

A Study on Whether the Adults' Second Language Acquisition Is Easy or Not—From the Perspective of Children's Native Language Acquisition

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Abstract—Children acquire their native language easily in the non teaching conditions with their excellent language skills, while adults are unable to do it. “Whether the adults’ second language acquisition is easy or not” is always debated. This essay is from the perspective of children’s native language acquisition, through the systematic review of relevant theories, to explore “whether the adults’ second language acquisition is easy or not”. And on this basis, the native language acquisition gives enlightenment to the adults’ second language acquisition.

Index Terms—adults’ second language acquisition, children’s native language acquisition, easy, difficult, enlightenment

I. INTRODUCTION

The language which is acquired during early childhood, starting before the age of about 3 years, is first language, which has different names such as, mother tongue, native language and primary language (Sinha, Banerjee, Sinha, & Shastri, 2009). Second language acquisition is needed for education, employment and other purposes, and it is typically an official or societal language (Ali Derakhshan, Elham Karimi, 2015). However, second language acquisition usually refers to any other language acquisition after that of a native language. As an independent discipline, research on second language acquisition really rose to prominence at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. It describes learners’ second language features and analyzes the internal and external factors which affect the second language acquisition. Compared with other social sciences, this kind of acquisition is a new area, mostly utilizing the methods of native language research and education research. On the study of adults’ second language acquisition, “whether this acquisition is easy or not” has always been argued. Some researchers believe that adults can acquire a second language easily because of their high cognitive level, clear logical analysis and strong self monitoring abilities, while others think adults’ second language acquisition is very difficult for many uncertain factors. Children are always considered to be the most successful example of language learning, they can easily acquire their native language in the natural environment, so it is very meaningful to analyze the adults’ second language acquisition from the perspective of children’s native language acquisition.

II. ADULTS’ SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION VS. CHILDREN’ NATIVE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Adults’ second language acquisition (Table 1) is a very complicated process. The theories of adults’ second language acquisition mainly include the behaviorism theory, the cognitive theory and the interlanguage theory.

The behaviorism theory was divided into the early behaviorism theory (John Watson, 1970) and the new behaviorism theory (Skinner, B. F., 1938). The early period of behaviorism theory mainly refers to the period from 1913 to 1930. American psychologist John Watson founded S-R theory (Stimulus Response theory) on the basis of the classical conditioning theory. John Watson advocated to abandon subjective things, such as consciousness, imagery, etc. but chose to study the observed things in an objective way. Skinner, as the representative of the new period of the behaviorism theory, divided behavior into two kinds, the respondent behavior, behavior in response to a specific stimulus, and operational behavior. He also divided the conditioned reflex into respondent behavior and operational behavior. The operational behavior is the core of the new behaviorism theory. Skinner’s greatest contribution to language research is arguably his “stimulation-response-enhancement” theory for adults’ second language acquisition as well as foreign language teaching, which derived a new teaching method: the audio-lingual method. Later, the establishment of variety of speech room is based on this theory. The new behaviorism theory has a great influence on

adults' second language acquisition as well as foreign language acquisition.

Krashen, the representative of modern cognitive theory (Krashen, Stephen, 1982), thinks that adults' second language acquisition requires a conscious learning process. In the process of adults' second language acquisition, using a conscious method to find the error and correct the error is an important step. Krashen's input hypothesis believes that adults' second language acquisition should follow "I+1" theory model (I represents the current level, 1 represents the new input); this hypothesis is the most important concept in adults' second language acquisition, because it not only answers the question of how to acquire language, but also has a profound influence on adults' second language acquisition. In addition, Krashen also holds the view that emotional factors are essential in adults' second language acquisition. Compared with Krashen's input hypothesis, Swain's comprehensible output hypothesis is a supplement and improvement to Krashen's theory. Swain found that language input is very important in second language acquisition, but it cannot be the sufficient condition for this kind of acquisition (Swain, 1995). In order to achieve the level of using the target language accurately and fluently, learners not only need a lot of contact with comprehensible output, but also need to produce the comprehensible output themselves. Firstly, Swain thinks that language output can enable learners to notice the gap between their intended expressive language and their actual expressive language, thereby stimulating learners' intrinsic cognitive process. Second, he believes the process of language output is the internalization of language knowledge, that is, the language function of language output. Last but not least, he also holds the view that second language acquisition is a process of making assumptions about the target language constantly and then testing them.

