Investigating the influence of setting on language learning: The case of Kurdish learners of English

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Abstract
It was argued that those learning the language while mingling with the community are better learners than those learning in the academic setting where they only opt to use the academic language. The current small scale study investigates the influence of the setting on two distinct Kurdish learners of English living in the UKin two different contexts. One of the learners has been learning English in an academic setting, while the other has been learning English through daily interactions with the community in a non-academic setting.The samples of this study are two Kurdish learners of English. Data were collected through interviews and observation. Results revealed that both learn English effectively for the context where their language will be used. However, the academic language learner is capable of expressing himself more than the one learning the colloquial language. The academic leaner could use a variety of strategies to express different situations and had a clearer language than the one learning the colloquial language even though the academic language learner did not mingle with academicians like the colloquial leaner did with the community.

Keywords: First language acquisition, second language learning, errors, interference, interlanguage, intralingua

1. Introduction

The internationalization of English and the increasing number of English learners has enhanced the interest in investigating the interlanguage of English learners. Linguists differedin their interpretations of the process of second(L2) learning. Troike (2006)defines second language acquisition (SLA) as the process of learning a language at a specific time in life after the L1 have been learnt. Gass and Selinker (2001) and Ellis (1997) agree that SLA is the process of learning anL2 after learning the L1. They alsoagree that since it is 'L2', it does not necessarily mean that it is the second language that the person has learnt; rather it could refer to the learning of a third or fourth language that he/she is learning. Additionally, Ellis (1997) goes on bysuggestingthat "'second'is not intended to contrast with 'foreign'" (p: 3).

Troike (2006) states that "SLA involves a wide range of language learning settings and learner characteristics and circumstances"(p.5). These factors differ from learner to another sinceeach learner has his own way of learning. L1 background can be very helpful in learning an L2.However, learners need to be aware of the differences between their L1 and L2 (Lightbownand Spada, 2006).

Kachru (1992) classified the world Englishes into three different categories labeled as Inner, Outer and Expanding Circles (cited in Karen, 2011). In his categories, he referred to the UK, Canada, the United States, New Zealand and Australia as the 'Inner Circle' in which English is the main spoken language and referred to these countries by the acronym (ENL) which stands for English as a Native Language. Followed that the 'Outer Circle' by which he referred to the countries where English is used as an official language and named it *English as a Second Language*(ESL).Lastly, the 'Expanding Circle' comprisesof the countries where English is used as a Foreign Language and referred to it as (EFL) (Mullany and Stockwell, 2010).

There has also been many prophesies about the future of English. Crystal (1997) is very optimistic about its future. He wonders whether English will be the only language of the globe in 500 years, adding if the effect of English continues, the globe will conceive a probable intellectual progression and English then might become the only language spoken (as cited in Harmer, 2001). Graddol (1997), on the other hand, suggests that the effect of global English might decline for certain reasons. He justifies his position in light of the fast growth of Hispanic language in both South and North American continents, indicating that a time might come when these two continents become bilingual–English-Spanish speaking areas. He also predicted that Mandarin might become widely used in Asia if Chinese travel services dominated the world airline services and if their internet computer websites and other services overtook other computer hosts (as cited in Harmer, 2001).However, nowadays, it can be argued that English is widely used globally which make it the international language. Therefore, the current paper tries to investigate the ways two distinct ESL Kurdish learners learn English. This paper falls into four sections. The first one is the literature review which is devoted to discuss the studies related to second language learning.

2. Literature review

In 1959, Chomsky published a strong attack on Skinner's*VerbalBehavior*which changed the impression of linguists and psycholinguists to consider the idea of Behaviorism as inappropriate. In that, Chomsky (1959) argued that Behaviorism was unsuccessful in explaining the logical problem of acquiring languages. He added, children's language is not

only based on copying, mimicking what they hear because the language they are exposed to is incomplete and lacks to grammatical features, but yet they distinguish between the correct and incorrect ones (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Thus, his nativist attempt controlled over psycholinguistics and his universal grammar (henceforth UG) approach consolidated that language learning is not based on S-R-R process (cited in Dickins and Dickins, 2001). In his UG, Chomsky (1959) held that there are certain sets of rules within the mind of human beings which help them acquire the language and that these rules are available in all languages which make long quotation – it is similar to each other,which in turn are referred to as 'Principles and Parameters' (Mitchell and Myles, 2006).

