

Contribution of Noticing Hypothesis to Vocabulary Learning in SLA

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Abstract

As vocabulary is the basis for English language learning, huge amount of time is spent in learning and memorizing them for foreign language learners. Thus it is crucial to find an effective way to master this skill. Noticing Hypothesis, proposed by Schmidt filled this gap and guide us to a new way of learning vocabulary more effectively. This paper will give a detailed description on how this hypothesis works in vocabulary learning in second language acquisition (SLA).

Keywords

Noticing Hypothesis, Vocabulary Learning, SLA.

1. Introduction

As technology develops in the world and globalization nowadays, there is an increasing demand of communication for people from different countries with different backgrounds. More and more people are learning a second language with different aims. No matter at which level of learning a second language, or in different language context (where learners speak their mother tongue or not), or in different specialties, vocabulary plays a basic and important role in SLA. Due to the importance of vocabulary in SLA, lots of attention has been paid to it during SLA.

In EFL settings where I learn English, Vocabulary is the basis of learning a second language, especially at the start level of learning process. However, vocabulary still plays a crucial role in higher level of learning L2. Large amount of vocabulary could not only make communication more flexible and easier to understand, but also deepen the understanding of a different culture. So vocabulary stands for an important position in English language acquisition. We spend lots of time and use some strategies to learn English words no matter in class or by ourselves. During my own learning experience, I find just learning in-depth or frequent exposure to target word is not enough, noticing is necessary and it helps me learn some words.

Hence, This paper will examine the role of noticing [7] in vocabulary learning process as well as its contribution in the process of vocabulary learning [3].

This paper will start with some relevant literature and research introduction and review of Noticing Hypothesis and then try to find out how noticing works in vocabulary learning process and its facilitation in vocabulary acquisition and raise the attention of people who ignore it during word learning.

2. Brief Description of My Learning and Teaching Context

In EFL settings where I learn English vocabulary, the main way we learn words in class through a vocabulary list. English words on one side, their respective translation on the other side, we need to memorize them with some strategies. The most frequent way is repetition and rote learning. Besides this, organizing words into groups like lexical chunks could help me memorize them. However, these methods do not work all the time, some words can't stay in my brain even thousands of times of exposure. Instead, noticing it and identify the differences between the new word and my existing knowledge could help me understand and memorize this word.

3. Definition of Vocabulary Acquisition

What does it mean to acquire a word? Basically it means pronunciation, spelling, and meaning of a word. At a comprehensive level, it includes some more aspects, like the strength, size and depth of knowledge in our long-term memory[5]. Strength means the word you use it actively or just recognize it passively. Size is easy to understand, it means the quantity of words recognized and represented in long-term memory. Depth includes more information, it refers to elaboration, specification and structure[1].

4. A Critical Review of Research Conducted on Noticing Hypothesis

This section first briefly introduced background of Noticing Hypothesis, then give a description of it, after that, some supportive evidence is given that shows noticing hypothesis is necessary in L2 learning and it could help L2 learners to identify differences between the given input and their own performances so as to facilitate their L2 learning process. In the end of this section, a brief discussion has been carried out of critics about noticing.

4.1 Background of Noticing Hypothesis

Before 1980's, research in SLA mainly focused on theories of unconscious learning like Universal Grammar and Behaviorism. The origin of noticing hypothesis came from Schmidt's own experience of learning Portuguese and his observation of English learning experience of a Japanese learner named Wes who migrated to US at his 30's[8]. Through these observation, Schmidt proposed that input can not become intake unless it has been noticed [8] which is known as noticing hypothesis.

4.2 Noticing Hypothesis and its supporters

The central view of Noticing Hypothesis is that noticing is supposed to be necessary when turning input into intake [8]. In Schmidt's noticing hypothesis [8], he believes that noticing could help L2 learners to distinguish forms from meanings through registering linguistic features with given input, thus L2 learners could identify the differences between the given input and learner's own output and finally turn this input into intake. L2 learners notice different linguistic features depending on various factors and adjust their own input, finally figured them out in output. According to [7], to distinguish with unconscious learning, he proposed conscious registration which includes intention, attention and awareness. He [7] states that noticing is conscious registration of attended specific samples of language. When learners are encountered to new message at some point during their learning process, if they could register them with some awareness before the message has gone, they could identify it and distinguish it with their own output. This would definitely promote the process of turning input into intake. What linguistic features or forms L2 learner would notice depend on some different factors, we will discuss it later.

