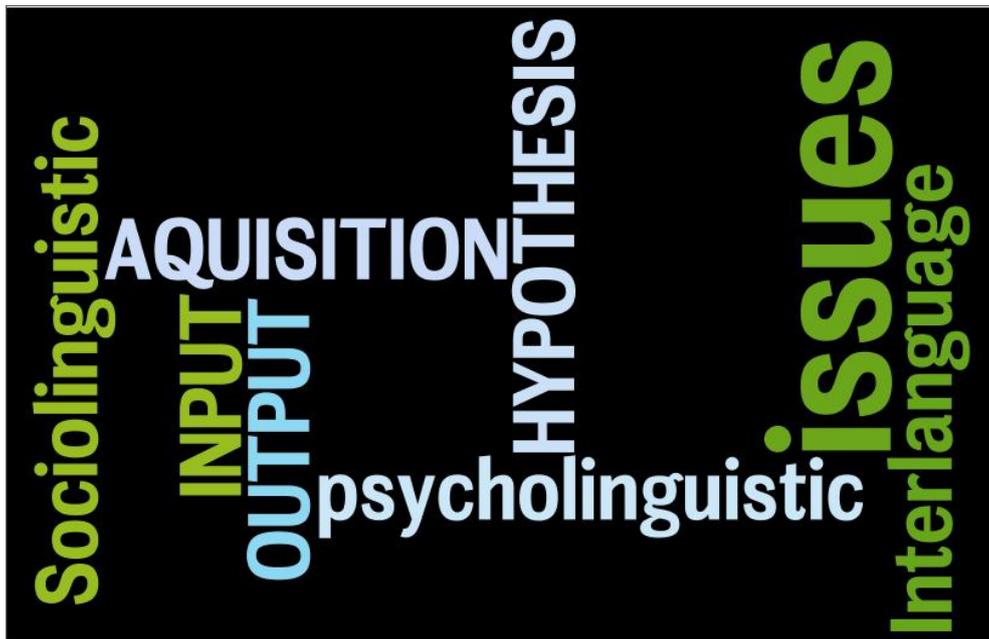# IS IT POSSIBLE TO ACHIEVE NATIVE-LIKE COMPETENCE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION?

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ABSTRACT

In this article I will present some of the most famous Second Language Acquisition Theories, based on the main focuses we should take into consideration when studying a Second Language: The Psycholinguistic Issues, the Sociolinguistic Issues and the Discourse Issues. For each of these theories I will explain the different hypothesis and

difficulties a person wanting to learn a Second Language might face, according to the several authors consulted.

From the analysis of those theories and hypothesis the author concludes that it is impossible for a non-native Second Language learner to achieve native-like competence.

En este artículo se presentan algunas de las más famosas teorías de Adquisición de un Segundo Idioma, a partir de los principales enfoques que se deben tomar en cuenta cuando se estudia un idioma: The Psycholinguistic Issues, the Sociolinguistic Issues and the Discourse Issues. Para cada una de dichas teorías se explican las diferentes hipótesis y dificultades que las personas que pretenden adquirir un segundo idioma enfrentan, según los diversos autores consultados.

A partir del análisis de dichas teorías e hipótesis la autora concluye que es casi imposible posible adquirir la competencia de una persona nativa por parte de alguien que adquiere un segundo idioma.

KEY WORDS
Language Acquisition, learning theories, native-like competence, Second Language.

PALABRAS CLAVE
Adquisición de un idioma, Teorías de aprendizaje, competencia de una persona-nativa, Segundo Idioma.

INTRODUCTION
Many are the reasons for learning a second language but in today's global world it has become a paramount necessity. The important thing is not only the reason one has to learn it but what makes a good language learner and if it is possible to achieve native-like abilities in a second language.

There are three main issues to take into consideration when studying a Second Language: The Psycholinguistic Issues, the Sociolinguistic Issues and the Discourse Issues. Any theory on SLA will fall into any of these categories. Their knowledge will

lead into the reasons to explain why a non-native learner can o cannot perform in the L2 as accurately as a native speaker.