Troike (2006, p: 47) purports that "Chomsky and his followers argue that children come to the task of acquiring a specific language already possessing general knowledge of what all languages have in common, including constrains on how any natural language can be structured". Chomsky (2002) said that, the ability by which children can acquire a language is the language acquisition device (henceforth LAD) which is the part of the human brain which does all the process of language acquisition. This (LAD) needs a comprehensible input to enhance the process of the language acquisition (Ellis, 1997). As for SLA, Troike, (2006) and Setter and Jenkins, (2005) say that if the parameter settings of L1 and L2 are the same, positive transfer will take place, whereas if they are different then interference will probably occur.

Then, when learners try to use what they have learnt, Interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) is developed.Learners come up with mixed structures between their L1 and the target language and these structures are neither in L1 nor in L2, but rather chunks of unreal structures made up as a result of this mixture of structures (Ellis, 1997 and Rutherford and Thomas, 2001). Because "parameter settings and mastery of morphological features"are only related to L1 acquisition, it is difficult for L2 learners to master these features. Thus, they find it difficult to acquire them which leads them to fossilize at a certain stage whichclearly falls short of high levels like native speakers (Troike, 2006, p: 51). He adds that, errors are also caused by incomplete learning of L2 and believes that the errors made by L2 learners are developmental ones and are referred to as intralingual errors.(Han (2004, cited in Fidler, 2006 and Selinker et al, 2004) sees that it is difficult for most of L2 learners to progress in learning the target language. Thus, the scale of their progression seems to become invisible even if they continue to be exposed to the target language in different ways no matter it is the classroom or by using the language in communication.

These attempts constrained linguists to concentrate on L2 learning and come up with new assumptions. Krashen's (1982) *MonitorModel* was another attempt in explaining L2 learning; it consisted of five hypotheses, as follows:

1- The acquisition-learning hypothesis

2- The monitor hypothesis

3- The natural order hypothesis

4- The input hypothesis

5- The affective filter hypothesis.

The first one holds that we acquire our L2 in just the same way children acquire their L1, that is to say, unconsciously, while we learn our L2 consciously being aware of what we are doing (Lightbown and Spada, 2006).The second one suggests that our conscious learning is in charge of monitoring and amending what we produce as a result of acquisition, which is the only "function" that learning does (McLaughlin, 1987).

Krashen's third hypothesis states that, we acquire the language in a fixed sequential order, and the easiest aspects of the language are not necessarily the first to be acquired (Krashen, 1985). The fourth hypothesis purports that, learning happens when L2 learners are exposed to understandable input which consists of structures that are slightly more difficult than their present level and also with the help of the contextual meaning (Krashen(1985, cited in Xu, Fang, 2010). Krashen's last hypothesis states that, when learners are exposed to large quantity of understandable input, it is not a matter of certainty that they acquire much knowledge of the language they are exposed to, and argues, the reason for that is their personality which is affected by the "affective filter" which is a kind of hurdles that block the (LAD) from storing this input as a result of the factors such as high level of anxiety, low motivation and lack of self- confidence (Lightbown and Spada, 2006).

3. Methodology

In this section, I shall talk about my two case studies in much detail and also give a brief description of the way I collected my data and give some reasons for that along with the problems I faced in gathering them.

3.1 Participants

One of the case studies is named Ahmed. His L1 is Kurdish. He is 24 years old. He was taught English when he was in the primary, secondary and high school but on a very poor and superficial way. When he arrived in the UK, he was enrolled on a full-time English course at Kirklees College.He studied there only for five months. During this period, he passed the beginner, intermediate (each level lasted for seven weeks) and studied two weeks in the upper-intermediate level. Then, he took an IELTS test and achieved a band of 4.5 which is generally considered as high. Side by side with his course, he used to listen to music, watch films, and go to gym. He had some English friends in the gym where he used to speak to whenever he went there.

