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SIMILAR OR DIFFERENT: CHILD FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (L1A & L2A) AND ADULT L2A

Dr. Saima Hassan

Asst. Prof., Department of English

National University of Modern Languages, Pakistan

Corresponding Email: globalwill2021@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates child Second Language Acquisition (L2A) and its differences and similarities with child First Language Acquisition (L1A) and adult L2A. Research studies related to effects of age on language attainment, particularly, Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) is explored to investigate the similar or different language acquisition patterns. According to the CPH, the Age at onset of Acquisition (AoA) plays a significant role in determining a learner's ultimate attainment of a second language. The CPH rests on the assumption that the age-related effects seen in L2 studies are the result of maturational changes in brain structures that are used to learn and/or to process language. On the prevailing view of ultimate attainment in second language acquisition, native competence cannot be achieved by post-puberty learners. There seems to be a correlation between the AoA and the level of attainment in the child L2A. I expect to conclude, in the light of the presented evidence, that child L2A is different from child L1A and adult L2A but at the same time shares a number of patterns.

INTRODUCTION

A widespread belief relating to L2A is that children are far better and quicker learners than adults. According to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), the Age at onset of Acquisition (AoA) plays a major role in determining a learner's ultimate attainment of a second language. The CPH hypothesizes that the age-related effects seen in L2 studies are the result of maturational changes in brain structures that are used to learn and/or to process language. For example, it has been hypothesized that as the brain matures, it becomes less "plastic" and that lost neural plasticity impedes L2 learning (e.g., Scovel, 1988; Patkowski, 1980,

1990; Birdsong, 1999). The issue of CPH in relation to L2A continues to be disputed among L2 researchers. The validity of the CPH in view of existing conflicting evidence regarding the different second language domains have been examined extensively.

Age and Language Acquisition

L1A and subsequent L2A are two distinct processes that are similar in a number of patterns, but which also differ considerably. L1A is, except in unusual circumstances (e.g. Genie[1]), usually successful, while L2A shows wide dissimilarity due to motivational, cultural and social influences that lead to marked variations among individuals in their language proficiency. AoA for normal L1A is universally the moment of birth (or before) (Kuhl, 1994); for L2A, however, AoA seems to make a difference, as will be discussed in the proceeding review of studies in the paper. The marked dissimilarity between L1 and L2 is that while L1 learners thoroughly acquire all aspects of the native language, for L2A there are differential age effects in different domains, for example L2 learner have more difficulty acquiring correct pronunciation than they do fluent syntax.

Research studies in favour of the critical period hypothesis suggest that the existence of the critical period implies that L2A for children should be similar to L1A. However, L2A for children might be similar to L1A in some respects but the fact that children have their L1 already in place must have some affect on L2A. Moreover, there are studies which claim that neither early nor late L2 learners can achieve native like competence (Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson, 2003). They claim that second language learners might appear native like in certain linguistic domains such as speech but if measured with linguistic tools differ from native speakers. But such claims are out of the scope of the present essay.

AoA and input have a significant influence (even in children) over a learner's potential to achieve linguistic mastery in different domains. Schylyter (1993) reports that even with simultaneous bilinguals reduced input in one of the languages makes that language "weaker".

Who is a Child Learner?

Is there any age specified for a child learner? This paper refers to a successive child bilingual (considered to be different from a simultaneous bilingual; see Meisel, 2004). Thus, a child learner would be an acquirer who is first exposed to L2 when already the bulk of his L1 is in place.

The Acquisition Pattern

Hawkins (2001) reports that the course of syntactic development is essentially the same irrespective of learners' AoA. For instance, in the acquisition of

[1] A child who was isolated by a disturbed father between the ages of 20 mths - 13 yrs 7 months and when discovered was unable to talk. Genie subsequently failed to develop English normally later (Hawkins,2001).

German word order the stages of development were the same in learners who started in adulthood (Clahsen and Muysken, 1986; Ellis, 1989) and in childhood (Pienemann, 1989). In the case of acquisition of unstressed object clitic pronouns in L2 French, similar stages of development have been found in 7-8 year old learners (Selinker et al., 1975). In studies of the acquisition of grammatical items, similar patterns of accuracy have been found in children (Dulay and Burt, 1973, 1974).

Ultimate Attainment in Second Language Acquisition

The existing view of ultimate attainment in second language acquisition claims that native competence cannot be achieved by post-puberty learners. There appears to be a correlation between the AoA and the level of attainment in the child L2A.

