply as a one-directional source of target language input, feeding into the learner's presumed internal acquisition device. It has often been remarked that while the input is paraphrased, recycled and queried, input will have greater potential usefulness in its field (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Long places emphasis on the significance of the interactional modifications applied by both participants of the interaction, which he thinks promote the comprehension as well as the communication process. What's more, in his point of view, interactive input is more important than non-interactive input (Ellis, 1994). Michael Long's Interaction Hypothesis, which has advantages as well as disadvantages like most of the theories. Although the study of the Interaction Hypothesis has aroused mixed results and a large number of heated discussions, it is necessary for the researchers to make a comprehensive understanding and explore of its advantages, and evaluate its demerits carefully. If it is possible, then the researchers should make some possible improvements.

The Output Hypothesis, which is proposed by Swain (1998), makes a great number of claims that go beyond this "practice function of output, and which have to do with the development of the interlanguage system, and not only increased efficiency in using it." It appears that output in Swain's views is dynamic; Output not only refers to the language produced by the learners, but also the process of producing the target language. Swain (1998) advances three functions for learners' output:(1)the "noticing/triggering" function, or what might be referred to as the consciousness-raising role; (2)the hypothesis-testing function; and (3)the metalinguistic function, or what might be referred to as its "reflective role". Swain pays more attention to the "reflective" role of output, and she has concentrated largely on the possible contribution of metalinguistic talk between peers to L2 development. However, other researchers have concentrated largely to link learners' opportunities for output to L2 development. Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993) made a small-scale study to make an investigation the effect of output in the development of English past tense. They spared no pains to encourage English L2 learners to modify their output relying on clarification requests (Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993). Izumi made a larger study to explore the potential of output in promoting English L2 students' learning of the counterfactual condition in English (Wen Qiufang, 2010).

The Input, Output and Interaction Hypothesis make the empirical research popular. However, each of them can't solve the difficulties alone.

The researchers should connect the three hypothesizes and intertwine with the development of more comprehensive models of the learner-internal L2 learning process.

D. Learner Differences

Second language acquisition research generally refers to learners who start to learn another language or the additional language, at least some years after they have started to acquire their first language. The learners may learn the additional language formally and systematically in a classroom setting; and the learner may learn the additional language through informal social contact, through migration, through their daily work or other social forces. Therefore, L2 learners may be children, or adults. They are likely to learn the target language in schooling; they are likely to pick it up in the playground or in the workplace. In the meanwhile, learning a highly localized language can help them to become insider in a local community and give them access to economic and public life. As a matter of fact, in the first part of the 21st century, English become the most important target language. It is commonly believed that there are about three hundred and seventy-five million individuals who regard English as their first language. On the other hand, there are billion or so people who use English as a second language.

As far as the factor of the learner is concerned, there are three main points of views among second language acquisition researchers: (1) the linguistic perspective, which is related to build language structures and process within learners' mind; (2) the social psychological perspective, which is involved with model individual differences among learners and the shortcomings of the learners' learning success; (3) the socio-cultural perspective, which is related to the learners who act as members of social groups and networks and social beings. However, there is some controversy among researchers on the question of age. For example, Do child and adult L2 learners learn in similar ways? Long (1990) proposed and explained the balance of evidence in favor of the existence of such a cut-off point. Singleton in 1999 proposed the idea that "younger = better in the long run". And many researchers agree with his idea.

The researchers will be easily aware that second language learners will show their performance that they will follow a common developmental route by the means of observation. Each of the L2 learners achieves different degree of success. Social psychologists have made it clear that learners have different learning outcomes because of individual differences among diverse learners.

