DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGES: A FUNCTIONAL AND PEDAGOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article examines the differences and similarities between first and second languages. The discussion focuses on the aspects of function and pedagogy. With respect to differences, attention is given to aspects related to language as a choice, the method of knowledge acquisition for first and second languages, and the different functions of first and second languages. For similarities, the discussion focuses on the importance of acquiring both first and second languages holistically. Although there are many differences between first and second languages, there are also similarities.

Keywords: Language Differences, Language Similarities, Language Acquisition, Language as a Choice, Language Functions

Abstrak

Makalah ini membincang perbezaan dan persamaan antara bahasa pertama dan bahasa kedua. Perbincangan tertumpu pada aspek fungsi dan pedagogi. Dari segi perbezaan, perbincangan menjurus kepada aspek kebebasan memilih oleh pengguna bahasa, cara penguasaan pengetahuan bahasa pertama dan kedua, dan perbezaan dari segi fungsi bahasa pertama dan kedua. Dari segi persamaan pula, tumpuan diberikan kepada keperluan untuk menguasai pengetahuan bahasa pertama dan kedua secara utuh. Hakikatnya, terdapat banyak perbezaan antara bahasa pertama dan kedua, namun tidak dapat dinafikan terdapat juga persamaan antara bahasa pertama dan bahasa kedua.

Kata Kunci: Perbezaan Bahasa, Persamaan Bahasa, Penguasaan Bahasa, Kepilihanan Bahasa, Fungsi Bahasa

INTRODUCTION

Language usage is a purposeful action. There are two things, which are surely true of any normal speaker/hearer of a native language. First, that he knows something, his language, and second, he can exploit that knowledge (Kean 1981, 175). To enable any language user to use language effectively, he or she must be competent in both aspects of language, that is, grammatical and sociolinguistics competence.

Language is an entity that makes it possible for a group of people to live together as a coherent society. Without language as a tool of effective communication, good relationship and cooperation are difficult to be formed and maintained in a society. Language is one of the determining factors in building and maintaining a stable society. However, languages have limitations, and different languages have different limitations. The differences in limitations are largely influenced by the status and conditions of societies or countries that use those languages. For example, in the third world or developing countries, which became independent from colonialization a few decades ago, their native or national languages may face a lot of limitations to describe or discuss the modern knowledge of sciences and technologies. In such situations, governments have to look for options to overcome or minimize the limitations of their native or national languages.

When faced with such limitations, a group of language users or a society generally has two choices on how to overcome the limitation of their first or national language. The first choice is replanning or reengineering their first language to enable it to undertake new language roles such as those related to law and judiciary, the learning of sciences and technologies, and international relations. The other choice is adopting another language as their second language which can undertake all the new language roles.

In this era of globalized world, a society or a country will usually choose the second choice, which is taking another language as their second language to overcome the limitations encountered by their first or national language. This is a more convenient choice because a chosen second language is usually a language that has proven to be an effective language. A government will determine the second language of a country based on many factors, and the most important factor is the ability of the second language to compensate any shortcomings of the native or national language.

In addition, when we adopt a language as our second language, we can have access to all forms of knowledge written in that language. In other words, we can break the knowledge barriers that allow us to have access to the achievements of the fast expanding scientific and technological researches. For example in Malaysia, we cannot translate all books on sciences and mathematics into Malay because the volume is so vast and our manpower to undertake this job is too limited.

Limitations faced by national or first languages are a universal phenomenon that happened in many countries, and many governments have discreetly determined a second language for their respective countries. In many instances, English is the chosen language. As a global language, English will enable a society to participate in almost every activity in this world without boundary.

In general, a national language functions as a unificatory language, which unifies all citizens into a cohesive society, and a second language, on the other hand, plays the role of a participatory language in an international arena. A national language will instill a sense of belonging among members of a society, while a second language will enable members of that society to participate in activities beyond their national boundaries.

Any language could have a status of being first, second or foreign. A language becomes the first language when it is acquired as a native language. Many linguists do not differentiate between second and foreign language. Any languages other than the first language become the second language. The term second and foreign language is interchangeable (Brown 1980, 130). In other words, a person could have more than one second language. To many writers, when they use the phrase 'second language learning and teaching', they refer to both concepts, second and foreign languages. When discussing this topic, Wilkins (1981, x) has this to say,

> By 'language teaching' I mean both second and foreign language teaching. I intend them to be understood as synonymous. In the absence of a term that covers both kinds of learning, I have used second-language learning in the title, but intend it to include foreign-language learning.

The discussion above illustrates that a language can be a second or a first language depending on how and when the language is acquired. This means that a language can play two roles in the same society, that is, as a second and a first language. There are some differences and similarities between first and second languages. In this article, we will describe the differences first, followed by the similarities.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGES

There are many differences between first and second languages. In the following sections, we will describe three of these differences: in terms of choice, method of acquisition and function.

