

Attention, Awareness, and Noticing: The Role of Consciousness and the Selective Fossilization Hypothesis

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Learning a second language (L2) is a complex and variable process. Unlike first language (L1) acquisition, second language acquisition (SLA) is often marked by an interlanguage (IL) consisting of fragmentary, incomplete knowledge to varying degrees in different linguistic domains (e.g., morphosyntax, phonology, and semantics), with only occasional, piecemeal success as far as complete acquisition is concerned. Selinker (1972) was the first one in the field of SLA to use the term *fossilization* to refer to such premature stabilization of L2 deviant forms. Since then, fossilization research has remained a cornerstone of the field, constantly shedding light on and/or fueling the advances in related subareas, such as L2 learnability and teachability.

Han's (2009) timely proposition of the Selective Fossilization Hypothesis (SFH) is yet another significant contribution to the field. It posits that the relative strength and interaction of the two parameters, namely L1 markedness and L2 input robustness, and their respective subvariables of frequency and variability, work in tandem to predict the fossilizability of specific target L2 structures. It should be noted, however, that some fundamental assumptions have been made regarding certain critical notions and perspectives in SLA in order for the SFH to materialize its predictive power. A case in point is its putative assumptions with regard to the cognitive perspective of SLA.

At the core of this cognitive perspective is the role of *consciousness* in L2 learning. At first glance, it seems clear enough that consciousness only plays a minimal role as far as the fundamental assumptions of the SFH is concerned. After all, for the parameter of L1 markedness, crosslinguistic influence in the form of L1 morphosyntactic, phonological, semantic transfer and so on are largely unconscious. As for the parameter of L2 input robustness, the whole point of making L2 input robust, i.e., frequent and invariable, is to manipulate "attention," and by extension, input processing, implicitly (VanPatten, 1994), in order to facilitate the development of L2 implicit knowledge.

That being the case, the notion of *attention* or its subjective correlate of *noticing*, is not a monolithic concept. While Schmidt (2001) claims that the concept of attention is necessary for understanding the development of IL over time and variations within IL at particular points in time, it is apparent that the kind of attention he is referring to is awareness *at a very low level*. Specifically, Schmidt (1990) postulates three putative roles of consciousness in input processing, and ultimately, L2 learning: (1) conscious awareness at the level of "noticing", leading to *subliminal learning*; (2) consciousness in the form of "paying attention," which results in *incidental learning*; (3) consciousness in the form of an unconscious process of abstraction, which contributes to *implicit learning*. According to him, subliminal language learning is not quite possible; the issues of incidental learning and implicit learning, however, still warrant further empirical inquiry.

Thus, although attention alone may not be a sufficient condition for acquiring a target L2 structure, the role of detection or cognitive registration of linguistic stimuli, one of the subsystems of attention, in facilitating further processing, and eventually L2 learning, still seems

worth pursuing (Tomlin & Villa, 1994). In short, the fact that the SFH does not take a learner's internal processing perspective in arriving at predictions about the fossilizability of target L2 structures by no means implies that the concept of attention has no bearing vis-à-vis L2 instruction and learning. Rather, attention is likely to be a key consideration to factor in as the L2 instructor deals with target structures that fall within the fossilization zone. Indirect as the role of consciousness may appear in relation to the Selective Fossilization Hypothesis, it is nevertheless an important one.

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