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The effect of learner factors on second language proficiency; an experimental study for formulating a viable theory/model of second language learning

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Abstract

This study was set out to investigate the development of the underlying linguistic system of second language learners. The main study included three case studies and three experimental studies. Case study I explored the development of the underlying knowledge of a young second language learner while case study II studied how learners in an instructional setting acquire lexical and grammatical elements. Case study III investigated the use of chunks by three selected second language learners. These case studies suggest that the development of underlying knowledge is a continuous process of the acquisition and development of lexical units, chunks, into a well-formed system of grammar.

Based on the assumption that chunks are central in acquisition, three classroom experiments were conducted using instructional procedures designed to increase salience of target chunks in the input. Experimental component I investigated the effectiveness of a teaching technique where the learners were forced to 'notice' and 'retain' chunks of language while they read a text. Both experimental and control groups were tested on the general cloze test at the end of teaching. The p value 0.000 in the Mann-Whitney U test indicated the significant difference of the median between the two groups, suggesting the effectiveness of the technique. Similarly, in experimental components II and III, the significant p value of the t-tests indicated a clear advantage of the instructional procedure. The results of these experimental components suggest that learners develop second language proficiency when they are directed to notice chunks of language in the input.

The results of these studies were used to formulate a learning model which comprises three interrelated processes: chunk acquisition process, expanding process and analysis-synthesis process.

Key words: second language, instructional/non-instructional settings, chunks, instructional procedure