

Language Development Hinges on Communication: An Emergentist Perspective

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Studies on the human language system have brought to the fore two key aspects. First, the prime function of language is communication. Second, language exists in the social world. The language learning process takes place within the socio-cultural context and the relevant macrostructures that influence language use and development. According to the emergentist perspective, during the language learning process communication plays the central role in the emergence of a language system in a learner. Thus, the grammatical structures emerge through discourse as a result of the interaction between the learner and the environment. This article explicates, from the emergentist perspective, the vital role of communication, particularly authentic communication, in the emergence of linguistic structures. It also sums up the pedagogical implications of this understanding.

doi: 10.5054/tj.2011.269749

Language is a familiar phenomenon to all of us and an integral part of our lives. We communicate and even think through a language. Thus, language is the vehicle of communication in the social world (MacWhinney, 1999). Furthermore, language links us to each other in human society. This down-to-earth proposition involves two key aspects of the phenomenon of language. First, communication is the fundamental function of language. We employ language for a number of interpersonal as well as intra-personal communication needs in our lives. Second, language exists in the social world (a *social tool*, as Atkinson, 2002, calls it) in which it fulfills communicative functions.

In linguistic studies, capturing the intricacies of language is quite a daunting task, because no one theory or perspective can offer a comprehensive or illuminating view of language (van Lier, 2004). This perplexity remains a perennial concern of language practitioners. Also, it is important to note that language learning capability is exclusive to humankind (Jackendoff, 2003; Pinker, 1994), and human beings are capable of learning languages other than their native or mother tongue. This language learning process takes place within the sociocultural context and the relevant macrostructures that influence language use and development. During the learning process, communication plays the central role in the emergence of a language system in a learner, and grammatical structures emerge out of discourse as a result of the interaction between the learner and the environment. This article, while building on the emergentist perspective of language learning, examines the emergence of language during the learning process and the implications of emergentism for English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) instruction. Thus, the article offers a blueprint for language learning by illustrating the theory with some exemplars. The discussion is limited to the development of syntactic structures during the language learning process, which is also an area of focus within linguistic emergentism.

EMERGENTIST VIEW OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

As mentioned earlier, language is a social entity employed for a variety of interpersonal communication needs. Therefore, second language learning (SLL) is motivated by communicative needs and functions. Communication is the prime objective of any language system, and that learners should be introduced to language through discourse. This belief is based on my realization that communication (and environment) plays a pivotal role in the emergence of a language system in an individual, and language rules are shaped and reshaped by communication events. To capture the emergence of a language (in a learner), emergentism provides a valid account of language structure and its evolution during the language acquisition process. It is pertinent to mention, however, that emergentism shares a great deal with several approaches in SLL literature, such as complex systems theory, cognitive linguistics,

and usage-based theories (see, e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 1997; Robinson & Ellis, 2008; Tomasello, 2003).

The Emergence of a Linguistic System

The Universal Grammar (UG) and Minimalist models (Chomsky, 1988, 2000) emphasize the innateness of language and the biological language faculty of humans, whereas emergentism stresses that “structure, or regularity, comes out of discourse and is shaped by discourse in an ongoing process” (Hopper, 1998, p. 156). These competing views appear to be tilted toward either *in the head* or *in the world* views of language and language learning (Atkinson, 2002). Emergent grammar, according to Hopper, is “simply the name for certain categories of observed repetitions in discourse” (p. 156). This notion establishes the primacy of discourse in language development and emphasizes, contrary to Minimalist models, the role of the environment through social interaction in the creation of linguistic associations (see, e.g., N. Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Gregg, 2003). Furthermore, Bates and MacWhinney (1988) capture the phenomenon of emergentism by using a machine metaphor, saying that language is a “new machine built out of old parts” (p. 147). For that reason, communication is a prerequisite to the development of grammatical structures, which is subscribing to the *in the world* view of language development.

Syntactic structures emerge through participation in communication events, and in this process language learners rely on their inferences about the language structure. The linguistic structures that emerge as a result of participation in communication events are likely to be added to interlocutors’ linguistic knowledge. While espousing the emergentist view, a clarification seems pertinent; unlike the UG models, in a strict emergentist interpretation there is no sharp difference between first and second language acquisition (see, e.g., MacWhinney, 1999; Hopper’s, 1998, discussion of emergentism does not mention SLL). Hopper further explicates the emergentist view of grammar by establishing the radical difference between the terms *emerging* and *emergent*; that is, *emerging* suggests a feature that is developing as part of something that already exists, whereas *emergent* “refers to the essential incompleteness of a language” (p. 157). In other words, the rules of language are

constructed (during social interactions). Accordingly, Hopper continues, “the grammar of a language, then, consists not of a single delimited system, but rather, of an open-ended collection of forms that are constantly being restructured and resemanticized during the actual use” (p. 159). This emergent view of language learning further suggests that language use has profound implications for the grammatical knowledge of a learner, because the grammatical knowledge evolves through social interactions and communication. Moreover, van Lier (2004), though in partial agreement with the emergentist perspective, concludes that language acquisition “emerges from participation in linguistic practice” (p. 88) in the social world.

