



Multilingualism in Language Acquisition

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Abstract

This paper presents research on Multilingualism in Language Acquisition, making emphasis on how it affects the process of learning a new language in multilingual people. The article goes through many topics, such as “the nativist theory” related to the process of language acquisition, among others that help to the understanding of the conclusions. The method used to gather information was through questionnaires. To carry out the research students and teachers from the Language Department of the University of Guanajuato were asked to answer questionnaires. The results of the questionnaires of the subjects were collected and analyzed to find and show the impact of knowing other languages in the acquisition of a new one. The conclusion of this article support and states that multilingualism affects and helps in a positive way with the acquisition of a new language, also stated that language learners who know more languages have an advantage in acquiring a new one than monolingual people.

Keywords: acquisition, bilingualism, learning, theory, transfer, SLA, code-switching, trans language, code-mixing, first language, second language, third language, multilingualism, influence.

1. Introduction

This essay will examine the acquisition of a third language and how it is affected by the second and first languages. This paper will consist of six different sections, the first section shows us a bit of the literature review used for this research. The second section describes the methodology including the research question employed to carry out this research. The third section of this paper (research) explains the qualitative approach. In the fourth section, it will be found the inquiry tools and the questions used for the collection of data, the fifth section of this research included the results and the analysis and discussion of it. And finally, in the sixth and final section, the conclusion of the findings and the conclusion of all the information shown will be included.

In the last decades, some researchers, such as Schepens et al., (2016) and (2013b) in their articles “L1 and L2 Distance Effects in Learning L3 Dutch,” and in “The Effect of Linguistic Distance Across Indo-European Mother Tongues on Learning Dutch as a Second Language,” has been studying the acquisition of non-native languages and its effects on learners. These researches have also indicated that the acquisition of the L1, L2, and L3 languages are qualitatively different from one another, and according to Bardel and Falk (2016), the acquired knowledge of each language plays an important role in the acquisition of other foreign languages.

2. Literature review

In this section, the main concepts included in this research's theoretical framework will be discussed: Multilingualism, Code-mixing, The nativist Theory, mentalistic Language Acquisition Theory, and the Developmentally Moderated Transfer Hypothesis. As mentioned before, these are the main concepts, but also, some other aspects will be discussed in this article, such as

2.1 *Multilingualism*

Multilingualism is not a recent phenomenon, it has been presented since a long time ago, nowadays, this phenomenon is very common all over the world. To understand better what multilingualism is, the definition of this concept will be given. As defined by Li (2008) in "Defining Multilingualism" by Cenoz (2013), multilingualism is the ability that individual possesses to communicate in more than one language be it active or passive (through speaking, writing, listening, or reading). This phenomenon can also refer to the use of language in society.

2.2 *Code-mixing*

One of the phenomena that exist in multilingualism is code-mixing. Code mixing refers to the dominant use of a language inserted with other language elements (Salsabila et al., 2021). Code Mixing is also defined by Kridalaksana (2008) that states that code-mixing uses language parameters from one language to another, such as words, clauses, idioms, etc., to expand the variety of language.

2.3 *Code-switching*

Code-switching in difference from "code-mixing" that according to Waris (2012) is a phenomenon in multilingual communities but especially in language teaching environments. The wonders of mixing some grammatical and structural aspects with some words, phrases or sentences are called code-mixing (as cited in Waris, 2012).

2.4 *The nativist theory*

When referring to second language acquisition (SLA), it is also common to refer to some theories, such as the "nativist theory". This theory is mainly supported and represented by Chomsky and Krashen, which have belief, and states that human beings are born with the capacity or ability to learn a language, and within this capacity, some abilities or rules are possessed by humans (Bingjun, 2013, a). In this nativist theory, Chomsky also claims that in language learning there exists something called "Universal Grammar" that is located in the human brain and it allows every single human to acquire the grammar of their native language (Ezenwa-Ohaeto & Ugochukwu, 2021), UG (Universal Grammar) consist of a series of language parameters, and SLA (Second Language Acquisition) is based on the parameters of the known language (L1) to acquire another one (L2 or L3) (Bingjun, 2013, b).

