

Investigating English Proficiency of a Kurdish and a German ESL Learner: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper investigates the differences and similarities of two second language (L2, hereafter) learners from two different countries, Kurdistan and Germany. According to the data collection process for both of the learners, it could be noticed that each learner speaks different 'English' from the other. The learner from Germany's language is closer to the British English, while the other speaks a mixture of Englishes, using both American and British accents interchangeably. From this, we can infer that each has learned English in a totally different way. Moreover, having a mixture of different accents of English could be due to that English language is flexible to its learners' creativity and the number of its native speakers is decreasing, while the number of its non-native speakers is increasing. This certainly affects the input that English learners receive, and the outcome is going to differ from native speakers' usage.

Keyword: *English as a Second Language (ESL), English Proficiency, World Englishes, German ESL Learners, Kurdish ESL Learners*

1. Introduction

The aim is to investigate the learners' English to find out the differences and similarities between them, and the reasons behind them. For this, two adult learners are selected; one from Kurdistan, and the other from Germany. English, as with other languages, has all necessary features or essentials, which are: grammar, vocabulary, phonetics and discourse. Thus, it can be taught, learnt and then communicated with because it is a perfectly structured language, and its spread is worldwide. Crystal (2003, cited in Kayman, 2004) states that teaching English, nowadays, does not only belong to its native countries but also other nations. Furthermore, Kachru (1988) argues that people from all social classes are now keen to learn English and it is no longer restricted to the privileged urban segments of society.

Moreover, English language gained its own significant role in the last two centuries, not only because of the British Empire, but also the global need and desire in the 20th century for a lingua franca. This has been particularly true since the 1950s.

However, English has some crucial characteristics that make it hard to learn. Smith (2005) points these obstacles out as: irregularity, complexity, and ambiguity. However, English has become a dominant language due to political issues rather than its structure. Crystal (2009) states that "it has nothing to do with English language structure; it is because of the power of its speakers that makes it global."

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In addition, sharing a global language expands the way people interact with each other. To accomplish this, it primarily needs a convenient, practical and functional form which is basically language, and English has already taken the role, and its huge impact across the world proves its performance. According to Harmer (2007), English has become a lingua franca and not just British and American English, but more effectively, the one that is known as 'some forms of world English'. Furthermore, it is not only the most popular L2 for those who have learnt it, but also nearly all international debates and communications are in English, which means that it has become the language of both formal and informal communications.

Moreover, it is obvious that English has become global owing to the influence of the British Empire and some other economic factors. English has also advanced its spread and expansion across the world since the second half of the last century through technology. According to British Council (2013, p.5),

If English took hold due to the historic factors of trade, empire, military and industrial might in earlier centuries, technology has enabled it to jump the fence and to thrive without the physical contact which had previously been necessary. The growths of English, and the emergence of the internet as a global communication channel, are mutually reinforcing trends.

Consequently, the growth of English continues due to the power of its speakers, people's interest in learning it as a second language, and more importantly, as the language of science, especially in emerging technologies like computers and mobile phones which Crystal (1997) refers to as "the implementation of the Internet throughout the world since the 1990s". Additionally, English is nowadays seen as a very crucial L2 in even the former countries of the British Empire. Rushdie who is a British-Indian novelist and essayist states that;

What seems to be happening is that those people who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it (Rushdie, 1992, cited in British Council, 2013, p.5).

2. Literature Review

In this section, the perspectives of second language learning and second language acquisition are presented in order to establish a clear ground to refer to when discussing the research samples' English language.

2.1 Behaviourism perspective

Behaviourists, such as Bloomfield, 1933; Skinner, 1957; Thorndike, 1932; Watson, 1924 (Cited in Mitchell et al. 2013, p.28) believe that human beings are able to learn a second language in a mechanical way, which is basically the idea of 'Stimulus-Response-Reinforcement', 'repetition, mimicking, or parroting' and then 'correction' follows, so that behavioural learning is the process that the L2 takes. They also argue that language learning is the formation and repetition of habits and is evident when a grammatically correct utterance or sentence is formed.

Furthermore, repetition and practice of the L2 are seen as essential parts of the learning process, and 'drills' are a main part of teaching an L2. Bloomfield (1942, cited in Ellis, 1990, p.23) claims that "Language learning is over-learning. Anything else is of no use".