As discussed, the usual outcome of L1A is a successful one: normal children acquire the grammar of the ambient language. Adult L2A, on the other hand, results in varying degrees of success. Failure to acquire the target language grammar is typical. This contrast in ultimate attainment - universal success in LlA, variable success in L2A - has been adequately acknowledged (e.g. Johnson and Newport, 1989) and has been the centerpiece for arguments that L1A and L2A are profoundly different epistemological phenomena (Bley-Vroman, 1989). The facts of ultimate attainment in L2A also represent a basic point of reference for studying maturational effects. Investigations of critical or sensitive periods for language acquisition examine the end-point or steady-state competence of individuals who began L2 learning at various ages or stages of development. The general conclusion can be drawn from the available results that adults are less successful in acquiring a second language.

Johnson and Newport's (1989) study, "considered to be the best evidence yet in support of the existence of a critical period" (Bialystok and Hakuta, 1994:67), show a relationship between age and L2A. They concluded that children have an advantage over adult learners in language learning. The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bely-Vroman, 1989) attributes the divergent end states, early L1A and late L2A, to a lack of access to Universal Grammar (UG)[2] and associated learning principles: something that younger learners are exposure to unlike adult learners. But does the child's ultimate L2 proficiency suggest that his L2A is similar to his L1A rather than adult L2A? I shall now compare the results of empirical studies from child L1A to child L2A to probe further into the matter.

Child L1A vs L2A

By exercising the language faculty early in life, it remains active. Because of the presence of L1 grammar, there is the potential for L1 transfer for L2A. A number of psycholinguistic studies have explored a large amount of cross-linguistic transfer from L1 to L2 for second language learners (MacWhinny,

[2] "a mental faculty consisting of innately specified constraints on the possible forms that natural language grammars may take" (Birdsong, 1999:3)

2001a). These studies report transfer of semantic information and syntax in adult bilinguals but studies from Haznedar (1997), Whong-Barr and Schwartz (2002) provide evidence to support the assumption of L1 transfer in child L2A.

The issue of L1 transfer in L2A has been investigated systematically. Researchers are trying to find out whether second language grammars are constrained by UG in the same way as L1 grammars are. Over the years many theories and approaches have developed[3] in second language acquisition (White, 2000; Hawkins, 2001). Some researchers believe that there is full / partial / indirect access to UG while others argue for no access to L1. Moreover, there are studies suggesting that there is full / partial / no transfer from L1 grammars to L2 (Birdsong, 1999). So, there is literature in abundance to identify the role of L1 in L2A.

The question is where does L2A start? What is the *initial state of second language acquisition*? What is the effect of L1 which is already in place? L1 is (under the Principles & Parameters view) grammatically described as a set of parameter settings—what role do the L1 settings play? In the "full access" approach to L2A Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) claim that L1A and L2A are alike in having full access to the language faculty. They differ, however, in development due to their potentially radically different onset points, for example for L2 learners the starting point is their L1 syntax while for L1 learners the onset point is the open parameter values made available by UG.

Recent research suggests that L1A is different from L2A with respect to L1 transfer at initial stages of L2A. Perhaps the most convincing evidence for L1 transfer in child L2A is provided by Haznedar's (1997) study on the L2A of English by a Turkish speaking child "Erdem" which will be dealt with in some detail. Haznedar (ibid) observed a clear pattern; the first nine samples were predominantly head final (OV) whereas after that the order changed markedly resembling the target language. Initial transfer of Turkish word order for both VP (1) and Negation (2) and (3)

1) a. Investigator: Shall we play with your toys?
Erdem: Yes, *toys play* (S3)[4]

[3] **"Access" hypotheses:**
• No access hypothesis. UG is not involved in L2A; The end of the critical period marks the end of the availability of UG for language learning purposes.
• Full access hypothesis. UG does not change; it is "accessed directly" during L2A; L1A and L2A are fundamentally similar processes.
• Indirect access hypothesis. UG *per se* is not involved in L2A, but UG shaped L1 and so properties of UG reflected in L1 are available during L2A.
• Partial access hypothesis. Only part of UG is available for L2A; some parts are unavailable (for example,some parameter setting options).
"Transfer" hypotheses:
• Full Transfer: The initial parameter settings (and principle inventory) are transferred from L1. L1 is the starting point for the L2.
• No Transfer: The initial parameter settings (and principle inventory) are independent from the L1. Parameters are either unset or set to some kind of universal default.
• Partial Transfer: Some of the parameter settings (and principle inventory) are transferred from L1, some are not.

