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## How Perspectives on Language Development Affect English as a Foreign Language Teaching

By Yan Wu

*Hebei United University, China*

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# How Perspectives on Language Development Affect English as a Foreign Language Teaching

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the field of SLA (second language acquisition), many theories, approaches and hypotheses have come into being. And all these theories, approaches and hypotheses have more or less affected teaching practice. For example, it is due to the altering of different assumptions about language development, teaching methods have been greatly influenced. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Classical Method – Grammar Translation Method was replaced by the Direct Method, which was based on the assumption that second language is learned in a natural way, just like the first language acquisition (Brown, 2000, p. 45). In 1940s and 1950s, it was due to the behavioristic approach to the explanation of language development, Audiolingual Method (ALM) was popular (ibid, p. 74). In 1970s, Noam Chomsky's innatistic view brought about an innovation in language teaching, during which many methods emerged, such as Community Language Learning, Total Physical Response and Natural Approach (ibid, pp. 103-108). From the examples above, we know that the assumptions or understandings towards language development have great effects on the choices of teaching methods. However, the effects are not constrained to teaching methods, yet other aspects of teaching are influenced by it. In this paper, I intend to explore the effects of understanding of language development on EFLT (English as a foreign language teaching) in classroom. First of all, I'll have a brief review of the literature of different perspectives on the process of language development. After that, I will discuss the potential effects on EFLT in classroom based on one of the perspectives.

## II. THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE EXPLANATIONS OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

### a) The Forms of Language Development

Before we start discussing about the process of language development, it is essential to know the various ways of language acquisition first. Every normal people speak at least one language. The process of acquiring the first language is named as L1 acquisition. If it is one language, we call this 'monolingual FLA' (FLA refers to first language acquisition) (Klein, 1986, p. 4). If two languages are acquired as the first language at the same time, we call this 'bilingual FLA' (ibid. p. 4). However, most people in modern society may speak more than one language. The process of acquiring a second or a third language is named as L2 acquisition. Compared with a child's success in L1 acquisition, it seems troublesome for people to speak a second language as fluently and naturally as a child even though they consume much time and energy in learning L2. Wondering about this sharp contrast, it is natural for people to think about how a child is acquiring the first language. Therefore, many theories have been set up in the explanation of L1 acquisition. The theoretical approaches accounting for child's L1 acquisition have provided a foundation for the understanding of L2 acquisition. Next, I will explore the understandings of language development with regards to L1 acquisition and its impacts on the understandings of L2 learning.

### b) Three perspectives on language development

A lot of approaches have been conducted on child's L1 acquisition. As a result, many theories have come into being. Generally speaking, there are mainly three perspectives. Those are:

- a. Behaviorism
- b. Innatism
- c. Interactionist's position

Behaviorists view language development as a process of habit formation which involves imitation, practice, correct reinforcement (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 9). In this process learners receive stimuli from the environment, make responses, and if the response is correct, it will be reinforced by others as a result of which, a habit is formed (Brown, 2000, p. 22). Therefore, from behaviorists' point of view, "the quality and quantity

**Author** : College of Foreign Languages, Hebei United University, Tangshan 063009, China. E-mail : helenawy2010@126.com

of the language which the child hears, as well as the consistency of the reinforcement offered by others in the environment, should have an effect on the child's success in language learning." (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 9) However, behaviorists' view on language development has received a lot of critics. Noam Chomsky (as cited in Emmitt & Pollock, 1997, p. 164) argued that, a child could produce or comprehend some words that he has never heard. Therefore, behaviorists' approach to the explanation of language development is discredited. However, Lightbown and Spada (1999, p. 26) maintained that, behaviorists' explanation to language development can account for the acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical morphemes. This is where we should value.

Noam Chomsky's LAD (Language Acquisition Device) and UG (Universal Grammar) are two of the most prominent theories within the framework of innatism. Chomsky maintains that a child is endowed with a universal innate mechanism that can help in acquiring a language system only by being exposed to some samples (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 16; Brown, 2000, pp. 24-27; Emmitt & Pollock, 1997, p. 164). At first, he used the term LAD to indicate the innate capacity of a child (Chomsky, 1959, cited in Brown, 2000, p. 24). Later, Chomsky and his followers adopted the term UG (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 16). Some scholars value the availability of UG and believe that UG is useful in teaching. Cook (2000) wrote in her book *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching* that "the grammar is seen as universal; the differences between languages come down to how words behave in sentences." (p. 158) However, there are also some critics on it. Klein (1986, p. 8) argued that if UG worked in L1 acquisition and after L1 acquisition, 'some open parameters are fixed' (Chomsky's formulation), why learning a second language appears more troublesome to adults than to children. Therefore, a teacher should be cautious in applying UG in teaching. Krashen, who has built the renowned Monitor model/ Input Hypothesis, forms another important theory within innatism. Nevertheless, his five hypotheses have received more critics than approvals.

Interactionalists hold that language acquisition is a result of children's cognitive development and linguistic environment in social interaction (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, pp. 22-23; Brown, 2000, pp. 28-29). Apparently, they seek to explain language development from the inside as well as the outside. And this might be a better way to explain language development.

There are two approaches within the framework of interactionistic framework. One is a cognitive approach. The other is a social approach. Jean Piaget (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 23) maintained that the cognitive development of a child partly influence the use of language. Another interactionist Michael Long (as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 287) proposed the interaction

hypothesis, which highlights the use of modified interaction in realizing comprehensible input. And Long believed that "comprehensible input promotes language acquisition." (as quoted in Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 43). Social interactionists put emphasis on the role of social interaction in language development. This point of view is developed by the psychologist Lev Vygotsky (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 44) who maintained that social interaction between the learner and the interlocutor plays an important role in language development. The definition of his zone of proximal development, known as ZPD, could at best underpin his point of view: "...the distance between the actual developmental as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86, cited in Lee, 1987, p. 7)

To sum up, interactionists take a point of view that modified interaction make input comprehensible hence promoting language development; and interactions between the learner and advanced or peer interlocutor are effective in guiding learners achieve a potential language level.

