

Acquiring Knowledge of Language

Kara Salazar-Panolong

From the answers on the question “What is knowledge of language?” Bierswick (1987) forwards the next question which is the “ How is this knowledge of language acquired?”.

To review, knowledge of language consists of two kinds: implicit and explicit kind of language. Implicit knowledge refers to the function that allows people to know about this knowledge of language. On the other hand, explicit knowledge refers to the grammar within a language.

Plato suggests that a knowledge of a particular language grows and matures along a course that is in part intrinsically determined, with modifications reflecting observed usage, rather in the manner of the visual system or other bodily “ organs” that develop along a course determined by genetic instructions under the triggering and shaping effects of environmental factors.

In this sense then, the knowledge of language is acquired rather than learned. The acquisition of this knowledge is affected biologically as in the intellect and also environmentally as in the social activities of the person.

On the other hand, Chomsky believes that the acquisition of knowledge of language is given by a specification of Universal Grammar (UG) along with an account of the ways in which its principles pertain to linguistic experience. The UG theory would consist of statements that are true of many or all human languages.

Maratsos (1988) as cited by Orillos (1997) enumerates some of the current universal linguistic categories under investigation by a number of different researchers. These are word

order, morphological marking, tone, agreement(e.g. of subject and verb), reduced reference (e.g. pronouns, ellipsis), nouns and noun classes, verb and verb classes, predication, negation and question formation.

On the plane then of Chomsky, knowledge of language is learned through a system of rules which in this case can be explained by the UG.

Universal Grammar constrains the form which the grammars of individual languages can take. However, it does not do this directly by providing the child with ready-made rules which he can incorporate into his grammar. Rather it sets parameters which must then be fixed according to the particular input data that the child obtains. (Orillos, 1997)

Williams (2009) further explains the acquisition of implicit and explicit knowledge. In his examples, implicit knowledge is when we listen to music and know that a note has been badly sang but we never had training in music. Explicit knowledge is exemplified when a student selects a certain theory to solve a geometric problem. He proceeded then by stating that implicit knowledge is learned or acquired through “ acquisition” and explicit knowledge is learned or acquired through “ learning” (attributing it to Krashen).

To differentiate, acquisition is the “unconscious” learning while “learning” is the conscious or formal way of acquiring the knowledge. If this is the concept to be considered, it is no wonder that there are limited ways of determining how implicit learning works. Also, since learning is considered is formal, the ways of assessment and knowing how language is learned are already stable.

The succeeding authors/ researches have attempted to explain how implicit and explicit learning takes place. However, much detail is given to implicit learning due to reason stated above.

Reber (1967) as cited by Rebuschat and Williams (2013) explained that explicit learning takes place when people become aware of the patterns to be applied in learning thus becoming intentional. Implicit learning on the other hand, is learning without intending to and unaware of the knowledge they have acquired.

And so, Rebuschat and Williams (2013) forwards that awareness as a criterion for implicit learning should be considered. Also, factors such as the aspects of L2 that can be and cannot be acquired as a result of exposure and without explicit treatments, individual differences, influence of prior knowledge and role of attention in L2 implicit learning should all be delved into.

Hulstijn (2002) strongly argues that knowledge representation is possible both in the forms of symbols and rules and in the form of networks with layers of hidden units representing knowledge in a systematic, subsymbolic way. Implicit learning is the construction of knowledge in the form of such networks. The strength of association between the network nodes changes in the beginning stages of learning with accumulating exposure, following a power law(automatization). Explicit learning is the deliberate construction of verbalizable knowledge in the form of concepts and rules.

With the arguments presented of the above people, the following model is forwarded to illustrate how one acquires the knowledge of language. The model is based from the first figure presented as an answer to the question, What is knowledge of language?

