A case study of the L2 development of Mohammad – An Iraqi child who is an immigrant in Australia – considering psychological and social factors that affect the development of his L2

Amal Alasmari

Dept. of English Language and Literature,
Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University
Alkharj, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
amalalasmari[dot]uni[at]gmail[dot]com

Abstract-_This paper examines the factors that influence the second language development of Mohammed, an Iraqi child who came to Australia as a refugee one year ago. The factors that affect the linguistic development of the target which will be considered in this paper are: similarities and differences between the first language L1 and the second language L2, psychological factors, and social factors. The paper will provide sufficient background information on the learner and draw on a number of language learning theories in the discussion of each factor. The examination of the various factors revealed that the most suitable approach in teaching is content-based instruction in which the target can learn the subject matter content and at the same time develop proficiency in English language. He must also be highly encouraged to speak L2 in and outside school to achieve suitable level of fluency._

Keywords- L1, L2, English & Arabic languages development, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, Arabic learners

1. CONTEXT

Mohammed is an Arabic ten-year old boy who immigrated to Australia from Iraq as a refugee one year ago. Mohammed received EFL instruction two hours a week in Iraq. He is familiar with some basic English vocabulary, grammar, and writing. In Australia, Mohammed attends the local primary school and Arabic classes on Saturday. He lives in Sydney's western suburbs with his parents and two older sisters. He is an average student who enjoys normal activities that boys his age enjoy such as videos games and soccer. His parents completed year twelve schooling in Iraq and they highly value education and believe it is the way to success.

2. L1 AND L2

Mohammed's L1 is Arabic and it is quite different from the English language. The learner is familiar with basic English vocabulary, grammar, and writing which he learned in his EFL classes in Iraq. The relationship between the learner's L1 and L2 can be explored by focusing on the following aspects.

3. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Some researchers argue that if similarities between L1 and L2 exist, it will positively influence L2 development and that L1 serves as a cognitive resource in the learning of L2 (Swain & Lapkin 2005, cited in Forman 2010). For

example, Schachter (1974) in his study of the use of relative clauses by four groups of students with different L1 backgrounds, Arabs, Persians, Japanese and Chinese, found that the Persian and the Arabic learners used far more relative clauses than Japanese and Chinese learners did. Schachter explains that the Arabic and Persian learners already have such structures in their native languages whereas Japanese and Chinese learners are unfamiliar with these structures and tried to avoid using them. On the other hand, other researchers believe that differences between L1 and L2 negatively impact L2 development. Gass (1984) found that Spanish speakers were able to perform significantly better than Arabic speakers on a vocabulary test and this is due to the fact that the nature of Spanish language is close to English while Arabic is quite different. Listed above are two instances of similarities and differences between Arabic and English languages that might facilitate or delay Mohammed's L2 development.

4. L1 AND L2 CULTURES

In learning a second language, the learners cannot be isolated from their first languages and from their own cultures. However, L1 and L2 cultures may have similarities or the learner might have some knowledge of the L2 culture. It is assumed that Mohammed has some knowledge of L2 culture through the EFL classes he attended. His interest in videos and computer games which

represent youth popular culture could be another way to become familiar with L2 culture. His desire to be part of youth popular culture in Australia would positively impact his L2 development.

5. PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

There are three main psychological aspects that would influence the learner's L2 development.

5.1 Age

Mohammed's age, which is ten years old, is an important factor that should be considered in examining his L2 development. According to Patkowski (1980, cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2007, p.69), second language learners can definitely achieve full native-like mastery of L2 only if they began learning before the age of fifteen. Dörnyei (2009) also examines the effect of age on the development of L2 and argues that learning L2 at a younger age is better only if it occurs in naturalistic contexts in which rich interactions with a variety of native speakers exist. In addition, Dörnyei points out that the naturalistic second language acquisition contexts are provided by the school experience for the immigrant children who start primary school at a young age in the new country. In regard to Mohammed, being ten years old when arrived to Australia and attending the local primary school would positively influence his L2 development.

