Universal Grammar and Transfer in Second Language Acquisition

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Kim, Chang-Kyum. “Universal Grammar and Transfer in Second Language Acquisition.” Modern Studies in English Language & Literature 53.3 (2009): 229-252. The purpose of this study is to examine how L2 learners involve universal grammar and transfer in second language acquisition. In transfer hypothesis, Chinese and Japanese speakers of English learners in the acquisition of control structures have some preference for finite clauses rather than non-finite clauses because their native languages do not have non-finite clauses. However, universal grammarians claim that learners use UG in that Japanese-speaking learners of English produce relatively few errors in the acquisition of word order although Japanese and English have different word order. Although they have some strong claims about second language acquisition, this paper claims that UG and transfer is involved together. L2 learners use transfer whenever they are accessible, otherwise they use universal grammar. However, this paper also claims that the target language gives the most powerful influence to second language acquisition in that learners begin to learn with knowledge of the target language. Thus, when learners learn L2, they use both UG and transfer which is accessible based upon knowledge of a target language. This means that second language acquisition involves the native language, the target language and UG. In addition, UG and transfer together can be used for the effective language acquisition as one of learning strategies. (Uiduk University)

Key Words: Universal Grammar, transfer, Second Language Acquisition, Native Language, Parameter Setting, Interlanguage

1. Introduction

Hypothesists (Lado 1957, Koda 1989a, 1989b, Carson, Carell, Silbstein, Kroll and Kuehn 1990, Martohardjono and Flynn 1995) have different views of language acquisition. Universal Grammarians think that language acquisition involves universal innate principles rather than the native language. In this Universal Grammar (=UG) theory, language acquisition process is mainly guided by L2 system rather than the native language system. They claim that the UG involvement comes from the fact that two groups of language learners of unrelated language backgrounds have the similar language acquisition order. However, Transfer Hypothesists claim that language acquisition involves the use of native language information. The route of acquisition differs for the children of different language backgrounds. For example, Zobl (1982) presents that the Chinese child and the Spanish child undergo the different language processes of English article acquisition. The Chinese child initially uses a deitic determiner to approximate English article usage because the native language does not have articles, while the Spanish child does not use the deitic determiner for a stage of the acquisition of English determiners because the native language has the determiners.

Although both theorists’s claims are strong points, some scholars (Susan and Ljiljana 1994) claim that language acquisition involves UG and transfer together because both theories are observed in the language acquisition processes. However, the major issue is that we cannot distinguish between UG and transfer. In other words, some evidences showing involvement of UG look like transfer in some aspects. Thus, this paper argues how UG and transfer are involved in language acquisition and shows what evidences each hypothesists have. In addition, this paper examines the evidences of UG and transfer in the different position. This shows that UG and transfer can be one of strategies in language acquisition.