Inspirations of Language Attrition to Chinese College English Teaching and Acquisition

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Abstract. As an opposite process of language acquisition, language attrition has been studied over 30 years abroad and established a relatively complete system of theory and particular research access. In this paper, the authors mainly introduce the researches of language attrition domestic and abroad, the typology of language attrition, two theories of language attrition. In the end, the authors analyze the inspirations of language attrition to Chinese College English teaching and acquisition.

Introduction

Language attrition, the adverse process of language learning and acquisition, is defined as the loss of a language by either a speech community or an individual. Language attrition can be divided into first language attrition and second language attrition. Gardner (1985) defined foreign language attrition as the loss of foreign language ability resulting from stop of use for a long time. The study of foreign language attrition abroad has achieved a lot after it became an independent subject, while it is still in its infancy in China. The present study is of great significance for foreign language learners in China to keep their English knowledge and skills.

Review

Studies of attrition in learners’ second or foreign languages were found in the literature as early as 1930s.

Kennedy (1932) studied the retention of Latin of English speaking secondary school children. Some scholars doubted the reliability, but the results of this study showed that the best learned was most resistant to attrition, which supported the threshold hypothesis.

Leopold (1954) studied a girl, who was at the age from three to seven, spoke English and German as her dominant and declining languages alternatively. As a result, Leopold was the first to identify recency as an indicator for attrition, which meant the last learned would be the first to be forgotten. This supported the regression hypothesis.

Hansen (1999) concentrated on the negation structure used by English speakers of Japanese. The subjects lived in Japan for 2 years. The investigation was conducted 25 to 30 years after they returned to America. The results supported the regression hypothesis and the threshold hypothesis.

A review of the literature demonstrated a growing awareness and knowledge of factors affecting L1 and L2 attrition.

Compared with the studies abroad, the studies on language attrition in China are confined to some introduction to its theories. Zhong Shuneng (2003) explores the implication of language attrition to Chinese foreign language teaching. They think that there exist many factors in Chinese context that accelerate second language attrition and affect Chinese foreign language teaching. Language teachers should do their best to help learners reduce language attrition and improve the efficiency of language learning.
Ni Chuanbin (2007) analyzes the features of foreign language attrition and the factors which affect foreign language attrition. The contributions of these researchers lie in: they prove the significance and necessity to study language attrition in the aspect of theory. Their studies are helpful for Chinese scholars and foreign language teachers in China to learn basic theories of language attrition and the situation of research abroad.

**Classification of Language Acquisition**

Van els (1986) provided a useful classification of natural language attrition studies, distinguished four types of language attrition in terms of environment.

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**Loss of L1 in L1 Environment**

This type refers to the loss of the native language in L1 environment resulted from aging, brain damage and aphasia.

**Loss of L1 in L2 Environment**

This type refers to the replacement of L1 by L2 which is spoken in a community different from the original community of L1 speaker. For example, the immigrants use L2 in L2 environment most of the time, and their L1 ability decreases gradually.

**Loss of L2 in L1 Environment**

This type refers to the learners who live in L2 environment and learn L2 and then return to L1 environment and undergo a loss or serious diminution of L2 skills. It also refers to the L2 learning at school, which deteriorates after systemic learning ends. The present study belongs to this type.

**Loss of L2 in L2 Environment**

This type refers to the loss of language skills when L2 speakers living in L2 environment suffers the normal process of aging and memory loss.

**Related Theories of Language Attrition**

**Regression Hypothesis**

Regression Hypothesis is the most controversial one in the study of language attrition. In 1880s, Ribot posed the hypothesis that the latest learnt is the easiest to forget. In 1941, Jakobson introduced this hypothesis into the study of aphasia. Later this hypothesis was called as Jakobson Regression Theory. That is, the sequence of language attrition is opposite to the sequence of language acquisition. The theory includes two features of regression phenomenon: one is the regression phenomenon in time. That is, the first items lost will be the ones that are acquired last or “Last learned, first forgotten”. The core of the regression phenomenon is: the later acquired language competence has not integrated with the early acquired language system, so it is attrited first. The earliest acquired language competence has
been rooted in language system, so it is kept for long. The other is the phenomenon that results from the intensity of language input and the differences of learners’ terminal level. Some scholars call it Inverse Hypothesis. The core of this hypothesis is that the best mastered language skills are forgotten last. Language level before attrition is in inverse relation to quantity or rate of attrition. The degree of language attrition of learners with high level is less than those with low level. Neisser (1984) explains this phenomenon from the perspective of cognitive psychology: language knowledge of learners with high level has formed a schema in their brains. Their language knowledge has been integrated into the complex cognitive structure. Therefore, the learners can effectively resist attrition. Language knowledge of learners with low level exists isolatedly and has not been combined with other knowledge in cognitive structure. Therefore, learners’ language will attrite easily. Bahrick (1984) further proves the law of change of language competence by applying Regression Hypothesis: in the course of language learning, receptive ability is mastered by learners prior to productive ability. However, in the process of language attrition, productive ability attrites prior to receptive ability. That is, learners’ speaking and writing ability attrites prior to listening and reading ability. But the learners’ speaking and writing are the important symbol to judge the foreign language attrition in future. Language learners usually have the ability to cope with the receptive language skills, but lack productive skills.