Moreover, behaviourism argues that L1 interference is the only important reason behind L2 learners' errors. According to Ellis (1997, p.52), in the time when behaviourism was accepted, L2 learners' errors were explained by 'L1 interference', which prevented the learners from acquiring the habits of the target language (TL). Therefore, it could either cause errors, or facilitate learning. Moreover, Ortega (2009, p.31) suggests that 'L1 interference' has been superseded by 'transfer or cross-linguistic influence' according to some recent researches. In other words, L1 interference is still considered to be one of the reasons for acquiring the L2. However, this approach failed to explain all errors of L2 learners, and the critiques were initiated by Noam Chomsky who was the pioneer of language acquisition.

2.2 Innate and natural perspectives, and cognitive theory

Behaviourism came under attack by Chomsky in 1957, who believed that human beings have an innate capacity to acquire languages. He also brought about the terms of Universal Grammar (UG) and Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Chomsky (cited in Ellis, 2008, p.557) explains that "UG consists of the set of general, highly abstract principles, which exist in the minds of individuals and are reflected in the rules of specific languages". Furthermore, Chomsky (1968, cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.116) argued that there should be a 'faculty' to trigger the UG's general principles in order for a language to be acquired.

There are different views on Chomsky's innate perspective on language acquisition. White and other linguists (2003, cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013) believe that UG provides us with a precise explanation of SLA as well. However, others like Bley-Vorman (1990) and Schachter (1990) argue that even though UG gives a good explanation of first language acquisition, it does not provide us with accurate information to explain SLA, particularly for adult and elder learners who pass the 'critical period' (Cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013, pp.104-105).

Correspondingly, Krashen's monitor theory hypothesis (1982, pp.10-32) provides us with more detailed explanations of the distinction between 'learning and acquisition' processes, and explains his hypothesis in five different main postulations, which are:

2.2.1 The Acquisition/Learning notion or hypothesis:

This means that learning a language is evident in two ways; first; 'acquisition' that exists subconsciously, and 'learning' which needs to be improved through a conscious process of education, i.e, language teaching.

2.2.2 The natural order hypothesis:

This explains that in spite of differences between different language learners, humans acquire languages in a predictable, fixed and natural order.

2.2.3 The monitor hypothesis:

In which he cites a strong relationship between language acquisition and learning. Acquisition gives us our fluency while the learning process inspects what is said and then corrects what we have acquired; therefore, 'acquisition and learning' give us both fluency and accuracy.

2.2.4 The input hypothesis:

Learners acquire a language when they receive understandable messages. This is known as 'comprehensible input' that should gradually be followed by a higher and new information of the target language in order to improve it, which is known as (i+1).

2.2.5 The affective filter hypothesis:

Learners can learn well when they are free from anxiety, are highly motivated and confident. Thus, personal attitudes are very important to the acquisition process.

Indeed, Krashen's perspective is closely related to Chomsky's, but Krashen considers acquisition to be far more important than learning. However, they both agreed that learning languages happens in the mind, i.e, cognitively.

Therefore, language pedagogy has been greatly influenced by the newly emerged notions of SLL and SLA, so that learner-centered approaches of language teaching are considered to be more useful than teacher-centered ones that help learners to acquire languages better. Besides, there is another perspective which deals with SLA differently, that is called sociocultural theory (SCT).

2.3 Sociocultural theory (SCT)

Correspondingly, the interactionism perspective of SCT brings about both of the previous notions. Ellis (1997, pp.44-45) suggests that,

Interactionist theories of L2 acquisition acknowledge the importance of both input and internal language processing. Learning takes place as a result of a complex interaction between the linguistic environment and the learner's internal mechanisms.

Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978, cited in Ellis, 1997, pp.48-49) suggests that learners are active agents in the process of learning and they attempt to become a part of the community of an L2. He also explains language acquisition in two stages of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). In the first stage, learners need an experienced and knowledgeable interlocutor such as a teacher, parent and peer to provide them with language knowledge. Second, learners reflect on the acquired knowledge in order to internalize them.