Logan, Taylor and Etherton[7] supported this view that learners can learn more where they pay attention to and less where they do not. Ellis[3] also believed that L2 learners need to proceed in a way which is different from how they did in L1 when they fail to notice cues.

Leow [4] also gives evidence that learners who could learn most if they have a higher level of awareness (or understanding), those who learn next if they notice cues but could not to generalize and those who have no learning if they fail to notice cues. Through the observation of my own process in SLA, I find that I could learn a lot if I am interested in the area and at the same time I have some background knowledge. I could learn some if I am curious about it and exhibit great desire to know it and I would learn nearly nothing if I am not interested in it nor have any background knowledge about it.

In VanPatten's research on input processing [9], he assumed that learners could direct their attention to linguistic forms so as to increase the links between forms and meaning and finally facilitate these input turn into intake.

Input for SLA is whatever instances of L2 that learners are exposed to. Saville-Troike and Barto [6] believes that it is not available for processing unless learners actually notice it: i.e. pay attention to it. Then it can become intake.

Noticing has also been considered in the research of corrective feedback. Long [10] points out that corrective feedback is accessible through the interaction between the sender and receiver which is prompted by selective attention and productive manner of the receiver activated by input. Learners could identify the difference between input and their own output by directive attention, and then realize linguistic problems they made and reformulate their input.

In order to find out whether noticing could promote word acquisition in spoken language, a case study of German learners of Dutch has been carried out by De Vos [2]. He concludes that noticing could facilitate word learning in spoken L2. Noticing could not only be learner-generated, but also be induced by others. In this case study, noticing was induced by pushing the learners to produce output shows all participants acquire target words. Conclusion of this case study will have a positive implication on future teaching.

4.3 Challenges on Noticing Hypothesis and its critics

Since Noticing Hypothesis has been proposed by Schmidt in 1980s, various of research has been carried out, it has been tested on different L2 learners coming from different professional areas with different background in different contexts, results are either supported or criticized. One main characteristic of attention is that its capacity is limited [5]. As focal attention is limited, it is also thought to be selective. Attention could only be focused on one thing at one time and it could not last long. From this point of view, Gass[7] claimed that the strength of attention and awareness may be facilitating for some kinds of learning but not others.

Besides, it is a problem that how to measure the efficiency of noticing. There is an assumption that learners are exposed to both input processing and output processing in the same value, they can perform well. And Leow [10] reviewed it and made a conclusion which is that noticing the input may be contributing to the increase in learners' internalization, but attention alone not be enough to trigger internalization of L2 knowledge. Noticing is necessary for L2 learning [8], but the process of input turning into intake is a complicated one, noticing alone is not sufficient for SLA. Besides, it is difficult to measure the level of consciousness [7].

5. Contributors to the Degree of Noticing

What kind of input that L2 learners could notice? When could L2 learners notice input? Under what circumstance could L2 learners notice and how L2 learners notice? Schmidt[6] lists the following features as likely contributors to the degree of noticing or awareness which will occur:

Frequency of encounter with items

Perceptual saliency of items

Instructional strategies that can structure learner's attention

Individual's processing ability

Readiness to notice particular items (related to hierarchies of complexity)

Task demands, or the nature of activity the learner is engaged in

6. Individual differences in Noticing and Awareness

From the discussion above, we know that individual differences has a influence on the level of noticing and awareness. individual differences have a correlation with the rate of learning [7].

L2 learners who pay more attention to relevant linguistic feature could learn better than those who do not. He compared two different L2 learning process of adults named Wes and Julie whose first language is Japanese and English respectively. Wes has good pronunciation and communication skills of English both professionally and in daily life. However, he often makes some grammatical mistakes even he knows they are wrong, but he doesn't care about it because he does not think it has an affection on his communication. Compared to Wes, Julie achieved near native-like level of Arabic after more than 20 years of staying in Egypt. Without having any formal instruction, she got native-like pronunciation and grammatical competence, and good communication skills as well. Her choice of vocabulary is quite similar like native speakers. Compared with this two L2 learning process, why do they achieve different level of grammar? [7] believe attention to form and innate talent are two decisive factors of Julie's L2 learning success.

