

Classroom Instruction Does Not Play an Essential Role in SLA

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I. INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a relatively complicated field due to the influence of the diverse teacher and student-centered factors. Specifically, second language acquisition requires the involvement of the language teachers, curriculum developers, students, and the learning environment to promote positive outcomes. This is also indicative of the various approaches both inside and outside language classrooms that are applicable to SLA. Considering the classroom environment, the idea of instruction as an effector of SLA becomes arguable because of the reliance on instruction to teach most subjects, including foreign languages. This paper counters the argument that classroom instruction does not play an essential role in SLA by arguing that classroom instruction play an essential role in SLA. The paper argues that classroom instruction exacerbates the process of SLA as compared to incidental approaches of learning L2. The paper also argues that children learn a language faster than adults as supported by Vygotsky's socialization theory and compressible period hypothesis, which means that explicit instruction is more applicable to adults than children. Most counter-arguments of classroom instructions are diligently refuted in the paper with the support of theory and personal experiences to strengthen the argument that classroom instruction plays an essential role in SLA.

II. FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE HYPOTHESIS (FDH)

There is a direct relationship between classroom instruction and SLA. In this debate, I totally disagree with the statement that classroom instruction is not essential in SLA. The argument on this issue is derived from the applicability of implicit versus explicit learning. The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (FDH) was evaluated by Bley-Vroman (2009) and proved that incidental learning processes are no longer effective for L2 acquisition, and especially in regard to adult learners. This evidence implies that in most cases, adults are not likely to acquire a second language with the desired fluency in the absence of explicit instruction in the language. This argument can be explained by the critical period hypothesis. The hypothesis states that childhood is the best period in which a person can acquire language (Robertson, 2002). Failure to input language at this stage will make it difficult for the individual to acquire the language effectively in adulthood. Therefore, classroom instruction cuts across all ages, and it is the best option for teaching second language.

III. EXPLICIT AND INCIDENTAL APPROACHES

Several authors are in support of the argument that classroom instruction is not essential in SLA. For instance Leung and Williams (2011) are in support of the argument by arguing that adults can acquire L2 through incidental learning. This sentiment is also supported by Rebuschat and Williams (2012) that SLA can be better acquired through incidental approaches. Incidental learning is defined by Denhovska, Serratrice and Payne (2016) as the learning environments that do not readily show the learners that they are learning something. This shows that the instruction is not readily presented to the learners as would be in explicit learning, but the system is complex to the extent that the learners cannot notice the existence of such rules (Denhovska, Serratrice & Payne, 2016). This also indicates that the learners do not receive feedback regarding their language learning process. Moreover, the learners are completely unaware that they are learning the language as there are no direct indications that they are learning the language.

Other opponents of the effectiveness of classroom instruction in SLA are Rebuschat and Williams (2012) and Tagarelli, BorgesMota, and Rebuschat (2011), who argue that learners can acquire language incidentally without being exposed to explicit strategies of language learning. The studies arrived at this conclusion by confirming that the participants learning grammar incidentally performed better in posttests that were used to measure knowledge retention. This proves that the main intention of Rebuschat and Williams (2012) and Tagarelli, BorgesMota, and Rebuschat (2011) was to measure the level of language retention in incidental learning. This argument, as countered previously, is not applicable to all cases as there are various factors that affect language acquisition also likely to affect this process. Therefore, in normal classroom

environments, it would take too long for all learners to equitably acquire a language in the absence of explicit learning.