Selinker created interlanguage, which means the transitional language in the acquisition process (Selinker, L, 1972). According to Selinker, adults' second language acquisition will be influenced by native language transfer, learning strategies, communication strategies and the overgeneralization of language materials. Tarone, another representative of interlanguage, his perspective is different from Selinker's. Tarone thinks that interlanguage is influenced by the language learning environment, which can be regarded as the capability continuum of formal language and actual language (Tarone, Swierzbins, 2009).

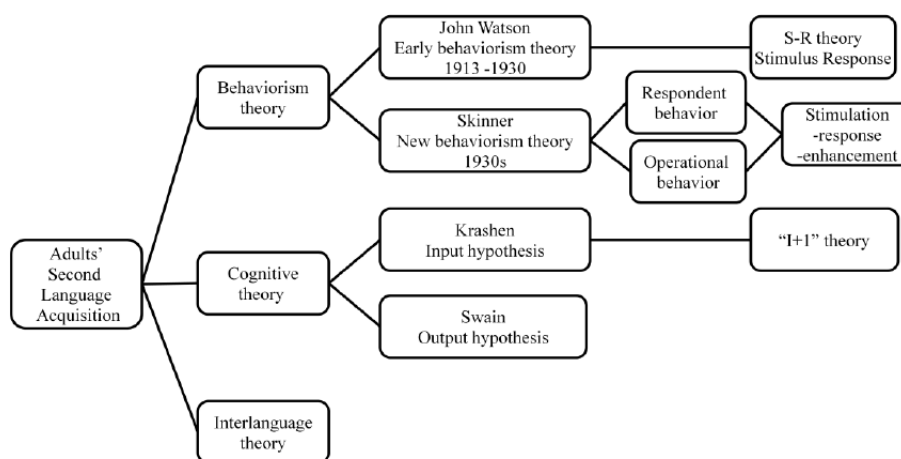


Table 1

Compared to adults' second language acquisition, the related theories of children's native language acquisition formed a number of different schools in the 1940s to 1950s. For example, the behaviorism theory, nativism, cognitive theory etc. Skinner, an American psychologist, and the representative of the behaviorism theory, stressed the effect of external response to specific stimuli, that is, the S-R theory. Krashen (1985) said that "Language, like other human behavior, is obtained by habit, rather than any other psychological behavior or points of view." Chomsky, the representative of nativism, emphasizes that the main task of psychological linguistics is to learn how to change the language skills into a specific surface structure by conversion rules; he also thinks human beings are born with universal grammar, which is regarded as the language instinct of humans. Piaget, the founder of the cognitive theory, believes children's development of a mother tongue is the result of the interaction between innate ability and objective experience. Halliday explored native language acquisition from the perspective of language communication, rather than the perspective of language structure (Halliday, 2004). He believes that children are able to learn the language because they think language can help them do things, and can help them to meet their own needs. The process of language acquisition is necessary to learn how to express meaning and master the language of the semantic system. In short, the common points of various children's language acquisition theories are: the influence of children's congenital constructional structure, external stimulus, the environment as well as conditioned behavior.

III. THE ARGUMENTS ABOUT "WHETHER THE ADULTS' SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IS EASY OR NOT"

There are always some debates on "whether the adults' second language acquisition is easy or not". Some researchers

believe that adults' second language acquisition is easy. However, some researchers have proposed the opposite view, that the adults' second language acquisition is not as easy as the children's native language acquisition.

A. *Adults Acquire Second Language Easily*

The advantages of adults' second language acquisition exists objectively, adults' cognitive level, logical analysis and self-monitoring abilities are higher than those of children. Krashen indicated that if the acquisition time is same, adults can also acquire the second language easily, and adults always make progress faster than children (Krashen, Stephen, 1982). Ellis also believes that adults have advantages in second language acquisition (Ellis, 2013).

1. The Aspect of Cognitive Level

In the process of adults' second language acquisition, adults' cognitive ability has been improved, and their thinking structure has matured (Xiaohui Wang, 2009). Piaget, a famous psychologist, divided cognitive development into three stages (Jean Piaget, 1991): pre operational stage (2-7 years old), concrete operational stage (7-11 years old) and formal operational stage (11 years old to adulthood). Pre operational stage based on intuition and the perception of static, children's language has not yet obtained the significance of this as well as the lack of logical conversion. In the concrete operational stage, children's language level has been improved, and they can get rid of the shackles of the static perception. The formal operational stage is the final stage of Piaget's theory of cognitive development. At this point in development, thinking becomes much more complicated and advanced. Ausubel pointed out that the adults can benefit from some grammar explanations, but children cannot do this (D. P. Ausubel, 2000).

