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ABSTRACT

An analysis of literature on second language learning identifies four approaches in the literature, each of which can make a unique contribution to the understanding of the second language learning process, particularly as it pertains to limited-English-proficient students. The four approaches are explained and illustrated with examples from the research literature. The approaches are: (1) the foreign language approach, which focuses on explicit classroom learning, especially for older learners; and which views language as a curriculum rather than as an abstract system or creative process with research being theory-driven; (2) language acquisition, which stresses metacognition and interdependence of first- and second language tasks; (3) psycholinguistic, viewing language acquisition as use and development of cognitive processing skills; and (4) sociocultural, which pays particular attention to the social nature of language use and learning. Contains 40 references. (MSE)

FOUR PERSPECTIVES ON SECOND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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There is no single absolute truth about second language learning; we are all like the blind Indians describing an elephant.
(McLaughlin, Rossman & McLeod, 1983)

Introduction

One of the most pressing challenges facing educators in many Oregon school districts is the need to educate students who are limited-or non-English proficient (LEP/NEP). Hispanic students make up a large percentage of LEP students and are high risk for failure and for dropping out of school (Shorris, 1992). One element contributing to the high risk factor for this group is illiteracy. In 1989, 12.2% of Hispanics aged 25 and over had completed less than five years of schooling, compared with 2.0% of whites; estimates of functional illiteracy among Hispanics run as high as 56% (Rosa, 1990). School age children of migrant farm workers are likely to have attended multiple schools on an irregular basis (Slesinger, 1992; Romo, 1993) and therefore present a very real problem for the classroom teacher: how to educate a child in English when literacy skills in his or her native language (Spanish) are poor.

The original intent of this investigation was to identify research that would identify teaching methods or approaches to teach LEP students with limited literacy skills in their native language (L1), especially for high school Hispanic migrant students. After reviewing the literature, however, it became clear that different types of research existed on second language (L2) acquisition, and that a lack of understanding of each perspective can make interpretation of research very difficult. There

are essentially four distinct perspectives on second-language development, each with a different research perspective. One problem raised by that fact is that since

> none of the four approaches...by itself gives a fully satisfactory picture of L2 acquisition, it is not surprising that practitioners are tempted to judge research findings as irrelevant to real-world problems (Snow, 1992).

Instead of focusing on a single approach, therefore, this paper will summarize research in each of the four research approaches to second-language acquisition, and discuss the importance of taking each approach into consideration in evaluating programs for LEP students. The four perspectives that will be examined in turn are *foreign-language, language acquisition, psycholinguistic*, and *sociocultural*. As we shall see, all four approaches to second language acquisition have unique contributions to make to our understanding.

The Four Approaches

Foreign Language Approach: The foreign language orientation to second-language theory is the oldest tradition. Researchers in this area focus on effortful classroom learning, and tend to look at L2 learning as different from L1 learning, since the focus is on older learners who are in a school setting. Language, therefore, is seen as a curriculum rather than as an abstract system or creative process. Teachers who instruct from a foreign language perspective assume that language needs to be presented in a careful sequence for learning to take place, and emphasize aspects of language such as grammatical correctness and pronunciation.

Research in the foreign language tradition is often theory-driven rather than generated from classroom experience, and hence it may seem unapplicable for the classroom teacher. For example,

one study investigated the connection between L1 and L2 learning using the hypothesis that phonological coding difficulties (as opposed to grammatical sensitivity, inductive language learning ability, and rote memory) cause problems in foreign language learning (Sparks & Ganschow, 1993). The introduction and literature review make it clear that this study was generated from questions raised in the research literature. Language is seen as the learning of certain skills, and the conclusion is therefore that the phonology of the student's native language should be taught before teaching the phonology of the foreign language: "the FL profession could support the explicit teaching of native language phonology and phonemic awareness during reading instruction in the primary grades" (Sparks & Ganschow, 1993). Sparks and Ganschow attempt to explain the problems that students have in foreign language classrooms in terms of deficits located within the students themselves, rather than in terms of the instructional method.

Very little research exists in the foreign language tradition that addresses the link between L1 and L2, and none at all that addresses literacy in a broad sense. The authors cited above seem to consider themselves innovative for even considering an L1-L2 link. Foreign language research addresses very narrow aspects of language learning (McLaughlin, 1987). As in the example cited above, most foreign language research focuses on qualities inherent in the learner to the exclusion of other factors.

That is not to say that foreign language research is irrelevant, however, to the understanding of L2 acquisition. Researchers in this tradition have made particularly strong contributions in the area of how to test for language proficiency (Snow, 1992) and have enhanced understanding of teaching language within a traditional classroom context.