The second participant is also Kurdish. His name is Bakhtyar. He is 30 years old. He has been living in the UK for nearly nine years. He speaks four languages; Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, and English. When Bakhtyar arrived in the UK, he was obliged to enroll in a language course to learn English, but soon he left it. He moved from a place to another seeking for a job. He finally found a job in a restaurant where he has been working ever since. He used to work from 7am to 8pm, five days a week. There he made English friends and began to interact with English people.

It is worth mentioning that the names used in the study are anonymous even though the participants volunteered to take part in the study.

3.2 Areas of analysis and methods of data collection

This study would primarily focus on some mistakes that the chosen case studies have made. It will also concentrate on the ways they use English language, that is to say, formal/informal

and link these areas to the theories of learning language. Different wayshave been used in collecting data. Due to the participants' business and because of the time constrains as it was very difficult for the researchers to keep contacting them. As a result, they had to depend on a small amount of data and deeply examine it.

3.2.1 Interviewing Technique

An interview is a conversation between two or more people where question are asked by the interviewer to elicit facts or statements from the interview (Punch, 2009). It is also defined as a qualitative research technique which involves "conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program or situation" (Boyce and Neale, 2006, p.3).According to Oppenheim(2000) interviewing technique is useful to obtain detailed information about personal feelings, perceptions and opinion, it allows more detailed questions to be asked. It usually achievesa high response rate. Through interviewing technique ambiguities can be clarified and incomplete answers followed up, precise wording can be tailored to respondents and precise meaning of questions are clarified. However, Cohen et, al. (2007) state that interviewing technique can be very time consuming: setting up interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, feedback, reporting may take long time.

During the conduction of the interviews, the data was recorded. This helped the researchers refer to the data whenever they needed it, especially with Bakhtyar who was unable to write.

3.2.2 Observation

According to Robson (2011), observation is a crucial qualitative data collection method that collects data from people by observing what they do and what they say. This technique is utilized as it is argued that conducting observations and interviews together reinforces the qualitative data of the research (Denscombe, 2007). However, this technique has its own limitations too. It is time consuming, writing notes is cumbersome and also they could be written subjectively (Hennink et al, 2011).

4. Discussion andAnalysis

This section is devoted to analyze some of the mistakes that my case studies have made when they used their L2. It will also touch upon their enhancing and inhibiting learning characteristics which they have a great role in learning an L2.

3.1 Ahmed

Ahmed said the following sentence which is incorrect;

-I did not received it.

The subject has been taught the structure of the past tense in his course, yet he made this mistake and many of this kind even though I was correcting it for him every time he used to say it. As it is clear, the subject wanted to say 'I did not receive it'. For such an error,evidence (Selinker, 1972) suggests that this kind of mistake could be Interlanguage. His L1 is Kurdish and if this sentence is translated into Kurdish, it would be; [mnnawargrtbo] which literally means (I not received it) in English. The subject used 'did not'and added'ed' to the verb 'receive', so [bo] in [wargrtbo]stands for the past tense in Kurdish and the'ed' in English. This mixture in structures creates a new irrelevant structure which is neither English nor Kurdish.

Another cause of such an error could be theunwillingness of correcting oneself. As I mentioned earlier, he has been taught this tense more than once, yet he does it every time which means that he might be aware of it and does not bother himself in correcting it. So, this might suggest that he has fossilized and not willing orable to progress to a further stage. This could be also linked to the idea of not monitoring oneself when using the target language, because his intention could be just to pass the message on and not the way of saying it.

Another error which was noticed in the piece of Ahmed's writing is as follows;

- **The teacher they taught us one of them was good and another not bad.**

There are some errors made in this sentence. One of them is the part ‘and another not bad’. There is a possible sense of transference in this part. It could be a typical Kurdish phrase in the meaning and form. If we translate it into Kurdish language, there will not be any difference in the form and meaning as well,whereasthe sentence structure ofEnglish and Kurdish are distinct. So, this could be due to his L1 transference, which is, using Kurdish language rules when talking in English which causes him to make mistakes.