2. The Aspect of Logical Thinking

One of the main strengths of adults is that they have the ability for logical thought (Fenghua Yao, 2011). Adults' thinking mode has been improved and their language consciousness is very strong. The maturity of adults raises their cognitive ability, resulting in strong abilities to analyze and conclude, thus providing advantages in grammar rules and sentence expression; allowing them to easily handle complex problems. Moreover, most adults not only have a wealth of life experience, but also have comprehensive understanding of a multitude of things. All of this accumulative knowledge and ability is of great help with their second language acquisition.

3. The Aspect of Self Monitoring Ability

In the process of adults' second language acquisition, the self monitoring ability of adults is very strong (Jingjing Hong, 2014). Adults will analyze and correct the mistakes which they make in the learning process. Besides, according to their own characteristics in different periods, they can use different learning strategies to carry out autonomous learning. Adults have a strong initiative, especially in the form of classroom teaching. It can be argued that children mainly gain language passively, because they have a lack of autonomy. Adults do things that always have a strong purpose. They can acquire a second language according to their own needs and will encourage themselves to continue, to persist, to carry on with the psychological adjustment, but most children do not have these characteristics.

B. *Adults Acquire Second Language Difficultly*

The critical period hypothesis suggests that adults may have lost their natural language acquisition skills after a certain age, so adults cannot successfully acquire the second language with the same level of eventual fluency as children's native language acquisition. Some linguists believe that although adults spend a lot of energy and time in the second language acquisition, they still cannot totally acquire second language (Boping Yuan, 2003).

1. The Aspect of Age

Researchers have found the relationship between age and some aspects of the second language (Tohidian & Tohidian, 2009). Age is an important factor in building a second language. The critical period of native language acquisition is from about two years old to the onset of puberty. In this period, a learner is more likely to acquire language than at any other time (Lenneberg, Eric, 1967). According to Piaget's observation, children can acquire their native language at the age of 11. It is almost impossible to automatically acquire a new language after puberty, because they have missed the critical period of language acquisition. Taking notably children "Genie" for example, who was kept in a locked room by her father, and never had any exposure to language before the end of the critical period. Throughout her life, she has learned small snippets of language, but she has never gained fluency, and her language level often decreases, despite constant exposure and teaching. In addition, we cannot deny that certain characteristics, such as age, cognitive ability and emotions, will inevitably affect the second language acquisition. The plasticity of the brain allows children to acquire the language well before puberty, but after puberty, with the maturation of the brain as well as the formation of the partial side, adults may lose the physiological advantage in the second language acquisition, and therefore it is difficult to reach the level of the mother tongue. Adults' second language acquisition also needs to proceed in an orderly way and proceed step by step, following the natural order acquisition mode. Besides, the study shows that the second language level of an immigrant is not directly proportional to the length of his/her residence in the country, but it is instead, related to his/her age immigration. For example, some Chinese immigrants to other countries when they were forty or fifty years old, still cannot speak English even though they live in an entirely English environment. So, compared with the second language acquisition, children's native language acquisition is successful (Bley-Vroman, 2006). Moreover, after puberty, language acquisition is not likely to be naturally acquired only through conscious learning and working hard (Krashen, 1982).

2. The Aspect of Environment

There is a specific type of environmental stimuli in the second language acquisition (Schachter, 1996). Children are exposed to their mother tongue every day in daily life. Their native language acquisition is a natural acquisition, mainly focusing on the content of the language rather than the form (Krashen, 1982). That is to say the environment plays an important role in children's language acquisition. Their learning ability is inherent, but the language is not. According to comparison method theory, although children's cognitive ability is poor, they still can use the first language fluently. However, second language acquisition classrooms generally use the fictional or virtual dialogue, and focus on the form rather than the content. The natural native language environment is usually unconscious and enjoyable. Children often acquire the language from their nanny or mother, they do not have a teacher, and they need not enter the school, so their native language learning process is smooth and complete. Furthermore, in the actual communication environment, children can not only master the language, but also form their own language communicative competence. Nevertheless, most second language learners must rely on a hard way to complete their study.

