

Insights into Second Language Acquisition from a Personal Interview

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Abstract. This study examines second language acquisition (SLA) through an interview with a Chinese economics major (IELTS 6.5) educated in Beijing. Drawing on *How Languages are Learned* and related SLA research, it analyzes her learning experiences across three dimensions: teaching methodologies, acquisition nonlinearity, and L1 influence. Findings indicate that behaviorism-dominated classrooms in China cause receptive-productive skill imbalances, while interaction-based approaches better develop oral fluency. The interviewee's plateau experiences illustrate acquisition nonlinearity, where apparent errors signal cognitive progress. Persistent difficulties with verb inflections, articles, and prepositions partially support the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, yet L1 also facilitates L2 acquisition through universal grammar and cognitive transfer. Her strategies—self-talk, contextual vocabulary learning, and selective attention training—offer practical insights. The paper argues for an integrated classroom combining behaviorism, interactionism, usage-based theory, and information processing approaches. Finally, L2 learning fosters metalinguistic awareness and cognitive flexibility, extending benefits to cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords: Second language acquisition; behaviorism; interactionism; usage-based theory; nonlinearity of language acquisition; contrastive analysis hypothesis; first language transfer; metalinguistic awareness; cognitive flexibility; Chinese EFL learners.

1. Introduction

The interviewee is a classmate from my high school. She completed her elementary, middle, and high school education in Beijing and is currently majoring in economics at a university in Beijing. She also participated in a summer program at a US university a couple of years ago. As far as I know, she has always shown a strong interest in learning English since high school, and even now, she often watches American TV shows like “The Big Bang Theory” in her spare time. During the interview, I learned that she recently scored 6.5 on the IELTS exam and said that her English is generally good enough for fluent daily conversations, but she still finds a bit challenging when using academic language. She also mentioned that she mainly uses English to read occasional English literatures and resources in her major courses, so she believes her reading comprehension is relatively strong. In addition, to get a more detailed understanding of the interviewee's English proficiency, I randomly found a piece of English text and asked her to read it aloud. I think her oral fluency is better overall than she described, but she has some difficulty with the pronunciation of certain phonemes that are not well distinguished in Chinese pinyin, such as /æ/ and /ɑ:/.

2. Teaching Methods of the Second Language

2.1. Behaviorism and Interactionism in Chinese English Classrooms

My interviewee mentioned that communicating with native English speakers significantly helps improve one's English proficiency. However, taking Beijing as an example, the most typical model in English classrooms is behaviorism. As a result, students mostly lack the opportunity to immerse themselves in an English - speaking environment and engage in oral conversations. Instead, they mostly learn grammar through the process of “memorization, feedback, and reinforcement.” According to my interviewee, during her elementary and middle school English classes, teachers always explained new grammar knowledge in Chinese. For instance, they would compare the

differences between the past tense and the perfect tense, as well as the three forms of the subjunctive mood. The vast majority of class time was devoted to explaining reading comprehension (reading passages and selecting the most appropriate answer from four options), cloze tests (focusing on fixed expressions with prepositions and understanding), and grammar completion exercises, rather than encouraging students to express themselves in English. “But when I was in elementary school, I signed up for an after - school English class, where the teacher forced us to converse entirely in English, including in scenarios related to the classroom knowledge and in chats among classmates,” she said. “This is where the foundation of my oral English was laid.” This contrast highlights the advantages of interactionism. Interactionists believe that language acquisition is achieved through social interaction, by communicating with others (Ellis, 2008)[1]. In an all - English environment, learners are compelled to use the target language for communication. They internalize the rich language applications in the input, extensively apply them in their own language output, and continuously adjust in real - life social interactions, thereby improving their language proficiency. It is evident that our language classrooms need to provide learners with more opportunities for language production to help them enhance their language skills.

