ACTIVATION OF LEMMAS IN THE MULTILINGUAL MENTAL LEXICON AND TRANSFER IN THIRD LANGUAGE LEARNING

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the composite elements of the multilingual mental lexicon and explores the nature and sources of transfer in third language learning. Unlike most previous studies of language transfer which identified learner errors by focusing on surface configurations of learner language, this study explains causes of learner errors by describing how language-specific lemmas in the multilingual mental lexicon are activated in language learning and speech production processes. To do so, it adopts some current psycholinguistic models of language acquisition. Multilingual transfer in third language learning is identified and described at several levels of information processing and speech production processes. This study focuses on the nature of lemmas in the multilingual mental lexicon and how they are activated in third language production. In so doing, sources of learner errors are traced to the composite nature of the multilingual mental lexicon and causes of transfer are explained in terms of constraints on third language development, learning strategies and processes. The third language data under this study came from two adult native speakers of Chinese. One has acquired native-like Japanese proficiency as a second language and is learning English as a third language, and the other has acquired native-like English proficiency as a second language and is learning Japanese as a third language. Based on evidence for certain specifications about the multilingual mental lexicon, this chapter presents a model of multilingual lemma activation in third language production.

2. VIEWS ON LANGUAGE TRANSFER

It has been commonly recognized that Universal Grammar (UG) is not the only correct mechanism for characterizing the role of grammar in second language acquisition. Although UG is capable of explaining certain language processing mechanisms and learning strategies, it fails to take into account quite basic and widely accepted principles of second language acquisition. To speak of universal
principles is to grossly oversimplify the nature of second language acquisition. According to Bley-Vroman (1989), UG parameters that are not fixed in the first language are lost, and those that are fixed are supplemented by general learning strategies, and these two things and only these two things mediate second language learning process. The questions then become apparent: What are the general processing/learning strategies in second language acquisition? How do they operate? What precisely can we explain with them? To answer such questions, we must first note that certain aspects of the second language grammar are initially not accessible to the learner, despite the fact that they may exist in the first language. This concerns especially the organization of lexical material into syntactic categories, which is a crucial prerequisite for speech parsing. It has been observed that initially learners organize their interlanguage around nonlinguistic processing devices and gradually build up language specific and target language specific processing devices (Pienemann, 1984). Huebner (1985) and Johnston (1985) argue that even the most advanced of second language learners will display weakness in certain areas. In other words, the learner’s internal representation of the target language is not the same as that of the native speaker although it is highly systematic. Researchers such as Klein (1995), Jessner (1997) and Hufeisen (2000a,b) depart from the view that multilingual learning is the same process as learning a second language. They claim that adult third language learners bring with them a wealth of knowledge and strategies that those of a second language do not. They argue that while adult third language learners make use of similar general cognitive capabilities to those of adult first foreign language or second language learners, they bring their previous foreign or second language learning experience to the new learning process. Although there are different perspectives within UG regarding second or third language acquisition, it has become apparent that the role of interlanguage in further language learning becomes relevant to a discussion of language transfer.

The concept of language transfer in studying the nature of second language acquisition has had a long history in the literature. As early as in 1940s and 1950s, Fries (1945), Haugen (1953), Weinreich (1953), and Lado (1957) claimed that language transfer was one of the major factors affecting foreign/second language acquisition. Lado (1957) discovered some basic principles underlying second language learners’ behavior and laid the basis of Contrastive Analysis in the practical need to teach a second language in the most efficient way possible. Therefore, the origins of Contrastive Analysis are pedagogic since it relates learner difficulty to differences between the target language and the native language. That is, on the basis of contrastive analysis of the two languages in question, differences between the language systems at various linguistic levels are determined in order to predict difficulties for the second language learner. Thus, according to Lado (1957), individual second language learners tend to transfer certain forms and meanings and their distribution from their native language and culture to the language and culture they learn to acquire.

There are mainly three criticisms of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. First, there are doubts concerning the ability of contrastive analysis to predict errors or transfer. Second, there are theoretical criticisms regarding the feasibility of comparing languages and its methodology. Third, there are reservations about its