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PROVIDING GRADES AND FEEDBACK TO SECOND LANGUAGE STUDENTS: SUPPLEMENT 1

(This handout is intended for those who are more interested in more in-depth understanding of the second language acquisition process. It first acknowledges the wide range of theories in second language research and introduces the focus of this handout---the psycholinguistic theories. It then discusses the acquisition of mental grammar---including a note on the distinction between mental and prescriptive grammar and the stages of mental grammar development---and the construction of mental lexicon for second language learners. It ends with some recommendation of the encouraged instructor attitude towards second language errors)

Theories on Second Language Acquisition

Many theories attempt to explain the second language acquisition (SLA) process, and there is little consensus among scholars concerning the best or "correct" theory. Nevertheless, each of the competing theories holds similar implications for writing instructors who work with L2 (second language) students. Namely, instructors should be aware of the need to provide authentic language models, sufficient scaffolding, and contextualized instruction of grammatical features and vocabulary items. While these pedagogical recommendations can be justified in a variety of both sociocultural and psycholinguistic ways, only the implications of the psycholinguistic (learner-internal) theories will be considered here.

When thinking about specific strategies for providing feedback and grades on the work of L2 writers, it is helpful to familiarize yourself with two key concepts found in psycholinguistic theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). In familiarizing yourself with these concepts, you will begin to understand how certain structures of the brain most likely affect multilingual students' use of the L2. These key concepts are 1) the construction of the mental grammar and 2) the construction of the lexicon. Each will be addressed below.

1) Mental grammar refers to the language-use rules that are stored in a speaker's head. "Mental grammar" is not the same as the grammar taught in school and contained in reference works. The grammar that we learn in school or look up in reference works is known as "Prescriptive Grammar." The rules of prescriptive grammar for any given language may or may not conform to the rules of mental grammar that govern speakers' use of that language. Examples of prescriptive grammar rules in English include the following:

> Never split an infinitive.
> Don't end a sentence with a preposition.

The prescriptive rule "never split an infinitive" does not conform to the rules of mental grammar for English. The prescriptive rule regarding word order in a declarative sentence does conform to the rules of mental grammar for English.

Prescriptive grammar is constructed and codified either intentionally or by default through the actions or language-use patterns of social, political, or cultural leaders in any given language community. Mental grammar is constructed internally and subconsciously by individuals through exposure to and interaction with the target language (TL). The process of constructing a mental grammar appears to

work as follows:

a) when a language learner is exposed to and interacts with the language(s) used in his or her environment, he or she subconsciously derives information about the structure and use of the language(s). Note that the term language learner can refer either to a child learning his or her native language (L1) or to a person of any age learning an additional language

b) the language learner subconsciously compares the linguistic information derived from his or her environment to a body of innate linguistic knowledge known as Universal Grammar (UG)

c) once the language learner discovers rules in the UG that seem to describe the use of language in his or her environment, he or she inserts those rules into his or her developing mental grammar. The rules are tested for correctness through further observation of and interaction with the TL(s). If observation and interaction confirm that the selected rules are correct, these rules remain in the learner's mental grammar. If observation and interaction indicate that the selected rules are incorrect, these rules are returned to the storehouse of UG and the process begins again.

d) as a learner is exposed to increasing amounts of language input and continues to obtain feedback on his or her own production of language, the rules stored in his or her mental grammar undergo frequent – and sometimes drastic – changes. This explains why language learners often produce a form correctly one day, incorrectly the following day, correctly the following day, etc. He or she will continue to cycle through this pattern of correct / incorrect forms until the target rule has been fixed in his or her mental grammar. It is assumed that the learner has achieved the "end state" of the language acquisition process when the set of rules stored in his or her mental grammar closely resembles that set of rules drawn upon by a native or highly proficient adult speaker of the target language. Children learning their L1 are generally assumed to have completed the language acquisition process at the age of approximately 12. This assumption does not, of course, preclude the possibility of learning new vocabulary and new stylistic conventions.

Although linguists have attempted to describe the mental grammar rules of various standard languages, few speakers are able to articulate these rules for either the L1 or any L2s they may know.

It is important to remember that the contents of the mental grammar constrain a student's ability to recognize and self correct language-use errors. For example, if an L2 student's mental grammar does not yet contain a complete and accurate set of rules governing the word order of questions, it is likely that he or she will consistently or occasionally produce questions with a word order that seems "wrong" to a native or highly proficient speaker. The student very likely does not realize that these sentences are "wrong" and may be unable to revise them without your guidance.

