

A Critical Review on the "Natural Order" of the Morpheme Acquisition: Three Major Antithetical Views

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Abstract

One of the most contentious and widely discussed studies in Second language acquisition (SLA) theories is the study of morpheme order, which is then renowned as the natural order. As the study generates a number of supports, this paper critically reviews the studies of natural order and presents three major antithetical views against the existing beliefs: the ignorance of other linguistic phenomena, the claim that accuracy is equal to acquisition, and the fatal flaw of overlooking the influence of L1 on L2.

Keywords: *Second Language Acquisition (SLA), First Language (L1), Morpheme Order, Natural Order, Target Language (TL).*

Introduction

As a series of attempts to explain the process of how a language and its components are chronologically acquired by learners, scholars have put a number of theories in the SLA. Among the existing studies aimed at unraveling the intricacies of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), a prominent claim asserts that both L2 learners and L1 learners follow a predictable series of benchmarks while acquiring the target language (TL). Since it was introduced by Brown (1973), the study of natural order has been significantly developing and contributing toward the development of second language acquisition in that it elucidates a set of putative order of grammatical morphemes acquired by L1 learners. Later, Dulay & Burt, (1973, 1974) extended the existing findings to deal with the L2 acquisition which subsequently inspired Krashen (1985) to establish the basic premises of his Natural Order Hypothesis in the field of SLA.

This study first provides a brief snapshot on the basic premise of natural order. It then reviews several L1 and more particularly L2 studies of morpheme order.

Thereafter, it will focus on discussing some lacunae as well as give three antithetical views against the natural order hypothesis, namely the ignorance of other linguistic phenomena, the claim that accuracy is equal to acquisition, and the fatal flaw of overlooking the influence of L1 on L2.

Method

In this research, the researcher conducted a comprehensive review of existing studies on the natural order in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The method involved a systematic analysis of literature, including studies by influential scholars like Brown (1973), Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974, 1978), Krashen (1985), and de Villiers and de Villiers (1973), among others. Researcher collected data from a wide array of scholarly sources, such as academic journals and books, to ensure a thorough examination of the natural order hypothesis. The data analysis focused on identifying recurring themes, patterns, and inconsistencies within the literature, allowing us to critically assess the evidence and limitations associated with the natural order hypothesis. It is also considered the implications of three major counterarguments: the neglect of other linguistic phenomena, the equation of accuracy with acquisition, and the oversight of L1 influence on L2.

Results

The mystery behind language acquisition has tempted numerous researchers to find out if there is a certain order followed by learners in acquiring a language. (Brown, 1973) was the first to prove this notion by conducting a longitudinal study on three children who were speakers of American English. Thereafter, he found out that there was a predictable grammatical or morpheme order of acquisition shown by children acquiring English as their L1, as indicated in his 14 grammatical functors order (noun and verb inflections, prepositions, and articles). He put forward, "some factor or some set of factors caused these grammatical morphemes to evolve in an approximately consistent order in these children" (Brown, 1973)p. 272). Later, de Villiers & de Villiers, (1973) strengthened Brown's study cross-sectionally by conducting research on more children. He found a striking fact that the morphemes

that learners tended to acquire earlier were also the items learners demonstrated higher accuracy in. In other words, the finding claims that accuracy is equivalent to acquisition.

Extending the existing L1 studies, Dulay and Burt (1973, 1974, 1978) reported that the same natural order was also performed by children acquiring English as L2, regardless of their L1. Despite the slight variations, the result mainly showed consistency toward the same order. The efficacy of this result was subsequently supported by a number of researchers (Kessler & Idar, 1979; Makino, 1979), even they added that the acquisition order in L2 remained similar regardless of the learners' age (Dulay & Burt, 1973; Fathman, 1975; Kessler & Idar, 1979).

Furthermore, Krahne & Krashen (1983,1985) introduced his "monitor model" theory that held five hypotheses. Of the prominent and widely discussed premises is the natural order hypothesis, which basically develops the studies of "morpheme order". Inevitably, the ground put by Brown, which is advanced by Dulay, Burt, Krashen, et. al to elucidate the theories in SLA, has drawn the attention of numerous investigators to support and criticize the natural order premises. Among the strong criticism addressed to the natural order studies are the three major antithetical views that would be scrutinized in this paper: the ignorance of other linguistic phenomena, the claim that accuracy is equal to acquisition, and the fatal flaw of overlooking the influence of L1 on L2. Sad to say, the remainder of the critiques is beyond the scope of the current paper.

