

# Using Developmental Sequences in the Oral Communication Classroom

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## Abstract

The world's communication problems would all but disappear if we could all, by just switching a button, be able to communicate in the language of our interlocutor. Alas that button does not exist. Instead languages need to be acquired and the process of acquisition is anything but simply switching on a button. It is a time consuming, often frustrating, often amusing, always taxing but ultimately rewarding experience. The time consuming component of acquisition is not a situation where one toils laboriously for years to finally, one morning, awake to find that, from having nothing the night before, total acquisition has miraculously occurred. Acquisition occurs throughout the time that the learner is engaged in trying to acquire. This paper will give an overview of evidence that suggests various features in second language acquisition (SLA) occur in sequences and that overall development of SLA seems to do so along a continuum that has some order. It will outline the research that points toward this being so, but also will show that some research is less convincing in this regard. Once it has been shown that the research to date strongly supports specific developmental sequences being apparent in SLA, the paper will then turn to outlining the effects these sequences may have on pedagogical practices in SLA.

## Introduction

The study of SLA is, in comparison to the broader field of

linguistics, young. Corder's (1967) article on learners' errors is noted as the point where SLA became a field of study in its own right, separate but intertwined with other studies in linguistics. Study of SLA involves the detailed description, analysis and explanation of a plethora of communicative skills and strategies used by learners in their quest of acquiring a second language. The study's complicatedness is compounded by the fact that each learner is unique. As it is a study of actual usage of the language it is this that must be described, analyzed and explained. Gathering examples of actual usage involves a variety of problems in itself for example what *is* "actual usage"? If one is observing communication, is it real or do those being observed change the way they would normally communicate (the observer's paradox)? If we observe without consent, ethical issues become a problem. These and many more problems are in the way of the student of SLA. Yet these problems are being overcome and results from research done to date show that the field of SLA is maturing and is being taken seriously.

One segment of the research into SLA that has created some excitement is the research into developmental sequences. "Sequence" here is separate to "order" of acquisition or development. "Order" in SLA refers more to a ladder toward acquisition - which 'rung' or grammatical, lexical, syntactical and/or phonetic feature on the overall ladder does the learner start at and which rung is next et cetera. "Sequence" refers more to the mental and cognitive processes that take place in the mind of the learner during the acquisition of a particular feature of the language being acquired, that is, the target language (TL). It is primarily these sequences that this paper will look at, but it will also touch on the idea of order of acquisition.

## Evidence for Developmental Sequences

Evidence has been being acquired since the late 1950's (Berko 1958) that suggests there is a fixed order to children's acquisition of their first language. These studies of first language acquisition (FLA) culminated in the Harvard study (Brown, 1973) which was replicated by de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) with the same results showing that there is a set order of acquisition by children of particular features of English. These studies have been replicated in studies of other languages with the same outcome. The sequences that occurred in FLA also show signs of being systematic. Ellis (1994, pp 78) lists the stages that children go through in acquiring English negatives in Klima and Bellugi's (1966) study. These show a clear development sequence. All the studies done were in natural settings. If there are these clear signs of order and sequence to FLA, those studying SLA would obviously look to see if they are evident there too. There are of course going to be differences between the ways babies acquire their first language, how children acquire a second language, and how adults acquire subsequent languages to their first, as at different stages of maturation, humans have different cognitive capacities, different motivations and different materials available to them.

The first attempts at finding proof of development sequences and orders in SLA started in the early seventies with the morpheme studies. The studies looked at how accurately students studying a second language (L2) used particular morphemes in situations where they would normally be obliged to do so (obligatory occasion analysis). From the analysis of the material, those doing the research were able to come to the conclusion that there was a specific order of acquisition. Further studies found that the order didn't change even with students from differing L1 backgrounds. All of these studies of developmental

order are outlined by Ellis (1994, pp 91). They are of interest, but as anyone who has attempted a second language will attest to, unless you are under an extremely rigid instruction regime, when you are acquiring a language it does not come in a set pattern to you. In a naturalistic environment the acquirer encounters a variety of different language features at the same time. How the learner puts the components of each language feature together, and how these features interact and come to form a grammar of the L2 in the mind of the learner, that is, the sequences that occur in the learning of particular features of the L2, then takes on great import to the SLA practitioner.