Acquisition Approach: In contrast to the foreign language perspective, theorists in the field of bilingual education began to take the perspective that L2 is acquired in a natural way, similar to the way in which L1 is naturally acquired (Cummins, 1979; Krashen, 1991; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). This perspective stresses the advantages that a second language learner has in terms of the metacognition of language acquisition and the interdependence of L1 and L2 language tasks: learning one language has laid the groundwork for learning another. This research has underpinned many of current practices in bilingual education, since this view holds that only by developing a "threshold" level of competence in L1 can a student achieve his or her potential in L2 (Cummins, 1979): you can't learn a second language until you've adequately learned a first.

In this view, proficiency in a language is defined as communicative effectiveness, not as native-like grammar and pronunciation. The role of the learner is considerably expanded from that of the foreign language paradigm, since language is seen as a process requiring cognitive interaction of the learner and the environment. Acquisition of language is seen as developmental, rather than functional, in nature.

The acquisition perspective has had a tremendous influence on classroom teachers. Krashen (1983) appeals to practitioners both because he is in the forefront of the movement away from grammar-based approaches towards communicative approaches, and also because of his emphasis on the affective and developmental aspects of language learning. L2 learners have been found to have certain advantages over L1 learners in some tasks (Hakuta & Diaz, 1985). Much of the literature in this area appears to be reinterpretations of existing research (Saville-Troike, 1984; Hakuta & Gould, 1987; Cummins, 1979; Hudelson, 1987) and, not surprisingly, tends to support the

hypotheses that the authors already endorse. This branch of inquiry has less than its share of research to contribute to the overall understanding of language acquisition, although it has undoubtedly generated the most literature on classroom applications.

Psycholinguistic Approach: Perhaps partly in reaction to the lack of rigorous experimental research on behalf of the acquisition theorists (McLaughlin, 1987), a third paradigm for language acquisition has developed within recent years. Dubbed by Snow (1992) the "psycholinguistic" approach, this perspective views language acquisition as a cognitive process, and is an information processing perspective that focuses on the cognitive processes within the learner. The research in this paradigm investigates language learning as a series of processing skills that can potentially cause interference from one system of learning to another. Information processing researchers have found that, for example, limited language proficiency in L1 can interfere with reading in L2 by "short circuiting" a good reader's system (Clarke, 1980) as well as by requiring the learner to conceptualize in more challenging ways (Swaffar, 1988); that bilingual and monolingual students use different cognitive reading strategies (Padron & Waxman, 1987; Verhoeven, 1990); that mixed-dominant L1/L2 readers use considerably different reading strategies than good L2 readers (Miramontes, 1990); and that metacognitive strategy training can enhance ESL reading (Carrell, Pharis & Liberto, 1989).

This approach has also found evidence that direct instruction can result in "more acquisition" in learners, in direct contrast to the assertions of the language acquisition proponents (VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993). In a similar vein, Krashen and Terrell (1983) hold that differences in the

nature of L1 from one group to another should not have a significant difference on the acquisition of L2, since according to their model the same strategies and outcomes would be used from one language to another. Psycholinguists, however, have provided research evidence that there are group differences in second-language learning outcomes (Hansen-Strain, 1989) and that the issue of how L1 literacy affects L2 may be considerably more complex than the acquisition theorists propose.

Perhaps the foremost proponent of the information processing model of language acquisition is Barry McLaughlin (1983). In this view, human beings are considered "limited-capacity processors" of information, requiring the integration of many different skills that have been practiced until they become routine. McLaughlin claims that his model is an integrated approach which "incorporates both the more creative aspects of language learning and the more cognitive aspects that are susceptible to guidance and training" (1987). In his view, the learning/acquisition distinction should be replaced by a distinction between controlled and automatic processes in second language learning (1983). Although psycholinguistic researchers have obtained research support for some of their hypotheses about how language is learned, this perspective has not captured the imaginations of practitioners to the same degree that the acquisition perspective has.

Sociocultural Approach: The sociocultural perspective of second language acquisition can easily deal with many of the issues involving the social nature of language use that the more cognitively oriented approaches are unable to address: personal identity, cultural identity, national and ethnic pride, communication, and other attitudes and beliefs that can have a significant impact on how difficult or easy L2 can be to acquire (Snow, 1992).