Also, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, which has been a prominent second language (L2) teaching approach in recent times, relies heavily on authentic communication and the activities that are built around authentic materials (Canale, 1983; Nunan, 1988). The proponents of CLT view language as communication and language instruction as aiming to develop learners’ *communicative competence* (see, e.g., Hymes, 1972; Munby, 1978; Widdowson, 1978). Furthermore, Hymes emphasizes that social life, where communication and interactions take place, exerts a profound impact on both the acquired linguistic knowledge as well as the actual language use. CLT, in a way, lends credence to the formative influence of real-life communication on language learning.

The Role of Authentic Communication

During the language learning process, lexicogrammatical strings and formulae become the building blocks for the language development of learners and their grammatical repertoire increases, enabling learners to comprehend and formulate complex language structures. The frequency and authenticity of communication in the target language are, thus, a *sine qua non* for the development of such formulae. Furthermore, exposure to authentic communication helps learners acquire grammatical structures far more effectively than can be achieved through explicit grammar instruction, because “grammatical structures not only have a morphosyntactic form, they are also used to express meaning (semantics) in context-appropriate

use (pragmatics)” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 4). This impact of authentic communication is especially true for intermediate- and advanced-level L2 learners (R. Ellis, 2006) who have an existing L2 base. However, this proposition does not imply that authentic communication is irrelevant to beginners. Probably, learners with a certain linguistic level in the target language will experience the impact of authentic communication as a catalyst in developing their linguistic skills.

In order to examine the impact of authentic communication in L2 development, a look at the definition of *grammar* in a larger context seems pertinent. If we expand the definition beyond “merely a collection of forms” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 4) to the three-dimensional pie chart—form, meaning, and use—acquisition of grammar skills depends remarkably upon the role of communication. The three-dimensional definition of grammar is elaborated as follows:

Form: How is the unit formed?

Meaning: What does it mean (its essential meaning)?

Use: When and why is it used? (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 36)

Communication episodes (i.e., activities involving any form of communication) help L2 learners master the *meaning* and *use* dimensions of grammar skills, which otherwise might not have been effectively learned through written teaching materials. At this point, a clarification about the emergentist view is necessary; it does not reject or undermine the significance of explicit grammar instruction in L2 teaching (e.g., R. Ellis, 2002; Norris & Ortega, 2006), especially in mastering the form. For instance, explicit grammar instruction can greatly assist learners in comprehending productive lexical processes (e.g., conversion, derivational affixation), homonymy and polysemy, and intricate syntactic structures (e.g., subjunctive mood, articles).

Grammar teaching and learning also plays a supplementary role in attaining fluency in the target language (R. Ellis, 1996). Therefore, classroom grammar instruction (and acquisition) facilitates SLL, in terms of learners’ fluency and accuracy, in addition to the impact of authentic communication, which is fundamental to development of the L2. Schmidt’s (1983) case study of Wess, an accomplished artist

in the United States who was a native speaker of Japanese and reasonably proficient in English, highlights his limited English grammar in spite of his extensive participation in authentic communication in an English-speaking setting. Therefore, the explicit grammar instruction has its relevance in ESOL programs in fostering the form dimension of linguistic skills.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

If the above-mentioned blueprint of language development is applied to a language teaching context, such as an English as a second language (ESL) program, the pivotal role of communication episodes in the development of syntactic structures (or the emergent grammar) will have curricular implications. Correspondingly, the sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1986) emphasizes that language use and learning are interdependent. According to the sociocultural perspective, the use of language in real-life communication events is “fundamental, not ancillary, to learning” (Zuengler & Miller, 2006, p. 37). Hence, the pedagogical implications of emergentism for a language instruction program entail the creation of optimal conditions for learners to engage in communication rather than overly relying on teacher-led activities in the lessons, which is not unusual to many language teaching contexts. Thus, subscription to the emergentist view puts heavy demands on language practitioners (and materials developers) to provide learners with ample opportunities for participation in communication events.

