

Noticing Hypothesis in Second Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT:

As one of the most influential theoretical underpinnings in second language acquisition (SLA), Noticing hypothesis has been receiving an increasing amount of attention from researchers in this field over the last decades. However, there have been different perspectives on the role of Noticing. In order to provide multi-dimensional perspectives on Noticing Hypothesis, contribute to the exploration of the Noticing Hypothesis, and reaffirm the importance of this hypothesis in SLA, this paper will briefly present the contents of the hypotheses by Schmidt and Robinson before presenting Krashen's perspective on the issue, which stood in contrast with the other two. Also, the comparison between these perspectives will be made. Finally, a critical review on the work of Schmidt's noticing hypothesis will be presented.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Noticing Hypothesis is a concept used in second language acquisition proposed by Richard Schmidt in 1990. Schmidt identified three aspects of consciousness which encompasses awareness, intention, and knowledge (Schmidt, 1990). In that, noticing is considered as a low level of awareness. According to Schmidt (1990), two levels of awareness includes awareness at the level of noticing and awareness at the level of understanding. He claimed that while awareness at the level of noticing is the vital and sufficient condition for language learning, awareness at the level of understanding can facilitate second language acquisition but it is unnecessary (Schmidt, 1990). Through many studies, Schmidt continually confirmed the vital role of noticing (1990, 1993, 1994, 1995, 2001, 2010). However, over the past years, this hypothesis has been regarded as a controversial topic and gained the concerns of many researchers on the vital role of Noticing. One of the dominant advocates is Robinson who also highly evaluated the role of noticing to successful second language acquisition (1995, 2003). In contrast, among many researchers with opposite perspectives, Krashen (1979, 1981, 1982, 1985, 1994, 2013)

In order to have a closer look at different perspectives on the role of noticing, in the scope of this paper, the works of three researchers mentioned above will be briefly summarized. Secondly, the comparison between the three perspectives will be made before presenting a critical review on the work of Schmidt's noticing hypothesis.

Introduction to Noticing Hypothesis

The Noticing hypothesis has its roots in two case studies of Richard Schmidt. In the first study, he found that Wes - a U.S immigrant from Japan was a very good learner in every area of language except limited development in morphological or syntactic accuracy. Therefore, Schmidt concluded that in the case of adult learning grammar, it is most likely impossible to learn without consciousness (Schmidt, 2010). He also showed evidence from his second case study to support the noticing hypothesis which was about his experience when learning Portuguese during his five-month stay in Brazil. Although he and Frota found some frequently used forms in the input, the acquisition started only when they consciously notice these forms in the input (Schmidt & Frota, 1986, Schmidt, 2010). He added despite being corrected many times during the conversations with native speakers, without consciousness, corrective feedback of his mistakes was ineffective. This refers to another hypothesis that Schmidt called "noticing the gap". Through this case, he put forward the idea that to avoid errors, it is necessary for learners to consciously compare their target language input and output. Based on the findings in these two case studies, Schmidt draw the conclusion that "intake is what learners consciously notice" (Schmidt, 1990, p.149).

Summary of each researcher's work

Schmidt's perspective on noticing hypothesis

Schmidt preferred Noticing to the "registration (detection) of the occurrence of a stimulus event in conscious awareness and subsequent storage in long term" (Schmidt, 1994, p.179). He assumed that noticing "is the elements of the surface structure of utterances in the input" rather than the underlying rule (Schmidt, 2001, p.5). In Schmidt's work in 2010, he confirmed that noticing strongly influences on second and foreign language learning.

Schmidt strongly confirmed that noticing is "necessary and sufficient" for the learners to make the conversion of input to intake (1990, p.29). In other words, a learner's acquisition progress could not begin until the learner is aware of the linguistic features of the input. Schmidt also refers the term "noticing" to "focal awareness" (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968) "episodic awareness" (Allport, 1979, p.132) and "apperceived input" (Grass, 1988) (cited by Schmidt, 1995, p.132). The similarity of these constructs is that they detect the degree at which incentives are experienced subjectively. Schmidt, therefore, explained noticing refers to an individual's experience which can be reported verbally and depend on the particular condition because some conscious experiences are intrinsically hard to describe (Schmidt, 1990).

From Schmidt's perspective, formal linguistic considerations including the instruction, frequency, perceptual salience, skill level, and task demands can influence the input (Schmidt, 1990). In detail, an instruction may be vital in preparing learners to notice linguistic features by forming their expectations about language. In terms of frequency, the more frequently the language feature appears in the input, the more likely it would be noticed and become part of the interlanguage system. A similar pattern could be experienced in perceptual salience, which is the more prominent an item form at the input, the more likely it would be noticed and internalized. As regards skill level, Schmidt (1990) pointed out differences in learners' skill levels might determine who noticed what. When comes to task demands, this is the way in which an instructional task drives individuals to notice specific linguistic items because it is vital to complete that task. Also, Schmidt (2001) added that "noticing is the first step in language building, not the end of the process" (p.31).

