

Review

Psycholinguistic determinants of immigrant second language acquisition

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Received 10 December 2015; received in revised form 21 March 2016; accepted 21 March 2016

Available online 16 April 2016



Abstract

The primary purpose of the paper was to review several secondary sources in the field of Second Language Acquisition. Consequently, various literatures available from PubMed, Scopus, the Cochrane Library, the Social Science Research Network (SSRN), Google Scholar, reference lists, and ongoing studies were reviewed. The current research identified and analyzed psycholinguistic factors that impact second language acquisition by immigrants with special emphasis on psychological, linguistic, and social determinants. From the literature review that was conducted, it was established that several previous studies confirmed that age at migration has an inverse correlation with mastery of the second language. Also, it was found that immigrants from groups that are largely represented in the host country have a lower probability of achieving second language proficiency. Further, the linguistic distance between the native and the target language is associated with second language acquisition. Concerning social and psycholinguistic factors, a difference exists between genders in the achievement of good oral skills and family particularly matters in the assimilation into the new culture. Therefore, this review paper highlighted the need for support from the local communities, the government and the non-governmental organizations to help the immigrants effectively learn a second language.

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Keywords: Psycholinguistics; Language acquisition; Immigrant; Linguistic distance

1. Introduction

The term “psycholinguistics” was first used by Kantor (1936) in his studies on the psychology of grammar and was later popularized by Pronko (1946) when he advanced the idea that a multidisciplinary approach is best for a proper understanding of the mechanisms underlying language acquisition, comprehension, and production. Psycholinguistics is now seen as an interdisciplinary field that incorporates not only psychology and linguistics, but that also relies on a wide variety of fields including cognitive science, neurology, sociology, biology, and speech and language pathology to elucidate the mechanisms that drive the development of human language (Kasper and Kellerman, 2014).

Furthermore, language acquisition has also been described by various researchers as the process through which humans acquire the capacity to enable them to perceive and comprehend language, as well as to produce and use words to communicate (Lantolf et al., 2015; Skehan, 1998; O'malley and Chamot, 1990). Additionally, primary language acquisition refers to a child's first or native language acquisition (L1) (Ingram, 1989). Moreover, secondary language acquisition is the method by which people learn a second language (L2) (Ellis, 1994). There has been extensive

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psycholinguistic research comparing the process of primary language acquisition with that of secondary language acquisition, and it is evident from the data that wide differences exist between the two, giving rise to numerous hypotheses relating to the acquisition of a second language (Brown, 1973).

Specifically, early studies on language comprehension and production mainly focused on the various components that make up human language. Such components include phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, that is, the mechanics of language (Ellis and Beaton, 1993). However, later studies concentrated on evolutionary, physiological and psychological processes that lead to language acquisition (Vivaldo-Lima et al., 2003; Jackendoff, 2003; Randall, 2007).

There are two competing views on language acquisition: nativism and empiricism. The followers of the first theory consider a child to be capable of acquiring and using language since birth. Chomsky (1975) adheres to the cognitive theory of nativism and believes that all children have an innate ability that guides the process of language acquisition and that some of the most complex mechanisms of learning, such as the ability to grasp syntax and semantics, are hard-wired in the brain. Brown (1973) agrees with Chomsky (1975) and suggests that the role of innate biological ability in mastering the first language cannot be overestimated. In contrast, empiricists hold that language is acquired gradually through experience and knowledge as we mature. They believe in a theory of universal grammar that serves as the source of the general principles inherent in any human language and that the acquisition of any language involves the learning of four basic skills, which include listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing (Markie, 2008).

There are several studies that suggest that the role of genetics in language acquisition is not as important when it comes to learning a second language and that age is a more important factor (Schumann, 1986; Ochs and Schieffelin, 2001; Marshall, 1994). It is generally regarded that the older we get, the more difficult it is for us to master a new language and become bilingual; that is, to develop the ability to use two languages at the same level of competency. Bilingualism has its psychological peculiarities, and there are different types of bilingualism according to the learning environment: simultaneous, early and late bilingualism. Simultaneous bilingualism occurs when a child has to master two languages at the same time; that is, the child has two native languages to learn (Mackey, 2000). This case is common in bilingual households, where each parent speaks a different native language. Early bilingualism refers to a phenomenon that arises when the national language differs from the family language (Meisel, 1989). Under these circumstances, a child is exposed to the secondary language at school, where he uses it to communicate with those who cannot speak his native language but continues to use his primary language at home (Meisel, 1989). Late bilingualism concerns the acquisition and mastery of a second language later in life and occurs through different mechanisms than are involved in the development of simultaneous and early bilingualism (Butler and Hakuta, 2004). There are also others with the ability to master multiple languages at a high level of competency.

There are many hypotheses regarding the acquisition of a second language, but there is one generalization that could be made about learning a second language. Specifically, it is more difficult and sometimes impossible to master a second language at an aptitude commensurate to that of a native language (Butler and Hakuta, 2004). It may be argued that this is because the acquisition of the first language is driven through innate processes and is thus a “natural” process while the acquisition of a second language relies less on cognitive factors than on psychosocial and cultural elements and thus is a “forced” process (Carlson et al., 2007).

Various methods have been developed to help others learn a secondary language. The most common methods are *traditional*, when the teaching is made via lectures and explanations; and *direct*, when the biggest part of the study is made up of conversations (such as the Berlitz method) (Reyhner and Tennant, 1995). Direct methods include an *audio-lingual* approach that stresses the perception of the language which is being learned; and *submersion*, where the learner undergoes intense exposure to the secondary language (Bruner, 1983). Whatever method is chosen, there are some peculiarities and dissimilarities between native and second language acquisition.

A person who chooses to learn a foreign language in adulthood (≥ 30 years of age) must face a number of challenges, but scholars tend to agree that one of the greatest hurdles concerns psychological factors. The study of a foreign language requires the memorization of a large number of rules, vocabulary units, as well as the flexibility and plasticity of the brain to develop the ability to properly use these rules to express their thoughts and understand others, all requiring more time and effort than when learning the primary language (Bruner, 1983). There are also material problems; learning a foreign language tends to take place outside the home, but as a rule, time spent at school is not sufficient to lead to mastery of the language on a communicative level. There are also social and cultural challenges, like the presence of certain elements that are absent in the culture of the native country and are difficult to understand and accept (Carlson et al., 2007). Linguistic and psychological studies have uncovered different nuances and aspects of language and speech that are difficult to understand outside the native culture. Furthermore, the acquisition of a secondary language is a complex process that differs substantially from that of other academic disciplines, in that one cannot rely on the knowledge and skills learned as one goes along; in language acquisition the proper application of knowledge and skills can differ according to context and requires constant training and practice to reconcile the variability of applications.

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