There are just quite a small account of people with exceptional talent, for most normal L2 learners, Godfroid[7] stated there are still likely to be differences in both inclination and abilities that affect what learners notice. Motivation may be one of major factors. Gardner [7] states that motivated learners are successful because they are active learners. He believes that motivated learners could learn more than unmotivated learners because motivated ones could pay more attention to morphosyntactic information, not just content knowledge, then they will do their best to understand the significance of noticed language and finally promoted their L2 learning.

Apart from motivation, aptitude is also a factor which could effect on the level of noticing. Robinson [7] argues that for adults, aptitude will have an effect on L2 learning under all circumstances (implicit, explicit and incidental) because the same cognitive abilities (including noticing) are involved in all learning.

7. How Noticing Works in Personal Vocabulary Learning and Process

I started to learn English when I was ten and have been learning it for couple of years. As time going on, I find noticing help me acquire some English words. And for me, words achieved through noticing could stay in my long-term memory for a longer time than those achieved by other strategies. During my learning process in class, I struggled with the meaning of some words in different context. For example, the word "solution". I got its meaning as method which could solve problem. But in class, lecturer mentioned it as solutions to the test. I was confused because we always say the answer to the question in my memory. Even though at first I can't match the meaning of this word, I noticed the difference between teacher's input and my own output, combing with the context, after a few seconds, I got the exact meaning in that context.

Noticing could take place at anytime and anyplace by focalizing on the input and output. I could learn new words anywhere. For example, I did some shopping when I came to UK in first few weeks, I wanted to buy some eggplants but I can't find price tag, just aubergine on it. After checking dictionary, I realize that English call it aubergine. This is another word I learn through noticing.

Learners may notice how native speakers use a particular form in the target language [2]. If they compare their own performance with the way which native speaker use the form of input, they would reformulate their input and make their English more native-like. For me, after I came to UK, I want to use words as native speakers do. So when I communicate with them, I notice the words they use. For example, I was in queue to wait for service in a restaurant one day, a local lady came in and asked me "Is this the queue? ", before that, I thought it was "wait in line", then I notice that and find it is different from what I knew before, wait in line is not wrong, but word "queue" is what native speaker would say in their daily life. And that is what I want to learn.

Besides, noticing help me correct some fossilized errors as well during my vocabulary learning journey. The word “vegetable” gave me an impression. I always think second letter “e” in the word sound as /i/ and I never doubt my pronunciation or meaning of this word even after I learned phonology which is one of my MA modules. One day, a video talking about syllables on YouTube caught my eye. It says that the word “vegetable” has only three syllables because second letter “e” keeps silent while pronouncing this word. At that point, I realized the difference of the way I pronounce it and correct it afterwards.

Noticing help me learn a lot during my vocabulary learning process. Not only because I am benefited from what I notice, but also the curiosity of this language motivated me as an active learner. I could pay more attention to what I am interested in and selectively attended to information which is not salient.

My husband has some problems about stressing in pronunciation because of his L1 accent. At first, I did not point this out straightly because I didn't want him feel embarrassing, I just read the right version in different occasions try to raise his attention, but he still pronounced it as he used to due to his failure of noticing it. I told him the difference face to face, and pushed him to speak out the right version, then he identified it and reformulated his output finally he got it correctly.

8. Possible Implications of Noticing on My Future Teaching

In light of above discussion, this section will try to give some suggestions to apply the research findings on my potential future teaching among young learners. In order to give the best possibilities of achieving final attainment, I need to consider some factors which will have an influence in my teaching results at first. As they are young learners, age is an important factor to consider, the level of their English must be considered as well.

As Schmidt [6] states that contributors to the level of noticing are instructional strategies that can structure learner's attention and frequency of encounter with items.

For young learners, they can not concentrate their attention on one thing for a long time, so it is important to raise their attention to specific information. Activities and games about things they are interested in could be held to raise their attention. Besides, sticking small name tags on their favorite toys or hanging on some flashing vocabulary cards in their play area may increase the frequency encounter of words.

9. Conclusion

Above discussion in this paper highlights that noticing could definitely promote L2 vocabulary learning process. The level of noticing and what information a learner could notice depends on various factors. Noticing Hypothesis also serves some positive implication on future L2 learning and teaching process.

Much research and case studies have been carried out over last three decade on Noticing Hypothesis. Some highly reputable scholars give strong evidence to support this hypothesis, but there is not a theory is perfect, more research and studies need to be done on it in the future.

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