For instance, during one of the activities for new ESL students in my class, the head teacher and I took students on a grocery shopping trip to a superstore. The students had (low) intermediate English proficiency, and in a lesson prior to the shopping trip, they had learned how to ask for help or information (i.e., structures using modals) and form *wh*- questions. While shopping, students had a chance to communicate with the store staff and use the structures they had learned in the lesson. The activity was successful in providing students with opportunities to participate in real-life communication. Similarly, in a *table-talk activity* we divided the class into groups of three. Each group was joined by a guest, an American student in a graduate program at the same school. During

the course of a 30-minute conversation, the ESL students asked the guest students about U.S. culture, people, and lifestyles, and also shared their perceptions about the United States. The activity was quite engaging for the ESL students due to their intense involvement in this semiauthentic communication event, and they optimally employed various language structures in their conversation, such as tag questions, use of modals, and use of stative verbs. Language practitioners should make an effort to provide plentiful opportunities for learners to participate in authentic (or semiauthentic) communication in and outside the class and offer lessons focusing on grammar. With this approach, practitioners can tangibly help language learners achieve competence in the form, meaning, and use dimensions of the language.

As a matter of fact, language practitioners, especially in ESL contexts, can use a wide array of well-coordinated interactive activities, such as group projects, community interactions, interviews, and surveys, to promote social communication and language practice opportunities for learners. In my teaching experience, small-group projects have helped fulfill teaching objectives due to the greater frequency of communication involved and the peer-supportive conditions involved in practicing and using the language (as opposed to working individually). Such projects involve meaningful interaction and collaboration, negotiation for meaning, and presentation and sharing of academic tasks involving the L2.

When participating in real-life communication, students learn syntactic rules and templates through induction while analyzing linguistic input and engaging in a meaning-making process. In my ESL teaching experience in an English-speaking country, I noticed the acquisition of lexicogrammatical strings and formulae by newly arrived international students who had low-intermediate to advanced English proficiency. I found (during structured observations) that they rarely made errors in using the following lexemes and phrases, at sentential as well as suprasentential levels:

- *cool*
- *kidding* (e.g., *You're kidding, I'm just kidding*)
- *take it easy*
- *you know what I mean*
- *sounds good to me*

During my periodic informal observations, including one-on-one meetings and interactions in the class, I noted students' discourse appropriation efforts through their authentic communication (i.e., natural or real-world linguistic communication) experience while being in an English-speaking environment. Most of them made frequent errors in article usage, but they seldom failed to use the definite article before *United States* (e.g., *I arrive[d] in the United States with my family*), especially in their emails and writing tasks. In the above examples, learners did not make mistakes in subject-verb agreement (e.g., *you know, sounds good*), not because they were well versed in the underlying grammatical rules but because these grammatical structures were emerged knowledge, which learners had acquired through participation in communication events (Gregg, 2003; Hopper, 1998; Zuengler & Miller, 2006).

Moreover, moving on from these basic forms to more complex linguistic structures, learners were able to express futurity by using simple present and present progressive tenses. Although some of them had only a rudimentary grammatical knowledge at that stage, they could formulate sentences such as *I am going to start my thesis next year* and *My wife is arriving next week* in speech and writing. This language acquisition was the outcome of a few weeks of ESL teaching (which focused on academic writing) and, more significantly, ample opportunities to participate in authentic communication.

This phenomenon is well supported by empirical research (e.g., Myles, Hooper, & Mitchell, 1998; Weinert, 1995). The development of emergent grammar over a period of time provides learners with a large lexical base and grammar skills to become proficient users of the language (e.g., N. Ellis, 2005). For instance, participation in authentic communication facilitates learners whose first languages have subject-object-verb order (e.g., Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi) to gain competence in subject-verb-object patterns in English and to produce language correctly. This happens as a result of the "observed repetitions in discourse" (Hopper, 1998, p. 156) and the inferences learners draw about linguistic structures, which also highlight the *in the world* view of language development. The case of my mostly intermediate-level ESL students underscores the role of authentic communication in language development.

CONCLUSION

The emergentist view of language acquisition is grounded in the communicative roles and functions of a language. According to MacWhinney (1999), “the basic function of language is communication” (p. 213). Therefore, communicative needs initiate language teaching and learning, not vice versa. An efficient and fulfilling language program is necessarily based on interactive and collaborative language teaching and learning practice. As noted earlier, language is a social tool, and the linguistic structures emerge as an outcome of learners’ participation in social communication. Communication events provide excellent opportunities for language learners to enhance their linguistic skills through authentic language form, meaning, and use. Likewise, the CLT approach is a manifestation of the basic notion that language development occurs through communication events.

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