5.2 Motivation

Dörnyei (2005b, cited in Ortega 2009) points out that most motivated learners have strong intentions to invest efforts to learn the L2 and they also develop positive attitudes towards the L2 speakers and culture, as well as showing general interest in learning foreign languages. According to Lightbown & Spada (2007), motivation can be defined in terms of two factors: learners' communicative needs and their attitudes towards the second language community. In the case of Mohammed, experiencing insecurity due to the war in his original country might be viewed as a negative influence on his motivation. However, becoming a refugee in Australia represents an opportunity for Mohammed to have a secure environment to grow up, thus such opportunity represents strong motivation for him to be successful in learning the L2 and have a positive attitude towards the L2 community. The necessity to communicate with his peers and teachers in the local school is another motivation for acquiring the L2. Moreover, the fact that Mohammed's parents value education highly might be another motive for him to succeed in learning English.

5.3 Personality

Personality characteristics can contribute to second language learning. From the information provided on the learner, it appears that the learner has specific characteristics that could facilitate his learning of the L2. The learner is described as talkative and that he prefers experiment and discovery. Considering these characteristics, this learner might be described as an extroverted person who prefers to interact with others in the learning environment. Lightbown & Spada (2007, p.60) state that it is widely argued that an extroverted person is well suited to language learning. However, the authors claim that this argument is not always supported by evidence from the research. Brown (2006) also discusses learners' characteristics and learning styles and describes the learner who usually responds immediately and does not need time to reflect, as an impulsive person. Brown claims that impulsive people are often fast learners, yet they might not be as accurate as reflective learners. The author states that within the stages of SLA impulsive learners tend to move from one stage to another faster than reflective learners.

5.4 Social factors

Environment and identity are two main issues that could influence the learner's L2 development.

5.5 Environment

The environment the L2 learner is situated in has significant influence on his L2 development. In fact, some researchers such as Stevens (1999, cited in Dörnyei 2009) believe that language learning is a social process and it requires social interaction to occur. Norton and Toohey (2001) also emphasize the importance of community practices and the way the structuring of such practices facilitates or constrains learners' access to the linguistic resources in these communities. The authors, in their studies of L2 learners -- particularly a Polish girl aged five -- found that the success of this child is somewhat determined by the structure of the practices in her classroom as her participation in English language activities was encouraged and scaffolded. For Mohammed, the nature of the practices in the school environment tends to facilitate access to linguistic resources.

5.6 Identity

Identity is seen as an important social aspect in L2 development. The L2 learner's identity is associated with his/her culture and the change in the social environment he/she is experiencing. According to Toohey (2000, cited in Lightbown & Spada 2007), learners' identities affect what they can do and how they can participate in the classroom, and consequently affect their learning. In regard to Mohammed, his cultural background, as well as the way he is positioned among his peers and in society, and whether he accepts or resists such a position could shape his identity. His identity might show preferences for the L2 culture or he might form a kind of hybrid identity in which he will be able to negotiate the social and cultural differences between L1 and L2.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the information provided on Mohammed, it would be more beneficial if his teachers adopted two main approaches in teaching. The first approach is content-based instruction in which Mohammed can learn the subject matter content and at the same time learn the language. However, learners in content-based instruction might not

achieve high levels of fluency in L2 and therefore learners must be encouraged to practice the target language in and outside the class (Lightbown & Spada, 2007). For Mohammad, considering a communicative approach in addition to content-based instruction in teaching would positively influence his L2 development because a communicative approach focuses on the listening and production of L2. Also, from the learner's characteristics it appears that he is probably a visual learner and therefore would benefit from a visual representation of information. Mohammed's parents could contribute to the development of his L2 by providing a rich environment for him outside the classroom to engage in social interaction either with his peers or even with his family at home.

REFERENCES

[1] Brown, H. D. 2006, *Principles of language teaching and learning*, 5th edn, Longman, NY.

[2] Dörnyei, Z. 2009, *The psychology of second language acquisition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

[3] Forman, R. 2010, 'Ten principles of bilingual pedagogy', in A. Mahboob (ed.), *The NNEST Lens: Non-Native Speakers in TESOL*, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, pp. 54-86.

[4] Gass, S. 1984, 'Language transfer and language universals', *Language Learning*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 115-131.

[5] Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. 2007, *How languages are learned*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

[6] Norton, B. & Toohey, K. 2001, 'Changing perspectives on good language learners', *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 307-322.

[7] Ortega, L. 2009, *Understanding second language acquisition*, Hodder Education, London.

[8] Schachter, J. 1974, 'An error in error analysis', *Language Learning*, vol. 24, pp. 205-214.