In relation to my personal experiences as an ESL learner, I unconditionally relate to the arguments made by Bley-Vroman (2009) that grammar instruction is essential in SLA as they boost the acquisition of the language by learners in all age groups. Therefore, my personal experiences as an ESL learner counter the arguments by other authors that incidental learning is more reliable than explicit learning in SLA (Denhovska, Serratrice & Payne, 2016; Rebuschat & Williams, 2012; Tagarelli, BorgesMota, Rebuschat, 2011). As an Arabic speaker, I knew that I would come across numerous challenges in regards to learning English as a second language. I had no exposure to English during my childhood years and was post-puberty, which has been found to be impactful on SLA (Brey-Vroman, 2009). Therefore, based on the fact that I was almost late to learn the language, I was to be very strategic in acquiring the language. Compared to the incidental learning approach, I realized that the explicit language learning strategy worked effectively in the classroom. It was easier to learn the grammar rules, and the other related SLA practices through explicit learning. I acquired the language promptly, at a rate that would not have been possible if I depended on the incidental approach alone. Therefore, my personal classroom experience is not in support of the argument that classroom instruction is not essential in SLA. Instruction is very important; they motivate the students, and the feedback is important to check the language acquisition process.

IV. FREQUENCY OF LANGUAGE EXPOSURE

Another theory that counters classroom instruction is the frequency of language exposure. Brandt, Verhagen, Lieven and Tomasello (2011) demonstrated the frequency of exposure to a certain language is important for boosting the language acquisition process. This approach is more effective in children, although it is also incidental. However, there is no significant research to prove that the same outcomes are applicable to adults learning grammar through incidental processes (Denhovska, Serratrice & Payne, 2016). Frequency has been adduced as one of the key factors promoting language acquisition in the L2 classroom. According to Hamrick and Rebuschat (2013), frequency impacts on L2 vocabulary in adult learners exposed to incidental learning conditions. This shows that, for adult learners to fully acquire the L2, they have to frequently apply the frequency approach whereby certain language learning symbols co-occur in training (Johnstone & Shanks, 2001). According to their argument, frequency is more important in incidental learning, and it is more effective in adults learning L2 than in children. In support of this argument on the effectiveness of frequency in L2 learning, Robinson (2005) offered essential findings through his study using Japanese speakers in the acquisition of Samoan. In this study, sentences were repeated over 50 times in the course of training to satisfy the motive of frequency in L2 acquisition. The findings indicated that there were improvements in the learners' posttests especially regarding the accuracy of old grammatical sentences. However, the evidence is contentious because it does not show how frequency impacts the acquisition of L2 as compared to the acquisition of L1.

As much as frequency is an acknowledged factor that improves L2 acquisition, it cannot be compared to classroom instruction in SLA. This is because frequency is an aspect of incidental learning, and is more applicable to children as compared to adults (Brandt, Verhagen, Lieven & Tomasello, 2011). Therefore, there is controversy in the role of frequency in either L1 or L2 acquisition as they (L1 and L2) differ in terms of grammatical rules. However, researchers that appreciate the role of frequency in language acquisition cannot confirm whether the same principles of acquisition are also applicable to L2. Studies such as Ellis (2006) and Hulstijn (2005) posit that the acquisition of L2 through frequency is similar to learning L1. This argument refutes the claim that the acquisition of the L2 cannot be achieved through the frequency approach as it would be in L1 learning (Tomasello, 2008). I am in agreement with the above statement because L1 development is different from L2 development due to early exposure to L1 and delayed exposure to L2.

To support my argument that classroom instruction is more efficient as compared to natural exposure to language, I believe that associative and cognitive learning is more applicable to L1 learning than to L2 learning. This is because learning L2 grammar through the frequency approach requires the learner to possess partial knowledge of the language being taught (Lee, 2002). Therefore, the key point is that frequency is only restricted to children with partial knowledge of L2 but adults that have never been exposed to the L2 will find it difficult to learn the language (Lee, 2002; Tomasello, 2008). Therefore, they support my argument that, in the absence of classroom instruction, it would be a challenge for adults to learn L2 irrespective of the frequency of exposure to statements in the L2. I also believe that children form the only justifiable group of individuals who can learn a language incidentally through high exposure frequency to the language but adults must adhere to specific grammar rules taught explicitly to gain adequate knowledge of the target language. The relevance of frequency in SLA is explained by Krashen's Comprehension Hypothesis, which states that it is easier for individuals to develop literacy and acquire language when they understand messages (Krashen, 2003). In this regard, individuals should understand what they hear, and it occurs subconsciously. Therefore, children have a greater advantage in acquiring language in this manner as compared to the adults.