It is also important to remember that the mental grammar is not the only language structure in the brain that constrains a learner's ability to recognize and self correct language-use errors. Although a learner may possess a complete and accurate set of mental grammar rules for the L2, his or her ability to recognize and self-correct language-use errors may still be constrained by the kind and amount of data stored in his or her lexicon. (See below for more information on the lexicon.) In particular, the kind and amount of data stored in a student's lexicon may affect his or her ability to self-correct errors involving the use of determiners. Determiners are words such as "a," "some," "many," "all," "my," and "the." An

understanding of when and how to use determiners is most likely encoded in the lexicon and is often the last piece of information to be acquired by a learner.

In spite of the constraints imposed by the contents of both the mental grammar and the lexicon, L2 writers are generally able to self correct language-use errors that violate the rules of prescriptive grammar. These types of errors can generally be corrected by referencing and applying the rules contained in an online or print-based list of grammar rules. For example, errors that violate the rules governing subject-verb agreement or pronoun-noun agreement can generally be self corrected by students, provided that the errors are pointed out to them and the rules for use are provided as needed.

2) The lexicon is a mental storehouse of morphemes; words; and "set phrases," such as idioms. (Morphemes are the building blocks of words. The most easily recognizable morphemes in English are prefixes, such as "re," and suffixes, such as the past-tense marker "ed.") The lexicon works in conjunction with the mental grammar to help speakers communicate in comprehensible ways. Items in the lexicon are encoded with at least the following kinds of information:

1) phonological information (i.e., how the item sounds
2) semantic information (i.e., what the item means)
3) syntactical information (i.e., what other kinds of morphemes, words, or phrases the item can combine with in what order to produce a meaningful utterance, what grammatical roles the item can play in a sentence, etc.)
4) morphological information (i.e., what forms the word takes under various circumstances)

Opinion is divided as to whether bilinguals possess a single, bilingual lexicon or multiple, language-specific lexicons. Opinion is also divided on the extent to which non-phonological and non-semantic information can be successfully encoded on L2 items in the lexicon of a bilingual speaker.

While acquisition of the lexicon has not been thoroughly researched in the field of SLA, it is generally assumed that the lexicon, much like the mental grammar, is acquired inductively through exposure to language input and feedback on language output. Direct vocabulary instruction is clearly useful in helping L2 speakers expand the lexicon, but decontextualized instruction is generally not sufficient, as such instruction rarely helps students develop the kind of syntactical and morphological knowledge that is believed to be encoded on each item in the lexicon of a native or highly proficient adult L2 speaker.

It is important to remember that a learner's ability to recognize and self-correct language-use errors may be constrained by the contents of the lexicon long after he or she has acquired a complete and accurate set of mental grammar rules (see above). For example, an L2 student whose mental grammar is complete, but whose lexicon contains a “partial entry” for the word “allure” may produce a sentence like the example given below. This example seems to indicate that the student understands the meaning of the word “allure” and has a general understanding of clause structures and word order in English, but does not possess sufficient syntactical information about the word allure to use it correctly in this context:

> “This confusion, therefore, trapped women with the idea that creepily allures PMS is such a serious problem that they really need a pill for it.”*

While the contents of the mental grammar and the lexicon are probably the two key constraints operating on a learner’s ability to recognize and self-correct language-use errors, there are other factors

that affect students' use of the L2. These factors include, but are not limited to, personality, motivation, and learning style.

Not all L2 writers are affected in the same way by the contents of the mental grammar and the lexicon or by factors such as personality. However, many L2 writers are constrained by these factors in their attempts to produce language that conforms to our expectations of "correct" academic English. Thus, it is advisable to exercise a bit of leniency in grading the work of L2 writers. It is also advisable to provide feedback that complements the SLA process, rather than penalizes students for their inability to produce "perfect" language forms.

Recommended Reading on SLA Theory

For a brief overview of information about the lexicon, see

http://www.learnlab.org/uploads/mypslc/publications/juffslexiconhandbookchapter.pdf

For an overview of information about mental grammar, see

Chapter One: Explanatory Issues in SLA *in*

M. Pienemann's 1998 *Language Processing and Second Language Development: Processability Theory,* Amsterdam: John Benjamins. This book is available electronically through Mirlyn.

OR

Chapter One: Developmental Schedules *in*

M. Pienemann and J-U Keßler's 2011 *Studying Processability Theory: An Introductory Textbook,* Amsterdam: John Benjamins. This book is available electronically through Mirlyn.

For a comprehensive introduction to the field of SLA, see

M. Saville-Troike's 2012 *Introducing Second Language Acquisition* (2nd ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This book is available for loan from the Sweetland Center for Writing.