COMPARING FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstrak

Tulisan ini membahas tentang kajian penerolehan bahasa pertama (L1) yang dibandingkan dengan penerolehan bahasa kedua (L2). Adapun aspek-aspek yang dibandingkan mencakup masukan (input), lokasi (setting), dan kiat-kiat penerolehan (learning strategies).

Hasil dari perbandingan proses penerolehan kedua jenis bahasa ini dapat dipelajari dan diterapkan pada pengajaran bahasa asing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies on language acquisition, both on first language (L1) and second language (L2), have been done in order to find out some answers concerning with language learning and teaching. In language teaching, methods and techniques have often failed to produce effective learning, however sound they may have appeared in theory. In almost every sphere of education, there has been a growing tendency to become more learner-centred. These factors have stimulated to compare L1 and L2 acquisition. By comparing L1 and L2 acquisition, it is expected the problems of language learning and teaching can be overcome. The differences and the similarities that are found in this comparison will help the teachers in choosing their way of teaching. Since it is believed that children are easier to acquire the L1, the way of teaching L2 is oriented to the way how the children acquire the L1. Therefore, in teaching L2, the teachers are expected to decrease the differences in order the situation is similar to situation where the children acquire the L1.

This topic tries to discuss how meaningful it is to compare the L1 and the L2 acquisition. And from this comparison, it is expected some implications that can be applied in teaching English to speakers of other languages. Since there are so many aspects of the language that can be compared between L1 and L2 acquisition, the discussion will be limited on three aspects only: input, setting, and learning strategies. The input will be described in the first part and the setting will be in the second part. The third part, the learning strategies will be discussed. In each discussion, some examples will be included. While the implications will be parted in each aspect discussed. The last part will be the conclusion of all the ideas of the discussion.

The comparison in this topic will concern with first language (L1) acquired by children and second language (L2) acquired by adults. The terms acquisition and learning are used interchangeably.

2. INPUT

Input serves as the raw materials that enable the language acquisition take place. Before comparing the input in L1 and L2 acquisition, it is wise if we look at the role of input in language acquisition first. Ellis (1985:127) points out that the behaviourist, the nativist and the interactionist agree that it is axiomatic that in order for second language acquisition to take place, there must be some second language data made available to the learner as input and a set of internal learner
mechanisms to accounts for how the second language data are processed. While Littlewood (1984:15) points out that in a behaviourist approach to language acquisition, the child’s environment is seen as exerting a major influence that provides both models with the child imitates and the rewards which make learning take place. This opinion is supported by Ellis (1985:128) who says that the linguistic environment is seen as the crucial determining factor. In this case, input comprises the language made available to the learners in the form of stimuli and also that which occurs as feedback. Further, Littlewood (1985) points out that in a cognitive approach, on the other hand, interest is drawn more towards the child’s internal process. This opinion is also stated by Ellis (1985) in the view of interactionist approach. From all views that have been pointed out by Ellis and Littlewood, it can be concluded that input takes a great role in language acquisition.

In the case of input in L1 acquisition, there have been a number of observational studies that are addressed to small children by mothers, other adults or older children. These studies have shown that this so-called caretaker speech has a number of characteristics which distinguish it from typical speech between adults. The following characteristics have been given by Littlewood (1984: 15), such as:

- It is generally spoken more slowly and distinctly
- It contains shorter utterances
- It is more grammatical, with fewer broken sentences or false starts
- It contains fewer complex sentences (e.g. with two clauses)
- There is less variety of tenses
- The range of vocabulary is more limited
- There is more repetition
- The speech is more closely related to the here-and-now.

This caretaker speech seems particularly well suited to help the child to learn the rules and meanings of the language. It is typically simpler in structure and more limited in vocabulary, contains more repetition, and is more closely related to immediate situation. The language is, therefore, easier, to understand and the child has more opportunity to organize and remember it. Many researchers believe that these input play an important role in helping L1 acquisition to take place.

It is probable similar that the nature of the speech addressed to L2 learners is an important factor in influencing how well they learn. It is, therefore, now often proposed that the ideal input for acquiring a L2 is similar to the input received by the child, comprehensible, relevant to their immediate interests, not too complex but not strictly graded, either. Therefore, if this kind of input is exposed to L2 learner, their natural acquisition mechanisms can automatically operate to pick out the structures for which they are ready at any given time.