Research carried out into pronoun acquisition (individual morphemes), acquisition of syntactic structures such as negatives, relative clauses and word order - as summarized in Ellis (1994 pp 96-104) - suggests that the processes that occur in all learners' minds during the acquisition of an L2 are exceptionally similar. The studies seem to show learners progress through regular stages and make the same errors in their pursuit of proficient use of each of the above features of the language. When producing the language they are learning, the similar patterns learners from a wide variety of L1 backgrounds follow when acquiring English as an L2 are thus shown as evidence of development sequences. Other languages have also been shown to have these features. Kanagy (1994) discovered that when learners of L2 Japanese attempted to acquire negatives they did so in regular sequences, these sequences also being the same as those exhibited by L1 Japanese learners.

This evidence however is not given one hundred per cent credibility as there are areas in the studies that have been called into question. The fact that the results from the cross sectional studies do

not always fully correlate with those from longitudinal studies is one case that lowers the credibility of the evidence. Another is the fact that errors are one of the main sources of evidence. Error analysis has weaknesses (Ellis 1994, pp 69), particularly if it is only carried out over a short term such as is the case in cross sectional studies. Five other areas of concern are outlined in Ellis (pp 112 - 115), these include the omnipresent focus on grammar, the lack of a general index of SLA, inter-learner variability, intra-learner variability and the various methodological problems that arose from the studies. However, even accounting for these limitations, the overall picture is still that of developmental sequences occurring in learners of an L2.

Further evidence and explanation of developmental sequences has emerged with the Multidimensional Model, a cognitive theory of L2 acquisition. The model's development is summarized in Ellis (1994, pp382). The comprehensive manner in which the results have been attained for this model give it validity, reliability and strength that were lacking in earlier studies. It applies to both order and sequence and gives the SLA practitioner a framework on which to predict what "grammatical structures will be acquired at which general stage of development" (Ellis 1994, pp 387). This framework is built around the general description of the stages of SLA those being firstly the silent period followed by the formulaic speech stage and then works into the structural and semantic simplification stage. However one weakness of the model can also be found therein. It doesn't specifically account for formulaic speech. This can affect the placement of learners into stages. This is a problem if only particular features of a learners' language production are considered, but if a broad account of the language produced by the learner is considered, the chances of this occurring are reduced dramatically. Other problems are outlined by Ellis (1994,

pp 387) the most serious shortcoming being that the model is only production based and therefore does not delve into the internal aspects of SLA in learners. Other cognitive accounts of L2 acquisition are outlined in Ellis (1994, pp 388 - 393) that focus particularly on skill learning theories. Previous to these were input focused theories, and theories on how learners represent the L2 they are trying to acquire. Each of these mentions development, but don't use it as a central theme in their arguments. Some are somewhat behaviouralist in nature in that they emphasize practice as the key to development, whilst there are others that have internal development as their basis. The number of theories is large and all of them could not be outlined here. Ellis (1994, ch 9) does a precise summary. What none of them say is that L2s or any feature of an L2 can be instantaneously attained, except in the form of formulaic speech. None could. The process of acquiring an L2 and features therein takes time and effort. What the studies do point toward is that there are sequences that each learner goes through when they attempt to acquire different features of an L2, and that an order seems to exist in learners' L2 acquisition. These can vary depending on a variety of factors, in particular the individual learner, whether the learner is acquiring the language in naturalistic or educational surroundings and also the varying motivations involved, thus definite patterns cannot always be observed, but regularities often can.

