

Teachability/Learnability Hypothesis and Its Implications for Language Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Teachability Hypothesis is based on the idea that instructions need to be geared to learners' natural developmental stages to be more effective. Learnability theory exerts some constraints on the Teachability Hypothesis which means that the effectiveness of teaching is limited to the learning for which the learner is ready. On the other hand, what is learnable can be teachable. Such theories call for an awareness of the sequence and order of learners' acquisition and their developmental stage to determine their readiness in acquiring certain language features on the part of language teachers. By taking into consideration Pieneman's (1989) teachability/learnability hypothesis teachers need to get more conscious about their learners' sequence of acquisition and their current developmental stage so that they are confident in their decisions based on their knowledge about learners' readiness in acquiring specific linguistic features.

KEY WORDS: Teachability Hypothesis; Learnability theory; Language instruction; Language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

According to Rahimpour and Salimi (2010), Teachability Hypothesis (TH) was first formulated and introduced by Pienemann which is based on the idea that in second language acquisition, instruction compatible with learner's next developmental stage is more effective than the one geared to a, far beyond, learner's level. On the other hand TH is involved in predicting "that some structures are best learned if the specific instruction coincides with the learners' next stage of development" (Ollerhead & Oosthuizen, 2005, p. 62), or as Rod Ellis (2005) puts it in TH "for instruction to be effective it needs to target features that lie within developmental stage next to that which the learner has already reached" (Ellis, 2005, p. 11). Such contentions are compatible with Lightbown's (Lightbown, 1983 cited in Barrot, 2010) findings which shows that formal instruction can be successful only temporarily in altering the order of accuracy and is possibly the factor in delaying the beginning of a learner's passage through the natural sequence.

"Teachability Hypothesis (Pienemann, 1989) suggests that the natural developmental sequence cannot be altered by instruction for element of language whose acquisition is governed by universal processing constraints but that other, variational features of language can in principle be successfully taught at any stage of development" (Housen & Pierrard, 2005, P. 5).

Kumaravadivelu (2008) defines teachability hypothesis according to L2 learners' interlanguage:

“The teachability hypothesis predicts that instruction can only promote language acquisition if the interlanguage of the L2 learner is close to the point when the structure to be taught is acquired in the natural setting so that sufficient processing prerequisites are developed” (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 77).

According to Jordan's (2004) Teachability Hypothesis and Krashen's (1980, cited in Jordan, 2004), Input Hypothesis are in agreement in that they both believe that learners can only acquire a new structure when it is one step ahead of their current developmental stage, Pienemann (Pienemann, 1984, cited in Jordan, 2004) criticizes the Input Hypothesis for not being predictable or testable.

According to Ellis (2001), within such a theory, perspective teachers need to be familiar with the order and sequence of learners' acquisition and the learners' current developmental stage. He argues that only through such a process teacher can be confident about their decisions concerning their learners' readiness in acquiring specific features that they have a plan to teach. Long (1985, cited in Ellis, 2001) argues that it is unlikely that teachers gain such a familiarity based on the fact that knowledge about the developmental stages and sequences is not still satisfactory after 30 years of research in SLA. Another reason set forth by Ellis is 'logistic' drawbacks that teachers face in determining the exact developmental stage reached by learners. Such drawbacks hinder the effective teaching based on discrete linguistic forms, even in the light of its theoretical justified stance.

According to Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001), TH believes that teachers need to get familiar with the order and sequence of acquisition that learners demonstrate.

Pienemann (1989) holds that teachers must be familiar with the order and sequence of acquisition that learners in general manifest and the developmental stage that individual learners have reached. Only in this way can teachers be certain that a learner will be ready to acquire the specific linguistic features they are targeting in their teaching. (p. 409).

Pienemann (1989) argues that the teachability of language is constrained by what the learner is ready to acquire. The Teachability Hypothesis (TH), based on this constraint, uses a speech processing approach to explain second language acquisition and contains important psycholinguistic information on which second language teaching methods could be based. What Kumaravadivelu (2008) asserts is noteworthy that teachability hypothesis does not contend that teaching does not affect at all on second language development, rather it asserts that the impact of teaching is limited to the learning items for which the learners is ready to process.

Bardovi-Harlig and Comajoan (2008) in their definition of teachability hypothesis (TH) consider a role for socio-psychological factors that determines learners' linguistic behavior. They also introduce two more components of TH: (1) developmental sequences are determined and controlled by constraints on

processing; (2), formal instruction is effective in helping learners acquire specific forms to the extent that learners are ready for it.