Compared with Inverse Hypothesis, a lot of researches show that Regression Hypothesis is not universal attrition law. Hedgcock J. (1991) draws the following conclusion through empirical study: there is no close relationship between the sequence of language input and language maintenance after systemic learning. Hedgcock J. further points out that language learning is generally thought of as a progressive process, and the sequence of language learning can not affect language maintenance. The key factor that will affect language maintenance is the quantity of language input and reinforcement and repetition in language teaching. Therefore, the so-called time sequence is probably due to the fact that learners have no enough time to digest what they have learned, which results in attrition of language ability.

Critical Threshold Hypothesis

The Critical Threshold Hypothesis (best learned, last out) claims that there are levels of attainment above which a linguistic system is immune to attrition. Kennedy (1932) defines items on a test of Latin morphosyntax as best learned when all students answer correctly. Hedgcock (1991) identifies morphemes that are best learned by setting up rank order scores (but these are not consistent across testing times and thus fail to support the prediction). A variation on the critical threshold hypothesis is known as “the more you know, the less you lose” (Hansen, 1999).

Bahrick (1984) takes 777 foreign language learners who study Spanish as his research subjects, conducts an empirical study, in which language attrition lasts 50 years. One of the conclusions he draws is: language competence of remainder after attrition is in inverse relation to attrition of foreign language level. In six years of attrition after training, the foreign language proficiency of the beginners is similar to that of the people who are not trained in foreign language. On the contrary, if the subjects’ foreign language proficiency attain high level, most of their foreign language skills remain. Researchers make more researches and find that there is an obvious boundary among foreign language learners. There exists obvious difference in speed and degree of learners’ language attrition above and below the boundary. Neisser calls the boundary as critical threshold of language attrition. The speed of language attrition of the learners whose language proficiency does not attain the critical threshold accelerates. Once the learners’ foreign language proficiency attains the critical threshold, they will remain most of their language competence and resist attrition effectively. Linguists are being faced with significant task on how to find the measurements and standards of critical threshold. Lowe sets the critical threshold between S2/R2 and S3/R3(S and R stand for speaking and reading respectively). Clark (1988) further determines the critical threshold as Level 13 in FSI Scale.
Inspirations of Study of Language Attrition to College English Teaching and Acquisition

In China, the English learners are over 300,000,000, while most learners forget almost all they have learned because of the lack of the environment in which they use English. It becomes an important project for foreign language workers how to make English learners keep the English language ability after they finish the systematic English learning. After reviewing the theories of language attrition abroad, the author find that the study of language attrition has important inspirations to College English teaching and acquisition in China.

First, critical threshold has great inspiration to College English teaching in China. According to the current situation of College English teaching in China, the key is to set the critical threshold of College English, which will better guide College English teaching. Large quantities of researches show that as for second language acquisition, it is hard for language learners to apperceive language rules without large amount of input. The English learners must increase language input to strengthen and solidify their language level when they approach the lowest language level which the critical threshold requires. Thus, the learners’ English attrition will be the least.

Second, according to College English Curriculum Requirement (2007), the objective of College English is to develop students’ ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively. That is in the past more emphasis was put on the training of students reading skills. Now more emphasis will be put on the training of students’ comprehensive ability of listening and speaking. The traditional teaching method attached importance to the training of students receptive skills, while the new teaching method puts more emphasis on the training of students’ productive skill. According to the theory of Regression Hypothesis, in the course of language attrition, the productive skills will be attrited earlier than the receptive skill. With the new teaching method, the students’ productive skills will be strengthened and become more resistant to attrition, and the students will keep their spoken English longer. At present, only a small number of students have the chance to take the spoken test of CET. If all students have the chance to take the spoken test, more students will take spoken English seriously. The change of the content of the test will inevitably bring about the change of the students’ idea to study, and make the students spoken English above the requirements of critical threshold. Thus, the students’ spoken English attrition will be reduced.

The research of language attrition, an important topic of the research of language acquisition, has great significance. If the foreign language researchers do research from language attrition, survey the problems that exist in foreign language teaching in China, new breakthrough will appear in this field.

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References


