



Learnability, Teachability Hypothesis: How Does It Work in Learner-centered and Learning-centered Instruction?

Mohammad Reza Mozayan^{1*}

¹Shahid Sadoughi University of Sciences and Health Medical Services, Yazd, Iran.

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/BJESBS/2016/21688

Editor(s):

(1) Eleni Griva, University of Western Macedonia, Greece.

Reviewers:

(1) Maria Teresa Jacinto Sarmento Pereira, Universidade do Minho, Portugal.

(2) Dare Ojo, Omonijo, Covenant University, Nigeria.

Complete Peer review History: <http://sciencedomain.org/review-history/12195>

Short Research Article

Received 29th August 2015
Accepted 23rd September 2015
Published 9th November 2015

ABSTRACT

This paper primarily poses the question whether the instruction *per se* is useful in teaching L2 or not. The different positions adopted by the researchers are presented in length, the last one of which is the teachability hypothesis. The tenets of the learnability/teachability hypothesis are presented in the following section and a brief comparison of the hypothesis with UG is also made. Later the concepts of learner-centeredness (exercising attention to the learners' needs, goals, and strategies) and learning-centeredness (viewing acquisition of the linguistic system as incidental and not intentional) are explained as well. And finally, the study discusses the application of the learnability/teachability hypothesis in the learner-centered and learning-centered paradigms.

Keywords: Learnability/teachability hypothesis; UG; learner-centeredness; learning-centeredness.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main issues in language pedagogy is whether instruction is of any help in second

language acquisition. In this regard, three different related positions can be found in literature. By differentiating between acquisition and learning and believing that 'picking up' a

*Corresponding author: E-mail: mozayan38@yahoo.com;

second language becomes possible only through minimal exposure to it, Krashen has taken a non-intervention position [1]. Moreover, there are those researchers who argue that while instruction might be necessary for second language acquisition, it does assist in rapid acquisition of L2 [2]. And finally, there are a number of scholars who take a middle position assuming that formal instruction is essential for at least *some aspects* of language [3].

The first position or the non-intervention position which has also been called the 'zero position' is in favor of abandoning formal instruction so as to support language development via a natural route [4,5]. This position maintains that language learners are unlikely to proceed more efficiently unless they are allowed to get along with the natural route of their interlanguages, that is, they would certainly learn grammar when being involved in learning how to communicate naturally [6]. Ellis furthers that according to Prabhu, "form can best be learnt when the learner's attention is focused on meaning". It is here important to note that Prabhu actually did not assert the impossibility of learning grammar through formal instruction, but he claimed that learning grammar is more effective through communicative practices. Krashen, on the contrary, believed in the teachability of grammatical competence. His position which is termed a 'non-interface position' in literature means that learning fails to contribute to acquisition in any way. Borne out, anyway, by Krashen and Prabhu, the 'zero position' entails not only a rejection of planned intervention...but also of unplanned intervention in the form of error correction" [6].

According to Ellis [6], if, however, the facilitating role of instruction is accepted, different positions have been delineated by scholars. These are as follows:

1. Interface position advocated by DeKeyser and some others acknowledges that explicit knowledge gradually becomes implicit knowledge through practicing certain structures.
2. Variability Hypothesis adopted by Ellis [6] reiterates that instruction can directly impact on the learners' ability to perform specific structures. In other words, its influence will be conspicuous when learners are performing only in planned language use, not in an unplanned one.
3. Weak interface position argues that easier internalization of the structures in the long

run can transpire through formal instruction by helping the learners to *notice* the rules.

4. Teachability hypothesis mostly ascribed to Pienemann is on the position that "instruction can only promote language acquisition if the interlanguage is close to the point when the structure to be taught is acquired in the natural setting" [7].

2. TEACHABILITY AND LEARNABILITY HYPOTHESIS

Cook comments that the teachability/learnability hypothesis is a hypothesis driven from Pienemann's *multidimensional* model which was later called the *processability* model [8].

Researchers have for long demonstrated that learners pass through a series of ordered and predictable stages in their second language development. Meisel, Clahsen and Pienemann [9], for example, have explained that learners' progress through these stages depends on their psycholinguistic processing abilities. Pienemann [7,9,10] formulated a 'teachability hypothesis' which is predicated on the psycholinguistic research in second language acquisition. On the basis of Pienemann's hypothesis, instruction should proceed in a manner to target a learner's next developmental level so as to be more effective than the one which targets features distant from the learner's current level. Those features which are subservient to instruction *at specific times* are termed 'developmental' and those which are considered to respond to instruction at just *about any time* are termed 'variational' [11].

