

Mutual Intelligibility of English: A Behavioral and Cognitive Study of the Acquisition of L2 English in Indian Context

RITUPARNA DAS

“We only ever speak one language...

(yes, but)

We never speak only one language.” (Derrida 10)

In visualizing the later works by Derrida, Herman Rapaport pointed out that Derrida says at the outset, it ought to be read in terms of two contrary propositions that form a rule or law that is “a bit crazy”. For example, this law would instantiate the condition of translation in which one both and at the same time speaks only one language and never just a single or singular language for we are always alert to the possibility of speaking differently that is the condition of the essence of speaking one language properly. For even as conservative a science or philology, when its sights are set on linguistic pedigrees, argues that the native tongue is made up of foreign elements that, over time have not only become incorporated in the native language but have been so incorporated as to become indistinguishable from native soil. Philology, then also asserts that one only speaks a single language-(yes, but) - one never speaks one language alone (Rapaport 27-28).

So, now on the basis of the above observation, I want to state my modes of discussion on the mutual intelligibility of English and the acquisition of L2 English in the process of teaching and learning English in India. When the mutual intelligibility of English as a language is concerned, we cannot underestimate the fact of the study of acquisition and learning, where linguistics is concerned with discovering and defining the

form and structure of human language. According to the notions of the innatism and within the Chomskyan generative grammar there is said to be an innate grammatical structure and universals, rather a common natural grammatical formation among all the languages that are so presented in all human brains, which manifest without being taught. The principles of this Universal Grammar is explained, in turn, by the innateness hypothesis by Chomsky in 1968, where he argues that the innateness hypothesis also explains the fact of language acquisition, specifically the remarkable rapidity with which children of all cultures learn language, despite insufficient data as input on the basis of which to learn the highly complex adult grammar (Hawkins 5-6). We cannot deny the very fact regarding the understanding of the expression and impression of knowledge that are present in a more active and intelligent mode in Homo Sapiens than any other species on earth as a part of the genetic endowment as far as even Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* has also proved it in some way. The expression of knowledge leads definitely to the use of the voice in that manner and ultimately results in a language which is being uttered by the human beings only. Now the properties of language that is basically consisted of the words and the sentences, a definitive use of these elements make the language more distinct, which again differs whether due to the demographic or any other more acute condition.

After viewing over this broad and basic structure of the evolution, I must focus on the modes of this expression of the knowledge of language by the culture of the acquisition of language where Chomsky said, in a nutshell, that language acquisition cannot be explained without appeal to an innately represented Universal Grammar, and any general learning strategy that the child might apply to the input data, will be insufficient without it. As I already stated that we cannot deny the very fact of the presence of the active

understanding nature with the genetic endowments, but the hypothesis of innateness cannot be termed as being 'innate' except for the fact that yes, we cannot detect the exact placement of our mind but other than that it is not at all a complete innateness of any hypothesis because the properties itself are very much in active mode which in a way define the Homo Sapiens. So, when the acquisition of language as a 'subconscious process'¹ by Stephen Krashen is being criticized and disputed by the psychologists like Barry Mclaughlin, thus, explained as a conscious structure. This conscious structure of acquisition is again negating the fact of the presence of grammar as a Universal whether in Critical Period Hypothesis or any other 'innateness' hypothesis. When acquisition is relating towards the acquisition of a definitive language, it can be taken as the natural discipline of language acquisition but it is not at all possible to detect and even understand the grammar, by its meaning and usefulness in a sentence, by a child, say, when she is on the verge of acquiring the language. It may be rather a more definitive result of imitation and conscious learning due to the understanding, that she is thus, able to at last acquire the language, say, when a child is able to understand the features of a particular noun, like a bottle, with a vessel-type cylindrical feature having a cap, it is quite possible that the child is then very much able to mistake a vessel-type cylindrical test-tube with a cork or some other substance with a bottle. Then, obviously, she is being corrected by the actual source from where the acquisition, and thus, the learning continue. Citing the argument, examples are also stated even in *Philosophy of Language* that if the new born children would have been the only living beings left, then at that time, the language which they uttered would have been the only living language of expression.