### **Affects of Applying Developmental Sequences to Pedagogical Practice**

Any practitioner of SLA would know that knowledge of development sequences is an enormous advantage to have when carrying out any aspect of language pedagogy. Said practitioner should also be able to tell you from experience that relying too heavily on

them will not always be advantageous. From the outset, when one is preparing a course or unit of work, one requires an understanding of how language develops and at what stage your charges are at along the language development continuum. With beginners one cannot enter a classroom and expect them to be able to converse with native like confidence from the first lesson. Understanding of the order in which language can be most effectively taught is essential. ESL - Framework of Stages (McKay/Scarino, 1991) outlines in detail a number of different approaches to the ordering of SLA development, each depending on different factors, such as age and L2 development. With this kind of framework one has a sound basis on which to build a curriculum. The content of the curriculum will of course depend on the students being taught. However with knowledge that at particular junctures throughout the curriculum, specific features of the language being taught will present problems for the students, the SLA practitioner will be able to alleviate said problems. Knowledge of when the difficulties may happen, what forms they will take, and what the natural progression will be thereafter, will help the practitioner be able to prepare their students to understand and overcome the difficulties more quickly.

Once in the classroom, knowledge of developmental sequences will be an advantage to both the student and the instructor. For the instructor, the approach adopted when starting to teach a new feature of the language would differ if clear knowledge of what is to be expected is already known. An example would be the teaching of negatives. As there is strong evidence of developmental sequences with negatives in English (Ellis, pp 99-100), I will use them to illustrate how understanding of developmental sequences can successfully guide pedagogical practice.

From the outset one needs to outline explicitly to the students that there are developmental sequences. From personal experience in learning an L2 and from teaching English as an L2, I know the frustration that is apparent when one says something that you know is wrong, your interlocutor knows is wrong, but no one seems to know why. If it is explained from the outset that the language learning to take place does so within the framework of developmental sequences, the frustration felt when errors are made will be felt as part of the progression process, not as a feeling of “I’m stupid and these mistakes prove it!” This in itself is a huge motivational tool. Students see themselves going through the stages and making the errors that are common to that particular stage would spur them on to reach the next stage, and aim at the final one.

Making the stages explicit is no easy task. As I am teaching Japanese students of college age oral communication, I will focus on the oral aspect of the sequences. The following steps would obviously differ in a multi cultural class, a class for absolute beginners, or a class involving one of the other macro skills, but the ideas behind the steps would remain the same. Japanese college students have all passed through the secondary school system in Japan where five years of English tuition is included. Though changes are slowly taking place, for the most part this tuition focuses on an understanding of traditional grammar and reading English. Very little emphasis is placed on what I believe is the most important part of language learning, the oral communication aspect. It is this aspect that I will concentrate on. Firstly one would have to expose students to a large amount of normal language use where negatives are used. A broad selection using simple vocabulary but a variety of different structures would be required. As my charges are familiar with the traditional grammar of English yet still



at a very elementary stage of language development, I would initially concentrate on the basic tenses. I have found that my students, when faced with a native speaking teacher, sometimes for the first time, revert to the silent stage of language development at the start of first year so this form of comprehensive input (obviously the content of the material presented should be of interest to the students) at the early stages is necessary for students to develop goals and know what it is they are working toward.

Once examples of correct target language rules have been detailed, examples of common errors from a corpus of L2 learners at different stages would be used. Examples of initial stage external negation would be played on tape, and students would be asked to decide whether the material was correct. If adjudged incorrect, they would be asked to detail what changes might be made to correct it. This would be done under the title "common errors in stage one of development". There would of course need to be considerable assistance from myself, but as the students have a great deal of latent knowledge developed during the secondary school years, I would try where possible to encourage them to tap this. Over the ensuing weeks, stages two and three would also be covered in similar style. I would, in the process of giving feedback, ask students to review the parts of the conversations they had made where there were common errors from the various stages. Self analysis of the errors would be a very explicit way of showing students that they are progressing along the development continuum. I cannot stress enough, though, how important it is to do this in a positive manner. If an instructor focuses on the negative aspect of mistakes as being a "wrong", students' confidence and hence motivation will obviously decrease. However if the mistakes are shown to be "right", in that they are a natural part of

learning a language, the students will take heart from them and use them as the springboard into the next stage. The errors that I have concentrated on to date have been syntactic, however similar exercises could be used for phonological development too.