1. PSYCHOLINGUISTIC ISSUES.

1.1. <u>Interlanguage.</u> The concept of interlanguage was proposed independently in the late 1960´s and early 1970´s by researchers such as Adjémian (1976), Corder (1967), Nemser (1971) and Selinker (1972). These researchers pointed out that L2 learner language is systematic and that the errors produced by learners do not consist of random mistakes but, rather, suggest rule-governed behavior. Although it is believed that most students follow a similar route when learning a second language, the development may vary from learner to learner. Moreover, in some learners some errors never completely disappear and this is given the name of *fossilization* by Ellis (1994).

1.2 <u>The role of L1 in L2 acquisition.</u> Under this issue we find code switching which according to the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (1985, p.92) "is a change by a speaker (or writer) from one language or language variety to another one." Crystal (1987) suggests that code, or language, switching occurs when an individual who is bilingual alternates between two languages during his/her speech with another bilingual person. L1 transfer may have interfering effects in the acquisition of the L2. *Negative transfer* or *interference* (Brown, 2000) occurs when the native language disrupts the performance in the target language leading to failure in L2 competence.

1.3. <u>Universal Grammar</u> (UG). Universal Grammar was proposed by Noam Chomsky (1965) and claims that every speaker knows a set of principles which apply to all languages and also a set of parameters that can vary from one language to another, but within certain limits. To explain failure in L2 acquisition, this issue is quite controversial. Thus, the following question arises: to what extent, if any, does UG constrain SLA? Three possibilities have been considered: the no-access hypothesis (no aspect of UG is available to the L2 learner), the partial access hypothesis (only L1 instantiated principles and parameters of UG are available to the L2 learner) and the full access hypothesis (UG constrains L2 acquisition) (Epstein, Flynn & Martohardjono 1996).

1.4 <u>The Input Hypothesis</u>. Being one of the most controversial in Second Language Acquisition was stated by Krashen and it has five key hypotheses about it:

* The Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis. This states that there are two ways of learning a second language: acquisition, which occurs subconsciously, and learning, which needs to be developed consciously through formal education.

* The Natural Order Hypothesis. Krashen believes that the evidence in this area shows that teachers should not follow any ordered pattern at all when teaching grammatical structures.

* The Monitor Hypothesis. This describes the relationships that exist between acquisition of language and learning of language. Acquisition is responsible for becoming fluent in a language while the learning process is only good for correcting or "monitoring" what has been acquired. Krashen presents three difficulties in monitoring:

    a) Not having enough time,

    b) Not being focused on what is correct, and

    c) Simply not knowing the formal rules.

* The Input Hypothesis. : the language that learners are exposed to (comprehensible input) should be a bit beyond their current competence so they can understand most of it but still be challenged to make progress. Production (speech) will emerge once the learner has built up enough comprehensible input.

* The Affective Filter Hypothesis. Low anxiety, high motivation, and self-confidence are ideal. If one of these is lacking, there would be a hindering on the learning.

Although, according to this theory, a number of drawbacks leading to learner failure could be identified if the learner does not address these interrelated hypotheses. As a result, production may never happen.

1.5 <u>The Output Hypothesis.</u> Swain (1985) states that learning takes place when encountering a gap in the linguistic knowledge of the L2. By noticing this gap the learner becomes aware of it and might be able to modify his output so that he learns something new about the language. And so, with this hypothesis Swain, claims that success in a foreign language cannot be attributed to input alone.

1.6 <u>The Information Processing Model.</u> McLaughlin (1987) mentions that learners of a second language are only able to process part of the input they

receive, and so that they can compensate for this, they acquire certain skills through what we call routinisation. He also states that through restructuring learners are able to expand their information-processing capacity and to produce important changes into their interlanguage.

      1.7 <u>The Multidimensional Model and Processing Operations</u>. Clahsen, Meisel, and Pienenmann (1983), stated that the learner's stage of acquisition of the target language is determined by two dimensions: the learner's developmental stage and the learner's social-psychological orientation. variational features are acquired at any time, or not at all, thus, explaining learners' failure.