Pienemann (1989) also proposes the learnability hypothesis (LH), which states that the classroom is beneficial to learners only to the degree that they are psycholinguistically ready for it. According to Kumaravadivelu (2008), learnability hypothesis exerts a constraint on the 'effectiveness of teaching' which is the same as the teachability hypothesis. On the other hand, "what is learnable can be teachable" (Yinguo, 2007, p. 3). Toth (2000) also maintains that attempts to introduce a specific structure for all learners, even in the case of learners at the more or less the same level of L2 development, does not seem promising. Toth (2000) believes that this is quite compatible with Pienemann's (Pienemann, 1984, cited in Toth, 2000) Teachability versus Learnability distinction based on which the probability of accommodating a new structure into a developing L2 grammar may highly vary among different individuals. On the other hand, the conclusions drawn from a teachability perspective does not guarantee the learnability.

Ellis (2004) maintains that TH represents a good example of a theory which rejects the idea that instruction is effective in altering the natural route of development of developmental features through asserting that instruction can result in the promotion of language acquisition to the extent that interlanguage comes close to the point when the structure to be taught is acquired in natural setting.

According to Kumaravadivelu (2008), Pienemann puts the relationship between learning and teaching into the following paradigm:

Provided the learner is at the appropriate acquisitional stage, instruction can improve acquisition concerning (a) the speed of acquisition, (b) the frequency of rule application, and (c) the different linguistic contexts in which the rule has to be applied. Based on his finding Pieneman derived two general tenets for L2 teaching: The principles of L2 development are not only a more reliable background for psycholinguistically plausible simple-complex criteria in material grading than the present intuitive procedures but they are a necessary background for grading, since formal L2 learning is subject to a set of learning principles which are shared by formal and natural L2 developments. Thus, teaching is only possible within the margin determined by these principles. As a consequence, any learning task which contradicts these principles is not-learnable; it would ask too much of the learner" (Pienemann, 1984, cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2008, pp. 77-78).

Criticisms of teachability/learnability hypothesis

Kumaravadivelu (2008) asserts that although the hypothesis has resulted in fruitful areas of research, it suffers from validity and applicability shortcomings due to the small size of the sample and practical constraints such as the difficulty of determining learners 'current state of grammar' or interlanguage.

The other criticism put forward by Kumaravadivelu(2008) is the fact that classroom learners create their language (interlanguage) in a sequence different from that introduced by the teacher. On the other hand, they develop a hidden curriculum that may be quite disparate with teacher's expectations. What is generally agreed upon is the fact that we still lack adequate knowledge of the learner's capacity in language processing to 'coordinate the teaching sequence with learning sequence.

RESULTS

By taking into consideration Pienneman's teachability/learnability hypothesis teachers need to get more conscious about their learners' sequence of acquisition and their current developmental stage so that they are confident in their decisions based on their knowledge about learners' readiness in acquiring specific linguistic features. Learnability hypothesis imposes limits on the effectiveness of teaching and so teachability hypothesis. Teachability/learnability hypothesis suffers from validity and applicability shortcomings, and the fact that learners create their sequence in language learning which may be in sharp contrast to that of their teachers.

Since language teaching methods can all be constrained within the scope of the language centered, learner-centered, or learning-centered paradigms, as Kumaravadivelu (2008) also maintains, the role of the teacher as the facilitator of the learning process does not seem to be much easy and smooth providing he is enthusiastic enough to benefit from the Hypotheses established in educational pedagogy. A competent and qualified teacher with an adequate knowledge of the findings of the teachability/learnability hypothesis incognizant that in the learner-centered settings in which learners are put at the center of learning, accessing the needs, styles and especially the goals of the learners must primarily be established. Here it is crucial to note that students are not often in a position to formulate and articulate their needs and goals unless they are well into a course (Nunan, 2002).

However, as the Hypothesis asserts that instruction should address the next developmental stage of the students in the learning process, the teacher should bear the knowledge of the overall pattern of learning and does not expect, for example, the correct use by the students of possessive 's' before plural 's' as these two grammatical patterns have proved to be distant from each other in the process of learning (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). This is not to say that because copula 'is', for example, is easier to learn than the auxiliary 'be', it must be learned earlier; the scholars have come to identify that "it is not necessarily true that things that are easy to use are learnt first (Cook, 2001). This perspective surely puts the teacher's task on a difficult and complicated task.

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