Along with this is the misuse of the articles which we do not use in Kurdish. This might be because the subject has stopped changing the rules which he has acquired from his L1 and applies them when using English language. Thus, it seems that he has fossilised because he does not show any progression in regards to the difference of the rules of Kurdish and English languages. Mixing between two distinct structures will result into a new one which is neither L1 nor L2 is what Ahmed has done in this sentence. So, taking the sentence as a whole could be apossible evidence of Interlanguage, where the rules of both Kurdish and English are applied.

Another assumption to such an erroris that the subject might know the correct form of the sentence but due to the pressure of the time that I had set for him, he couldnot monitor himself when writing his sentence. Thus, he used the wrong form unconsciously. So, there were not any factors triggering his conscious part of the mind which is responsible formonitoring, checking and editing his errors. On a formality level, there is a sense of informality in using "not bad" in this context. Normally, in English "not bad", in such contexts, is used in spoken English.

Another main point which is worth mentioning is the pronunciation issue, which I realized when interviewing him. In fact, Kurdish language has some sounds in its phonetic system which are not available in English phonetic system and vice versa (Dovaise, 2010). This is another fact that adds more difficulty to the improvement of the language of most of Kurdish learners who are trying to learn English as a second language unless they have been learning English for a long time. Adding to that, the fact that Arabic is hisL2 and that it contains the uncommon sounds of both Kurdish and English. So the sounds he has difficulty with seemed to be the uncommon sounds of both languages. The below examples of his pronunciation make it clear that he is one of those students who face much difficulty in pronouncing the uncommon sounds (Dovaise, 2010), as follows:

Sentence/word pronunciation

- **I saw something there /aɪsəʊsʌmsɪŋz3:ʳr/**
- **Most of the time /məʊstovz̲ə̲taɪm/**

Because there is neither / θ / nor / ð / in Kurdish sound system, the subject had much difficulty in pronouncing any English words or sentences containing one of these sounds. Moreover, this would confuse him even pronouncing the rest of the sentence/word. These sounds were sometimes pronounced correctly by him, but that was when he used to over monitor his pronunciation according to Krashen's monitor hypothesis. I also noticed on more than one occasion that he used to avoid my questions which involved him mentioning these sounds. Thus, he was very slow in speaking, i.e. being very careful and over monitoring his pronunciation were the main reasons of him not being fluent in speaking and reading as well.

This process also drove Ahmed to pronounce the word in a new way which is neither correct in English nor in Kurdish whichcould be because of Intralingual, that is, a stage of development in the process of attempting to produce the correct sound. Such pronunciations are made by Ahmed when he is very concerned about the content of the message rather than thepronunciation of it which in turn deviates him from monitoring himself. So, evidence (Krashen, 1985) suggests thatsuch errors might be as a result of not monitoring himself which makes his pronunciation errors more clearly. Thus, itcould be very difficult for him to change his pronunciation and add the uncommon sounds to the system he already possesses. CPH could also support this argument as the reason is his age which is beyond the age of puberty (Ellis 1997). He is already 24 years old which, according to some linguists, makes it difficult for him to acquire or adjust his pronunciation.

Since Ahmed is a student and learns English for his own special purposes, his personality has much effect on his learning style and on the process of his language learning as well. Throughout my interviews and the time we spent living together, it seemed to me that Ahmed's personality and motivation had some contradicting points. He seemed to be an extroverted, spontaneous person and loved meeting and speaking to people even. So, his desire for communication seemed to be huge which in turn triggered his aptitude for learning English. However, his anxiety, nervousness and fear of making mistakes especially when speaking seemed to inhibit the process of his language learning to some extent. It was noticed that when he used to speak in English (not in interviews) he was very careful and worried about the mistakes that he would make. This could have a great effect on his fluency because he used to care much about his accuracy as his IELTS target was 6.5.

4.2 Bakhtyar

Bakhtyar, who has been in the UK for nearly nine years,is my second case study. Throughout our discussion about English language, it seemed to me that his attitude towards English language is positive and that he sees that learning English is very useful for everyone since English has become the global language. According to the interaction hypothesis, I further deduced from his speech that living with Kurdish people in the same house has been his major issue of not mastering the spoken English and thus being unable to attain a native like level. However, there has been a compensation for that. His English friends have been of much support to him in learning English.

One of the common errors that Bakhtyar made while communicating in English is as follows:

Sometime I <u>am</u> not see him.

