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How alert should I be to learn a language? The noticing hypothesis and its implications for language teaching

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Abstract

The role of awareness in language learning has gained strength with the increasing popularity of cognitive approaches in the field. The Noticing Hypothesis- any form should be noticed in the input and registered consciously to be acquired (Schmidt, 1990, 2001)- contradicts the earlier popular approaches to language acquisition which focus on subconscious processes (Krashen, 1981). The extend that awareness and noticing play a role in language learning is important especially for practitioners to design more effective teaching courses and programs. The implications of related studies will also be determinant of teacher and learner roles in the learning process. Therefore, this paper presents a review of the related studies on 'noticing' and discusses the important concepts of the Noticing Hypothesis. With the purpose of detecting and refuting the contradictory arguments in these studies and clarifying the conceptual issues, the paper adopts a critical perspective. Highly polarized view of the involvement of either conscious or unconscious processes in learning is in the centre of discussion in the paper. One of the main conclusions of the study is that such a dismissive tone may impede a more comprehensive perspective on the subject and may lead the practitioners to adopt absolute approaches to language learning.

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1. Introduction

The long journey of Second Language Acquisition from the mid-40s till our time began with a purely behaviouristic approach to language learning (Skinner, 1957; Lado, 1964) but has come to a point of more complexity with the introduction of innate mechanisms (Chomsky, 1959; Dulay & Burt; 1973) and later cognitive

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science into the field (Schmidt, 1986, 1990; Ellis, 2003). Human mind has always raised curiosity with its complex and mysterious nature. Marriage of Cognitive Science and SLA has opened a new door to the field with more doors to open to the human mind and language learning. Schmidt, whose studies on consciousness, attention, and awareness (1990, 1993, 1994, 2001) have led to the emergence of the Noticing Hypothesis, is one of the few names who tries to make a connection between the way people learn a second language and cognitive processes as this connection is hardly achieved by the researchers (Doughty & Long, 2003).

In this paper, the reader will be first informed about the origins of the Noticing Hypothesis. Then, some concepts of the Noticing Hypothesis and different perspectives to the ‘noticing’ will be discussed with an emphasis on the difficulty of meeting on the common grounds and from a critical view point. After connections between the Noticing Hypothesis and some well-known SLA hypotheses are evaluated in the scope of conscious and unconscious processes, the implications of the hypothesis for teaching practice will be discussed.

2. Origins of the Noticing Hypothesis

The Noticing Hypothesis has its roots in the study where Schmidt (1983) questions the underlying reasons behind the consistent lexical and grammatical errors in the proficient language use of a Japanese learner of English, whom he calls ‘Wes’. As an explanation to this stabilization of some specific errors in Wes’ English, he suggests that Wes may not have noticed the correct form of the errors in his interlanguage. He may not have known that he had been saying them wrong. Whether that was the case is not explained in his paper but that study is the origin of the Noticing Hypothesis.

Already aroused curiosity of Schmidt into the impact of learner awareness in the learning process is reinforced and supported with evidence from his study of his own language learning experience of Portuguese (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). In this study, he documents accounts of his own learning by keeping a journal which contains his notes during the time he was taking official language courses and also during his daily conversations. His written accounts of his learning are compared with the recordings of the conversations in Portuguese between Schmidt and Frota (1986). Two main findings create a base for his hypothesis; frequency of a language form in the input did not result in acquisition if it was not noticed by the learner and corrective feedback of his mistakes did not contribute to his learning if they were not noticed by him (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). The findings of that study played the main role in the proposal of the Noticing Hypothesis.

These two main studies raised the questions that led Schmidt to propose the term “noticing” and the Noticing Hypothesis. To get a more comprehensive understanding of the hypothesis, a closer understanding of the terminology is essential. Therefore, the following section will provide some definitions for the key terms with reference to some related criticism for the confusion that terminology causes.

3. The Noticing Hypothesis and ‘noticing’

Schmidt and Frota refer to “noticing” as conscious awareness of the target language which requires the attendance and awareness of the learner to the input (1986). In other words, the learner needs to be aware of the input and attend to it to be able to process the input, which means that input becomes intake. However, Schmidt and Frota avoid operationally defining the term in their study where they make their initial claims of the hypothesis (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). Subjective nature of the term is accepted by Schmidt (2001) as he refers to it as a "subjective correlation" of attention. Schmidt (2001) aims at suggesting a neat definition with clearer boundaries of ‘noticing’ by offering equivalent terms such as "apperception" (Gass, 1988), "detection within selective attention" (Tomlin & Villa, 1994), and "detection plus rehearsal in short term memory" (Robinson, 1995). However, these definitions do not truly comply with his definition of the term. First of all, definition of "apperception" contains some form of understanding of the relations between the past and new knowledge (Gass, 1997) while Schmidt (1990) states that noticing does not require understanding, which is stated to be a higher process. Although Gass’ (1997) comprehended input concept seems more similar to the concept of understanding (Schmidt, 1990), it is important to point out the conceptual ambiguity that is caused by naming similar concepts differently. Similarly,

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