So, the whole acquisition of a language thus becomes a notion of first language, the one which is being the inception of the acquisition. As we discussed about the presence of a definitive reason, for which thus, the first language i.e. L1 is acquired, we cannot complete or rather make a summation of a constant hypothesis, whether it is again working in the same way when ‘the other’ language, i.e. the L2 being acquired by the same mind, I would like to call it as on a more variable basis and not a constant one. Though, according to Wolfgang Klein, “...no sharp dividing line can be drawn between first and second language acquisition for the simple reason that the latter is frequently initiated before the former has come to close” (15).

It is very much evident through any kind of experience on regular basis that for a simple acquisition of second language, we need to have at least a basic knowledge of L1, though again it is quite impossible to tell in general terms what effect the ‘partial’ acquisition of the first language might have on the learning of a second one. It is because in some cases, there are conditions that a child is learning both the languages L1 and L2, more or less starting from a close approximation of duration. Now the fact arises whether the competence in both the languages are also going to be either equal or equally varied by the interface of the duration that is being mentioned and checked from their beginning of the acquisition.

As far as the acquisition of L2 English is concerned, I would like to say that the same parameters of first language or L1 is definitely an active proposition for the acquisition of English as L2. But, again, when there is the question of competence regarding the L1 and L2 simultaneously, it is very much possible that the ratio of the acquisition is not going to be equivalent in the same manner of inception. So, the output is

thus not constant and it is also not basically depending on the duration of input. This is the one case that may happen, when there is the presence of that ‘partial’ acquisition of the first language, because the question may obviously arise, that otherwise, how does at all L2 is being acquired, when it is not depending on any natural discipline but on the other hand, very much upon the acquisition of the first language. On a broader sense, this duration is divided into four modes of language acquisition by Wolfgang Klein (see table 1).

Table 1

Basic Modes of Language Acquisition

Age	Acquisition of Language		Designation
	A	B	
1-3 yrs	+	-	Monolingual FLA
	+	+	Bilingual FLA
3-4 yrs up to puberty	+	+	Child SLA
After puberty	-	+	Adult SLA

Source: Basic Modes of Language Acquisition, *Second Language Acquisition* by Wolfgang Klein, trans. Bohuslaw Jankowski (U.S.A, Cambridge University Press, 1986), table 1.

Hence, whether partial or not, the acquisition of L1 is definitely effecting the acquisition of L2 in one or the other way, say, when a learner is able to learn the next language, she is obviously relying on her acquisition of the first, again there will be a definitive confusion of say, even, S-O-V (subject-object-verb) and S-V-O (subject-verb-

object) structure, but she will be able to differentiate the notion through the correction of the appropriate structure. In case of English (L2) where it is,

Subject-verb-object

I eat rice and,

Say, Bengali as the L1, where it will be

Subject-object-verb

Ami bhaat khaai.

The contrasting feature is more or less the same for all the languages, even when they belong to the same dialect also. In this regard, if we take Hindi as the L2 instead of English, we will see that though here the basic structure remains the same, but what remains crucial is the fact, which is very much important while talking in Hindi, i.e. the utterance of the gender in a sentence, like,

Subject-object-verb (with gender)

Main chawal khati huun

That again stands in contrast to the basic sentence structure in Bengali.

Thus, ultimately, a paradoxical situation is again constructed, where the contrastive features are giving spaces to the ‘positive assimilation’ (where positive transfer of the meaning is concerned) and to the ‘negative assimilation’ (where negative transfer in the form of error is concerned) and though they are acting as the two opposite poles but at last getting interrelated, giving way to a proper acquisition of L2. Hence, when L1 is an intrinsic component of a child’s overall cognitive and social development, in case of L2, these developments has already been more or less completed. The point that still remains unexplained is how far the proper acquisition of English as L2 can be attained as a proper acquisition at all. Or, why it is so, that the phonemics of L1 can be found even in the phonemics of L2, which should definitely be different from the former.

It thus, generally occurs that a second language can be acquired in a variety of ways, at any age for different purposes and to varying degrees. According to Stephen Krashen and Wolfgang Klein, there are fundamental distinctions in second language acquisition that helps ultimately to define the causes that leads to a proper/improper learning. These acquisitions are referred to as

1. conscious and subconscious language acquisition
2. tutored and untutored language acquisition or,
3. guided and spontaneous language acquisition.

