

系別：英文學系 B 組

科目：英文(含英語語言學議題)

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Test in English for TESOL Candidates

There are two selected passages from the TESOL literature. They are completely different in the concept of language and how a language is learned. The first one is from Bernard Spolsky's "What Does It Mean to Know a Language?" and the second one from Michael H. Long's "The Least a Second Language Acquisition Theory Needs to Know".

There are two tasks for you. Firstly, summarize each passage in a paragraph in fifteen sentences for each. Secondly, what are the major differences in the concept of language and how is language learned or acquired? Why are they so different even though they are concerned about the same topic? For the second task, write one paragraph in about fifteen sentences.

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Bernard Spolsky

What Does It Mean to Know a Language?

In any consideration of language acquisition, whether first or second, we need first to look at the end result and analyze the notion "knowing a language." What does it mean when we say someone knows a language? How do we decide that someone has acquired a language?

Look first at the definition provided by Charles Fries, pertaining specifically to the learning of a second language:

A person has "learned" a language when he has thus first, within a limited vocabulary, mastered the sound system (that is, when he can understand the stream of speech and achieve an understandable production of it) and has, second, made the structural devices (that is, the basic arrangements of utterances) matters of automatic habit.¹

Fries arrives at this position after first showing the inadequacy of the notion that knowing a language means knowing its vocabulary. He points out that even a native speaker's knowledge of the words in his language is limited by his experience. We never finish learning all the words and their many meanings, as can be proved by just a few minutes' study of a dictionary. On the other hand, he claims, we finish early with the business of mastering the sound system and "the fundamental matters of word-order and the patterns of form." A child of four can recognize all the sounds of his language and produce recognizable variants of them and by the time he goes to school, has learned the basic Grammar of his language. It is natural, then, that we tend to believe that second-language learning is a matter of doing in another language what we are conscious of doing in our own, namely learning words, rather than doing what we did unconsciously as young children when we mastered the phonology and grammar.

Fries argues then that vocabulary need not be stressed in initial phases of language learning:

Accuracy of sound, of rhythm, of intonation, of structural forms, and of arrangement, within a limited range of expression, must come first and become automatic habit before the student is ready to devote his chief attention to expanding his vocabulary.²

It is interesting to see what happens when Fries's definition of knowing

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a language is translated into practical terms by preparing a test to see whether a student knows a language. Let us assume first that knowing a language consists only in knowing—that is, being able to recognize definitions or synonyms of—the words of the language. Obviously, we wouldn't test the student with every word in the dictionary before we decide whether he comes up to the criterion. We would make use of some appropriate statistical technique to select a representative sample of words, find out what percentage our student knows, and compare his performance with that of a native speaker. The process is not simple, but it is feasible, for we are dealing with a more or less finite number of items (the words of a language) from which we can choose a more or less representative sample; we need have little hesitation in generalizing our results. The words "more or less" are used advisedly, for there is a real sense in which the lexicon of a language is an open set; new words and meanings are added and old ones dropped all the time. Still, at any given time, the words of a language are listable in a way that the sentences of a language cannot conceivably be.

Can this same degree of finiteness be found if we move from the area of vocabulary that Fries rejects as irrelevant to the areas he names: the "sound system" and the "structural devices"? The answer is "yes." If we consider that each of these systems is a matter of units and patterns for arrangement. For the sound system, one would list the segmental phonemes, the suprasegmentals, and the possible combinations. The list of phonemes would be quite small, no more than sixty or so items, so that it would be quite easy to test each one. Once you start to worry about all the possible combinations, however, the list gets much larger, and sampling is necessary. Again following Fries, the "structural devices" are equally straightforward, a matter of a list of items and possible arrangements. Fries points out that English uses three structural devices: word order, inflection, and function words. It is possible, he says, to select from these a minimum set that will provide for the production of "one pattern for each of the situations in which the language is actually being used" and a larger set for recognition, chosen on the basis of frequency in the speech of native speakers. It is possible to list the items in these sets and to use the list as a universe from which we can draw a representative sample for use in deciding whether a student has learned the language or not. A detailed examination of the nature of language tests that follow these principles is given by Robert Lado.⁴ While Lado does discuss various types of tests of the "integrated skills," he spends more than twice as much space on specifications for tests of the "elements of language": the sound segments, stress, intonation, and grammatical structures (which he defines as "the patterns of arrangement of words in sentences and the patterns of arrangement of parts of words in words").