2.4 Internal and external factors affecting SLA

Some learners learn an L2 more quickly and easily than others either through self-study or at school. Thus, there are individual differences, and some are considered 'good' or 'successful', but others are not (Cook, 2008, p.135). This might be due to some difficulties that learners face. Lightbown and Spada (2013, pp.79-93) explain factors affecting L2 acquisition, that can be categorized into two parts: Internal factors, such as; "Intelligence, aptitude, learning styles, personality, learner beliefs and age", and externals, that include "Attitude and motivation".

Moreover, Brown (2007, p.8) explains that both processes of learning and teaching are firmly tied together and when we consider learner differences in teaching an L2 class, it will provide us with better outcomes.

2.5 The Acculturation Model (Acculturation Factors)

Brown (1980, cited in Ellis, 2008, p.326) simply defines acculturation as "the process of becoming adapted to a new culture". Moreover, Schuman (1986, pp.378-379) distinguishes two types of acculturation and he believes that both types are equally important for improving L2 acquisition. In the first, the learner fully integrates with the second language environment and culture, which psychologically provides a comfortable situation to make inputs become intakes. This is clearly seen with the German ESL learner (hereafter, Y), who copies British-English native speakers' accent and tries to use their words and expressions, because she thinks that this helps to be a better English speaker.

However, the second type includes learners who use the target language (TL) group as a reference. Interestingly, observing the Kurdish ESL learner (hereafter, X) for nearly two months helped to decide that he is not happy with adapting with the TL environment and views them as a reference. However, his English writing and speaking skills are quite good, but not as good as Y.

Therefore, a useful way to learn an L2 fluently is to be adaptable and flexible to the changes that occur in it and each learner should have the ability to understand the real use of L2 native words and expressions, in order for acquisition to take place.

3. Methodology

The two L2 adult learners were chosen for two important reasons. Firstly, due to their differences in culture, gender, age, and the similarities in exposure to English language and English proficiency.

Secondly, investigating those differences and similarities requires the researcher to have a friendly relationship with them in order to obtain enough real data for analysis. Fortunately, both samples are in convenient acquaintance with the researcher which facilitates the provision of detailed data. Furthermore, they live and study in the UK in order to achieve a certain degree at the University of Huddersfield, thus English language is an inevitable part of their lives in this country. Moreover, to obtain data from them, two methods are used in this study. First, through semi-structured interviews of approximately half an hour with each of them. These were recorded not only to make a comparison and spot errors, but also to have the data available whenever it was needed. According to Mackey and Gass (2005, p.173), interviews, generally, are interesting for both interviewers and interviewees because they are great opportunities for the researcher to ask for more explanation and make follow up questions. They are also good for interviewees who may not be comfortable with other methods. In addition, in the semi-structured interviews, interviewees have the freedom to add more to their answers, and getting precise and natural data is highly likely to record. Besides, observation is used on some occasions to be sure of the data that have been gathered in the interview sessions. Information about their writing skills have been gained through chatting online and their previous essays which provides the research with both their informal and formal use of language.

4. Analysis

4.1 First learner (X)

He is 27 years old, and comes from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. He speaks Kurdish fluently, and has English as an L2. He is a successful individual in education and his socializing skills are quite high. He always seems friendly, outgoing, hard-working, and has a good sense of humour. He has used English in the last two years extensively which has obviously helped him to become a very good English speaker. Also, he mentioned on many occasions that his stay in the UK for the last two years has completely changed his life in some ways, especially in English language.

4.2 English in Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The Kurdistan region of Iraq has been autonomous since 1992, and English has been intensively introduced after the collapse of Saddam in 2003 and the Americanization of the country. Therefore, Iraqis, including Kurds, have concentrated on learning English in order to broaden their global horizons and, more importantly, to get better jobs (IREX, 2012). Moreover, Gunter (2003, pp.123-124) explains that Kurdish language is not only different from English, but also from most European languages. Therefore, learning English is seen as a challenging and difficult task in Kurdistan. However, Klaus (2007) who was a lecturer at one of the region's universities states that there are many very good and native-like English speakers in the region, although those learners have never travelled to English speaking countries. Thus, we can infer that, even though the two languages are very different, there is still a great opportunity to learn English very well.

4.3 Second Learner (Y)

She is 29 years old, and comes from Germany. German is her mother tongue, and English is her second language. She is also very friendly and outgoing. She described herself as a quiet, attentive and punctual, and always keen to speak English slowly in order to avoid mistakes.