1. Difference in Terms of Choice

In the acquisition of first language, a child has no choice. He will acquire his mother's or his guardian's language as his first language. A Malay child living with a Malay family and uses Malay as his language of communication in daily life will acquire Malay as his first language. A Chinese boy adopted by a Malay family, which uses Malay as their language of communication will also acquire Malay as his first language, if the adoption process had taken place when the child is still very young. He has no choice in determining which language to be his first language. It is a language that he was exposed to in his early life (Elliot 1987, 10).

The case is different with the second language. The acquisition of second language is normally motivated by certain reasons. Without definite reasons, a second language would not be learned. In this case, a learner always has a choice, that is whether he wants to learn a second language or otherwise. Second language learning needs clear reasons to motivate its learner. Brown (1980, 112) says, "… especially in third world countries where English has become an international language, second language can be acquired very successfully for instrumental reasons alone". The learning of a second language, for example English, needs clear and precise objectives, whether it is learned for instrumental reasons or for integration purposes. The learner will make the decision whether a second language is worthy of learning or not.

An individual who has decided to acquire the knowledge and proficiency of a second language has chosen to undertake a very difficult task. To explain this phenomenon, Brown (1980, 1) stresses that, "The learning of second language is a complex process, involving a seemingly infinite number of variables". Therefore, the prospective learners have to bear in mind the sacrifice they have to make in terms of effort, time and expenditure. The choice is theirs. Authorities can implement rules and regulations, but the final decision lies in the learners' minds. They are the final decision makers.

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On the contrary, the acquisition of a first language is a universal phenomenon, and not one single person was ever given the choice to choose which language to be his first language. There is no freedom of choice, and our first language is our parent or guardian language. For the first language, a child cannot choose, while for the second language we have a very wide choice to make. We can learn any languages, whether one, two or more depending on our own requirements. Learning extra language is usually a planned process that is motivated by certain needs.

2.   Difference in Terms of Method of Acquisition of Language Knowledge

In this aspect, there are clear differences between the acquisition of first and second language knowledge. *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Volume 10, 657) clearly states that, "Whereas every normal person masters his mother tongue with unconscious ease, people varies in their ability to learn additional languages, just as they vary in other intellectual activities". This statement clearly shows that knowledge of first and second languages have to be acquired in different ways.

Nobody ever needs a formal instruction or education to enable him or her to acquire his or her first language. Every normal child upon reaching the age of five will be able to speak in his or her first language fluently, regardless of his or her family background, economic status, family size, or place of living. In other words, any child who has sufficient contact with any language will acquire that language as his or her first language without any difficulty. In describing this phenomenon, Hornstein & Lightfoot (1981, 10) argues that,

> Normal children attain a fairly rich system of linguistic knowledge by 5 or 6 years of age and a mature system by puberty. This is impressive when compared with the laborious efforts of squads of adult linguists, who with only moderate success, try to characterize explicitly what people know when they know English, Dutch, Swahili; or whatever.

These processes, which result in the acquisition of knowledge of first and second languages, are different. For the second language, we normally use the term second language learning, but for first language we usually use the term the acquisition of first language knowledge. These statements do not mean to deny that these two languages can be acquired simultaneously in the early age that is before the

age of five. In this case, a child is actually acquiring two first languages. When describing this phenomenon, Brown (1980, 56) says,

> It is clear that children learning two languages simultaneously acquire them by the use of similar strategies. They are, in essence, learning two first languages, and the key to success is in distinguishing separate contexts for the two languages. These children do so with amazing dexterity.

Brown's statement shows that, if the acquisition of second language knowledge takes place in early childhood, the second language may be acquired in the similar manner to first language. But, if the process takes place in later years, the child will have to undergo a totally different process, that it, learning the language formally to be learned formally. According to Sanders (1987, 204),

> We cannot ignore the significant difference that second language learners have a first language. This is important not only in terms of the acquisition of the sounds and structures of another language, but also in social and cultural terms.

A second language is normally learned in a classroom situation with a trained teacher, and using a well-devised curriculum, with clear learning objectives. It requires much effort to enable second language learners to speak fluently. On the other hand, first language speakers will usually be fluent speakers of their respective first languages as early as five years of age.

3. Difference in Terms of Function

The learning of any second language is determined by what function the second language has to offer to its learners. It is not surprising to ask a second language learner 'Why do you learn your second language?' But the situation is different for a native speaker, as we do not ask the native speaker 'Why do you acquire your first language

In contrast to first language acquisition, second language learning is usually related to the benefits to be gained, and its benefits or functions are determined from the very beginning of the learning process. It is normally related to career building or something vocational and instrumental in nature. When discussing this topic, Strevens (1965, 7), states that, "… much foreign language teaching that lead to a well-specified end is concerned with practical language ability and in some sense vocational".

Strevens' view suggests that the efforts given for the learning of a second language knowledge and proficiency are usually balanced by the rewards to be gained. Effort and reward are usually precisely calculated. The amount of effort is usually balanced with the amount of reward to be gained.

