

The Comparative Fallacy in SLA Literature

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Learners' language has been described as *transitional competence* (Corder, 1967) and *interlanguage* (Selinker, 1972), and it has been categorized as a natural language (Adjemian, 1976). This indicates that learners possess their own languages. However, the question remains whether or not learners' language has been explained and understood on its own, and not merely compared to target-language (TL) norms in the SLA literature (Cook, 1999). Bley-Vroman (1983) asserts that comparing learners' language to TL norms may preclude researchers from an understanding of the systematic nature of a learner's system, which in turn results in the *comparative fallacy*. He also warns that "[t]he comparative fallacy can have very serious effects on the validity of empirical studies in the way that it influences the interpretation and classification of data" (p. 15).

In this paper, I will discuss two studies on the efficacy of corrective feedback on rule generation from the perspective of the comparative fallacy. Considering Bley-Vroman's caution that, "any study which classifies interlanguage (IL) data according to a target language (TL) scheme or depends on the notion of obligatory context or binary choice will likely fail to illuminate the structure of the IL" (p.15), I will focus in particular on how the studies assess and analyze learners' linguistic gains and interlanguage systems. First, I will briefly summarize two studies – Carroll & Swain (1993) and Tomasello & Herron (1988) – and then discuss the studies with regard to the *comparative fallacy*.

SUMMARIES OF THE STUDIES

Carroll and Swain (1993)

In an attempt to investigate the facilitative role of negative feedback on learning grammatical generalizations, Carroll and Swain undertook an experiment with 100 adult Spanish-speaking learners of English enrolled in various low-intermediate ESL classes. The study focused on the relative effects of four different types of negative feedback on the learning of particular constraints on English dative alternation (NP V NP *to/for* and NP V NP NP). The learners were assigned to four experimental groups and one comparison group according to the type of feedback they would receive during the experimental session (e.g., explicit hypothesis rejection, explicit utterance rejection, modeling/implicit negative feedback, and indirect metalinguistic feedback). Data were collected through a training session, an experimental session, and two recall test sessions. After being exposed to the exemplars of the target form in the training session, the learners went through 48 items in two feedback and two guessing sessions with different types of feedback tailored to the group. After that, the participants' linguistic gains were assessed by means of a recall test containing the randomized 48 items, and a second recall test administered one week later. The results showed that all of the experimental groups outperformed the comparison group on both recall tests. Among the experimental groups,

the explicit hypothesis rejection group, which received the most explicit feedback, performed considerably better than the other feedback groups.

Tomasello & Herron (1988)

This study aimed to explore the relative effects of two methods for teaching exceptions to grammatical rules: correction of induced errors in Garden Path sentences, and explicit teaching of exceptions to grammatical rules. Thirty-nine college students enrolled in two sections of beginning-level French classes participated. They were randomly assigned to two groups. Each group received one teaching method (Garden Path or explicit teaching) for one semester, and then received the other teaching method the following semester. Eight target structures known as “exceptions to a rule” were randomly assigned to the two teaching conditions. The students in the Garden Path group received canonical exemplars and were encouraged to induce the rule. After that, the students were presented with the exceptions to the rule, without being told that these were exceptions. In this process, the students were induced to make errors, and the teachers immediately corrected the resulting overgeneralization errors. In the explicit rule presentation group, the students were explicitly taught the exception as an exception and expected to memorize the rules. The results of posttests indicated that the students learned the exceptions better in the Garden Path condition, and such learning was maintained throughout the semester. The study revealed the positive impact of feedback on learning exceptions by proving the benefits of drawing learners’ attention to the rule itself and the exception by providing feedback.

DISCUSSION

In this section, I will discuss (a) the limitation of employing a single TL scheme to analyze the learners’ internal systems (Bley-Vroman, 1983), and (b) the problem with accessing multicompetent L2 users’ language norms using monolingual speakers’ norms (Cook, 1999).

Measurement

Swain and Carroll (1993) fell short of explaining the learners’ internal systems on the target forms by solely measuring the systems using a single TL scheme (Bley-Vroman, 1983). The target language forms (of the English dative alternation) in the learners’ ILs were merely assessed by their ability to produce the target norms on two recall tests. The number of correct answers was simply counted to report the learners’ approximation to the target norm. More specifically, no further analysis on the learners’ performance with the alternating verbs followed. The learners may have determined the possibility of alternation relying on the verb category they had established themselves through input. Except for the learners in the explicit hypothesis rejection group, the rest of the learners were expected to set up the rules based on exemplars and the feedback they were provided. Exploring the rule devised by the learners may reveal the learners’ learning problems on the generalization of the English dative alternation. Furthermore, the learners may have merely guessed the answers without basing them on any systematic rules.