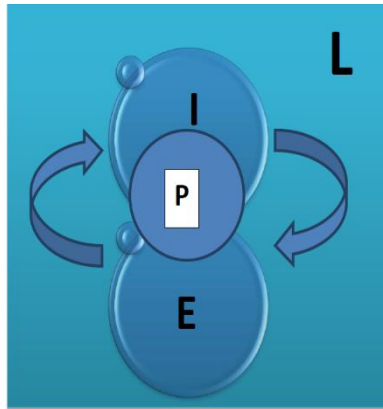


Figure 1. Knowledge of Language

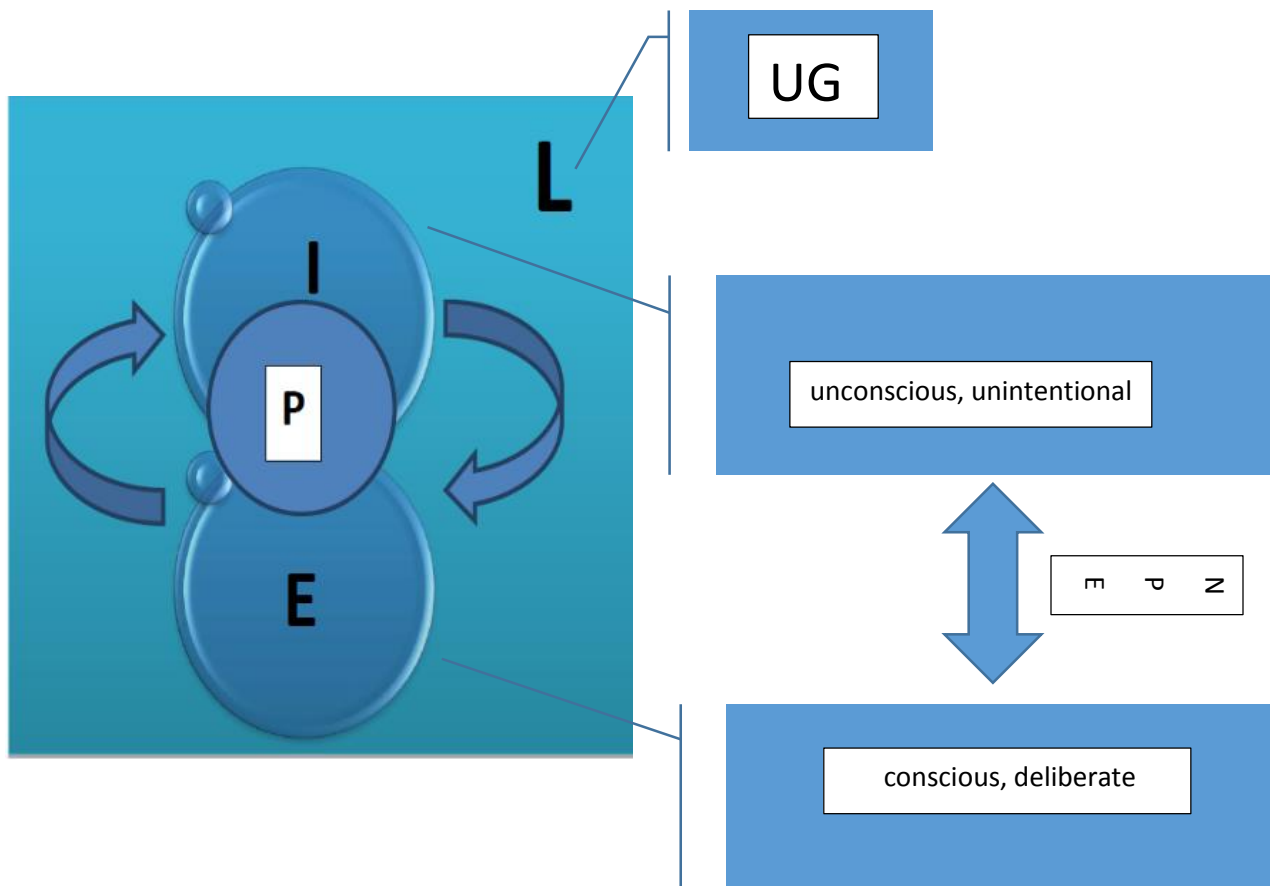


Figure 2. Acquisition of knowledge of language

In this figure, L (language) is believed to be consisting of a universal grammar (UG) whether it is an explicit or implicit knowledge. Implicit knowledge is identified to be acquired unconsciously, unintentionally while explicit knowledge is conscious and intentional learning. The arrow between these two (N, P, E) are Neurological, Psychological and Environmental realms of these concepts. Both of these knowledge are undeniably neurological processes especially for the implicit knowledge. Thus, prior knowledge, awareness and attention are considerable factors to explain the acquisition of this kind of knowledge. When a person functions, the psychological state (comprehension, individual differences)coupled with the environmental factors (school environment, type of instruction) affects how the knowledge of language is acquired.

The acquisition of the knowledge of language is complex but comprehensible. Directions for future research should be clearly established.

References:

- Chomsky, N. (1986). Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use. Praeger Publishers
- Hulstijn, J. (2002). Towards a unified account of representation, processing, and acquisition of second language knowledge. *Second Language Research*.
- Orillos, L. (1997). Language Acquisition Theories , Principles and Research. UP Open University
- Rebuschat, P. & Williams, J. (2013). Implicit Learning in Second Language Acquisition. The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics
- Williams, J (2009). The New Handbook of Second Language Acquisition. Emerald Group Publishing Limited