2.5 *The mentalistic language acquisition theory*

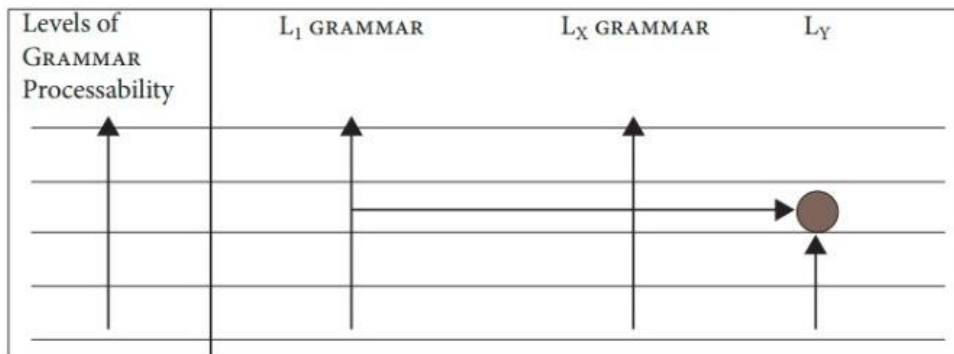
Another theory in the language acquisition is "*the mentalistic language acquisition theory*" is developed in America as a reaction to the behavioristic language learning theory. According to Wilkins, (1972), the main principle of this mentalist learning theory of language is

that “everybody can learn a language because they possess an inborn capacity which permits them to acquire a language as a normal maturational process.”

2.6 Developmentally moderated transfer hypothesis

The Developmentally Moderated Transfer Hypothesis is a component of the Processability Theory, which states that once the architecture of human language processing is given, the L2 is based on specific information that is essential for grammatical processing. (Pienemann et al., 2013)

As is shown in the next image (Figure 1) this is an example of how this method works (Pienemann et al., 2013: 80).



Note: taken from Pienemann et al., 2013: 80.

Figure 1. The Developmentally Moderated Transfer Hypothesis

As is seen in the table, “one can only transfer what is processed”, the L1 transfer can occur when the given structure can be processed, not before. This means that features of the L1 will be utilized once the developing L2 system can process them.

2.7 Interlanguage

Interlanguage is an important part of the process of acquiring or learning a new language. Interlanguage is a language theory developed by Selinker, an American linguist, where he mentioned that during the process of learning a language there exists a systematic knowledge produced by the learners, that part of the process of learning a language is called “interlanguage” (Al-khreshe, 2015). In other words, the term interlanguage refers to the language that the language learner creates but is in constant change, this language contains characteristics of their L1 and L2. The interlanguage has the characteristic of being unique, each learner develops their own.

3. Methodology

As cited in (Jackson et al., 2007), methodology refers to identifying and utilizing the best approach for addressing a theoretical or practical problem (Kaplan, 1964).

The focus of this study is on people who already perfectly speak or have an acceptable knowledge of more than two languages. The immersed participants were people from the Language Department of the University of Guanajuato. This selection was made because more people speak more than 2 (two) languages, also, there is a language school, therefore, it offers the opportunity and more possibilities to carry out this research of this problem in the acquisition of a new language.

3.1 *Participants and procedure*

The participants' age is variable, two of them are 20 years old and one of them is 58 years old. They were asked to answer a questionnaire that consist of 6 brief questions, related to their process of learning or acquiring a language. All of them learned a Romance language as their new language (L3 or L4), also all they have in common is that their L2 is English.

4. Research questions

The objective of this research is to know how the acquisition of a third language is affected by the second and first languages. Therefore, the main state or research question to take into consideration to be able to carry out this study is the following:

How do learners' first and second languages influence the acquisition of a third?

5. Qualitative approach

The qualitative inquiry aims to understand the meaning of human action by describing the inherent or essential characteristics of social objects or human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This research is going to make use of the qualitative approach because it focuses more on the people's experience, the use of this approach is going to be useful because it allows knowing the subjects' experience and the process of acquiring or learning another language that will be useful to some conclusions.

6. Inquiry tool

With the purpose of finding the most accurate and precise information about multilingualism in language acquisition, the data for this research comes from the use of tools, such as interviews and questionnaires with questions that allow the participants to share their experience and their process of acquiring a third or fourth language and how their second and first affect or help the process. The questions used to collect data and carry out this research are in the Appendix.

7. Results

In the research made collect the data three different subjects were asked to answer some questionnaires. Subject A is a 20-year-old female who speaks two languages, Spanish as her mother tongue and English as her second language, she learned Japanese and Italian. Subject B is also a 20 years old female, who speaks three languages, Spanish as her mother tongue, English and Japanese, and she is learning French as her fourth language. Subject C is a 58 years old female who speaks three languages, French as her mother tongue, English as her second, and Spanish as her third language. According to the results, the three of them had similar answers.