Pienemann's processability theory was developed "to explain the well documented observation that second language learners follow 'a fairly rigid route' in their acquisition of certain grammatical structures" [12]. The implication of the notion of route is that learnability of structures becomes possible when the previous steps on this acquisitional path have been attained. Pienemann states that learners can, at any given point in time, only operate within their Hypothesis Space constrained by the processing resources they have available at that time.

Also some researchers [13] argue that learnability hypothesis refers to the idea ascribed to Pienemann in which the complexities of the linguistic structures of a second/foreign language, in terms of psychological processing, determines the learner's capacity to learn.

Psychological processing is defined as the extent to which linguistic material must be rearranged and re-ordered when semantics and surface form are mapped. It's devices are a necessary building block to move a learner from one stage to another. The implication of this is a teachability hypothesis as well, since successful learning of structures fails to transpire unless the learner has learned to produce structures belonging to the previous stage. To them [13], teachability hypothesis maintains the perspective that learner's readiness to acquire is a critical determining factor.

The corollaries of this hypothesis are as follows:

- 1) A learning process which is virtually impossible at a certain stage is not to be expected.
- 2) Introduction of the deviant forms is prohibited, and
- 3) Inclusion of structures which were not intended for production is possible in general input. [see also 14].

3. UG AND TEACHABILITY, LEARNABILITY HYPOTHESIS

By comparing UG with Teachability/Learnability hypothesis, some scholars [15] state that learnability can virtually be put within the constraints of UG. Since learners construct grammars in terms of the input together with principles of UG, providing positive evidence is central in UG. However, there are some language structures, i.e., parameters, that address input as the only source of learning. When learners have accessibility to positive evidence, resetting the parameter is provided and as a result little transfer is predicted.

White's [16] conviction is that UG, though exerting constraints on acquisition, is a theory of learning as well.

3.1 Learner-centeredness

Understanding fundamental considerations in language learning will undoubtedly assist in understanding how to teach. As Nunan [17] contends, humanism and experiential learning approaches have contributed to the emergence of some of the most crucial and influential ideas in language teaching comprising communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching, negotiated curricula and learner-centered instruction. In learner-centered

instruction, usually no single teaching method is employed. In this approach, the teacher's role shifts from provider of information to the facilitator of the learning process through various methods of teaching [18].

In contrast to structuralism which was new and scientific at its own time, the educators found that language can also be analyzed, described, and taught for expression of meaning. They identified teaching of different communicative ends for different learners being reflected in terms of the learners' needs analysis. [18].

The learner-centered instruction is applied to those approaches to language teaching founded on the conviction that learners are self-directed, responsible decision makers [19]. It actually puts the learners at the center of learning. Brown [20] contends that this approach applies to specific teaching methods as well as to curriculum development. To him this mode of teaching can be contrasted with *teacher-centered instruction* subsuming the following features:

- Learners' needs, styles, and goals are addressed through certain techniques.
- Learners' control of their own learning is provided through specific procedures (group work or strategy training, for example)
- Objectives and curricula are determined through consultation with the students and not presupposed in advance.
- Students' innovation and creativity is allowed.
- Student's sense of competence and self-worth is also enhanced.

Furthermore, some researchers [21] highlight that "the emphasis on learner-centeredness and relevance is achieved by analyzing the learners' real-world needs and interests. Their needs and interests are then organized and sequenced into a task syllabus, which by definition are a type of analytic syllabus."

Harmer [22] is also of the same perspective asserting that "[g]etting students to think for themselves is one aspect of what is often referred to as learner-centeredness". In comparing learner-centered pedagogies (Communicative Language Teaching, for example) with *language-centered approaches*, Kumaravadivelu [23] comments that both approaches assume language learning as *linear* and *additive*, however, the former adds *functions* as well as *notions* to the mode.

3.2 Learning-centeredness

The *learning-centered* approach to second/foreign language pedagogy refers to the methods that strongly focus on the student learning processes. This approach, which is applied in many communicatively-driven teaching practices worldwide and one example of which is the Natural Approach, seeks to engage learners in meaningful interaction through communicative or problem-solving activities in classroom [23,24]. As these scholars comment, Terrell was the researcher who bore some experiences on L2 pedagogy in terms of learning-centeredness and his later cooperation with Krashen contributed to the construction of the theoretical rationale for this paradigm.