In this case, the score calculated would not reflect the learners' internal logic regarding generalization.

Similarly, Tomasello and Herron (1988) overlooked the students' internalization of the rules and the exceptional rules by merely measuring their language through the use of fill-in-the-blank tests. This assessment only allowed the researchers to test the learners' declarative knowledge on certain linguistic features. In other words, what was tested was the learners' simple memorization of linguistic rules, not the learners' acquisition of target forms. The feedback learners received in this study may have just reinforced their memorization of the exceptional rules. Assessing scores of learner memorization of target norms cannot reflect learners' interlanguage systems.

Also, by merely looking at the test scores, it seems that the students successfully dealt with intra-lingual transfer – the students got almost perfect scores on tests of five out of eight forms. However, without assessing the students' application of the target form to other contexts, that is, their control over the forms, it is premature to conclude that their internal systems had effectively dealt with intra-lingual transfer.

In addition, depending on the targeted linguistic features, the students' linguistic gains exhibited variation. For instance, while the students' performance in the Garden Path group on the targeted forms *Du* and *Au* improved gradually through three tests, their performance on *Meilleur*, *-er* imperative and *Cet* showed backsliding in the second test. In the control group, while the students showed gradual improvement on *Cet*, their test scores on *Ne* decreased. This indicated that, although these rules are all exceptional rules in French, the students' internal systems may not have sensed these rules at the same level.

Multicompetent Language Users

Cook (1999) describes second language (L2) users as multicompetent language users, and they “have the L1 constantly available to them” (p. 192) during language processing. He also points out that multicompetent language users have language and thought processes different from those of monolingual users. Thus, to understand learners' interlanguage, it is indispensable to be aware of their first language (L1).

Given this condition in both studies, the learners' first language (L1) may have affected IL development to a considerable extent. Cook suggests that it may be more desirable to look at L2 users' performance based not on the target norms, but on the norms of high level L2 users, in order to gain real insight into learners' internal logic controlled by both the L1 and the L2. However, in both studies, the learners' interlanguage was merely assessed using the monolinguals' target norms. Consequently, both studies fail to show how the learners' L1 and prior knowledge of the L2 may have had an impact on the development of their internal interlanguage systems.

In sum, in both studies, the individual learners' interlanguage was merely measured by a single TL scheme, and this may have eventually obscured not only the structure of the individual interlanguage, but the structure of each interlanguage in the population in a different way as well (Bley-Vroman, 1983). In addition, both studies fell short of revealing the learners' internal systems built on both first and second language knowledge by judging multicompetent L2 users' language based on the monolingual's TL norms (Cook, 1999). Hence, although both studies lend

some support to the role of corrective feedback on rule generation, they failed to find the learners' underlying internal systems restructured by the feedback. Consequently, the lack of understanding of the learners' internal systems may threaten the validity of these studies, as Bley-Vroman noted.

CONCLUSION

Empirical studies which merely count learners' errors and then measure the learners' interlanguage systems are likely to fall into the comparative fallacy (Bley-Vroman, 1983). Unfortunately, a considerable amount of research on the efficacy of corrective feedback in L2 development has been conducted in this manner, that is, the learners' exhibited linguistic gains have been assessed by a single TL scheme (target-like or non-target-like utterances). This measurement is not insightful enough to explore the learners' developmental processes. If so, how can learners' developmental processes be measured in studies on corrective feedback? Doughty and Varela (1998) provided one possible way to avoid the comparative fallacy. They employed interlanguage analysis which measures learners' performance in three ways: (a) changes to target-like use, (b) changes that showed improvements while still falling short of the full target version, and (c) declines in non-target-like use. This measurement enabled the researchers to track the learners' developmental processes caused by the provision of feedback. In order to assess learners' internal systems and avoid the comparative fallacy, there is a need to develop sophisticated and insightful measurement.

Furthermore, it may be possible to discern some pedagogical implications here. In most cases, students' errors are judged by the target norms teachers possess, and the teachers provide feedback to the students based on their judgment. If the students' internal logic is not counted and the teachers' provision of feedback solely relies on the teachers' logic, this feedback can fall into the comparative fallacy. This eventually brings about mismatches between the teachers' intention and the students' interpretations, which can render corrective feedback ineffective. It should be noted that teachers, as feedback providers, have to make an effort to adapt themselves to learners and look at their internal systems in order to use feedback to facilitate the learners' IL development.

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