The Comparative Fallacy in SLA Research

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In most of the second language acquisition (SLA) research done in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus was either on errors defined in terms of the mature second language (L2) system, or on items regarded as having been adequately acquired when they were supplied 90 percent accurately in obligatory contexts. This made all the more important the early eighties warning issued to SLA researchers by Bley-Vroman (1983) as to the danger of falling into "the comparative fallacy"- that is, relying on theoretical constructs which are defined strictly in relation to the target language (TL) norm. He noted that "work on the linguistic description of learners' language can be seriously hindered or sidetracked by a concern with the target language" (p. 2), thus suggesting that the learner's internally-constructed second language is worthy of study in its own right, not just as a degenerate form of the target system. In other words, SLA researchers should not adopt a normative TL perspective, but rather seek to discover how an interlanguage (IL) structure that appears to be non-standard can nonetheless be used meaningfully by an L2 learner.

While a number of SLA researchers have followed in Bley-Vroman's footsteps by insisting that interlanguage needs to be considered in its own right, L2 learning still tends to lean on native competence, in the sense of expecting an L2 to become identical to an L1. Anything that does not come close to native speaker standards is regarded as wrong, and this has the serious result of producing incorrect or misleading assessments of that data. Indeed, most L2 learners observed in the field of SLA research seem to fail to acquire the target language fully from the "standard" point of view, which just makes it that much more important that we complement it by also looking at the issues from the standpoint of an independent interlanguage grammar.

Lakshmanan and Selinker (2001) argue that "in order to make serious progress in the investigation of interlanguage, researchers should focus on the construction of linguistic descriptions of learners' language that can shed light on their specific properties and their own logic" (p. 395). In other words, researchers seeking to discern patterns in the interlanguage itself should look at learners' productions on their own terms, as opposed to only in native-biased obligatory contexts. In this paper, I give some examples of the comparative fallacy, either when a target language scheme is used to preselect data for investigation, or when a grammaticality judgment task is employed.

In order to investigate the effects of positive and negative evidence in the classroom, White (1991) begins her study by analyzing the obligatory context. In English, adverbs do not appear between the verb and its direct object (SVAO), whereas they may do so in French. In other words, the French verb-raising value of the parameter permits SVAO order and prohibits SAV, whereas the English value permits SAV order and prohibits SVAO. Thus, given the present trend in language teaching, which seeks to provide ample positive evidence and which avoids form-focused instruction or error correction in the communicative language-learning environment, L2 francophone learners may assume, given a lack of positive English input, that SVAO is a grammatical and possible order, and may thereby be unable to reset the appropriate

L2 value of the parameter on the basis of positive evidence alone.

Based on such a parametric difference between French and English, White propounds three hypotheses in this study: 1) L2 learners will assume that L1 parameter settings are appropriate for the L2; 2) specific instruction, including negative evidence, in English adverb placement will be effective in helping French learners of English to master the fact that English allows SAV order and disallows SVAO; and 3) learners will show evidence of a clustering of properties in accordance with the parameter. For this study, five classes of an intensive ESL program in Quebec, consisting of fifth- and sixth-graders, were divided into two experimental groups. An adverb group was taught certain aspects of English adverb placement, while a question group was not taught adverb placement but did receive instruction in question-formation and was given ample positive evidence of adverb placement possibilities.

The results suggest that positive evidence alone did not help the question group to recognize certain properties of adverb placement and to act accordingly. The adverb group learned that SVAO was not permissible in English, even though they were not able to identify the difference either between the VO and the VPP structures or between manner and frequency adverbs in the VPP case. Thus it can be seen that White's first hypothesis was supported, given that both groups, prior to the instruction, assumed SVAO to be a possible English word order, based on their L1 understanding of the verb-raising parameter. White's study also shows that negative evidence specifically oriented toward adverb placement is effective in helping L2 learners to learn this particular L2 structure in the short-term, and thus her second hypothesis is partially supported. The third hypothesis was not, however, confirmed, since the adverb groups of students failed to acquire other properties related to SAV in English.