1. The Ignorance of Other Linguistic Phenomena

As noted, Brown put 14 functors of morpheme acquisition in his investigation to describe the grammatical order, while Krashen put 9 functors in SLA framework. The following table shows the items taken into consideration in both Brown's and Krashen's investigation.

Table 1. Order of L1 and L2 Acquisition of English Morphemes

L1 study (R. Brown, 1973)	L2 study (Krashen, 1977)
1. Present Progressive	1. Present Progressive
2. on	2. Plural
3. it	3. Copula
4. Plural	4. Auxiliary
5. Irregular Past	5. Article
6. Possessive	6. Irregular Past
7. Uncontactable Copula	7. Regular Past
8. Article	8. 3rd Person Singular
9. Regular Past	9. Possessive
10. Regular 3 rd Person	
11. Irregular 3 rd Person	
12. Uncontactable Auxiliary	
13. Contractible Copula	
14. Contractible Auxiliary	

Likewise, the other investigators (de Villiers & de Villiers, 1973; Dulay & Burt, 1973; Slager, 1974; Hakuta, 1976; Perkins & Freeman, 1975) also put the same functors in their morpheme order list. Given this fact, some researchers criticize the natural order because the grammatical functors are too narrow to represent the wide range of linguistic phenomena, as pointed out by (Zobl & Liceras, 1994). The natural order is considered to underestimate the role of other linguistic phenomena in contributing to acquisition such as phonology, pronunciation, morphology, etc. Even the functors fail to thoroughly represent every component in grammar itself. As underscored by Tarone and Pica (1980, 1988), morphemes with different meanings should not have been categorized as a single grammatical structure.

2. Accuracy is not Necessarily Equal to Acquisition

De Villiers and de Villiers (1973) conducted a cross-sectional study using the 14 functors in Brown's investigation. He picked 21 children who were speakers of English aged from 16 to 40. The results showed striking similarities to what was found by Brown. More surprisingly, he also discovered that the morphemes that came earlier were also the same items that learners tend to get right more often (Krahnke & Krashen, 1983). To put it another way, he claims that the order of difficulty is similar to the order of acquisition.

This leads us to a question: is accuracy necessarily equated with acquisition as claimed by de Villiers and de Villiers? This claim is not always justifiable apparently. Hatch's 1978 study (cited in (Kwon, 2005) proved the opposite that correct usage was not necessarily indicating successful acquisition. Furthermore, McLaughlin also put forth a very significant critique on this issue, "correct usage is not monolithic – even for grammatical morphemes, correct usage in one situation does not guarantee as correct usage in another" (McLaughlin & Shields, 1987). In this regard, he continued to challenge Krashen's unclear definition of the term "acquisition": is acquisition taking place when a learner no longer makes any mistake in comprehension? or when a learner reaches a particular stage in production? With that being the case, a learner might use certain rule correctly in one utterance, but end up making errors on another occasion. In this case, accuracy cannot be deemed as an acquisition.

3. The Fatal Flaw of Overlooking the Influence of L1 on L2

As mentioned above, a number of researchers who look into this issue from the innatism view confidently remove the L1 interference throughout the acquisition process as it would support the behaviorists' premises, and this appears to be of the fatal flaws. Even though the notion of native language transfer has been a never-ending debate among scholars, the influence of L1 on L2 acquisition is too strong to overlook. The evidence was provided by Fathman (1975), comparing Spanish and Korean learners of English. He looked closely at the article which was found in Spanish grammar but was not present in Korean. The results showed that compared to the Spanish, the Korean speaker acquired the article much later.

The study of similarities and differences of learners' L1 and the TL has been done massively by numerous researchers (see Gass & Selinker, 2001 p. 126-132). In the end, it turns out that the recent findings convince most investigators to no longer overlook the influence of L1 on the L2 acquisition.

Conclusion

The previous discussion provides a number of lacunae in the natural order hypothesis. The three major antithetical views presented simply show the need of reformation on the natural order. However, the results of the natural order study remain practical in many classroom settings. It is also beneficial in its attempt to reveal the developmental sequence in SLA. Thus, despite the criticism, the studies on this issue should be reproduced beyond the limitations of the previous researches.

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