2.2. Outcome: The Imbalance Between Receptive and Productive Skills

Implementing behaviorism, which emphasizes imitation and practice, can indeed help students quickly learn a lot of vocabulary and build a relatively solid grammatical knowledge system when they are completely unfamiliar with a foreign language, laying the foundation for subsequent English language learning. However, as mentioned in *How Languages are Learned*, many foreign language learners have significantly weaker speaking and writing skills compared to their reading and listening comprehension abilities (Swain, 1985)[2]. This is very evident in English classrooms in China. Based on my observations during my IELTS preparation, Chinese students generally score much higher in listening and reading than in speaking and writing, including myself. This can also be seen as an extension of the impact of behaviorism, the most traditional theory, on second language acquisition classroom practice. Among the four language domains, speaking and writing are both outputs, and output needs to find opportunities in interactions based on social and cultural contexts. My interviewee said, “My listening is pretty good, but I’ve always been hesitant to speak English. Later, my teacher suggested that I try to talk to myself in English when I go out to buy food or tidy up, without worrying about being right or wrong, just to practice fluency. I’ve been relying on this method ever since.” *How Languages are Learned* also refers that older foreign language learners are usually more concerned that the mistakes they make while learning the language will cause embarrassment or ridicule, which hinders them from actively using their newly acquired language and making progress through mistakes[2]. Talking to oneself provides a safe and output - rich solution.

2.3. Combining Theories for the Ideal Language Classroom

The ideal language classroom should be a combination of these theories, allowing their strengths to complement each other. The curriculum should include a lecture where the teacher centrally explains key points and provides demonstrations, thereby encouraging students to engage in imitation and consolidation exercises. After that, in the practice session, incorporating group projects can encourage students to communicate with their peers, thus facilitating acquisition through the language use in collaborative dialogue. Additionally, incorporating movies and music in the target language can enhance cognitive abilities and cross - cultural understanding while exposing students to numerous authentic expressions, helping them break free from the influence of certain fixed expressions from their first language.

3. Characteristics of Second Language Acquisition

3.1. The Role of Context and Usage in Language Acquisition

My interviewee pointed out that her major sometimes requires reading English literature. She found that, compared to memorizing words with vocabulary apps, reading literature while looking up unfamiliar words enabled her to quickly grasp most of the professional vocabulary and left a more lasting impression. In context - based learning, learners can integrate linguistic knowledge with specific contexts, thus establishing connections between abstract knowledge and the real world, which in turn facilitates better comprehension and memorization of language materials. However, vocabulary apps often lack the element of using words in context. This finding confirms the usage - based theory that views the use of language as the key to language acquisition. The methods mentioned above, such as talking to oneself, engaging in group projects, watching movies, and listening to music, all allow learners to truly master the rules and common expressions of a language in the context of practical application. Moreover, in the interview, she expressed the view that the use of language largely endows it with its charm. Language is essentially a means of communication, and the usage - based theory is in line with its core function of “expression.” Putting language knowledge into use is also the key to liberating language from rigidity and releasing its unique charm that is shown in its fluidity.

3.2. Attention, Noticing, and Information Processing

3.2.1. The noticing hypothesis vs. information processing theories

In addition, the interviewee mentioned in the interview that even listening to English songs while doing other things can unconsciously enhance her understanding of the English language, even if she is not “paying attention” to the specific lyrics. This is related to the noticing hypothesis, which suggests that nothing is learned unless it has been “noticed” (Richard Schmidt, 1990, 2001)[3][4]. It should be pointed out that this theory does not claim that noticing itself results in acquisition but rather sees it as an essential starting point. However, the results of this interview seem to lean more towards information processing theories, which argues that anything that uses up our “mental processing space,” even if we are not aware of it or attending to it intentionally, can contribute to learning. But the value of “noticing” is still evident. The interviewee pointed out a problem in IELTS listening that had troubled her for a long time. She often forgot to add the plural form of nouns in fill - in - the - blank questions, even though the audio clearly read out the “s.” Her view was that she focused all her attention on understanding the meaning of the text and neglected the grammatical issue. This is consistent with VanPatten’s view that meaning is always prioritized over language form.

