

Reaction Paper to “Are Young Learner’s Better Learners of Foreign Language” Article

by Oroji & Ghane (2013)

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Synopsis

This is a reaction paper on the article "[Are Young Learner's Better Learners of Foreign Language](#)" written by Mohammad Reza Oroji and Azam Ghane, published by Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 136 (2014) 84 – 88. The topic was presented at the LINELT Global Conference on Linguistic and Foreign Language Teaching in Antalya, Turkey, 2013. I chose the article because it addresses common interlanguage errors, a topic I was not directly familiar with. In addition, the article brought up new theories and concepts to me such as Keshvarz model for error analysis.

The authors carried a study with 40 students divided into two groups: Twenty learners around the age of six to thirteen and adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five who had the same proficiency level. The adults were using the Intro level for the book *Interchange*, a book I am very familiar with, and the younger kids were using *Family & Friends – 2*, that I was not familiar with. Both books focus on the communicative approach and their main philosophy is that language is best learned when meaningful communication takes place. The aim of the study was to investigate the grammar errors committed by both groups and two questions were taken into consideration for data analysis: 1) Do adult learners commit more errors than younger learners?; 2) To what extent, are adult learners' errors similar to young learners'? (Oroji & Ghane, 2014). Sixty learners were preselected and tested prior the study; however only forty were selected because they had similar morpho-syntactic and lexico-semantic errors. According to the findings, adults mostly made inter language errors, while young learners made errors as a result of overgeneralization.

Analysis

Being a good professional when teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) goes beyond good teaching. A deep understanding of the process involved in learning a language and continuous professional development are mandatory. “One of the biggest challenges ESL students face is learning academic content in English; however, research shows that in current US K12 schools, most teachers have not received bilingual or ESL courses as part of their professional training (Menken & Antunez, 2001)”. (Prater & Steed, 2009). According to Perkins (2009), being a good coach/teacher means to know each one of your players, predict barriers, difficulties, and talents. One of the transformative principles presented in Perkin’s book *Making Learning Whole: How Seven Principles of Teaching Can Transform Education*, in my opinion, is Work on the Hard Parts, aspects that students usually struggle. This is one of the reasons why I chose this article to react to. As an ESL professional, I believe it is mandatory we are prepared to deal with the hard parts when learning and teaching a new language. L2 is understood here as English, the target language; L1 can be any other mother language. In this study, the mother language was of Persian origin. The hard parts will vary according to the L1, because each language has different have linguistic characteristics that will dictate how well and fast one will learn English. The study analyzed here is contrasting common errors made by learners whose language has Persian structure. That is another reason why I chose this article.

Before starting my analysis, I dedicated some time to learn more about the Keshvarz model for error analysis, “a procedure used by both researchers and teachers which involves collecting samples of learner language, identifying errors, classifying them according to their

nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness” (Keshvarz, 2012). He also highlights the distinction between errors and mistakes stating that “errors are rule governed, systematic in nature, internally principled and free from arbitrariness, showing learner's underlying knowledge of the target language that is his transitional competence. Differently, mistakes are random deviations and unrelated to any system” (Keshvarz, 2008), mistakes are self-corrected, while errors are not.

Much has been discussed about the best age to learn a new language, but can we affirm that adults have more difficulties? According to research, “the human being has developmental stages related to cognitive development that seem to reflect the gradual mastery of the linguistic elements” (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006). “In the arena of language, the neural signatures of learning can be documented at a remarkably early point in development, and these early measures predict performance in children’s language and pre-reading abilities in the second, third, and fifth year of life” (Khul, 2011, pg. 128). Oroji & Ghane (2014), preselected 60 learners ages between six and twenty-five and pre-tested them. Then, forty students were selected and divided into two groups of twenty. The first group was labeled “young learners”, six to thirteen-year-olds, and the second, young adults, ages between eighteen and twenty-five. The goal was to find out how linguistic awareness would interfere in their learning process. That was a very wise strategy because, according to Many (2010) “linguistic awareness is an interface mechanism that promotes heightened awareness of language forms between the first language (L1) and the target language (TL)”.

In order to figure out the possible linguistic errors of participants, the researchers decided to record the learners’ utterances in the class and then transcribe them. The collected data was analyzed according to Keshavarz (2012) model of error analysis. Transcription of

recorded utterances was done, and grammatical errors were identified. The categorizing the errors into syntactic and morphological types followed these. Having been classified, the errors were counted to realize how frequent the errors had been made by the learners. Once the errors were counted, the results were tabulated. (Oroji & Ghane, 2014)

Something that stood out to me was the seriousness of this study and the criteria adopted for data analysis. “Data analysis is key and requires in-depth approach to recording, analyzing, dissecting the data, and presenting the findings in an easily-digestible format” (Wulff, n.d.). The table showing the results of the study was very clear and easy to understand. The authors also selected some samples of common errors made by the students. According to their findings, younger learners made committed more errors, but when it came to structure contrasting Persian and English, none younger learners committed errors, in contrast with 15 adults. (Oroji & Ghane, 2014). That reiterates the idea that linguistic Awareness does interfere the L2 learning process as stated by Masny (2010). However, previous knowledge does help in some aspects of L2 learning. One good example highlighted in the study was the use of inversion to ask questions in which 26 young learners made that mistake in comparison to 18 adults. The use of preposition also exemplifies that.

Conclusion

Although this is one isolated study with a small number of subjects, the results lead me to conclude that the theories are right about developmental stages, maturity and linguistic awareness influencing L2 learning.

I have been teaching ESL for 21 years and my target learners have always been students whose language are originated from Latin. I have always wondered how difficult it would be to

teach students whose languages have totally different linguistic structure than mine. I was very surprised to learn that the errors committed by Persian speaking learners are about the same in Latin origin language. I am starting to realize that it is important to learn some peculiarities of my learners' mother tongue, but it is impossible to know them all. Perhaps, a good strategy would be focus on L2 peculiarities and make sure I find an effective way to explain those hard parts to my students. I believe that is what most ESL teachers who had not learned an L2 do. The conclusion made by the authors in this article assure me that we, ESL professionals, have the same concerns, hypotheses and are searching for the same answers, however, there is not right answers so far. "When it comes to ESL, we cannot say with certainty which groups are better learners, because their errors are almost identical, and the number of errors made by both groups is almost the same" (Oroji & Ghane, 2014). The beliefs the authors have when it comes to teaching grammar, coincides with mine. I like to use the contrastive method when teaching grammar to adults and tend to elicit the differences from them first. I believe it is easier when they do the critical thinking process and then I meet them wherever they are.

We believe that in order to help adult learners improve their knowledge of English; teachers are advised to teach grammar deductively and with details. The instructors can benefit from a contrastive method as well; that is, they can compare the structures of both languages and try to illustrate that the structures are whether identical or different. (Oroji & Ghane, 2014)

Lightbrown & Spada (2006) mention Lydia White (1991) and others who suggest that second language learners may need explicit information about what is not grammatical in the second language, so they do not assume some structures of the first language have equivalents in the second language when they do not.

The article I chose for this review was very interesting and brought me several new pieces of information, possibilities and reassurance.

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