2. SOCIOLINGUISTIC ISSUES.

2.1. <u>Accommodation Theory.</u> Giles agrees with Gardner (1979) that motivation is the primary determinant of L2 proficiency. It also accounts for learner's variable linguistic output. Giles et al. (1977, p.105) writes "people are continually modifying their speech with others so as to reduce or accentuate the linguistic (and hence) social differences between them depending on their perception of the interactive situation." Therefore, the learner will fail to achieve native like competence if he or she is negatively motivated towards the out group.

2.2. <u>Acculturation Theory.</u> Brown (1980, p.129) defined it as "the process of becoming adapted to a new culture." And another definition is "the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language." (Schumann 1978, p34).

2.3. <u>Nativisation Model.</u> It's closely related to the acculturation model. Schumann (1978). Andersen builds on Schumann's acculturation model, in particular by providing a cognitive dimension which Schumann does not consider. He, to a much greater extent, is concerned with learning processes. Andersen sees two general forces; nativisation and denativisation. Nativisation consists of assimilation while denativisation involves accommodation. It provides explanations of why L2 learners, unlike first language learners, often fail to achieve a native-like competence.

3. DISCOURSE ISSUES.

3.1. <u>Discourse Theory.</u> The main principles by Hatch (1978) are: 1) SLA follows a 'natural' route in syntactical development. 2) Native speakers adjust their speech in order to negotiate meaning with non-native speakers. 3) The conversational strategies used to negotiate meaning, and the resulting adjusted input, influence the rate and route of SLA in a number of ways, namely: a) the learner learns the grammar of the L2 in the same order as the frequency order of the various features in the input. b) the learner acquires commonly concurring formulas and then later analyses these into their component parts; c) the learner is helped to construct sentences vertically; vertical structures are the precursors of horizontal structures. 4) Thus, the 'natural' route is the result of learning how to hold conversations.

3.2 <u>Variable Competence Model.</u> The model is based on two distinctions—one of which refers to the process of language use and the product. The process of language use is to be understood in terms of the distinction between linguistic knowledge and the ability to make use of this knowledge. Widdowson (1984, p.246) refers to "knowledge of rules as a competence and to knowledge of the procedures involved in using rules to construct discourse as capacity." It follows from this view of the process of language use that the product, different types of discourse, is the result of either or both of the variable competence and variable application of procedures for actualizing knowledge in discourse. In this case, activation of L2 rules can be used in unplanned discourse. If there is no use of a variable competence no variable application of procedures for actualizing knowledge in discourse, will exist and low level in L2 proficiency will be the result.

3.3. <u>Interaction Hypothesis.</u> "The Interaction Hypothesis has taken as basic the notion that conversation is not only a medium of practice, but also the means by which learning takes place, more specifically when it comes to the negotiation of meaning." (Gass p.234). Especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the Native Speaker or more competent interlocutor facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways (Long 1996). So, if negotiation in the target language fails to occur, there will not be any second language acquisition.

3.4. <u>Creative Construction Hypothesis.</u> Proposed by Dulay and Burt (1973), it asserts that second language learners do not merely imitate the language they are exposed to,

but subconsciously construct mental grammars which allow them to produce and understand words, phrases and sentences they have not heard before. Though the formal grammar instruction is of limited utility as it fuels conscious learning rather than subconscious acquisition.

Conclusion

So after thorough explanation of the different theories, models and hypotheses of Second Language Acquisition and having given some of the reasons on each of them, we can observe either from the Psycholinguistic Issues as for the Sociolinguistic and Discourse Issues' perspectives that there are several difficulties which may account for the hindering of the acquisition of native-like competence in Second Language Acquisition.

These obstacles, which are most of the time difficult to overcome, lead us to the conclusion that it might be difficult not to say impossible to happen that a non-native speaker achieves native-like competence.

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