The Comparative Fallacy:
An Analysis and Discussion of Selected Research

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the introduction of the "independent grammars assumption," whereby a child is said to have its own grammar and not just an imitation of adult language, first language (L1) acquisition researchers such as Martin Braine (1963) and others have constructed grammars for children's languages rather than treat them as defective adult grammars. This is based on the view that language learners create grammars of their own, rather than master the target grammar imperfectly. Thus, at any moment, a child's grammar is an independent system. In second language acquisition (SLA) research this notion has led to several slightly variant conclusions. On the one hand, second language (L2) learners should be treated as already having a language of their own, not just as poor beginning learners of the target language, and should be encouraged to create a system from experience and internal resources rather than have the target language thrust down their throats by teachers (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). In reality, however, as Cook (1999) asserts, "SLA research has often fallen into the comparative fallacy (Bley-Vroman, 1983) of relating the L2 learner to the native speaker" (p. 189). In other words, the learner's language is typically explained by reference to the target language system, rather than treated as an independent set of rules and performance characteristics.

The aim of this paper is to examine two empirical studies in SLA from the perspective of the comparative fallacy: the studies of Dulay and Burt (1974) and Mendizabal (2001), both of which address L2 learners' morpheme acquisition order. The first study investigated whether L1 transfer plays a significant role in determining this order. The second study examined whether L1 and L2 acquisition orders coincide. Both studies will be reviewed and analyzed with particular attention paid to the issues of measurement and multicompetent language use in connection with the comparative fallacy. In this regard, the implications of acknowledging the distinctiveness of multicompetent language use for both empirical research and L2 teaching practice will be discussed.

REVIEW OF THE STUDIES

Dulay and Burt (1974)

To test whether similar patterns of development obtain across different L1 groups in child SLA, Dulay and Burt (1974) conducted a study of L2 English acquisition among 60 Spanish-speaking children and 55 Chinese-speaking children aged six to eight. The authors investigated the order of grammatical morpheme acquisition in the two groups and compared the results both to each other and to data from a previous study (Dulay and Burt, 1973). The authors

used an expanded version of the Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM) to elicit 11 grammatical morphemes in the children's speech: pronoun case (*he-him*), article (*a, the*), singular copula, progressive (*-ing*), plural (*-s*), singular auxiliary, past regular (*-ed*), past irregular, long plural (*-es*), possessive (*-'s*), and third person singular (*-s*). The BSM consists of seven colored pictures about which children are asked questions designed to elicit responses that sample their use of English morphemes and syntactic structures (Dulay and Burt, 1974). The study found that the order of morpheme accuracy (the ranking of the 11 functors in terms of native-like use) was essentially the same for the two groups. This led the authors to suggest that L1 transfer was not significant in determining the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes, at least not for child second-language learners.

Mendizabal (2001)

This study examined whether morpheme acquisition order is invariant between L1 and L2, with the aim of determining the most appropriate strategies for L2 teaching and learning. For data elicitation, the author adapted the Makilakixki measurement test, which was created by a team of teachers from several *ikastolas* (schools in which all teaching is done in Basque) to determine the level of knowledge of Basque among primary school students. The test was based on a short story and question–and-answer framework. The subjects in group 1 (781 children whose L1 was Basque) and group 2 (952 children whose L1 was Spanish) were all five years of age. After eliciting data using Makilakixki, the researcher assigned a rank order to various morphosyntactic structures (i.e., grammatical morphemes and clause/sentence types) based on the difficulty they presented to the subjects. Examination of the correlation between the L1 and L2 learners in the study confirmed the hypothesis that the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes would be roughly equivalent.

DISCUSSION

In this discussion, the above-described empirical studies of grammatical morpheme acquisition order will be analyzed in light of the notion of the comparative fallacy. The analysis is divided into two sections: a) measurement; and b) multicompetent language use.

Measurement

In his influential work on L1 acquisition, Brown (1973) introduced the concept of *suppliance in obligatory context* (SOC). Examining free speech samples from three L1 English learners, Brown isolated the contexts in which an adult native speaker would be required (obligated) to use a given grammatical morpheme and ranked the subjects' acquisition of these morphemes on the basis of how frequently each "functor" (as Brown called these morphemes) was correctly supplied. The concept of SOC was later taken over by many researchers, especially in natural order studies.

Bley-Vroman (1983) asserted that "any study which classifies interlanguage (IL) data according to a target language (TL) scheme or depends on the notion of *obligatory contexts* or *binary choice* will likely fail to illuminate the structure of the IL" (p. 15; emphasis added).

According to Bley-Vroman, most natural order studies succumb to the comparative fallacy because they rely on the SOC scoring methodology. This is because suppliance in the contexts in question may be obligatory for a native speaker, but comparison of L2 learner responses to this standard ignores the issue of the IL as a distinct grammar. Moreover, whereas Brown divided obligatory contexts into four categories (linguistic context, nonlinguistic context, linguistic prior context, and linguistic subsequent context), most research in SLA has borrowed the concept of SOC, but has used it only with reference to linguistic context. This limitation applies to Dulay and Burt (1974). The authors in this study isolated instances in which the 11 grammatical morphemes were required by linguistic context in English and calculated an accuracy score based on native-like use, thus falling prey to the comparative fallacy.

       Mendizabal (2001) also appears to fall into the comparative fallacy. Although this study elicited data not through BSM but through Makilakixki, the researcher still evaluated the grammatical accuracy of the answers by giving two points for each "correct" answer, zero points for "incorrect" ones, and one point for those that, although not incorrect, were simpler than the correct answers (e.g., a valid one-word answer where a sentence was expected). In other words, this research also fell short of exploring the learners' internal systems on their own terms by comparing them to a TL scheme (Bley-Vroman, 1983).