The acquisition of speech by children is discussed in the study by Sandbank and Yoder (2016) on the association between the length of parental utterance and outcomes of language acquisition in children. This is in line with the influence of child-directed speech, which is different from speech directed to adults. Child-directed speech is characterized by higher pitch, longer pauses, slower delivery rate, and expanded intonation to ensure that the child understands better. Therefore, this assertion can be used to explain why incidental language learning is more functional in children as compared to adults.

Just as Denhovska, Serratrice and Payne (2016) argue on the credibility of the research on the principles of learning grammar under incidental conditions, I am also of the opinion that associative learning is better than constant adherence to the frequency approach. As a child, I had limited exposure to English language, but I later enrolled for classes in the language. The first weeks of enrolment were very confusing as the exposure to the language could not help me acquire the language irrespective of the frequency with which the natives were communicating to me in English. I also believed that the frequency of exposure could only play a partial role in enhancing my ability to learn English; however, I could not use it purposely and solely to learn English as I was already in the adulthood stage. Therefore, I believe that classroom instruction such as reading comprehension, writing, oral presentation, and tests played the biggest role in my SLA. With time, I realized that I could easily follow the explicit instruction and my proficiency in the language developed momentarily. I also realized that I used to make numerous grammatical errors while learning English incidentally through associative interaction with the native speakers. In most cases, I would err in formulating the past tense forms of some verbs. However, since the classroom instruction on past-tense formulation were so clear, I quickly learned the rules and quickly metamorphosed into a competent English language speaker.

V. LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION

The theory of language socialization has been studied to support the arguments on language acquisition through classroom instruction. Language socialization enables novices to gain communicative competence of a language and become members of a community (Patricia, 2007). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory effectively describes how language is acquired through socialization. According to this theory, cognitive development is linked to a zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the area set aside for the cognitive development of a learner, and social interactions are essential for the development of the zone (Vygotskii & Cole, 1978). Importantly, language socialization develops the process of learning a new language through learning the pragmatics and the linguistic conventions of the target language. Most of the studies conducted in language socialization support the idea that language is best acquired through explicit approaches. The sociocultural theory is also mainly applicable to classroom instruction but not applicable to the other approaches of SLA. According to Patricia (2007), human mental functions are best mediated by sociocultural theory (SCT) with the aid of language systems. SCT is a psycholinguistic theory that also ensures the interaction of people on a social plane is regulated, and their reasoning functionally mediated by the linguistic methods put into place by an educational institution (Watson-Gegeo & Nielsen, 2004). Therefore, the ultimate argument is that the sociocultural theory supports the idea that classroom instruction plays an essential role in SLA because the elements of this theory are indicative of the relevance of explicit learning.

During my ESL learning at the college, the SCT was highly embraced as the psycholinguistic approach for grammar instruction, testing, and feedback being offered in the course of learning English. Therefore, I can comfortably argue that, with the essentiality of this theory in language learning, its application in SLA makes the learners achieve their objectives of gaining competency in the language as compared to when the other methods such as incidental approaches are used in SLA. Therefore, my personal experiences indicate that classroom instruction plays an essential role in SLA more than the other SLA approaches. Students need to be engaged in explicit learning to enhance their language acquisition.