Two of the participants mentioned that they are learning their new language (French and Italian) because of educational requirements or future job opportunities. One of the three participants mentioned that she learned her new language because she moved to a country where that language (Spanish) is spoken. Another interesting finding in the research was that the languages involved with the three participants are just Spanish, French, and Italian, languages that are similar to each other, they are romance languages, and also all of the participants decided to study these languages because they are similar to their mother tongue (Spanish and French).

According to the findings, the three of the participants make use of their L1, L2, or even L3 in order to acquire the new one but also, the three of the participants mentioned that using their L1, L2 or even L3 facilitated the learning and acquisition of their new language.

In the following section, the results and analysis of the data collection will be analyzed and discussed by answering the research question planned to be able to carry out this research: “How do learner’s first and second languages influence the acquisition of a third?”

8. Analysis and discussion of results

Many people in the world perfectly speak or have an acceptable knowledge of more than two languages, but how are these previous languages acquired affected by the acquisition of an additional language? How do learners’ first and second languages influence the acquisition of a third?

In the results shown above, it is found that the three of the participants make use of their L1, L2, or even L3 in order to acquire the new one, but also they mentioned that there exists some interference in the new language from their previous languages. This phenomenon is called interlanguage. Interlanguage is a language theory developed by Selinker (an American linguist) where he mentioned that during the process of learning a language there exists a systematic knowledge produced by the learners, that part of the process of learning a language is called “interlanguage” (Al-khreshe, 2015). In other words, the term interlanguage refers to the language that the language learner creates but is in constant change, this language contains characteristics of their L1 and L2. The interlanguage has the characteristic of being unique, each learner develops their own. Subject B mentioned that in her process of learning her L3, existed some interference from both languages (L1 and L2) especially with grammar and the vocabulary part at the moment of producing the language, this is what Selinker referred to when he says there exists a systematic knowledge produced by the learners. Interlanguage can be seen in problems with grammar structures, for example, in a Spanish speaker who is trying to learn English, when he tries to learn some grammatical aspects such as adjectives, the learner would say “The apple red” instead of “the red apple” because the learner is mixing both languages, their first language (L1) and their second language (L2) and is creating their own.

Subject C made mentioned that she used their first (L1) and second language (L2) to acquire her third language (L3), “I often code-switch between my languages.” she mentioned. Code-switching is a common phenomenon that mainly occurs in the multilingual community that according to Kridalaksana (2008) this concept refers to the use of languages parameters from one language to another, such as words, clauses, idioms, etc., to expand the variety of language.

Subject A mentioned that she is in process of learning Italian and subject B mentioned that she is in the process of learning French, both of them have the same reason for what they are learning that language, the mother tongue of both subjects is Spanish, and they decided to learn those languages because they are similar to their first language. All of the participants mentioned that learning a language that is similar to their first language is kind of difficult but at the same time is easier than learning one totally different from their L1, this is because some pronunciation and even grammar are similar between languages, here is where the Universal Grammar (UG) takes place, Universal Grammar states that LA (Language Acquisition) is based on the parameter of the known language (L1) to acquire another one (L2 or L3) (Bingiun, 2013, c). This has a relation to the Developmentally Moderated Transfer Hypothesis, which states that one can only transfer what is processed. This will be utilized once the developing L2 system can process them. It can be said that the subjects of this study found it easier to learn a language that is similar to their mother tongue because they already have a piece of previous knowledge about the grammar or vocabulary of their mother tongue (Spanish and French), which can be transferred in order to acquire new

similar one (Spanish, Italian and French). This process of learning a new language that is similar to their native language is also related to the linguistic distance, which is defined by Schepens et al., (2016) as the measure that ranks how different the linguistic structures are between one language and another, at the lexical or morphological level. In other words, the more different the L1 (first language) is from L2 (second language) the lower the capacity of second language acquisition will be (as cited in Schepens et al., 2016b). This concept can totally explain why the three participants found it easy to learn a similar language (French, Spanish and Italian) to their mother tongue, (Spanish and French) which is Romance Language. The Romance language are modern languages that have evolved from the vulgar Latin and share a common source, such as their development, each language may be traced back to the Latin origin (Harrys & Vincent, 2003). Also, according to Bardel & Falk (2016), the acquired knowledge of each language plays an important role in the acquisition of other foreign languages, this supports the argument of Schepens about Linguistic Distance, and the Developmentally moderated Transfer Hypothesis, defined in detail in Pieneman et al., (2005), this hypothesis states that one can only transfer what is already processed.