3. The Aspect of Device

People are born with a language acquisition device, but for adults, this acquisition device has been weakened, they already have a native language grammar system in their brains (Chomsky, N, 1972). Children have the same native language acquisition device, which consists of a group of Universal Grammar (Bley-Vroman, 2006). As a result, the average child can master the native language at the same age in spite of the differences in intelligence, environment and language materials, but for the second language learners, they must rely on their own language concepts or system of language knowledge to complete the second language acquisition.

4. The Aspect of Mode

Bley-Vroman also thinks that adults' second language acquisition needs the combination of the native language and cognitive system (Bley-Vroman, 2006). In the process of language acquisition, these two features maximize mutual cooperation and complement each other. Children start learning language from imitation; they imitate the surrounding language, and then make a response to the environment and adult's language. In order to strengthen it, the adult will give praise or material encouragement if the reaction is correct, thus forming language habits. After that, children can automatically make some responses because they were once stimulated by this language. Take vocabulary acquisition as an example. Children's vocabulary acquisition begins with imitation, memory and phrases then forms the concept of things. In contrast, adults firstly combine their own native language's "code switching" and "meaningful notes" for speech analysis (Gao, Xia, 2002), then they can understand and grasp the target language vocabulary through the process of comprehensive analysis. The development of children's language ability is related to their physical, psychological and cognitive development as well as their knowledge, ideas and value development. However, adults' second language acquisition should be based on the native language ability they have formed. Native language knowledge may negatively transfer to the second language resulting in conflict with each other. When the native language is deeply ingrained, adults will extend their first language rules (Phonology, Syntax) into their second language acquisition, but children cannot do this. Therefore, compared with children's native language acquisition, adults' second language acquisition has a lower chance of success.

5. The Aspect of Motivation

Clear learning goals and motivations, as well as the target language and cultural interests, often bring some strong learning motivations to people (Dai, M, C, 2012). For children, the native language becomes a very important tool to help them communicate with other people. Native language acquisition is a kind of life need. In this acquisition process, children will not feel the burden, but they will instead feel the happiness. Mastering the native language is necessary to fulfill the need of communication, development and even survival; nevertheless, second language learners are often faced with some requirements of the language acquisition. Generally speaking, native language acquisition is a natural need for children, however, the motivations or purposes of adults' second language acquisition are much more complicated. Some people may have a comprehensive motivation or an inherent interest in the target language; some people may have an instrumental motivation, they treat the target language as a tool or a need, for instance, in order to further learning as well as upgrading (Gardener, D, 2002), etc. Children's native language acquisition process is in a natural and pleasant manner, but most adults need to do some careful design, long-term hard training, and even some compulsive execution in their second language acquisition. In addition, there is a difference between the acquisition mode and the final result. All in all, to a large extent, language learning depends on the acquisition target as well as the motivation of the learners; therefore, adults' acquisition process will eventually be conscious, or even painful.

IV. CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, because of the age, environment, device, mode and motivation, adults' second language acquisition becomes very complicated and extremely difficult. Therefore, the passive acquisition plays an important role in the process of their acquisition. On account of adults' stable psychology and character, the restrictions of adults are much more than that of children. Adults cannot avoid using the first language in their second language acquisition. At the same time, the negative transfer of native language also makes the effect of the second language acquisition greatly reduced. The characteristics of children's native language acquisition are different from adults' second language acquisition, and the processes differ greatly too. It is confirmed that the acquisition of native language is natural and easy, but the second language acquisition of adults is difficult and complicated.

The difficulties of adults' second language acquisition are worth thinking about. Maybe children's native language acquisition could have a great effect on the change of the adults' second language acquisition. The mode of native language acquisition can be used to assist the development of adults' second language acquisition. For example, adults could attempt to emulate the way that children imitate the language of their surroundings. Through repetition and practice, adults will come into contact with some language materials constantly and then they can creatively use the language to interact, in the same way as a child progresses in their native language learning process. In addition, adults' learning behavior is mostly dependent on the language environment, and the language environment is constituted by a variety of communicative activities. They can not only utilize their own initiative to create a second language acquisition environment, but also learn children's fearlessness, to attempt to eliminate the fear of making mistakes.

Adults' second language acquisition is a long, painful process, and it will encounter many setbacks. However, I believe that if adults can borrow some rules of children's native language acquisition and combine them with the actual situation as well, then the likelihood of success will increase exponentially.

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