Unlike language-centered and learner-centered paradigms, "in *learning-centered* approaches, language development is more *incidental* than *intentional*. That is, grammar construction can take place when learners pay attention to the process of meaning-making, even if they are not explicitly focused on the formal properties of the language" [24]. In other words, the natural, non-interventional process of language learning is attempted through this mode. Here are some other features of the paradigm:

- Language learning process is nonlinear
- Conditions that can involve L2 learners in meaningful activities in the classroom setting has to be provided
- Grammar is not focused on
- Understanding, saying, and doing are capitalized on
- High complexity of the linguistic system is viewed as important; "language cannot be neatly analyzed, explicitly explained and profitably be presented to the learners". [24].

Moreover, Ellis [2] warns against an undue instruction with a conviction that it can have a negative impact on the learners implying that one should be cautious not to generalize the whole issue. For example, if the subjects comprise young children, it is likely to predict that formal instruction may not work for them at all.

Here it is not pointless to note that important differences can be ascribed to *Natural approach* and *Natural Method*. "The Natural method is another term for what, by 1990, had become known as the Direct method" [24]. In the Natural approach, the emphasis, rather than being on

practice, is more on exposure, or input. As Richards and Rodgers further add, taking the concept of affect into account, attending to the learners' need for listening before language production, and the disposition to use written as well as other materials to supply comprehensible input are enumerated as the features of this mode.

4. APPLICATION

Since language teaching methods can all be constrained within the scope of the language-centered, learner-centered, or learning-centered paradigms, as Kumaravadivelu [23] also maintains, the role of the teacher as the facilitator of the learning process does not seem to be much easy and smooth providing he is enthusiastic enough to benefit from the Hypotheses established in educational pedagogy. A competent and qualified teacher with an adequate knowledge of the findings of the teachability/learnability hypothesis is cognizant that in the learner-centered settings in which learners are put at the center of learning, accessing the needs, styles and especially the goals of the learners must primarily be established. Here it is crucial to note that students are not often in a position to formulate and articulate their needs and goals unless they are well into a course [17].

However, as the Hypothesis asserts that instruction should address the next developmental stage of the students in the learning process, the teacher should bear the knowledge of the overall pattern of learning and does not expect, for example, the correct use by the students of *possessive 's'* before *plural 's'* as these two grammatical patterns have proved to be distant from each other in the process of learning [25]. This is not to say that because *copula 'is'*, for example, is easier to learn than the *auxiliary 'be'*, it must be learned earlier; the scholars have come to identify that "it is not necessarily true that things that are easy to use are learnt first [8]. This perspective surely puts the teacher's task on a difficult and complicated task.

As Green, Christopher, and Lam [26] also put it, teachers can manipulate the learner-centered instruction by applying activities founded in terms of teachability/learnability hypothesis to develop higher-order thinking skills as well and to encourage students to become increasingly independent and self-directed in their learning.

These researchers, however, consider discussion activities as most appropriate for advanced classes only, on the grounds that attempts for discussion have to be shunned unless students have attained relatively high levels of linguistic competence.

Also Taguchi [27] comments that specification of the sequence of some of the language features a person learns is previously established in the Learnability hypothesis. However, as Cook [8] asserts, the teacher becomes virtually disarmed in trying to sequence the grammatical morphemes especially where the class fails to be fairly homogeneous. That is, it might be unproductive to teach something to a particular learner who is not ready for it; if so, it can lead to frustration or loss of confidence, which in turn increases the learner's affective filter. Moreover, regarding the mistakes that students make in the process, Cook [8] has put it rightly saying "[t]here is an implicit tension between the pressure on students to produce well-formed sentences and the natural stages that students go through. Should learners be allowed to produce these 'mistakes' in the classroom since they are inevitable?"

Furthermore, it is not pointless to point out that for the younger students who are not endowed with ability to recognize their needs and goals, the task of curriculum development on the basis of the teachability/learnability hypothesis makes the teacher's responsibility even heavier.

Anyway, supplementing the classroom activities with *functions* and *notions* which are not highly demanding as well as providing the relevant engaging activities is essential in learner-centered paradigm. However, the point of difference between this mode and the learning-centered approach lies in the fact that for the *incidental* and not *intentional* property of learning in the latter (learning-centeredness), heavier burden is put on the shoulders of the teachers.