E. Tacit Knowledge and Explicit Knowledge

Tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge have become the focus which scholars researched on in the past 30 years (Wen Qiufang, 2010). If learning is seen as a process, the result of learning is knowledge, which is stored in brain and is the part of memory. However, the implicit learning produces explicit knowledge, which is implicit memory in the brain (Wen Qiufang, 2010). Bialystok (1979) argues that the content of the explicit knowledge and implicit language knowledge is same, which refers to the target knowledge that learners should master, including pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary and other aspects. And the grammar knowledge is considered to be the most important part of language knowledge. Explicit knowledge is what the learners can realize and speak out; while tacit knowledge is intuition knowledge that learners can express. Studies have shown that second language proficiency mainly depends on tacit knowledge (Ellis, 2006). The theory of SLA has been trying to explain how learners develop their tacit knowledge, and even thinks second language proficiency refers to the development of tacit knowledge. So the idea that how explicit knowledge can be converted into tacit knowledge has arisen the researchers' attention. Researchers have put forward different or even opposite views, for example, non-interface position; strong-interface position; weak-interface position. On the other hand, many empirical studies have shown that learners' explicit knowledge is related to the scores of second language proficiency test. Knowledge of explicit and implicit grammar can predict the level of second language proficiency (Ellis, 2006). And it proves that explicit teaching is superior to tacit teaching in foreign language learning. In recent years, the study of the subject mainly focuses on the relationship between explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge, and especially focuses the discussion whether explicit knowledge could "convert" into tacit knowledge. The researchers also study the correlation between the implicit/explicit teaching and second language proficiency, but the study lacks empirical research on the application of the explicit grammar knowledge. Whether tacit knowledge is transformed from explicit knowledge, and how the explicit knowledge affects the path of the second language acquisition. All these questions are worth to be further studied and discussed.

F. Universal Grammar and Interlanguage Representations

In the early 70s and 80s, morpheme acquisition became the hot issue of second language acquisition research. The researcher investigated and analyzed the morpheme acquisition of learners in order to find the natural development paths of interlanguage representations. Dulay made a survey on morpheme acquisition, which triggered a series of related research (Dulay, 1974). Learners obeyed the natural order when they acquired the language structure. In the 1980s, the variability of universal grammar became a new hot spot. According to Chomsky's universal grammar theory, all the language all over the world had some common language principle and language parameter unvalued, which is the baby's initial state (Chomsky, 1965). In the 1980s and 1990s, most of the research about second language acquisition was based on the theory structure of universal grammar. It was the first time that the researchers combined the linguistic study and second language acquisition study, which became one of the most important fields of second language acquisition.

In the 1990's, the researchers began to study the property of interlanguage representations. There are two opposite views towards the problem of interlanguage representations' initial state. Schwartz and Sprouse were in favor of the Full Transfer Hypothesis, who held the standpoint that interlanguage representations corresponded to the character of natural language (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996). On the contrary, Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1996), who supported the Minimal Trees Hypothesis, thought that interlanguage representations were different to natural language in some basic aspects. According to the Full Transfer Hypothesis, mother language grammar made up the initial state of interlanguage representations. But universal grammar restricted interlanguage representations. However, the Minimal Trees Hypothesis believed that there was big difference between interlanguage grammar and the grammar of adult native language. The initial state of interlanguage representations only exited in lexical category, for example, noun, verb and so on. And it was lack of functional category. As a result, according to the Minimal Trees Hypothesis interlanguage grammar existed great defects, which didn't restrict by universal grammar.

The study of interlanguage representations on the basis of universal grammar have become one of the major trends in studying second language acquisition. What's more, nowadays the study is ascendant. Just like what White said, universal grammar was not a kind of learning theory, which could explain the properties and characteristics of interlanguage representations only by combining with other theories (White, 2003). With the development of cognitive science and the perfection of research method, the researcher will have common view on role of the universal grammar playing in second language acquisition.

III. CONCLUSION

Second language acquisition has the prospect of multidisciplinary, which will deeply widen its cooperation with other areas. At present, the study of second language acquisition has much to do with philosophy, linguistics, psychology, pedagogy, sociology, cognitive psychology and so on. The visual angle of second language acquisition will further expand the scope of its research. The theory system and research method of second language acquisition plays an important role in second language teaching and learning. In addition, it is of great significance to second language reform. As a result, it is necessary for the researchers to study the key issues in second language acquisition. Researchers have a continuing responsibility to make their findings and their interpretations of SLA theories as

intelligible as possible to a much wider professional audience of language teachers. This thesis describes the main problems mainly from five perspectives since the 1990s, including sociocutural theory; input, interaction and output in SLA; learner differences; external elements of learners, tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge and universal grammar and interlanguage representations. This thesis puts forward drawbacks and looks into the future development. This thesis makes domestic learners better understand the current researches of this field and increase the general level of our foreign language education and teaching. For domestic scholars to better understand the social culture under the theory of second language acquisition research status play a guiding role, the overall level of China's foreign language education and teaching have bigger boost. At present, the study of second language acquisition theory is various, and its theory has different objectives, different fields theory paradox. Therefore, it is necessary to research on second language acquisition, to review and summarize the important problem to the significance of further researches.

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