3.2.2. Practical strategies for improving accuracy

How Languages are Learned suggests that the solution to this problem lies in automating the declarative knowledge of thinking about the meaning of each word through practice, so that attention can be diverted to language form [2]. But my interviewee proposed another interesting solution. “I first focused on identifying all the plural nouns in the audio, regardless of what the sentence meant. In this way, I became familiar with the plural form of nouns (a grammatical phenomenon that does not exist in Chinese). After I developed this habit, I then tried to focus on the plural form of nouns while understanding the meaning. As a result, my accuracy improved a lot.” This shows that “noticing” can effectively facilitate learning. These two examples seem to indicate that second language acquisition can be promoted without deliberately allocating “attention” to input, but the effect is far less strong than when “noticing” is involved.

3.3. The Nonlinearity of Language Acquisition

According to *How Languages are Learned*, the progress of language acquisition is not always linear. Sometimes, it manifests as correctly remembered forms, leading to visible improvement; sometimes, it shows as a decrease in the use of chunk learning beyond the initial context, which may

lead to new mistakes (Lightbown, Spada, 2013)[2]. Some errors may also stem from learners finding patterns in isolated grammatical points and over-generalizing them. The latter two situations are actually improvements in cognitive ability, but they can easily be mistaken for regression in performance. My interviewee said that she had experienced this. For a while, she felt that her English level seemed to be stuck and hard to break through. Although overall she had become a more proficient English user at that time, she kept making various mistakes she had never seen before. “I look back to that period now, I realize that I was trying out many English expressions I had never attempted before to convey what I really wanted to say, instead of completing grammar fill-ins.” When second language learners encounter this situation, they should not doubt their efforts but realize that they have entered a new, more advanced stage of learning. After a detailed analysis of the errors, it has been revealed that many of them are not simply due to the direct transfer of the first language to the second language but are better explained by the learners’ developing knowledge of the second language. At this point, using the second language more frequently to interact with the outside world in a socially and culturally meaningful way, as well as exposure to authentic expressions in movies and original books, will be of great help.

4. The Impact of First Language on Second Language Acquisition

4.1. Challenges Posed by L1-L2 Differences

4.1.1. Linguistic distance and persistent errors due to L1 absence

“Language proximity” refers to the degree of similarity between two languages in terms of phonology, syntax, morphology, and lexicon (Odlin, 2003)[5]. From this perspective, Chinese and English have significant differences. Chinese is a tonal language, where tones are crucial for distinguishing meaning, while English lacks tones but has more complex syllable structures. English uses the Latin alphabet, which is phonetic, whereas Chinese characters are logographic. Additionally, Chinese grammar is more flexible and lacks inflectional morphology, while English has a rich system of tenses, aspects, and word forms. My interviewee told me that the most common mistakes she makes are inconsistencies in verb tenses within a sentence or omitting the third-person singular form, both of which are absent in Chinese. These errors are also the main factors that undermine her confidence in speaking English. “Because native speakers never make such mistakes, it makes me feel even more that my spoken English is poor,” she said. “I think it’s because Chinese and English are so different.” Moreover, she referred to another frustrating issue: the misuse of prepositions and articles. “During last week’s final presentation, I wanted to say, ‘on the bus,’ but I said ‘in the bus’ instead. And I often struggle with whether to use ‘the’ before a noun when writing essays. These should have been learned in elementary school, but I still can’t get them right every time.” The morpheme acquisition studies in *How Languages are Learned* mention that although linguistic forms like articles appear early in the acquisition sequence, many learners from various language backgrounds (including Slavic languages, Chinese, and Japanese) still have difficulties with these aspects of English, even at advanced levels (Lightbown, Spada, 2013)[2]. It shows that the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which predicts learners’ errors based on language differences, is partially reliable. Many errors made by second language learners occur because the corresponding logic or cognitive patterns do not exist in their first language, leading to a lack of proficiency and mistakes. These errors should be assessed objectively; they should neither be ignored nor arbitrarily used as evidence of learners’ second language ability, as doing so may have a negative impact on their confidence.