The quantitative, statistical research paradigm has been used extensively by the foreign language, acquisition, and psycholinguistic approaches to L2 acquisition theory. It is unlikely, however, that this paradigm is likely to answer all of the questions surrounding the education of LEP students (Cziko, 1992). Examination of studies of achievement among Hispanic LEP high school students, for example, result in contradictory conclusions as to whether socioeconomic status affects achievement (Espinosa & Ochoa, 1986; Buriel & Cardoza, 1988; Ortiz, 1989; Wiley, 1990). These studies treat socioeconomic status as a dependent variable as if it exists in isolation. Yet upon examination, the studies are so flawed in their actual design due to factors beyond the researchers' control (attrition, lack of access to suitable subjects) that the validity and generalizability of such studies must be called into question. In increasing numbers, second-language researchers are beginning to turn to anthropology and sociology for a different research model: ethnographic research (Mercado, 1991; Weinstein, 1984).

Since literacy is essentially a social construct (Ferdman, 1990), the sociocultural perspective is essential to investigate the relationship between L1 and L2 literacy. One of the most illustrative examples of this type of research speaks to this question. Known as the Arizona Project, this project was a collaboration between education and anthropology that studied the households of working class Hispanic families in order to analyze the cultural and intellectual resources available to students and teachers for curriculum development (Moll, 1986; Moll & Diaz, 1987; Moll, Velez-Ibanez, & Rivera, 1990; Moll, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992).

The objective of this study was to identify and use the "funds of knowledge" existing within households to inform instructional practices and enhance the acquisition of literacy, particularly for

students whose literacy skills were low. The link between family and environment has long been known (Trueba, 1988) but through applying ethnographic research techniques, these researchers were able to help teachers see the family environments of the students in the study as positive, rather than negative, aspects of the learning process. Their core hypothesis was that "changes in the social context of learning can produce important changes in the students' academic and literate performance."

The study was extensive, lasting 3 years. The design included three parts: a study of the household funds of knowledge, development of curricula for classroom use based on those funds, and finally an extension into the community involving study groups. I will confine my remarks to the first part of the study, during which the data on funds of knowledge were gathered. 30 students (and their families) were chosen to participate in the study and began the study as 4th graders. Half the students were assigned to a school that implemented their proposed curriculum changes, and half to a comparison school. Household data were collected primarily through participant observation, including field notes, questionnaires, and literacy checklists. Participant observation was done by three-person research teams consisting of a trained researcher and two graduate students. After the researchers felt that an appropriate, trusting relationship had been established with the families, the research assistants were allowed to collect data without immediate supervision. Analysis of the data included a compilation of information about what types of funds of knowledge exist within the households (e.g. agriculture, medicine, child care, etc.). Many hours were spent with teachers and anthropologists developing ideas how these funds of knowledge could be translated into classroom applications. This study was clearly not just concocted for the purpose of publication.

One of the aspects of this study that distinguishes it from traditional educational research in second language acquisition is that the researchers were able to take into account some of the aspects of social class and lack of empowerment that affect the students' ability to learn language and content. For example, working class children tend to receive rote, drill and practice instruction as opposed to the process-oriented teaching given to students of the majority culture. The researchers were clear that one of the objectives of the research was to find ways to empower students and teachers to remove the "zones of underdevelopment" from their classrooms. They report that they found more diversity of instruction than originally anticipated when the study was proposed.

This study involved intensive, controlled data collection in a naturalistic setting. Observees were not studied until the observers felt that their behavior would be natural enough to reduce observee bias to a minimum. The authors were honest enough to revise their working hypotheses (e.g., type of instruction delivered to working class students) upon collection and analysis of their data. Their research review is extensive, and goes into depth as to how their study is rooted in linguistic as well as anthropological research. Finally, the most salient feature of this study was its contribution to our understanding of how L1 literacy skills can be used to inform L2 literacy instruction. By using the existing funds of knowledge that children possess within their community, schools can begin to tap a valuable resource for promoting literacy that has been hitherto overlooked. Results of the implementation phase of the project point to a strategy that has the potential for a high degree of success in promoting literacy.

Taking a sociocultural approach to second language acquisition is essential if we are to understand many of the affective and social issues that impact our students. In addition, studies

such as the Arizona Project give classroom teachers very real justification for reaching out into the community to create instruction that is meaningful and accessible for LEP students. Statistical research methods can point out the existence of phenomena such as motivational differences among different groups of LEP students (Hernandez, 1991), but cannot go far towards explaining why those differences exist. While the more traditional approaches to second language acquisition are essential for an understanding of some of the mechanical processes involved in learning language, a social perspective is crucial for rounding out the picture.

Conclusion: This paper has focused on four approaches to second language acquisition theory, with emphasis on the sociocultural perspective. All four perspectives, however, are necessary for reaching a clearer understanding of this extremely complex phenomenon. Educators confronted with the formidable task of instructing LEP/NEP students from diverse academic and sociocultural backgrounds should be aware that no single approach, by itself, is adequate to describe the wondrous and complex process that is second language acquisition.

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