VI. VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGY

Context-based learning, which is part of classroom instruction, facilitates L2 word learning with the aid of the underlying concept (Lan, Fang, Legault & Li, 2015; Snow, 2005). Embodied cognition theories support the use of context in second language teaching as they facilitate cognitive development of the learners (Coward, 2005). The learning environment should then provide room for the perpetuation of these approaches in the classroom. Vocabularies can be learnt through the translation of L2 words into L1 words. Using this approach in the classroom context, learners can pair L1 words to L2 words or image to L2 words in an active participatory manner (Lan et al., 2015). This argument is supported by Fang-Chuan Ou and Wen-Chi Vivian (2015), who state that a vocabulary learning strategy (VLS) should be engraved in overall instructional design to help learners to discover the meaning of vocabularies and to internalize them. This is also known as a constructivist instructional design that emphasizes the student-centered teaching design. A counter-argument by Chacón-Beltrán, AbelloContesse and del Mar Torreblanca-López (2010) posits that learners do not consistently prefer VLS, and their preference is influenced by what they feel about the effectiveness of the VLS strategy. Therefore, contrary to the argument by Fang-Chuan Ou and Wen-Chi Vivian (2015) that VLS is unmatched in

offering the best alternative for vocabulary acquisition, Chacón-Beltrán (2010) refutes this claim by arguing that VLS is optional and learners select it after confirming that it is the best strategy for their learning purposes. Unfortunately, there is limited evidence on VLS and its applicability in vocabulary acquisition, which limits the reasoning on why and how the strategy can be applied universally in L2 classrooms. However, as a future language teacher, I will apply VLS in teaching my learners because I think it is one of the best context-based classroom instruction strategies.

Based on these arguments, it is evident that classroom instruction enhances the process of vocabulary learning and acquisition. It also enhances the process of vocabulary retention by L2 learners. As an English learner, I participated in such hands-on activities involving matching of vocabulary to understand it better. I used to match English words to Arabic words in a process that enhanced my understanding of the meaning of the English words. Using this approach, I would easily retain the vocabulary and use it in statements while communicating. The same could not be achieved through incidental language learning approaches. On the contrary, without knowing that words are to be matched between L1 and L2, and in the absence of feedback, the process of acquiring L2 vocabulary in an incidental learning environment becomes an uphill task. Therefore, positive outcomes in L2 learning are best achieved through classroom instruction.

VII. WORKING MEMORY

Explicit and systematic instruction supports the working memory (Smith, Sáez & Doabler, 2016). In their study, they defined working memory capacity as the phenomenon of processing information to enhance the performance of complex tasks. It is through this aspect that the language teacher can easily manipulate information and avoid interference in the course of SLA. The ability to multi-task without interference is developed by coordinated classroom activities that avoid disruption of the learning process (Swanson, Lussier, & Orosco, 2015). Therefore, it is evident that the working memory capacity is directly dependent on intervention outcomes that learners are exposed to during SLA. To support this finding, McConnell and Kubina (2016) argue that struggling readers should be exposed to explicit classroom instruction to support their learning, and parents should be actively involved in the process. Alliteration, rich vocabulary, and alphabet knowledge should be part of the instruction that parents should provide for their children to enhance their learning capacities (McConnell & Kubina, 2016). However, contrary to this, Denton (2012) argues that early reading prevention should be applied to primary grades. This means that for children with reading difficulties, their parents should not rush to teach them at home unless there is a special arrangement with the curriculum developers to establish the best explicit approaches to be used by the parents with their children.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The arguments in support of the importance of classroom instruction in SLA indicate that it is the most appropriate language learning technique for L2 learners. Most of the previous studies on this issue agree that classroom instruction, through explicit learning, significantly influences SLA. Moreover, classroom instruction improves the process of vocabulary learning and retention through the utilization of the working memory. Therefore, as much as other authors argue that incidental learning is more workable than explicit learning, they fail to offer exhaustive justifications for their arguments. The other weakness of the counter-arguments is that their SLA approaches do not work equitably across all ages as they mostly favor children learners. However, classroom instruction can be applied to learners of all ages. My personal experiences also indicate that classroom instruction plays an essential role in SLA and it should be continuously applied in teaching second languages.

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