This process of input could explain why children are often more successful than L2 learners in acquiring language. In the case of input in L2 acquisition, the learners are often expected to understand speech which is more complex and less concrete.

3. SETTING

Setting is a place and time where the language acquisition to take place. Hymes (1972: 60) quoted by Widdowson (1990: 182) points out that setting refers to the time and place of speech act and, in general, to physical circumstances. While Klein (1990: 85) points out that setting may simply indicate the topic on which something is going to be stated, or it may specify the place and time for what follows.

There are two types of setting, formal setting in classroom and natural setting outside classroom. As we know that L1 is acquired by child in natural setting, while L2 is generally acquired by learner in formal setting. The setting in natural situation enables the child acquires the language freely without any anxiety or pressure about failure. Therefore, the process of acquiring the language in this setting runs unconsciously.

On the other hand, the setting of L2 acquisition is generally very formal. This situation makes the learner feel depressed, uneasy, or worry. Littlewood (1984: 97) comments that in the classroom, anxiety can
hinder learning and make learners reluctant to express themselves through the L2. We should therefore avoid becoming over-critical of their performance, try to create space for each learner’s individuality to express itself, and work to produce a relaxed classroom atmosphere with co-operative relationship. This shows that the impression of formal situation in teaching L2 must be dismissed.

The implication that can be taken from both discussions, comparing the input and the setting of L1 and L2 acquisition, for teaching of English to speakers of other languages that the environment of the learning process is created as natural as possible. As Littlewood (1984: 91) suggests that almost our whole teaching effort should be directed towards creating contexts for language use in the classroom, by means such as listening and reading activities, discussion, communication tasks and role-playing. These contexts should enable learners to construct their own representation of the language in the same way as they would in a natural environment, and pass through the same sequences of development as a natural learner. Since the learner’s attention should be almost entirely on understanding and expressing meanings through language, form-oriented procedures such as conscious drilling or correction should be avoided as much as possible. One approach which tries to implement these principles in the classroom is the ‘natural approach’ of Tracy Terrel (1982).

4. LEARNING STRATEGIES

Ellis (1985: 299) gives definition about learning strategies as how learners accumulate new L2 rules and how they automatize existing ones. They include the strategies involved in the general processes of hypothesis formation and testing. These can be conscious or subconscious. Learning strategies contrast with both communication strategies and production strategies, which account for how the learners use their rule systems, rather than how they acquire them. From this definition, it could be said that strategy is a way how a learner to acquire a new language. In general, strategies as varied as overgeneralization, transfer, and simplification have all been treated under the general heading of learning strategies.

Before comparing the learning strategies in acquiring L1 and L2, it is better if we look at the errors are not seen as the signs of learning failure anymore. From both researches, in studies L1 and L2 acquisition, is found out that errors can be tolerated as the evidence of learning product that underlying process of learning. The errors that are due to transferring rules from the mother tongue or also called interlingual errors, the learners also make many errors which show that they are processing in the L2 in its own terms or always called intralingual errors, are often similar to those produced by the child in mother tongue. From this point of view, Littlewood (1984: 35) points out that the evidence that L2 learners use creative strategies which are not dissimilar from those used by L1 learners. The following discussion will try to prove the statement.

4.1 Overgeneralisation

Overgeneralisation is one of strategy that is used by the learner both in L1 and L2 acquisition. In this strategy, the learner applies his previous knowledge in learning the target language. In the case of L1 acquisition, the child tries to apply his previous knowledge to learn the new knowledge. This strategy, sometimes, causes errors because the learner, in this case, the child always avoids exceptions, he overgeneralises the rule that he has got before. For this case, Littlewood (1984: 24) gives an example using plural forms and fast tense form by a learner of English that has learnt the rule before. In the case of plural forms, the learner predicts that a noun can be made plural by adding –s, however, when he says we saw two mouse, he has overgeneralised the rule, since mouse is one of the exceptions to it. In a similar way, until he learns that come and go lie outside the scope of the general rule for forming the past tense, he is likely to produce over generalised forms such as comed and goed.

