

# The Relationship Between Interlanguage, Learning and Cross-Cultural Communication

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*Key Words:* interlanguage, language acquisition, culture, communication

## Introduction

Although large numbers of educators and linguists are currently involved in the study of second-language acquisition (SLA), its research history is not very long. SLA research had its beginnings in the late 1960s when early researchers first attempted, through empirical studies, to describe the characteristics of learner language. Not satisfied with merely descriptive research, many researchers soon began attempts to explain why learners made errors, why regularities appeared in their language and why their language displayed systematic change over time. They wanted to know the mental processes that second-language (L2) learners used to convert input knowledge such as the learner's employment of knowledge about her first language (L1), universal language, and general learning strategies used to acquire L2. Through such processes the learner constructs an interim language between L1 and L2.

The term used most frequently today to describe this transitional language, *interlanguage*, was created by Selinker in (1972). Interlanguage was the first significant theory which tried to explain L2 acquisition. Interlanguage refers to the language a learner has constructed at a specific point in time, 'an interlanguage'. It also refers to the series of languages that have been constructed over a period of time, 'interlanguage'. Ellis (1985 and 1989) proposed that interlanguage develops simultaneously in three phases: (1) innovation (the acquisition of new forms), (2) elaboration (the use of more complex language as the use of forms in different

contexts is discovered), and (3) revision (the adjustments of language that are made as a result of innovation and elaboration).

Another important feature of Selinker's interlanguage theory is that it distinguishes between L2 'communication strategies' and 'learning'. Communication strategies are ways in which the learner uses her linguistic resources to communicate fluently or to handle communication difficulties. Learning involves "the mechanisms that learners use to (1) notice features in the input, (2) compare these features with those that are currently part of their mental grammars or interlanguages, and (3) integrate the new features into their interlanguages." (Ellis, 1994, pp. 30). This paper will discuss interlanguage and learning strategies from a cultural perspective, focusing on Chinese learners of English.

## Interlanguage and Culture

Culture as well as linguistic ability, influences interlanguage and, therefore, communication. A study by He Ziran (1996) found that young Chinese and Japanese emigrants displayed characteristics of interlanguage. The young people themselves reported that when they spoke their native tongue, they did not actually obey the L1 cultural standard. There are two interesting examples. One is that young Chinese emigrants abroad do not use their traditional modest way to refuse invitations outwardly. While, conversely, Japanese emigrants use more direct language than they do in Japan.

Researchers have given much attention to aspects of interlanguage that cause misunderstanding and difficulty in conveying desired meaning. In general, compared to native speakers, L2 learners use more direct language when extending, accepting and rejecting invitations or suggestions. Language used by L2 learners is frequently too direct and often construed as rude by native speakers. For example, Chinese shop keepers regularly greet foreign customers with, 'What do you want?' The greeting is a common and acceptable one in the Chinese language. Although the phrase is grammatically correct in English, it is considered impolite by L1 speakers when used in that situation. L1 transfer greatly influences the interlanguage.

L2 learners frequently make interlingual identifications that result in the misuse of vocabulary. In the case of Chinese learners this is also true. Learners often equate the Chinese words, *xuānchuán*, *gǎnlǎnzhī*, and *zhōu* with the English words, 'propaganda', 'olive branch' and 'porridge'. However, both sets of words are closely related to their respective cultures and convey messages and images that are actually quite different. L1 speakers of English may address older men with whom they are not acquainted or their male superiors at work as 'Sir' (e.g. Yes, Sir.) In Hong Kong, we can often hear, 'Cheng Sir, or Zhang, Sir'. As a result, some Chinese mainland students now address their teachers in this way.

Although both Chinese and Americans teach their children to address older people respectfully, there are cultural differences in the attitudes of the addressees. Chinese believe that elderly people must be respected and treasured. As they are considered to be wise and possess valuable experience. Samovar and Porter, 1995 pp. 53) Therefore, Chinese children who see people belonging to their grandparents' generation will call them 'grandmother' or 'grandfather'. On the contrary, most Americans value youth and many feel uncomfortable when children who are unrelated to them address them as 'grandmother' or 'grandfather'. If the L2 speaker's interlanguage is lacking in cultural

input, the attempt to communicate one's real intent may fail.

Interlanguage is not always a negative factor in communication, though. In fact, it is through interlanguage that L1 and L2 speakers negotiate the meaning of words, sharing what they know to acquire mutual understanding. Language is an expression of culture and each culture is unique. Therefore, the more one knows about the target language culture, the better will she be able to understand and appreciate the language on a deeper level. Interlanguage can bring both the native speaker and L2 learner closer to the other's culture.

The term used for a human-like figure placed in fields to scare birds away from crops is called a 'scare crow' in English and a 'paper tiger' (*zhilǎohǔ*) in Chinese, reflecting each culture. Westerners call the 'west wind' a warm wind, while Chinese call a warm wind the 'east wind'. Both terms may be input features of a speaker's interlanguage that cause faulty communication. Once additional cultural knowledge is acquired and compared to the old, interlanguage adjustments can be made. The acquisition of additional linguistic knowledge enhances a speaker's linguistic skills. Similarly, new cultural input enhances the learner's understanding of the L2 culture, thereby, facilitating communication.

## Conclusion

Interlanguage is not only useful in helping the learner acquire L2 linguistic competency but is also central to achieving cultural sensitivity. In order to develop both of these aspects of L2 learning, students need to communicate with L1 and speakers. As more teachers become aware of this fact, the L2 instructional process will become more active and purposeful to the individual learner and, ultimately, to the world.

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(Receive Aug.30,2002)