Subject C, also mentioned that when she goes back to their country, some of her first language is missing, due to the fact that she forgot some words or common phrases, phrases that result easy to her to remember in other languages, so she uses those languages in order to be able to communicate. This phenomenon is called, code-mixing, which is defined by Kridalaksana (2008) as the use of language parameters from one language to another, such as words, clauses, idioms, etc., to expand the variety of the language.

Subject C who is 58 years old, also mentioned, that for she the process of acquiring their L3 (Spanish) was easier than learning her L2 (English), she also mentioned that she learned her L2 in elementary, secondary, and high school and that she also made some intensive summer courses, but her process of learning Spanish was different, she only took some classes in Guatemala and in Mexico, but when she totally moved to Mexico, she learned faster. According to some research, for adult language learners to learn a language can be a struggle process, but the language acquisition process may be facilitated by studying abroad (as is cited in Linck, et al., 2009) that is what happened whit subject C.

Multilingualism can also be seen as an advantage in acquiring or learning more languages because of their experiences with other languages as language learners. These multilingual people can develop learning strategies to help them to learn new ones (Cenoz, 2013). As is mentioned before, the subjects of this study made mentioned of how easy was to learn their L3 instead of their L2, because they made use of their previous knowledge in acquiring their L3.

As was mentioned before in the results, according to the findings the three of the participants make use of their L1, L2, or even L3 in order to acquire the new one. This guides us to the theory that multilingual people have more advantages over monolingual people, because of their previous experiences and knowledge, this could interfere with the “nativist theory” this theory is mainly supported and represented by Chomsky and Krashen, which have belief, and states that human beings are born with the capacity or ability to learn a language, and within this capacity, some abilities or rules are possessed by humans (Bingjun, 2013, a).

All humans have the capacity to learn a language, such as the first that humans acquire when they are in childhood, this is could be related to the Mentalistic Language Acquisition Theory, that according to Wilkins, (1972), the main principle of this mentalist learning theory of language is that “everybody can learn a language because they possess an inborn capacity which permits them to acquire a language as a normal Maturational Process.” Even though, multilingual people have more advantages in acquiring a language because they have previous experience in acquiring a new one.

As can be seen in the results, according to the findings the three of the participants make use of their L1, L2, or even L3 in order to acquire the new one, and the theories, hypotheses such as, Developmentally Moderated Transfer Hypothesis and the Linguistic Distance, and what some researches have stated such as, Bardel and Falk (2016) the acquired knowledge of each language plays an important role in the acquisition of other foreign languages, this answer the main research question “How do learner’s first and second languages influence the acquisition of a third?”

9. Conclusion

The previous research presented above was enriching and of great importance to learn more or better the lot of people’s learning distinct languages and their processes. As is already known the process of acquiring a language in each person is different, therefore the knowledge of one or more previous languages helps to acquire or even can prejudice the learning of a new one.

By answering the research question, it can also be seen or concluded that learners’ first and second language influence the acquisition of a third or fourth language. The results of this study conclude that even though, multilingualism affects in a positive way the learning or acquisition of a new language it is affected by some aspects, such as code-switching, code-mixing, and interlanguage, among others. This process of acquiring a new language can also be affected by interlanguage or some other processes or interactions of the previously learned languages that can stop a bit the process of learning. Also, it can be concluded that multilingual people possess an advantage over monolingual people, because of their previous experiences in acquiring language, as was discussed in the analysis of the results.

So, after giving these results in the article, the information obtained can also be of great help for a wide variety of people, such as, language teachers, in the order they could be able to have a better comprehension of the learning of their students and according to this information, they can develop new strategies to grant a better development in the language learning.

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Appendix

The questions utilized in the collection of the data are the following:

1. How old are you?
2. Can you describe the process of your 3rd language learning?
3. How did you learn your second language?
4. Do you use your L1 or L2 in the acquisition of your 3rd language?
5. Do you notice some interference in the acquisition of your third language?
6. Why are you learning or why did you learn your 3rd or 4th language?