4.4 English in Germany

To begin, Coughlan (2011) states that Germany is a very clear and important example of English language globalization because it comes first even for teaching English language courses. Moreover, Germany is hugely influenced by English language and culture, and English language learners in Germany receive an excellent education.

Thus, learning English generally seems easier, faster, and of better quality for German learners due to their early exposure to it. This is important because the learner Y said that many English words and expressions are used by Germans on a daily basis. Thus, this has helped her to be more familiar with English and has further facilitated learning English.

In addition, Swan and Smith (2001, p.37) state that because of the great similarity between English and German languages, Germans tend to learn English more quickly and easily than most other learners from other countries.

4.6 The learners' SLA process analysis

4.6.1 Behaviouristic analysis

X is a Kurdish-Sorani speaker, who on some occasions misuses singulars and plurals in English, and does not distinguish between them properly.

E.g. ²(*) *they make it as a rules*

(*) *the words that is new for me*

(*) *a real life things*

The case (X) is a dynamic learner and improves daily because of his exposure to the language. He has intensively studied English since the beginning of 2012; hence, he might still be widely influenced by his L1, which is Kurdish.

In the Kurdish-Sorani dialect, it could be said "*wakw yasayaki le akan*" which is exactly (*)*they make it as a rules*. Here, *yasa* means 'law' and has a plural connotation in the Sorani dialect, and *yak* is the indefinite articles of 'a' or 'an'. Moreover, the grammatical rule in Kurdish is '*plural noun + indefinite article*' which is the opposite in English. Therefore, it is highly likely that this negative interference will continue and might be fossilized if he does not receive enough feedback to correct it. Richards and Schmidt (2010, p.230) and Thornbury (2005, p.32) argue that 'fossilization' are incorrect features in someone's linguistic competence which may last permanently in both his/her spoken and written language, and it may be impossible to de-fossilize them. Furthermore, Thornbury (1999, p.16) makes a clear argument that providing learners with correct instructions is crucial in order not to fossilize incorrect language.

On the other hand, Y appears to have been influenced by the interference positively. Therefore, she is more fluent, comfortable and precise when speaking English. This could be due to the languages sharing a lot of phonology, vocabulary and grammar (Swan and Smith, 2001, p.37).

Therefore, 'cross-linguistic influence' might work either positively or negatively. However, it is not the same with all learners and it varies from one to another, which is one of the major criticisms that behaviourism faced. Ortega (2009, p.32) states that in some cases it is easily noticed that similarities and differences between L1 and L2 neither facilitate nor impede L2 learners.

4.6.2 Cognitive and sociocultural analysis

Although both learners have used English communicatively, X is more dependent on the grammar rules than Y, because he thinks that it makes him very accurate when speaking. Therefore, he sometimes over-generalizes some grammatical rules. For example:

² This symbol (*) denotes grammatically incorrect.

3(?) *I am not a native, and I still need the dictionary.*
 (?) *She believes in herself.*

In both of the examples, X seems unaware about *state verbs* and overuses them in a continuous form with *-ing*. Furthermore, this overgeneralization makes the sentence semantically odd, and someone with English as a L1 would never use the present continuous tense in these contexts. However, it is still comprehensible but not proper and fluent.

On the other hand, the German learner Y usually omits some auxiliary verbs, particularly when asking or questioning something. Even though the examples are not grammatically correct, they both effectively convey good meaning and are sometimes even used by English native speakers. For example:

(*) *you come with me?* (Instead of saying; *do you come with me?*)
 (*) *you liked it?* (Instead of saying; *did you like it?*)

In spite of the fact that X is grammatically more correct than Y, Y seems more fluent than X. This could be due to their previous exposure to English because X has learned it mostly at school (i.e. conscious learning), unlike Y, who has been exposed to English more communicatively (i.e. subconscious learning). This proves that studying grammar rules does not always result in fluency, and overgeneralizing those rules do not always help learners to be accurate and fluent. According to Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990), "being competent in a language means a lot more than simply knowing how to form syntactically accurate sentences" (Cited in McConachy, 2009, p.116). Furthermore, Hymes (1972, cited in Cook, 2008, p.23) explains that the ability to use the language appropriately and fluently to communicate results from having a high degree of '*communicative competence*'; which is the ability to use the language communicatively. Correspondingly, Chomsky (1986) introduces a more appropriate term '*pragmatic competence*', which includes not only using the language communicatively but also other possible uses (Cited in Cook, 2008, p.23).