Robinson's perspective on noticing hypothesis

The Noticing Hypothesis has been supported by a large number of SLA researchers. One of the advocates of this notion is Peter Robinson who shared a similar perspective on the significance of noticing. As stated by Robinson (1995, 2003), learning can not take place without the existence of awareness at the level of noticing. Robinson defined "noticing as detection with awareness and rehearsal in short-term memory" (Robinson, 1995, p.318). According to Robinson, the Noticing hypothesis regarded as a detailed description of inherent features belonging to the "attentional mechanisms", and their connection with contemporary replicas of the "memory organization" (Robinson, 1995, p.283). In other words, Specifically, Noticing is a result of the process of rehearsal, through which linguistic features in short-term memory are encoded in long-term memory, hence, noticing is considered vital for language learning. He also put forward the idea that there is a need to differentiate between short-term memory in which noticing occurs and long-term memory. Short-term memory is regarded as a subsystem of long-term memory which is in the state of activation (Robinson, 1995, p.318).

In his study, to expand the basic theory of noticing, he took a closer look at the essence of attention and memory. He assumed that memory allocation and attentional capabilities could exert an impact on noticing as well as second language learning. Robinson supposed that "noticing can be identified with what is both detected and then further activated following the allocation of attentional resources from a central executive" (Robinson, 1995, p.297). He added the volume of short-term memory controls the amount of knowledge noticed when the task is carried out. These variances lead to distinctive performance on specific tasks. This, therefore, accompanies with a distinction between different learners' rates in their second language learning development. (Robinson, 1995, p. 320).

Krashen's perspective on noticing hypothesis

Krashen made a clear distinction between learning and acquisition. According to Krashen, "the acquisition is a subconscious process" which is like the process that children experience to acquire their first language. The language acquirers, therefore, acquire the language subconsciously, they only consciously using language for communication purposes not the structure of their utterances (Krashen, 1982, p.10). In Krashen's perspective, when the language has been acquired, it is kept in our mind subconsciously without our consciousness. Also, children and adults are unaware of when acquiring language (Krashen, 1982, p.10).

Krashen posited two facts related to language acquisition. Firstly, what all language acquirers need is to understand the messages and this process requires no effort and work. Secondly, second language acquisition happens naturally when learners are exposed to an adequate amount of comprehensible input (Krashen, 2013, P.2).

Through the Monitor hypothesis, Krashen postulated that formal rules or conscious learning make a little contribution to second language acquisition. Conscious rules are only used when three conditions are met. First, in term of time, learners need an adequate amount of time to think and use the rules. Second, learners must pay their attention to the form. Finally, learners have to know to rule (Krashen, 1982, p.16).

Krashen also assumed learners do not have to be aware of the form of the sentences when learning because they could correct self-correct just as they felt the need for grammar (Krashen, 1981). When we intend to use the target language to convey something, just before the utterance is made, we will look through and examine it internally and then use what we have learned consciously for error correction (Krashen, 2013, P.2).

Similarities and differences in the work of each researcher

Firstly, Schmidt highly evaluated the necessary and sufficient role of noticing in successful second language acquisition. Similarly, Robinson shared the same perspective. He affirmed that noticing which is the outcome of encoding in short-term memory is essential for second language learning. In the view of Schmidt, noticing – a subsystem of awareness- is sufficient for the conversion from input to intake in second language acquisition. However, Robinson stated Schmidt didn't exert any detailed explanations. Whereas, in Robinson's finding, he took a closer look at attentional mechanisms and their inner connection from a number of subsets of the central executive which are deemed as great attributions to the importance of noticing (Robinson, 1995). Identifying clearly the relationship between attention and memory, Robinson made a complementary to complete Schmidt's hypothesis. Meanwhile, Krashen had an oppositional perspective with the two researchers discussed above. Although Krashen acknowledged the occurrence of noticing in the second language acquisition and learning, he denies the role of it. As discussed above, in Krashen's perspective, language acquisition happens naturally without our consciousness and it, thus, store in the central executive subconsciously. While dismissing the importance of noticing in second language acquisition, he stressed the role of understanding - a higher level of awareness than noticing that learners acquire language and develop language skills when they understand the utterance that is conveyed (Krashen, 2003). In contrast, Schmidt highlighted the vital role of noticing but took a poor view of the importance of understanding because he assumed that it makes learning process easier but unnecessary (Schmidt, 1990). Furthermore, in terms of instruction, Schmidt (1990) proposed that instruction plays a vital role in making learners ready to notice linguistic attribute by setting up their expectations whereas in Krashen's study, he provided evidence to confirm that using formal instruction is not essential for the acquisition of reading ability, vocabulary, spelling, and grammar (Krashen, 2009).