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Unfortunately, certain structural characteristics of SLA research make known facts rather easier to determine with respect to how birds fly than why some people can learn a second language and others do not. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the following are a few examples (by no means intended as a comprehensive list) of what I would claim are well-established findings about learners, environments, and interlanguages, along with some of the challenges they pose to current SLA theories. Space limitations preclude surveys of supporting literature. For each generalization, references are provided to recent reviews and/or to key studies of the phenomenon concerned. (The very existence of reviews, of course, attests to the familiarity of many of the results.)

Learners

Wide variation in learners' abilities (e.g., intelligence), states (e.g., motivation), and traits (e.g., extroversion) has relatively little effect on most aspects of (first or second) language acquisition by young children. Child language development is strikingly regular in both course, rate, and ultimate attainment, and success is the norm (Slobin, 1982). On the other hand, individual differences do affect adult first (e.g., American Sign Language) or second language acquisition. SLA processes and sequences are again fairly regular, but learning rate and ultimate SL attainment are highly variable and failure is common (Ellis, 1985; Newport, 1984).

Differences in learners' starting age (Krashen, Long, & Scarcella, 1979; Scovel, 1986), aptitude, attitude, and motivation (Skehan, 1989; Spolsky, 1989), for example, are systematically related to variance in rate of progress and ultimate attainment. The role of affective factors appears to be indirect and subordinate to more powerful developmental and maturational factors, perhaps influencing such matters as the amount of contact with the L2, or time on task (Schumann, 1986). The most positive attitudes to target language speakers and the strongest motivation, for example, cannot overcome psycholinguistic constraints on learnability at a particular stage of development (Clahsen, 1987; Meisel, Clahsen, & Pleinemann, 1981; Pleinemann & Johnson, 1987; Schmidt, 1990). Both L1 and L2 development appear to depend on the same universal cognitive abilities (e.g., the capacity for implicit and inductive learning) and to be subject to the same cognitive constraints (e.g., limited human memory attentional resources, and information-processing capacity) (McLaughlin, 1987; Schmidt, 1990; Schmidt, in press).

Environments

Variation in the linguistic environment has surprisingly little effect on first language acquisition by children, where a high degree of success is achieved even under conditions of quite severe linguistic deprivation (Gleitman, 1987).

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The effect on adult language learning of differences in the amount and kind of input available is much greater and varies among different groups of learners, in part as a function of L1/L2 relationships (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Both children and adults need the language they encounter to be comprehensible for it to become potential intake (Krashen, 1985). Comprehensibility is not dependent on linguistic "simplification" from the source (speaker/writer), which is often absent, but may result from interactional or elaborative modifications, which are frequently the product of negotiation for meaning between the source and the learners themselves (Hatch, 1978b; Long, 1983; Parker & Chaudrot, 1987). Exposure to comprehensible input is necessary but not sufficient, as evidenced by successful untaught development in the absence of negative input, such as overt error correction (Bley-Vroman, 1986), but a focus on form (which overt error correction can sometimes induce in the learner), along with any other behaviors or tasks that make certain L2 features salient, improves rate and ultimate SL attainment (Doughty, in press; Long, 1986). Attention to form is necessary for mastery of certain types of L1/L2 contrasts, for example, where the way the L2 encodes a grammatical relationship is more marked than the equivalent L1 structure (Eckman, 1981; Schachter, 1986), and where the L1 allows two options (such as placement of frequency adverbs before or after the direct object), only one of which is grammatical in the L2, but both of which are communicatively successful. This situation presents negative input on the ungrammatical item via repair sequences (White, 1989b). Noticing, brought about by feedback, task structure, or other means, is necessary for input to become intake, and negative evidence must be recognized as such for it to be effective (Schmidt, in press). Much of a language is not learned unconsciously.

Interlanguages

Interlanguages, the psycholinguistic SL equivalent of idiolects, exhibit systematicity and variability at any time in their development (Hawber, 1985; Selinker, 1969). The systematicity manifests itself in many ways, including the regular suppliance and nonsuppliance of both targetlike and nontargetlike features in certain linguistic contexts and in the persistence of the same errors for often quite lengthy periods (Sato, 1990; Schmidt, 1981). Interlanguages, that is, are, or at least appear to be, rule-governed. Much of the variability they also reveal turns out to be systematically related to such factors as task, task requirements (e.g., attention to form and planning), interlocutor, and linguistic context (Crookes, 1988; Hulstijn, 1989; Kasper, 1986; Preston, 1989; Trone, 1988). However, some of it does appear to be random, or free, as when a learner produces *no put* and *don't put* or *I born* and *I was born* within moments of one another under seemingly identical conditions (Ellis, 1985).