4.1.2. Interlanguage and the need for feedback

When discussing the mutual influence between Chinese and English, the interviewee mentioned a point that I also strongly resonate with. In English speaking or writing, we often question whether our expressions are idiomatic. Even though we know that many expressions translated directly from Chinese thinking sound strange to native speakers, we still can’t pinpoint the problem unless we receive external feedback that affirms or corrects us. This is also explicitly referred in *How Languages*

are Learned, where it states that learners may “struggle to notice when something they say is not a feature of the language as used by more proficient speakers” (Lightbown, Spada, 2013)[2]. This state between the two languages further confirms the uniqueness of the language that second language learners are acquiring. It is not entirely the second language, but also distinct from the first language. The influence of the first language on language acquisition reveals that errors also stem from the learners’ current interlanguage understanding. On the other hand, given that most interactions where feedback can be obtained are not in daily communication, but rather those that occur in language classrooms, this classroom corrections become very important. Otherwise, learners are likely to stagnate in their development of the second language.

4.2. Positive Transfer from L1 to L2

Even with many distractions, the first language can still bring a lot of help and inspiration to the acquisition of the second language. Firstly, the first language provides learners with an initial understanding of how language works. For example, the concept of Universal Grammar indicates that all languages have some common structures and rules stored in the brains of normal people [1]. The acquisition of the first language undoubtedly activates this function first, helping learners grasp the grammatical framework of the second language more quickly. My interviewee mentioned, “There are still many similarities in the expressions between these two languages. For example, I cannot achieve that without you’ using double negatives to express affirmation. In Chinese, we say ‘没有你 (without you), 我就做不到 (I cannot achieve),’ which is the same. This commonality between languages has been of great help to me in learning foreign languages.” In addition, the development of the first language also cultivates their cognitive abilities, such as logical thinking and language analysis skills, which are equally applicable in the acquisition of the second language.

5. Benefits of Second Language Learning

Although learners of a second language face more challenges, the benefits of this process are also significant. Learning a second language can significantly enhance learners’ metalinguistic awareness, that is, their awareness of language itself. When asked about the impact of English learning on herself, the interviewee said that she began to pay more attention to how she used Chinese expressions. “It used to be like speaking Chinese automatically, never thinking about why I said it that way, but after learning English I started to review my own language and gained a lot of novelty that beginners have.” She gave an example that I had never thought of: “cape.” In terms of its literal meaning in Chinese, it means “A breeze brushes past my shoulders.” She said she realized this when she looked up the translation of “cape” in a dictionary. In addition, the bilingual brain has cognitive flexibility that the monolingual brain does not have, particularly in terms of language system switching and conflict inhibition (Bialystok, 2017)[6]. It is not only about being able to adjust one’s language strategies, but also about appreciating and understanding cultures that are different from one’s own. The interviewee referred to her love for musicals like “The Red and the Black” and “Hamilton,” as well as her views on some actors and movies in the Western entertainment industry. The second language seems to become an invisible thread that connects people who speak it. The cognitive flexibility brought by being bilingual enables people to understand and appreciate each other better and largely eliminates the barriers and prejudices caused by political, social, and cultural differences.

6. Summary

This paper investigates second language acquisition (SLA) through a case study of a Chinese economics major with an IELTS score of 6.5. The study examines three core aspects: (1) Teaching methodologies—contrasting behaviorism-dominated Chinese classrooms with interactionism-based approaches, arguing for an integrated model combining explicit instruction with communicative practice; (2) Characteristics of second language acquisition—demonstrating how context, usage and

attention towards language promote this process, and that apparent plateaus and errors often signal cognitive advancement rather than regression; (3) L1 influence—analyzing how linguistic distance between Chinese and English causes persistent difficulties with verb inflections, articles, and prepositions, while acknowledging L1’s facilitative role through universal grammar and cognitive transfer. The interviewee’s self-developed strategies—self-talk, contextual reading, and selective attention training—illustrate practical applications of usage-based theory and the noticing hypothesis. The paper concludes that effective SLA requires combining multiple theoretical approaches and highlights the broader benefits of bilingualism, including enhanced metalinguistic awareness and cross-cultural cognitive flexibility.

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