As it has been said before, that the errors themselves are the product of learning.
From the errors it can be made inferences about the process. In the case of L2 acquisition, the learner also applies the same process as children do in L1 acquisition. Further, Littlewood present some examples that show how a L2 learner makes errors in an effort to learn the new knowledge. Here are the examples that he gives. In forming progressives, the learner makes we are not knowing the rule. In this case, he overgeneralises the rule. In Who did write this book?, the learner overgeneralises the use of that for introducing a noun clause. In What is this for?, he overgeneralises the rule for inserting do in to interrogative. From the example, we can see that the errors the child and the L2 learner make errors of overgeneralisation. Therefore, it is common to use the same label that is overgeneralisation, to describe the learning strategies that they allow us to infer.

4.2 Transfer
Transfer of overgeneralisation actually are not distinct process. Both of them are the fact that the learner uses what he already knows about language, in order to make sense of new experience. In the case of overgeneralisation, it is the child’s or the learner’s previous knowledge of the first or the L2 that the child or the learner uses. In the case of transfer, the learner uses his previous mother tongue experience as a means of organising the L2 data (Littlewood, 1984: 25) and (Ellis, 1985: 30–305). If we look at this process, it seems that we can not compare the transfer in L1 and L2. What we see from this process is the role of L1 knowledge in acquiring L2. Therefore the transfer can be positive, when a L1 transfer pattern is identical with L2 on the other hand, the transfer can be negative, it a L1 transfer pattern is different from the L2 in L1, we can not find this process. Therefore, we can not make any comparison between L1 and L2 in this learning strategy aspect.

4.3 Simplification
Simplification is one of learning strategies which refers to the way of the learners in easing the burden of learning or using a second language by controlling the number of hypotheses they try to form at any one stage of development, or by omitting grammatical and or propositional elements in production (Ellis, 1985: 304).

The process of simplification in acquiring a language can be found in both L1 and L2. In L1 acquisition, the child uses telegraphic speech. He cuts the sentences and makes them short. Some examples of telegraphic speech that have been made by an English child given by Littlewood (1984: 7), such as allgone sticky is said after had washed her hand, allgone outside is said after the child had closed the door, more page is said when the child asks an adult to continue reading, and sweater chair is said the child indicates where the sweater is. The similar process also happens in L2 acquisition, the learner expresses incomplete sentences because of the lack of second language knowledge in vocabulary or in structure.

It is also caused by the influence of the learner’s knowledge in L1, for example, No understand. He champion and is man are influenced by Spanish rule. (Littlewood, 1984: 29). Therefore, simplification can be said as a from of overgeneralisation an transfer.
From comparing the learning strategies between L1 and L2 acquisition, we find out that they are nearly similar. This similarity shows that the errors caused by overgeneralisation, transfer and simplification are not a failure in acquiring the L2, but they are strategies in learning the L2. Therefore, this learning process can be tolerated in L2 acquisition (1984: 95) gives comments on this learning strategies and its implication in the classroom.

“Apart from any strategic decisions that we may consider adopting in the light our knowledge about natural sequences, this knowledge can produce changes in the way that errors are treated during classroom. Errors have traditionally been regarded as a signs of failure on part of both the teacher and the learner, and have frequently let to a sense of demoralisation on both sides. Now,
however, we realise more clearly that they represent normal stages in the development of communication skills. We also realise that it is normal for a learner to produce a form correctly in one task but make errors with it another. We can therefore adopt a less negative stance towards errors.”

Further, he suggests the implication of this learning process in the classroom that in some activities, for example, a teacher may decide to be selective in the errors which he corrects with ignoring those which do not relate to previously acquired knowledge. In other activities, the teacher may decide to avoid correcting the forms of the language at all, if this would interfere with the learners’ concentration on the communication of meanings. By this way, the learners can feel less anxiety about producing errors and teacher can respond to them with more tolerance, with beneficial effects on the classroom atmosphere and on the motivation of all concerned.

5. CONCLUSION

From discussion above, we can take a conclusion that by comparing L1 and L2 acquisition, we can know the differences and the similarities. As language teachers, especially teaching English for speaker of other language, we have to be aware of this aspect. By knowing the similarities and the differences, we can decide what way of teaching that suits to the learners.

REFERENCES