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An Examination of the Relative Significance of Convergence & Divergence in Employment of FLA & SLA Concepts

– A Critical Literature Review

제1언어 습득과 제2언어 학습의 공통점과 차이점에 관한 문헌 연구

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An Examination of the Relative Significance of Convergence & Divergence in Employment of FLA & SLA Concepts: A Critical Literature Review

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1. Introduction

The quest for a deeper understanding into the uniquely human capacity for language learning has incubated a vast array of inquiry, with theorists offering often markedly different perspectives into this most fascinating area of our development (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). The resulting body of research, perhaps understandably, has centered on the remarkable transition from cooing baby to adept native language (L1) conversationalists, while the spectacular development of “cognitively precise, socioculturally appropriate sentences in just a few short years” (Brown, 2000, p. 21) has been a focus of disciplinary effort; the impact of this process on second language (L2) development has undergone similar scrutiny. According to Richards & Schmidt (2010), this process of acquiring language may be generally distinguished whereby: “the learning and development of a person’s language [leading to] ... learning of a native first language is called first language acquisition, and of a second or foreign language, second language acquisition.” (p. 312).

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This fundamental distinction, terminologically speaking, has gained near-comprehensive traction within the discipline, even if the exact nature of the processes themselves have been the subject of rich debate (Brown, 2000). Early behaviorist paradigms, for example, treated the mind as essentially a blank slate, subject to operant conditioning via the imprinting of the L1 by means of external stimuli (Skinner, 1957). In response, nativists such as Chomsky (1965) countered with the assertion that language acquisition is an innately determined system, governed by genetically endowed, and therefore universal, principles. Nativist theories draw evidence from the ease and rapidity with which young children first acquire, and then creatively use language, specifically when considered in relation to an infant's limited cognitive abilities and low level of input exposure (White, 2003). In time, observations on the phenomena of heightened grammatical competences would lead to the proposal of the 'universal grammar' (UG) theory, a ubiquitous set of language learning functions embedded within the brains of humans. The debate on what level of access, if any, L2 learners have to UG principles still perseveres today, comprising a major strand of contemporary inquiry in the field of applied linguistics.

As highlighted above, language acquisition is patently complex in nature, encompassing a wide variety of often-conflicting theories. Consequently, it is the purpose of this literature review to provide a brief overview of relevant first (FLA) and second language acquisition (SLA) studies. Specifically, similarities and differences will be investigated and critically appraised, ultimately establishing whether a meaningful level of commonality is shared between the two processes. Moreover, the significance of those features will be assessed and evaluated.

2 FLA and SLA

2.1 Psychological Considerations

The affective domain is concerned with the multitude of emotional factors that potentially influence one's ability to acquire language successfully. Correspondingly, inquiries into affective influences on SLA have been gradually accumulating for a number of decades (Brown, 2000). Krashen's (1982) oft-critiqued (De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2005; Zafar, 2009) yet influential *affective filter hypothesis*, for example, lists a number of negative attitudes (such as anxiety, self-doubt, & boredom) that act as a 'filter', impeding learning by preventing the absorption of input. Krashen posits that acquisition is best served in an environment where such an affective filter is low, i.e. in a relaxed setting (Brown, 2000).

One possible filter is the onset of *language learning inhibition*. Closely linked to anxiety, inhibitions may be classified as the "boundaries the person builds in order to protect his or her ego" (Hulya, 2009, p. 159). These inhibitions provide no obstacle to very young learners who are acquiring their L1 due to childhood's generally heightened egocentricity. As a person ages and develops, however, self-consciousness increases, discouraging the instinctiveness and risk-taking that is essential to both FLA & SLA (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Considering that many L2 learners undertake language study during this reserved phase, it is apparent that inhibition will negatively affect SLA to a greater degree (Hulya, 2009).

In an effort to explain inhibition in L2 learners, Guiora (as cited in Brown, 2000, pp. 64-65) proposed the *language ego* theory, arguing that, as a person

matures, so too does their sense of self-identity and as a corollary, a certain defensiveness over that identity. Importantly, the learner's L1 is a critical component of this developmental dynamic due to its role in the communicative process, having shaped their sense of self up until that point (Brown, 2000). During SLA, learners must create a new and unfamiliar self-representation that corresponds with their target L2. This potentially triggers an ego defence, ushering learners beyond their 'comfort zone', and resulting in heightened anxiety. This process proves especially problematic amongst adolescents, who, at this point in their development, are often striving to find and express their own sense of individuality (Moskowitz, 1978; Young, 1992). Conversely, language ego has a minimal effect on FLA, as there is no conflicting L2 identity to process. Furthermore, L1 learners are still acquiring the agency of selfhood that will shape their future identity, resulting in affective adaptation being both unnecessary and impossible. FLA, therefore, poses no "threat" to the L1 learner's sense of belonging; on the contrary, it is vital to its very development.

Krashen (1982) also identified motivation as a component of the affective domain, and one that is integral to the acquisition of language. Cheng & Dornyei (2007) concur, observing its ability to provide both the initial impetus to commence learning and the subsequent sustaining force to drive continued study. Other researchers, meanwhile, have also suggested that motivational *style* is a major contributor to linguistic development. Deci & Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, for example, describes two general forms of motivation: *intrinsic* & *extrinsic*. Whilst the former bases itself around interest in the enterprise one is undertaking, the latter is motivated by the rewards one may receive upon the achievement of specific task goals. The body of motivation research in applied linguistics is fast-growing, with findings indicating an increased need within the discipline to provide context-specific

and nuanced accounts of L2 motivation that are appreciable of both individual and culturally-specific factors (e.g. Islam, 2014; Aref Sadr, 2013; Dornyei & Ushioda 2009; Dornyei & Schmitt 2001).