Whether it is conscious or tutored or even guided language acquisition, all refers to a much inspected and dedicated learning through acquisition by a source person or a guide as opposed to the subconscious or untutored or spontaneous language acquisition which is occurred in everyday communication in a natural fashion free from systematic guidance. A.L. Khanna mentioned in one of his articles about the pioneers of this variation who experimented this by conducting a series of studies over a period of twelve years in the U.S.A, Canada, and Philippines. On the basis of studies in Louisiana, Maine and Connecticut in the U.S.A, Gardner and Lambert suggested that:

A friendly outlook towards the other group whose language is being learned can differentially sensitize the learner to the audio-lingual features of the language, making him more perceptive to forms of pronunciation and accent than is the case for a learner without this open and friendly disposition. (Gardner and Lambert 134)

Even Stevick who pioneered the 'silent way' points out that those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not only tend to seek less input, but will also have a high or strong filter, i.e. even if they understand the message, they may not

internalize it. According to Gardner and Lambert, a favourable attitude towards the target language would also influence the learner's motivation to learn a foreign language. If a person learned a foreign/second language with desire to enter into an active interaction with the target language community, his/her motivation would be called 'integrative motivation'; if on the other hand, a person learned a foreign/second language with such utilitarian objectives as obtaining admission in a particular course or getting a better job, he/she would have 'instrumental motivation'. Thus they implied that success in foreign language learning is likely to be comparatively less if the underlying motivation is instrumental rather than integrative. They also observed that in spite of the setting-to-setting diversity, there is substantial evidence of the separate roles played by intelligence aptitude and motivation in the development of second language competence (Gardner and Lambert 133). The component social milieu is included to emphasize the fact that:

The second language learning process must be considered in the larger context in which the individual and the second language learning program exist...it is proposed that the social milieu gives rise to many expectations in the minds of the teachers, parents and students concerning the entire second language learning task. A student resident in a community where bilingualism is an expected part of his cultural heritage will have and will encounter cultural beliefs which are of a different order from those of a student resident in a community where unilingualism² is the norm. (Gardner 195)

After going through the whole dichotomy of the second language acquisition, it may be concluded that there are actually many diverse problems and paradoxical situations that are evolved when there is a question of acquisition of L2 English, specially upon the

context of Indian society that ultimately gives rise to the question of mutual intelligibility of English, that also becomes variant according to the acquisition of the language. It is commonly experienced that most ESL learners in India acquire the proficiency in English to do well at schools and colleges and later at a various job sectors. There are even parts of core syllabus in some Indian Universities where the L2 learners are learning the basic form of English roughly including four skills of learning (reading, writing, speaking, listening) under the name of ‘Communicative English’ or ‘Business English’. Under such a varied condition, if we still try to give proposed explanation for the given phenomenon, where there are still some breach to be fulfilled, we can even generally try to dissolve the terms of variations and oppositions, by an adaptive hypothesis which definitely occurs after the acquisition of first language, where the innateness hypothesis or the identity hypothesis or even the monitor hypothesis, giving way to a general process of acclimatization in which all the positive aspects of the afore said propositions can become the source of utility while describing the second language acquisition.

Notes

1. ‘Subconscious process’ used by Stephen Krashen in his Acquisition Learning Hypothesis.
2. ‘Unilingualism’ used by Robert C. Gardner which is a synonym for Monolingualism.

Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*. Translated by Patrich Mensah, California: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Gardner, Robert C, and Wallace E. Lambert. *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*, California: Newbury House Publishers, 1972.

Gardner, Robert C. "Social Psychological Aspects of Second Language Acquisition." *Language and Social Psychology*, edited by H. Giles and R. St. Clair, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979.

Hawkins, John A. "Issues in the Explanations of Language Universals." *Explaining Language Universals*, edited by John A. Hawkins, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988.

Klein, Wolfgang. *Second Language Acquisition*. Translated by Bohuslaw Jankouski. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Rapaport, Herman. *Later Derrida: Reading the Recent Work*. New York, Routledge, 2003.

About the Author

The author is an Assistant Professor (Department of English) of City College, Kolkata.