

Short Research Article

The Role of Universal Grammar in Second Language Acquisition from the Perspective of Chinese Acquiring English Reflexives

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Abstract

In China, the second language learning has always played an important role in primary and higher education. The issue of how children acquire the second language has experienced a boom in China over the past decade as the proficiency of a person's English level mainly depends on its acquisition in primary stage. The main focus of this paper is to examine the role of UG in the second language acquisition and to what extent it plays in the process. To illustrate this, the four access hypotheses were given firstly. In addition, the role of UG from the aspect of Chinese learners' acquiring the English reflexives was discussed. In this section, the importance of analyzing the reflexives and the different features of them in Chinese and English were exhibited.

Keywords

Universal grammar, English reflexive, Second language acquisition

1. Introduction

The fact that children attain the first language completely and easily without any formal instructions and sufficient input in a short period has received increasing attentions and discussions by linguists. How the children acquire language? Is it a biological endowment or based on the accumulation of knowledge by learning? This is well-known as the logical problem of children first language acquisition. To investigate the nature of mental processes of language acquisition, Chomsky (1981a) introduced a Universal Grammar (UG) composed by the principles and parameters and argued that UG was a special innate existed system that exerted influences on facilitating first language acquisition immediately. Many evidences can be found that UG plays a crucial role in the acquisition of L1 (White, 2000).

However, it is quite different on the perspective of adult foreign language acquisition. As the linguistic competence of adults is more complicate than children, linguists have being interested in the question arises as whether UG plays a role in the development of inter-language grammars as well as the children attaining their mother tongues, if it does, then to what extent.

To indicate the role that UG acts, this essay is organized as follow: The first part will mainly identify the assumptions about the role of UG in second language (L2) acquisition, serving as the theoretical background. The central focus of chapter 3 will be primarily drawn on the explanation of the role of UG in the L2 acquisition from the aspect of Chinese learners' attaining the reflexives. This section contains two parts. On the one hand, the reflexives in L2 acquisition will be demonstrated with its importance and its use in English. On the other hand, the role of UG in L2 learning will be showed in the process of attaining reflexives by Chinese learners.

2. Access Hypotheses on the Role of UG

To what extent does UG play a role in the development of inter-language grammars? According to Cao and Mai (2004), there are four hypotheses on the accessibility of UG in the inter-language development, namely direct access hypothesis, indirect access hypothesis, lack of access hypothesis and interactive access hypothesis.

2.1 Direct Access Hypothesis

The first assumption is that UG is directly available to the learners in L2 acquisition and it acts the same role as in the L1 learning. That is to say, the inter-language grammar in the L2 learning is entirely constrained by UG principles and parameters. According to Flynn (1984), it contains the parameter settings guided by the UG in the inter-language grammar development of foreign language learners.

To prove this, Flynn (1984) conducted an experiment in which 175 subjects from all over the world were chosen to use 18 English sentences. It can be concluded from his experiment that the foreign language learners have obtained an innate UG, which can not be achieved from other approaches. Furthermore, the UG principles do play role in the L2 acquisition.

2.2 Indirect Access Hypothesis

The indirect or partial access hypothesis points that only a small part of UG, namely the principles and parameters instantiated in first language learning can be available in the L2 acquisition. In this case, the L1 attaining is the basis of the parameter setting and parameter values resetting after this process.

In 1986, White carried out an experiment involved 72 second language learners joining in the sentences grammatical judgement tests (White, 1986). In his study, White discovered that in the initial period of learning the mother tongue, the Spanish learners transferred the pro-drop parameter to their L2 acquisition. Similarly, WU Yi-min (2003) used another study to test the pro-drop value of parameter and claimed that UG played an indirect role in the L2 learning.

2.3 Lack of Access Hypothesis

This hypothesis is also known as No-access hypothesis which claims that UG has no access to L2

learners and the L1 and L2 acquisition process are fundamentally different from each other. The representative scholar of this hypothesis is Bley-Vroman who put forward the Fundamental Differences Hypothesis (1989, p. 50) to completely deny the affects of UG in L2 learning. Schachter (1989) carried out an experiment to test whether the subadjacency principles had accessibility to L2 learners. The results showed that few subjects succeeded in judging the correct grammatical sentences with subadjacency principles. Then, Schachter concluded that the L2 learning was not constrained by the UG.

