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FACILITATING LEXICAL ACCESS FOR THE FLUENT PRODUCTION OF SPEECH

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IN MEMORY OF

MY DEAR FATHER

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Abstract

Since the emergence of input theory, the amount and type of exposure to second language has been recognized as a determinant mediator in L_2 development . One of the areas in which exposure has turned out to be a source of contribution is its possible effects on the development of L_2 lexical competence.

In cognitive models of language processing (Skehan, 1998) which are drastically based on memory functioning, an extended responsibility is claimed for the memorized chunks of speech. Words as the smallest units of meaning need be actively present in working memories to accomplish a fluent production of speech.

Inspired by Levelt's (1989) model of speech production which assigns a significant role to lexical access in the formulation stage of language production , it is assumed that hesitated access to mental lexicon will lead to breakdowns in speech (Aithison, 1994). The present study is an attempt to substantiate the role of exposure in developing second language with due regard to the effect of lexical access on speech fluency.

The hypothesis is that recent and frequent exposure to lexical items leads to a more fluent production of speech in terms of rate of speech . To test the hypothesis , a one-way ANOVA experimental design was carried out. 24 senior students of EFL participated in a one-way interview test. Data analyses revealed that those who were exposed frequently to the lexical items over a week prior to interview , demonstrated higher scores of speech rate. However single, recent exposure to lexical items did not have any significant effect on the fluency of speakers.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

Speaking is one of the most fascinating cognitive capabilities of human beings . We spend hours a day in communicating with each other without being aware of how we cope with this fabulous facet of language . The way thoughts and feelings are transformed into fluently-articulated speech still remains a mystery for applied linguists. While the study of cognitive processes involved in the generation of language is a major undertaking of psycholinguistics, the bulk of attention in this field has been directed towards the comprehension and acquisition of human language. As Levelt (1989) complains: "production seems to be the stepchild of psycholinguistics". Any endeavor, within applied linguistics to detect psychological processes involved in the generation of speech will be of great help in a plainer understanding of language use. The present study is an attempt to shed light on the role of mental lexicon in fluent production of speech, a variable that, generally speaking, occupies a significant position in language use.

Following the second world war, with the wide-spread adoption of audio-lingual methodology and the blossoming of generative grammar, the role of lexical dimension in L_2 pedagogy was marginalized and the state

even continued in the communicative era. During these years, the priority in modeling language was assigned to the syntax of language and the production of language was deemed as filling out a set of rules with lexical elements. But since early 1980s there has been a reorientation towards a greater preoccupation with lexicon (Singleton , 1999) . In cognitive models of language processing (e. g . Skehan 1998) , which are dramatically based on memory functioning , an extended responsibility is claimed for the lexis in language. Overall , the researches carried out through the last decade seem to confirm Lewis' (1993 , cited in Vermer , 2001) great idea that "language is grammaticalized lexicon rather than lexicalized grammar" .

One of the issues related to mental lexicon which claims a notable effect on the performances of speech production is the speed with which the lexis is accessed in the course of spontaneous speaking (Levelt, 1989).

Theories of lexical access account for both language production and language comprehension ; however, most of the work in this area has been devoted to language comprehension , in general, , and word recognition studies, in particular . During the recent three decades , the studies on lexical access were mainly inspired by the analyses of speech disorders and dysfluencies (Levelt, 1992) . However , another line of research has been established , over the last decade , through psycholinguistic experiments such as lexical decision tasks , picture naming , priming , etc . (Aitchison , 1994). In this research an attempt is made to scrutinize the issue of lexical

access with due regard to its facilitatory predictions in fluent production of speech.

1.2. Significance of the Study

The amount and type of exposure to second language has been recognized , by SLA researchers , as a determinant mediator in L_2 development (e. g. Gass and Madden , 1985 , Leow, 1998 , Towel , et al. , 1996 , Krashen, 1982). One of the areas in which exposure has turned out to be a source of contribution is its possible effects on the development of L_2 lexical competence.

Spontaneous speech requires the presence of active vocabulary knowledge in working memories of the speakers .On the other hand , active vocabulary of L_2 learners is reported to develop as a result of frequent exposure to second language (Laufer , 1991) , a predictor that appears significant in the course of fluent production of speech , so that the speakers tend to use those words in their speech that have been recently and frequently used by them (Levelt , 1992).

The general assumption behind the present study is that the latest exposure or exposures to certain lexical items of L_2 has a facilitatory effect on the fluent production of speech where using those items is a requirement. This leads to the fact that most of the measurable pauses occur before major lexical items (Aitchison , 1994).These pauses seem to result from hesitations in lexical access. Be it that the recent and frequent exposure to L_2 lexicon facilitates the process of lexical access , this

exposure will contribute to a more fluent flow of speech , a fact that can well influence the areas of developing speaking skill which has appeared , illusioningly , unteachable in the history of SLA (Levelt, 1992).

1.3. Statement of the Hypothesis

Based on the assumptions of the study introduced above, the following research question was spotted on:

Does the recent and frequent exposure to L_2 lexicon facilitate the production of speech?

To initiate the study the following hypotheses were proposed:

H_0: *' Prior exposure to L_2 lexicon has no effect on the production fluency in terms of rate of speech.'*

H_1: *'Prior exposure to L_2 lexicon results in more fluent production of speech in terms of rate of speech.'*

1.4. The Study in Outline

In this introductory chapter, the overall skeleton and the general assumptions behind the study were presented. Chapter two is devoted to the review of related literature where an attempt is made to piece together a sum of related issues that provide theoretical advocacy for the hypotheses raised in the study. Chapter three covers the methodology and design of the