[4] S =Stage

b. Investigator: Where are we going now?
Erdem: *Newcastle going* (S5)
c. Context: on the swing
Erdem: *Fast push* (S5) (Haznedar 1997: 247)
Before S9, utterances with verbs are XV but at S9, abrupt change to VX
Context: watching cartoons on TV
2) a.Investigator: Oh it's finished. Let's play.
Erdem: *Finish no* (S1)
b. Investigator: Shall we play hide and seek?
Erdem: *Play no* (S2)
c. Investigator: Look, here is a colouring book. Let's colour this piggy.
Erdem: *Colour no* (S3) (Haznedar 1997: 249)
3) a. Investigator: Is this a cat?
Erdem: *Cat no* (S1)
b. Investigator: Is that a pig?
Erdem: *Pig no* (S1)
c. Investigator: Is it a duck?
Erdem: *Duck no* (S1) (Haznedar 1997: 251)

At S8, abrupt change to Neg+N pattern. In summary**,** child L2A does not mirror L1A. L1 English-acquiring children do not systematically produce XV or N+Neg. Both adult and child L2A exhibit transfer E.g., like Erdem, Turkish speakers acquiring German start off OV as was found by Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994). Negation data suggest, contrary to Minimal Trees (Vainikka and Young-Scholten 1994)[5], that functional categories do transfer.

Whong-Barr and Schwartz (2002) also examined L1 transfer by comparing child L2A with different L1s. They investigated the acquisition of the dative alternation in English by Korean and Japanese children. Both the groups differed significantly in overgeneralizations of the double-object *for*-datives. Whong-Barr and Schwartz (2002) claim this difference to be a consequence of L1 transfer.

Various differences between the processing and representation of L1 and L2 have been reported in psycholinguistic studies even when the L2 is acquired at a very early age (Perani et al. 2003, Mack, 1984, 1986 cited in Paradis, 2004). In summary, the comparison of child L1A to child L2A concludes that the latter is thus more compatible with adult L2A in terms of L1 transfer and the initial state is not developmentally independent in child L2A.

5.1.1. Child L2A vs Adult L2A

Given that child L2A is more like adult L2A than L1A in a number of patterns, researchers are trying to find out whether the underlying language acquisition mechanism is the same as adult L2A. The literature provides ample evidence

[5] Vainikka & Young-Scholten (1994,1996) claim that adults learning an L2 start off with minimal trees, basically a VP. No functional categories are insantiated at the earliest stage and only lexical categories can transfer.

for L1 transfer in adult L2A. (Schwartz, 1992, 2003; Lazarona-Nikovska, 2004; Unsworth, 2004, 2005). Lazarona-Nikovska (2004) concluded from a study on Macedonian learners of English that besides a few differences, syntactic development is the same in adult and child L2A: both groups show transfer effects from L1 which makes both adult and child L2A different from L1A. Moreover, in regards to differences children are better than adults in morphology and show more similarities to L1 learners; children master free and bound morphology equally well while adults have difficulties with bound morphology.

Unsworth (2004, 2005) observed acquisition of scrambling in Dutch by very advanced child and adult L2 learners. She concluded from the data that child and adult both go through similar non-scrambling stages until they finally end up learning it. She found transfer effects for both groups and thus she claims that there is no difference between the child and adult learners in this particular domain i.e. acquisition of scrambling.

Blom and Polišenská (2005) investigated the acquisition of the morphosyntactic properties of finiteness in L2 children and adults. More specifically, they considered whether child and adult L2A are alike in their acquisition of verb form and verb placement and compare this with child L1A data taken from the literature (Zuckerman, 2001). They observed that in this domain, child L2A generally exhibits more similarities with child L1A than with adult L2A.

CONCLUSION

It appears that age and ultimate L2 proficiency are inversely related which makes child L2A different from adult L2A. Adult L2A is fundamentally different from child L2A (Bley-Vroman, 1989). Children appear to develop more slowly than adults (Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978 cited in Hawkins, 2001) and in the long run their mental grammars do not fossilize[6] in the way older L2 learners' mental grammars tend to (Patkowski, 1980; Johnson and Newport, 1989). The evidence also suggests that there are differences in child L1A and child L2A even if acquired within the critical period. It seems that L1 plays a role in L2A which makes it different from L1A. Comparison of child and adult L2A conclude that they might differ in ultimate attainment and certain other areas of morphology, phonology etc but they do coincide in some domains, especially as they both show transfer effects and as Hawkins (2001) argues, usually show a similar developmental sequence in the target language.

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[6] Stop short of becoming native-like.

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