However, it is obviously that this hypothesis is unconvincing because some phenomenon that the learners are able to get some knowledge from L2 and this cannot be explained by other factors.

2.4 Interactive Access Hypothesis

The interactive access hypothesis argues that UG makes contribution to constrain the L2 learning and the UG, L2 input and first language play interactive role in the development of L2 acquisition together (Schachter, 1989). In addition, this hypothesis accepts the important roles UG plays in L2 learning and at the same time, the effects of L2 input and L1 knowledge also are highlighted.

White (1986) found that the L2 learners transferred the parameters of their mother tongue to the process of foreign language learning in the initial state of their learning. Wang (2000) discovered that UG, L1 knowledge and L2 input influenced the advanced-level learners' understanding of the reflexives based on his study of the L2 learners' acquisition of the reflexives.

3. Chinese Learners Acquisition of English Reflexives

So far, this essay has already reviewed the four access hypotheses. To my mind, the fourth hypothesis which mentions that UG plays the interactive role in L2 acquisition is more convincing. As different experiments receive various results in which UG is expected to have different accessibilities, it is necessary to analyse its role from a particular aspects. This section will concentrate the interactive access of UG from the perspective of Chinese acquisition of English reflexives.

3.1 Reflexives in Foreign Language Acquisition

Reflexives are considered as a characteristic part of the study in L2 acquisition. According to Wang (2000), on the one hand, it provides a microcosmic perspective to investigate the accessibility of UG. Moreover, reflexives are composed of the universal and language specific characteristics. In other words, some characteristics of reflexives are the same in all language while they can also display various features in different languages.

On the other hand, the universal principles which affect the binding behaviour of reflexives are different depending on the different languages. Thus, it facilitates the investigation of Principle A of Chomsky's Binding Theory. To be more specific, the Principle A is one of the three principles of Binding Theory which concerns the structural relationship of the governance of sentences. Based on the theory of Chomsky (1981a), Principle A mainly describes that the anaphor like reflexives must be bound in its governing category. For example,

- 1) Mary_i gives Susan_j the photos of herself_{i/j}.

In this sentence, *herself* must be bound to its governing category—Susan.

3.2 Analysis of the Role UG Plays in Chinese Reflexives Acquisition

As Chinese and English are quite different, the reflexives in the two languages are also not the same. In details, the references of the reflexives are different. Take the following sentences for example,

- 2) 莉莉_i 希望 小红_j 给 自己_{i/j} 买 一件 裙子。
 *Lili hope Xiaohong buy self a skirt.

Lili hopes Xiao buy herself a skirt.

As seen in example, the reflexive “自己” are able to refer to Lili or Xiaohong while in English, the reflexive *herself* can only refer to antecedent next to it—Xiaohong. In addition, Chinese simple reflexive 自己 can only binding to the object.

From the different features of reflexives of the two languages, it can be assumed that the accessibility of UG would be realized if the Chinese learners’ understanding of the reference of the reflexives is changed. In addition, if they accept the long distance binding and allows the simple reflexive combines with a subject, it means that their learning is also affected by the L1 transfer. A study by Wang (2000) involved 24 sentences in the biclausal finite and infinite sentences with reflexives and the results showed that the subjects received high scores in the acquisition of the English reflexives while occasionally they are influenced by their mother tongue in this process. He concluded that UG is available to L2 learners and parameter resetting is a process with the effects of UG, L1 and L2 input.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, the main focus was to examine the role of UG in the L2 acquisition and to what extent it plays in the process. To illustrate this, the four access hypotheses were given firstly. Then the next part mainly concentrated on the role of UG from the aspect of Chinese learners’ acquiring the English reflexives. In this section, the importance of analyzing the reflexives and the different features of them in Chinese and English were exhibited. It is clear that the issue of the role UG plays in L2 learning is still generates much discussion debated, which requires further analysis. However, it is thus possible to infer that the hypothesis maintaining UG plays an interactive role partially with L1 knowledge and L2 input is more convincing.

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