Multicompetent Language Use

       According to Cook (1999), "because L2 users differ from monolingual native speakers in their knowledge of their L2s and L1s and in some of their cognitive processes, they should be considered as speakers in their own right, not as approximations to monolingual native speakers" (p. 185). Cook (1991) proposed the term *multicompetence* to refer to the total range of knowledge and abilities, as well as the distinctive learning criteria, of those involved in learning and/or using an L2. From the standpoint of this distinctiveness, the comparative fallacy clearly pervades the L2 classroom, where native-like use of the TL is almost always the acknowledged or implicit goal and where TL use is typically modeled in terms of native-speaker scenarios and native-speaker norms. As Cook (1999) discusses in his seminal article "Going Beyond the Native Speaker in Language Teaching," there may be many fruitful ways in which L2 teachers can circumvent the "monolingual bias" of traditional pedagogy.

       First of all, both empirical and theoretical research in SLA has established that the achievement of truly native-like competence by an L2 learner is at best a near-impossibility. For adult learners, "failure" in this sense is almost universal (Felix, 1987), and even "fluent bilinguals" differ from monolingual L1 speakers on grammaticality judgment measures (Coppieters, 1987; Davies, 1991). As Cook (1999) argues, the idea of native speaker attainment in L2 is, for practical purposes, a myth, and its application in the classroom may have discouraging or alienating effects on the L2 learner.

       The collection and analysis of data for empirical research is one area in which this consideration might be suspended. In fact, to produce quantitative results, such research arguably needs not only a benchmark for comparison, it needs one that is fixed and universal. Putting aside for the moment the issue of individual and dialectal variations among native speakers, so-called "standard" TL forms may provide the only such yardstick available for SLA and other linguistic research. Thus, as Cook (1999) observes, "…SLA research can justifiably use native speakers' language as one perspective on the language of L2 learners" (p. 190).

From the standpoint of the comparative fallacy, however, it is important that such studies at least recognize this practice as a methodological limitation. A better case scenario might be one in which SLA researchers strive to develop methodologies whereby the native speaker benchmark is replaced or supplemented with measurement criteria that more realistically represent multicompetent language use; that is, analyses that take into account the strengths of the L2 language samples in their own right rather than merely counting their deficiencies by comparison to a hypothetical corresponding TL sample. This would address both the practical concern that deviations of L2 language use from a native speaker standard may be in a sense "imaginary," and the theoretical concern that comparison to a native-speaker benchmark ignores the status of the sampled L2 as an IL in its own right.

With regard to the classroom and the situation of the L2 learner/user in general, it must be noted that such individuals do in some ways measure themselves against, and aspire to, the abilities of native speakers. In other ways, however, they are keenly aware and are often proud of their distinctive status. This distinctiveness may be ethnic, cultural, experiential, or even cognitive. As Cook (1999) points out, there is evidence that "the minds of L2 users differ from the minds of monolinguals in several respects" (p. 193). In some capacities – even some linguistic ones – multicompetent users outperform monolinguals (Cook, 1999). Moreover, the sociolinguistic context and practical expectations of most multicompetent users differ considerably from those of most native speakers. Yet, as Cook (1999) observes, L2 teaching continues by and large to focus on the deficits in learner usage as compared to TL norms, rather than to emphasize communicative success, and to make use of predominantly native-speaker models and situations for teaching scenarios.

To overcome this "monolingual bias" in pedagogy, which corresponds to the comparative fallacy in SLA research, Cook (1999) argues that L2 teaching should emphasize the students' own status and capacity as real and potential L2 users. Specifically, he suggests that classroom goals should be set that are appropriate to L2 learners rather than native speakers; that L2 users and typical L2 situations should play a more prominent role in teaching materials and teaching scenarios; that teaching methods should acknowledge the distinctiveness and contribution of the learners' L1(s); and that teaching should be based on descriptions of how multicompetent users learn and use the target language, rather than on native-speaker norms. Cook concludes that whether these or other specific strategies are adopted, the most important thing is that attitudes be adjusted and techniques be found to place greater emphasis on the successful L2 speaker in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Two empirical studies in grammatical morpheme acquisition order were analyzed in light of the concept of the comparative fallacy. The claim of Bley-Vroman (1983), Cook (1999), and others that there is indeed a comparative fallacy – that is, a failure to take into account the status of samples of L2 language as ILs in their own right – in empirical research, such as the studies considered here, was supported. This fallacy was found to pertain to the studies examined in terms both of measurement methodology and lack of consideration of the distinctive features of multicompetent language use. It was argued that empirical research should seek to supplement or replace SOC and other methodologies that depend on comparison to native speaker norms

with measurements that take account of the status of sampled L2 as IL, both for reasons of theoretical consistency and because basing measurement on comparison to a theoretical rather than a practical norm (i.e., comparing L2 learners' interlanguage to the L2 native system) may have practical implications that cast doubt on findings such as the putative invariant order of morpheme acquisition across L1 and L2 learners and across L2 learners from different L1 groups.

Finally, the implications of the comparative fallacy—or monolingual bias—for L2 pedagogy were addressed. Cook's (1999) article on the distinctive knowledge, abilities, and learning criteria of multicompetent language users was discussed, including his suggestion that attitudes be adjusted and techniques be found to place greater emphasis on the successful L2 speaker in the classroom. In this regard, it should be noted that many of the specific strategies that Cook proposes were already in practice in various curricular programs to which he refers, and that additional programs and new initiatives may since have been instituted. The finding of this paper that a comparative fallacy exists and that it is relevant both to empirical studies and to classroom practice strongly suggests that research should be carried out both to determine the effects on learning outcomes of the L2 teaching strategies that Cook proposes, and to outline new measurement techniques that might bring SLA research more in line with SLA theory and avoid practical errors.

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