A study exploring similar terrain is that carried out by White, Spada, Lightbown, and Ranta (1991). In this investigation of the effects of form-focused instruction and corrective feedback on L2 development, the researchers asked whether a francophone learner of English can attain syntactic accuracy in dealing with English questions on the basis of L2 input alone, given that French and English differ in a number of respects: In French, inversion is optional with pronoun subjects, but prohibited with noun phrase subjects. When inversion occurs, main verbs can invert: There is no equivalent of *do*-support, and *wh-in-situ* is permitted even in non-echo questions. Based on this comparison of question formation in English and in French, the researchers assumed that French-speaking learners would start off with the hypothesis that English questions, like French questions, are formed in several different ways, with this leaving room for form-focused instruction to provide the necessary negative evidence.

Also, one sees the comparative fallacy at work in the assumption that L2 speakers do not significantly differ from native speakers with respect to performance on grammaticality judgment or sentence matching tasks. The research technique whereby learners are asked to judge whether sentences are grammatical in one way or another too often proves to be problematic in SLA studies, since it implicitly measures L2 performance against native intuitions of grammaticality, as opposed to against independent interlanguage grammars. Yet, such a technique has become a common practice in most experimental L2 studies.

Let us now look at two studies that fall into this trap. In White's (1991) study, both groups were pretested on adverb placement using a grammaticality judgement task, a preference task, and a manipulation task. The first of these was used to test for both permissible and impermissible adverb positions. As for the written preference task, it consisted of pairs of sentences. The subjects had to read each pair, and then select one correct sentence when two sentences that differed only with respect to their syntactic forms were presented for

consideration. In the sentence manipulation task, the subjects were asked to form sentences using a set of word cards. Then, after all three of these tasks had been accomplished, the main study's data were analyzed.

Another good example of the comparative fallacy occurring in the context of a grammaticality judgment task is shown us in White et al. (1991). In this case, the task consisted of 15 written *wh*-questions that were presented either in scrambled word order, without subject auxiliary inversion, or in an already correct order. In order to measure the effectiveness of the instruction that had been provided, the subjects were asked to (a) arrange the words so as to create a correct question, (b) judge grammaticality, and (c) ask questions orally that would match one of their own pictures with a picture being held up by the experimenter.

Another example seen in White et al. (1991) is its use of a native speaker group. In other words, information on the performance of the native speaker group on the same task was obtained for the purpose of comparison, and this use of a monolingual English-speaking class could only produce misleading comparison data. For example, White et al. (1991) analyzed the performance of the L2 learners in this way: "The instructed group does not, however, achieve native speaker accuracy; there is a significant difference between the native speakers and both the instructed and the uninstructed groups at the post-test" (p. 424). This seems to be a complete capitulation to the comparative fallacy, in that the researchers are explicitly judging these L2 learners by the degree of conformance to putative native standards.

Such "errors" matter since, as Bley-Vroman (1983) points out, the ways in which L2 learners understand the obligatory contexts of the target language may be quite different from the ways in which native speakers do. Thus, researchers must become far more aware than they seem to be at present of the danger associated with guessing in advance the imaginable subsystems learners may be making use of as they struggle to construct the target grammar (Lardiere, 2003). Indeed, all SLA researchers must begin to seek the patterns in learner language, viewed as being a fully functioning language in its own right, as opposed to just an incomplete version of the TL. Only by looking at learners' productions on their own terms will we begin to understand the properties of the language that L2 learners create to accommodate L2 input. The irony here, of course, is that we, the researchers, need to know the learner's L1 just as well as the target grammar, if we wish to become fully cognizant of the interlanguage subsystems. Nothing could be more fatal, I believe, to our investigations of interlanguage than for us to ignore either the native speaker system or the L2 learner's own internal language-processing system.

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