In this sentence, the subject has used verb 'to be' instead using verb 'to do' when talking about an action. This suggests that he is unaware as which verb to use because he has not been taught the rules of using these kinds of verbs. He might not have acquired it from the society because English never say so, but rather it could be of his own creation. Evidence (intralingual errors) suggests that this could be a generalization of the use of verb 'to be' which is related to the stages of development L2 learners go through.

Another assumption for this could be because he was thinking in Kurdish and speaking in English and used an equivalent structure to that in Kurdish. So L1 transference might be the cause for that because if you put this sentence in Kurdish, there will not be much difference in the structure and meaning as well. The overuse of this kind of verb might have caused Bakhtyar to fossilize as a result of not being corrected by the people around. As a result, he might have thought that it is correct, thus he kept on using it.

The way Bakhtyar used to interact with his costumers at work shaped his language in two ways which are; using a relatively short sentences and phrases, on one hand, and using a kind of formal language, on the other. He used the former (lack of the grammatical features) shape with his work mates and that was because of the nature of his work which required him to be quick in dealing with costumers. Thus, his focus was only on the key words which used to convey the full meaning of his message. A good evidence of his use of short phrases is as follows:

When I go work, he at home. When I come back he sleeping.

You go home, you very happy.

This kind of error could be as a result of the argument made above. So he might be fossilized and the reason could be the nature of his social context (only focusing on the key words of the sentence) which had a great effect on the progression of his language. The main focus was on the message and not on the form. Thus, his language was shaped in this way. On the other hand, he used to use formal questions when he dealt with his costumers, examples;

What can I do for you?

What would you like to have?

This was the positive side of using the language as English people tend to be more polite in their speech. Moreover, phrases like; "whatdya want? Hi! Wazgoin on", were also used at work especially with his friends as a result of the environment and the people he worked with. This could be to show that he is acculturated with them. Evidence (Ellis, 1997) suggests that such formulas help the learner to develop a kind of fluency. So his social context had a great effect on the growing shape of his language.

On the pronunciation level, according to Tedova and Cenoz (2009), being a multilingual speaker is a good factor of having a good pronunciation. Bakhtyar did not have any difficulties pronouncing any sound of English as he knew four languages. Nevertheless, he used to pronounce phrases and words just like the way English do in a kind of informal way like;

That one /da wʌn/

Leaving out the /t/ sound as in words like letter, bottom, matter and so on, is another issue that he had with his pronunciation. The reason for this could be his friends and the society he lives in, because these are the only sources where he learned his L2. Therefore, by using such pronunciations, I could argued that he might be fossilized as a result of the continuous usage of such pronunciations and because of that he did not know the exact pronunciation.

Due to the shortage of space, I had to explain Bakhtyar's learning factors briefly. It seemed that one of the enhancing factors of his language leaning is his personality. The kind of intimate relationship and the interaction that he had with his English friends planted a desire of communication in him which he could improve his language by. As a result of that, his aptitude for leaning became high and he used to communicate normally. Data from observation suggests that whenBakhtyar used to communicate, he did not feel anxious or worried about his English as Ahmed used to feel. Thus, there was nothing inhibiting his language learning. As a social being, being surrounded with helpful and trustworthy friends, his motivation for learning and communication reached a high level. According to some linguists, age has an important role in acquiring an L2. Bakhtyar's age is now nearly 30 years which might be of great effect on his language development, taking the period he lived in the UK into consideration. Thus, he used to make mistakes.

5. Conclusion

Language is not only learned in the classroom, but also learned by integrating especially with the people using it, though insufficient, but useful when learned inthis way. Thus, Ahmed's aim to achieve professional goals moved away from acquiring the social language to acquiringthe academic language which is of much difficulty to him. While Bakhtyar did not seem to have serious problems in acquiring his language because he did not have to achieve anything which in turn did not create any tension in him while learning it. Learning anything in a relaxed way will be more effective than learning it with much tension and stress. Bakhtyar did not have any tension in that while Ahmed's tension was the hindrance in his language acquisition. Hispronunciation tended to be more academic than beingcolloquial like that ofBakhtyar's.

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