On the other hand, X's errors are not considered a defect of his linguistic ability, but rather are praised by Lightbown and Spada (2013, p.41) as the mental ability in producing new utterances based on L2 learner's knowledge of the L2 and his/her interpretation to it.

Moreover, some linguists define L2 learner language as 'interlanguage'. The term 'Interlanguage' was first introduced by Selinker (1972, cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2013, p.43), which describes a learner's version of L2 as distinct from either his/her L1 or L2, and it evolves when learners receive more input. For example, X's errors of misusing state verbs with *-ing* could be due to the mixed knowledge of his L1, Kurdish and L2, English. In the Kurdish, there is no distinction between state and action verbs; therefore, a learner like X might say "*I need.. or I am needing..*", regardless of whether they are state or action verbs. While Y has a slightly different difficulty but with *modal verbs*, when using them interchangeably can sometimes affect the message she wanted to convey. For example:

(*) *Maybe you invite David?* (Instead of saying; *Would you invite David?*)
 (*) *He will know.* (Instead of saying; *He might know.*)

Moreover, Y says she mostly tries to correct herself when making mistakes about modal verbs in order to communicate effectively. On the other hand, X said that, "*I rarely try to correct myself when speaking English because this makes me to be a good communicator*". Interestingly, this contradicts Krashen's view (1982, p.15) on SLA. While, he (1982, p.19) also believes that there is a chance of monitoring over-users to acquire an L2.

³ This symbol (?) denotes semantically odd.

Furthermore, both learners have said that they always ask their teachers and tutors to correct them or give them feedback whenever they make mistakes to avoid further errors, which then helps to internalise language knowledge. This last evidence is closely related to Vygotsky's (1978, cited in Ellis, 1997, pp.48-49) model of zone of proximal development (ZPD), in which learners initially depend on interlocutors, such as English native teachers and later reflect on the knowledge that they have acquired.

To conclude that, Y has learned English mostly through her early and continuous exposure to its native speakers in the UK and Canada, and also by being taught English at school in Germany, while on the other hand, X has only been exposed to English in the last two years, particularly at a language school in the UK and at the University where he has undertaken academic study. Therefore, Y's ability in English seems higher than X's. However, both of them are also dynamic learners who are very likely to improve daily.

Moreover, Germans start learning English at a very young age, and before the 'critical period', so that they are highly likely to acquire English language. According to the critical period hypothesis (CPH);

Animals, including humans, are genetically programmed to acquire certain kinds of knowledge and skill at specific times in life. Beyond those 'critical periods', it is either difficult or impossible to acquire those abilities (Cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2013, p.22).

In addition, Deng and Zou (2016) argue that SLA will hardly be evident after puberty and is less likely to be as successful as first language acquisition. This is, therefore, another reason behind the better English of the German case who was exposed earlier to the English language compared to the Kurdish learner.

6. Conclusions

Although SLL and SLA are two controversial fields of linguistics, it is interesting to apply them on two different adult ESL cases in order to evaluate which theory is sounder. Therefore, teachers can take advantage of errors and student strengths which will help to design better pedagogical curriculum and instructions. While interviewing the case studies, it is noticed that their errors and strengths can be analyzed by different theories and perspectives of SLL and SLA. However, one case appears to contradict Krashen's monitor hypothesis and this could be due to the fact that SLA and SLL theories and perspectives both have strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, the field evolves because of its flexibility and instability. Furthermore, one of the crucial findings of this paper is that there is a considerable correlation between cognitive and socio cultural factors which influence learners' improvement over time.

An implication of this is the possibility that to acquire a language, a learner should be exposed to the L2 from a young age. However, it is still hard to be completely sure what exactly is happening in acquiring an L2, as Ellis (2008) states that "The findings of SLA research are not sufficiently secure, clear and uncontested".

Moreover, the role of English as a global language is of paramount significance, which has hugely affected both of the learners' learning styles. X appears to have created a kind of 'interlanguage' which is clear and sometimes close to the British English, however, Y is even closer and could be addressed as a native-like learner. Finally, learning an L2 is an important subject to consider because it helps to explore another culture and society. However, the learner should be adaptable in order to internalize the changes that he/she faces in the L2.

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