In addition, regarding detection, while it is essential to detect information for dealing with new stimuli, Schmidt claimed that only the subsystem of detection which is chosen through focal attention can be "noticed," and that is the attentional level at which the conversion from input to intake for learning takes place (Schmidt, 2010). Robinson agreed with Schmidt and stressed the role of detection. As mentioned above, Robinson stated detection is necessary as a first stage to intake, "but cannot be coextensive with it" (Robinson, 2008).

Finally, as discussed above in Krashen's research, focusing on form is seen as one condition among the three required conditions to make conscious rules be used by second language learners. In this condition, language learners must pay attention to the language form or correctness. Likewise, Robinson cited Long's finding as evidence for his ideas about focusing on form, which refers to attentional mechanisms allocation, may be necessary to improve and indicate the way to select attention to input elements. If not, it can be not noticed, performed, and seriously unlearned (Robinson, 2008).

Criticism of the Noticing Hypothesis

Schmidt's noticing hypothesis received considerable supports from several researchers such as Ellis (1994, 1997), Skehan (1998), and Gass (1988). However, it has also been facing various criticisms. This part is to present the critical analyses of some researchers from the past to recent time on the Noticing hypothesis of Schmidt.

First of all, Tomblin and Villa (1994) expressed their disagreement with Schmidt's idea by putting forward the idea that attention and awareness should be separated. Also, in contrast with Schmidt, they stressed the role of detection rather than awareness and assume awareness in second language learning (Tomblin and Villa, 1994, as cited in Robinson, 2003).

Secondly, as mentioned above, Robinson (1995) also commented that noticing hypothesis of Schmidt is inadequate and Schmidt did not have any clear explanation for the hypothesis which stressed the necessary role of noticing in turning input into intake. Therefore, Robinson researched the relationship between attention and memory to complete Schmidt's hypothesis.

Furthermore, Truscott (1998) made a clear evaluation on the findings of Schmidt and his critical review is considered as the most well-argued one. He supposed that noticing is weak in a number of aspects. Firstly, relating to the work of attention that Schmidt used to support noticing hypothesis. Truscott stated that Schmidt claimed the essential role of attention in learning and it is identified as awareness; however it is hard to explain

what attention means and decide the time for its allocation to a given task. Truscott postulated the relationship between attention and consciousness which Schmidt proposed is like an assumption rather than an empirical finding. He added the research and theory related to attention, awareness, and learning are vulnerable to contribute to any strong claims about the association of the three. Especially, he pointed out some evidence to demonstrate that form-focused instruction is unhelpful and ineffective. Truscott also commented noticing hypothesis of Schmidt is also unclear in interpretation and testing which leads to difficulties when being applied in natural language acquisition. Through his clear critical review, he concluded that the underpinning of noticing hypothesis is vulnerable and lack of property theories. Carroll (1999) shared the same idea with Truscott that Schmidt's noticing hypothesis is inadequate and the absence of property theory causes problematic.

In addition, Leow (2001) pointed out the weakness of the hypothesis relates to the limitations of Schmidt's researches (1990) which supported the level of noticing as awareness at consciousness. Leow supposed that his findings were not associated with the function of consciousness or awareness. This is because the evidence, which Schmidt provided to support his hypothesis, was solely unreliable in nature.

Finally, Philp (2003), who also pointed the fault of noticing hypothesis, posited that noticing not only depends on attentional resources but also various factors such as learner readiness, input frequency, saliency, the influence of the first language, the degree of understanding, etc. (Philp, 2003).

II. CONCLUSION

It is apparent that Noticing hypothesis has been facing a number of criticisms. However, regardless of its limitations, Noticing is regarded as an important stage and exerts considerable impacts on successful second language acquisition and learning. According to Schmidt, "people learn about the things they attend to and do not learn much from the things they do not attend" (Schmidt, 2001, as cited by Ellis, 2015). Ellis added if there is no Noticing, there is no learning (Ellis, 1995, p.89). Also, Noticing is considered as a factor that helps to connect input and output as well as implicit and explicit learning. However, as Truscott stated in his research, the theories based on Noticing hypothesis need to be much more evolved in order to exactly clarify the inherent features of knowledge that are noticed in the input (Truscott, 1998).

A closer look at different perspectives and understanding the extent that noticing in language learning is crucial for educators to design more effective teaching activities, courses, and programs.

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