As described above, second language learning is a well-planned process with definite objectives. As a result, the teaching and learning of a second language can be specific in nature. A second language may not be learned as a cohesive language but certain components of that language may be more focused than others. For example, certain programs may focus on the learning of grammar; some may focus on communicative ability, while other programs may focus on listening or writing skills. The skill to be focused depends on the function of the second language, and the function is concretely determined.

In contrast, when a child acquires his first language, he will acquire it holistically, which enables him to express himself in every situation for every reason. He will speak his first language grammatically and in accordance with the context of usage.

SOME SIMILARITIES BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGES

As there are differences, there are also some similarities between first and second languages. When a second or a first language user uses a language, the effects on the listeners are the same. If a first language user uses a language politely and effectively, it will have a positive effect on the receiver of the language output. The effects are the same for a second language user, that is, when he uses a second language politely and effectively, it will get the same response from the listener. In other words, we cannot use the excuse that our status as a second language user allows us to make mistakes, especially when it is related to the social aspects of that language. For example, when a Chinese uses Malay language as his second language, he has to use it in accordance with the Malay system of politeness. He cannot say to his teacher, 'Mengapa kamu menolak hadiah saya?' (*Why do you not accept my gift?*) or 'Kamu mahu ke mana?' (*Where do you want to go?*). This is because, in Malay politeness system, a student cannot address his teacher as 'kamu' (*You*). 'Kamu' is not a proper pronoun in this situation. The proper pronoun is 'Encik' (*Mr.*) or 'Puan' (*Mrs.*) or Cik (*Miss*).

From our observation, we find that grammatical mistakes are usually accepted as a normal phenomenon for second language users, but not the sociolinguistic aspects. For example, in every language there are some words that are taboo and are not allowed to be articulated publicly. Whether we are second or first language users, we have to abide by the same social rules when we speak.

From the above paragraph, it is clear that a second language program should teach the language as a complete entity, where both the linguistic and the sociolinguistic aspects are taught comprehensively. This means that besides grammatical knowledge, a learner would also be taught on how to use the second language appropriately in different contexts. In relation with this topic, Lee (1983, 3) says that, "modern linguistic science is moving away from the view that language is a system which exists over and above the communication situations".

Learning a new language is also learning a new culture because language and culture are two aspects of human life that cannot be separated. Asmah (1987, 112) explains that, "it has long been known and accepted fact that language is an index to culture. This means that language reflects the culture of its speakers – the way of life they lead as well as their physical and social environment". This statement clearly shows that cultural and linguistic aspects are two entities that have to be learned if we want to be a competent user of any language. Language never exists in a vacuum, but it always exists in a certain cultural context. In almost all language contexts there are certain patterns of language uses, and language users have to follow these patterns to enable them to be competent users.

DISCUSSION

We have to differentiate a first language from a second language because the difference is real. In many circumstances, a second language user cannot attain proficiency equivalent to the native speaker. The best they can attain is near native, but never as good as a native speaker. In the planning and teaching of a second language we must set objectives that can be achieved.

The differences between first and second languages are mainly due to the existence of an innate language acquisition device, which exist in children's minds from the moment they are born. Consequently, the acquisition of first language knowledge does not involve the learning process, but it is more of an adaptation

process. In this process, the innate universal language system is adapted to the child's first language system. In other words, the process does not start from zero, but it begins with the innate language knowledge.

In the learning of a second language, the process is the same as the learning of other knowledge and skills, such the learning of mathematics and science. The child has to start from the very beginning, learning the second language knowledge little by little. They can only acquire the listening and speaking skills after diligent practice, and they have to practise to build their new language habits, and not every one of them will succeed. Both the formal and social aspects of their second language have to be learned, and they need high motivation and positive attitude to enable them to do this great task (Sanders 1987, 204).

The differences between first and second languages also have great significance on the teaching and learning of language. First and second language learners will begin with very different basic knowledge. A first language learner, for example, has already acquired the spoken skills adequately.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we take note that there are many differences between first and second languages. A first language is acquired automatically in a natural environment without formal planning or teaching. We can say that the ability to use a first language is genetically determined. Everybody will at least acquire a language that is his first language. To acquire an extra language, determination and a well-planned learning process are needed. Without proper planning and sufficient motivation, second language learning will usually not succeed.

This article demonstrates that the status of language users is an important factor in determining the success and effectiveness of the process of acquiring the knowledge of any language. If we consider the differences between first and second languages as a determining factor, ethnic membership then should be treated as one of the important variables in the planning and implementation of any language education programs. For example in Malaysia, Malays are first language users of bahasa Melayu, and Chinese are the second language users. Both Malay and Chinese students should therefore be perceived as different groups of students with different language

status. Accordingly, teaching materials and approaches should also be different for these two groups of students.

Children are genetically prepared to acquire their first language (Wanner & Gleitman, 1982). In the process of first language knowledge, they do not start from zero, but it is more of a process of adaptation, that is adapting to the naturally existed language rules and constraints with their first language system.

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