In this approach, no direct construction of grammar is addressed as well. Also since learning in such classes would proceed in a *nonlinear* mode, the teacher is needed to be well aware of the proceedings of the class predicated on the teachability/learnability hypothesis so as to ameliorate the conditions for involving students in meaningful language practices.

Also benefitting from spiral mode of instruction through which the teacher can provide even

more accessible communicative moments gradually and thus eschew linearity and proceed commensurate with or at least closer to the learners' interlanguage will help succumb to the tenets of the teachability/learnability hypothesis.

5. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the Processability theory (PT), instructors working in either paradigms—learner-centered/learning centered approaches in L2 pedagogy—are needed to consider the learner's next developmental stages so as to help in facilitating the process of learning. Furthermore, they are also essential to bear the knowledge of the L2 features which are subject to respond to instruction at about any time termed *variational*, and the specific features which are teachable at specific times thus termed *developmental*. Also as the PT virtually concords with the robust theory of UG, those teachers who underpin their instructional practices by the findings of this theory, may benefit greatly from its tenets in different teaching paradigms. Be that as it may, the teachers' role in learning-centered approaches appears to become even far grave, given the belief in nonlinearity of the language learning and complexity of the linguistic system.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist

REFERENCES

1. Krashen S. Second language acquisition and second language learning. Oxford: Pergamon; 1981.
2. Ellis R. Second language acquisition & language pedagogy. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters; 1992.
3. Gunter AM, Estes HT, Mintz LS. Instruction: A model approach. Boston: Pearson Education Limited; 2010.
4. Dulay H, Burt M. Should we teach children syntax? *Language Learning*, 1973;23: 245-58.
5. Krashen S. Principles and practices in second language acquisition. London: Pergamon Press; 1982.
6. Ellis R. The study of second language acquisition. Oxford: OUP; 2008.
7. Pienemann M. Learnability and syllabus construction. In Hyltenstam K, Pienemann M, (Eds). *Modelling and assessing*

- secondlanguage development. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. 1985;23–76.
8. Cook, Second language learning and language teaching. London:Arnold; 2001.
 9. Miesel J, Clahsen H, Pienemann M. On determining developmental stages in natural second language acquisition. *Studies I Second Language Acquisition*. 1981;3:109-35.
 10. Pienemann M. Is language teachable? Psycholinguistic experiments and hypotheses. *Applied Linguistics*. 1989;10: 52-79.
 11. Pienemann M. An introduction to processability theory. In Pienemann M, (Ed.). *Cross-linguistic aspects of processability theory*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 2005;1-60.
 12. Mitchell R, Myles F, Marsden E. *Second language learningtheories* (3rd ed.). London: Hodder Education; 2013.
 13. Richards JC, Schmidt R. *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. Longman: Pearson Education; 2010.
 14. Kawaguchi S. Learning Japanese as a second language: A processability perspective. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. 2012;9(2):259-261.
 15. Gass SM, Selinker L. *Second language acquisition: AnIntroductory course*. New York: Routledge; 2008.
 16. White L. On the nature of inter-language representation: Universal grammar in the second language. In Doughty C, Long M, (Eds). *The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. Malden, Mass: Blakwell; 2003.
 17. Nunan D. *Second language teaching and learning*. U. S. A.: Heinle & Heinle Publishers; 2002.
 18. Blumberg P. *Developing learner-centered teachers: A practical guide for faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 2008.
Website:[Blumberg Developing Learner Centered Teaching](#)
 19. Richards JC. Theories of teaching in language teaching. In J. C; 2002.
 20. Brown HD. *Teaching by principles: An introductory approach to language pedagogy* (3rd ed.). NY: Pearson Education; 2007.
 21. McDonough K, Chaikitmongkol W. Teachers and learners' reactions to a task-based EFL course in Thailand. *TESOL Quarterly*. 2007;41(1):107-133.
 22. Harmer J. *English language teaching*. (4th ed.). England: Pearson Education Limited; 2007.
 23. Kumaravadivelu B. *Understanding language teaching: From method to postmethod*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2006.
 24. Richards JC, Rodgers T. *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2001.
 25. Dulay H, Burt M, Krashen S. *Language two*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House; 1982.
 26. Green CF, Christopher ER, Lam J. Developing discussion skills in the ESL classroom. *ELT Journal*. 1997;51(2): 135-143.
 27. Taguchi K. Is motivation a predictor of foreign language learning? *International Education Journal*. 2006;7(4):560-569.

© 2016 Mozayan; This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Peer-review history:
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
<http://sciencedomain.org/review-history/12195>