When assessment is being taken, understanding of developmental sequences is also required. Whether the assessment is of a portfolio form, such as is possible when taping of conversations is a regular part of the class and of homework, or whether it is of an interview or other form, discussion of results will inevitably include mention of developmental stages. This would best be done within the framework of criterion referencing. Hughes (1989, pp 110-112) outlines the American FSI's (Foreign Service Institute) criterial levels. These criteria are of a very negative nature, focusing on what cannot be done or what is done wrongly. No attempt is made to give diagnostic feedback or give the reader of the criteria an idea of what the student / learner of the L2 is capable of. Admittedly the stake holders who would use the criteria have only business in mind, but even they would benefit from knowing what *can* be done by the learner. A more positive approach to the wording of criteria with specific reference to how far into the various stages of development would better suit learners. These types of criteria would go a long way toward achieving the goals Brindley (1991, pp158) sets out when he states "assessing achievement based on communicative criteria would not only help to link teaching more closely to assessment, but also would allow for closer involvement of learners in monitoring and assessing their progress." Further than just monitoring and assessing, these types of positive criterion would also give the students some information on where they are along the continuum and how they can improve further thus empowering them to do so.

Thus in preparation of curriculum content, in the actual classroom context, and in assessment of the material produced by the L2 learner, one can see numerous advantages to using developmental sequences to guide pedagogical practice. However, like so many things, too much of a good thing can be bad for you. Disadvantages can be seen in relying too heavily on developmental sequences in guiding pedagogical practice. The most glaring problem is that not every feature of every L2 has been found to have fixed sequences. If L2 learners or teachers rely on them to be the answer to all questions they will be found wanting for explanations on numerous occasions. In addition, the movement from stage to stage is rarely, if ever, fixed. Students can be “between” stages. Again, in my particular situation, where students have already studied many of the traditional grammatical structures and have developed many formulaic speech patterns, students can gain a false sense of security believing that, because they have these, they are already into the final stage of development. For the practitioner in Japanese tertiary institutions, one must also be able to distinguish between what may seem like a feature of a particular stage, but is more likely to be a learned mistake or confusion relating back to the manner in which the student was taught in secondary school. To make a more generalized statement, the description of the stages of development does not always cover all the possibilities. This also ties back to Ellis’s (1994) suggestion that one should talk of regularities rather than definite patterns when approaching development sequences.

## Conclusion

The fact that SLA occurs in an order starting from very little and building toward becoming proficient does not require a great deal of intelligence to appreciate. Discovering what this order is however requires a sound understanding of SLA, along with the appreciation

that each person attempting to master the L2 is a human individual that brings all their individuality to the process. Though there is broad agreement on the basic outline of the order of acquisition as proposed in the multidimensional model and others, the order in which one person acquires the L2 will never be exactly the same as another person. However, along the way to acquiring the L2, each learner does so by acquiring particular features at regular intervals and putting each of these features together to form the whole that the L2 is. Research outlined in this paper strongly suggests that L2 learners, in acquiring many of these features, go through developmental sequences along the way to final acquisition. Though the research is not conclusive, and the methods used in attaining results have been criticized, there is overall agreement that learners do follow specific routes along the path to SLA.

This fact obviously has significant implications for the practitioner of SLA. When preparing curriculum content one must be able to do so with an idea of how language develops and how the features of the language develop in sequences but also be flexible enough to adapt when students are not “following the patterns”. Explanation of them shouldn’t be seen so much as mistakes but included therein should be the fact “that errors are not to be regarded as signs of inhibition, but simply as evidence of .. strategies of learning” (Corder, 1967) and are steps along the way to the final goal. When using developmental sequences in assessment, they should be used as an additional guide for giving positive feedback on the results attained and as a pointer as to ‘where next’. The research done into developmental sequences when used in this role can be shown to have been advantageous to pedagogical practice in SLA.

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