### III. EFLT(ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING) IN CLASSROOM— FROM THE INTERACTIONISTS' POSITION

#### *a) Context of language teaching— EFL (English as a foreign language)*

In an EFL environment, English language learners are seldom exposed to English language and also they have few opportunities to speak English outside classroom. The main access to English language learning is classroom. Therefore, classroom teaching takes great responsibility in helping learners achieve their various needs in English language learning. And the assumptions of English teachers about language and language learning, teacher and learner roles in classroom, learning activities and instructional materials are crucial to the effectiveness of teaching as well as the efficiency of learning. The assumptions about these three factors constituent the teaching methodology (Richards, 2001, p.167). Next, I will explore how the interactionist's perspective on language development affects the teaching methodology.

#### *b) The Effects of Interactionist's Perspective on Teaching Methodology*

Based on the interactionists perspective on language development, effective language learning takes place in social interaction. Therefore, classroom teaching should involve interactive communication, which means a break down of teacher's leader position. However, we cannot expect that classroom interaction is

the same as social interaction. It's ideal and impossible. What we can do is to create an environment for classroom interaction. Van Lier (2001, p. 91) classified classroom interaction as two broad types: teacher-learner interaction and learner-learner interaction. Thus, learners are no longer the followers of the teacher. They are independent learners, just like children acquiring the first language in natural settings. Spontaneous learning can be promoted in classroom interaction. Next, I'll discuss the conduct of teacher- learner interaction and learner - learner interaction in classroom.

Based on the understanding of Vygotsky's ZPD theory, both teacher-learner interaction and learner-learner interaction can promote learners' language development. After a careful examination of instructional model: initiation-response-feedback, known as IRF instruction model, which is found by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975, cited in McCarthy, 2002, pp. 12-18), Van Lier (2001) found that "when [IRF model] moves beyond mere recitation and display, [it] can be regarded as a way of scaffolding instruction, a way of developing cognitive structures in the zone of proximal development, or a way of assisting learners to express themselves with maximum clarity." (p. 96) Therefore, IRF instruction model may be beneficial to language learners' cognitive development.

As to learner-learner interaction, cooperative learning may be a good way to carry it out. Many theorists believe that in second language or foreign language learning, cooperative learning allow students to talk freely and negotiate meaning with each other, which can increase the comprehensible input (Liang, Mohan & Early, 1998; Olsen & Kagan, 1992, cited in Jacobs & Hall, 2002, p. 53). However, before applying cooperative learning to classroom, the teacher should make a careful plan, such as the size of the group, the way of forming a group, noise-solving measures, etc. (Jacobs & Hall, 2002, pp.53-58).

Another important interaction in classroom is the modified interaction which involves both teacher-learner interaction and learner-learner interaction. According to Long (as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 287), comprehensible input is resulted from modified interaction. Teachers may question what is modified interaction and how should we carry it out in classroom teaching? From Long's (as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 287) point of view, modified interaction involves various modifications created by native speakers and interlocutors which are aimed at making the input comprehensible to the learner. Brown (2000, p. 287) interpreted that modified interaction also includes learners' comprehension checks, clarification/repair requests, etc. As to how to use modified interaction in teaching and learning, Van Lier (2001) suggested that we can refer to "all relevant social and linguistic resources" (p. 101), such as strategic moves—"let me

give you an example"; backchannels---"uhuh"; repair---"Do you mean X?" (Van Lier, 2001, p. 101)

By involving instructional model—IRF in classroom teaching, learners can achieve a higher developmental level; and the cooperative learning and modified interaction can promote the comprehensible input hence promote language learning. Therefore, classroom interaction creates a language environment that can at best promote the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching and learning.

From the interactionist's point of view, social interaction is crucial in language development. Therefore, classroom activities and instruction materials should at best reflect the features of social interaction. Task-focused activities and authentic materials work effectively in classroom interaction. It is believed that by immersing students in tasks, they can negotiate meaning with each other which can promote comprehensible input also they can modify their output in this process (Doughty & Willams, 1998, cited in Richards, 2002, p. 154).

The task-focused activities require that the materials adopted should be authentic and contextualized. In referring to Crawford (2002, pp. 84-86), language in teaching materials should be realistic and authentic and must be contextualized; the focus of the materials should be on engaging learners in actual use of language and fostering their autonomy; and various kinds of materials should be adopted to cater to individual and contextual differences.

As to EFLT in classroom, there are some constraints that the teacher should take into account. Firstly, the size of the classroom is usually relatively large. While designing classroom activities, the teacher should make a careful plan in terms of the size of the class. Secondly, the teaching contexts vary. Mostly, teachers have little right to decide what to teach, because usually there is a set textbook. A good way to deal with it is to supplement the materials that can promote classroom interaction to classroom teaching. Thirdly, there is little access to authentic materials. One of the ways to handle this problem is to use the audio or video materials in teaching, which can set a shared context for the teacher and learners.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The understanding towards language development has great influences on classroom teaching methodology. It can influence the teacher and learner roles in classroom, the activities and the selection of instruction materials. However, the influences are not constrained to these aspects of classroom teaching. It can also affect other aspects, such as syllabus types. From the effects of the theories of language development, we know that every innovation of theories in the field of SLA will have effect

on the various aspects of teaching. Therefore, the way of teaching should be dynamic and flexible. An effective teaching demands a knowledgeable teacher and cautious practitioner. This is what we should follow in teaching.

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