During SLA, a host of considerations, both intrinsic and extrinsic, can potentially affect the rate at which a learner assimilates their target L2. Intrinsically motivated learners may acquire an L2 due to the process being enjoyable or challenging, for example. Extrinsically motivated learners, meanwhile, may be undertaking SLA in order to gain praise, a promotion, or to meet the linguistic expectations of a foreign culture. Whilst it is evident that L1 learners do not lack intrinsic motivation (children, by their very nature, are inquisitive beings, even in the absence of any discernible reward), comparatively, the main motivating factor during FLA is relatively simple: for a child to communicate and become part of a society, it must absorb that society's language(s). Aiding in this process are parents and caregivers, who provide a near endless stream of extrinsic motivation (Al Ghazali, 2006). Whatever form motivation takes, however, it is patently clear that children never refuse or deny themselves FLA due to its role in natural human development; simply put: "it's what human beings do to be human" (Cook, 2010, p. 150). Conversely, there is often conscious and unconscious resistance to SLA (Muramatsu, 2013). The above psychological considerations serve to highlight considerable differences in L1 and L2 acquisition.

2.2 Cognitive Factors

In accordance with Bloom's (1956) *taxonomy of learning*, Lev Vygotsky (1986) theorised that activities associated with FLA (such as state, describe & recall) require little cognitive demand, sitting on the taxonomy's lowest level, *knowledge*. Critically, however, Vygotsky also recognised that during SLA, it is natural

for L2 learners to compare and contrast their target language with their respective L1s. These high-order critical thinking activities place greater emphasis on cognitive demand, sitting on the fourth level of Bloom's taxonomy, *analysis*.

A clear cause for this divergence is the L1 learner's lack of relative cognitive maturity in comparison to their L2 counterpart (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Famously, Piaget's (1972) stages of intellectual development declared that, as children reach puberty, their ability to solve problems and think in abstract terms increases. During SLA, grammatical structures and lexical items may be consciously analysed and explicitly described, potentially enhancing the learner's ability to absorb their target L2. FLA, meanwhile, takes place in the crucial early periods of cognitive development labelled the sensorimotor and preoperational stages, during which, a child unconsciously acquires several major life skills, of which FLA is only one (Piaget, 1972). In this regard, SLA cannot be framed in terms of a human's wider cognitive development, with the acquisition of an L2 being a highly conscious effort that is (usually) far from an essential life skill.

Another striking feature that distinguishes SLA from FLA is the existence of a fully realised native language system (Yu, 2011). This metalinguistic awareness is a potential asset, allowing learners to *positively transfer* prior knowledge of language function to SLA (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). That is not to say that cross-linguistic influence is always advantageous to SLA, however. Interlingual error is a commonly noted hindrance (Kaweera, 2013), with the knowledge of a native language structure potentially leading to incorrect assumptions of the L2, resulting in *negative transfer* (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, pp. 322-323). Any such transference of linguistic knowledge, either positive or negative, is clearly not a factor in FLA due to the absence

of any L2.

There are also individual cognitive factors to consider in any comparison of FLA & SLA. Whilst learner proficiency can vary greatly during both processes, it is important to note that, if exposed to an appropriate level of input, all humans sufficiently acquire the L1 of their respective society (Bonar, 2005). This occurs regardless of intelligence, there being a widely reported absence of any “correlation between IQ and first language development” (Skehan, 1998, p. 233). Contrastingly, whilst it is broadly accepted that students of above average intelligence are more likely to be successful during SLA (Mitchell & Myers, 2004, p. 25), achieving full-grammatical competence of an L2 is highly unlikely, no matter how impressive an individuals’ learning skills.

Interestingly, however, Gardner (1993) describes cognitive ability as a pluralistic construct, suggesting that humans possess *multiple intelligences*, one of which being a sensitivity to spoken and written language. Accordingly, this linguistic intelligence may vary from person to person and not be immediately apparent during the formal assessment of general intelligence. Gardner’s theory hints at an innate capacity to succeed in language, a concept more readily associated with Chomskyan inquiry into FLA. If an inherent linguistic intelligence does exist, however, then by its very nature it would be universal, with any implications being applicable in *both* FLA & SLA.

2.3 Critical Period Hypothesis

The critical period hypothesis (CPH) refers to a proposed biologically-determined period, beyond which brain lateralisation is complete, which thereby acts to make language acquisition (amongst other skills) increasingly difficult (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Popularised by Eric Lenneberg (1967) and often

linked to the Chomskyan revolution of linguistics that occurred during the same period, CPH was initially associated with FLA and cases of extreme linguistic deprivation (Brown, 2000). Considering that almost all humans encounter language at a very early age, these exceptional cases provide the most compelling evidence of a biologically determined critical period (CP) for FLA (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Perhaps the two most famous examples of language deprivation are Genie (Fromkin et al., 1974) and Isabelle (Tartter, 1998). By 13, Genie was totally bereft of language and underdeveloped intellectually. Although she did make a large amount of cognitive progress thereafter, there remained a sizeable gap between her language use and that of a typical adult (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Isabelle, on the other hand, was exactly half of Genie's age when discovered with her deaf and mute mother as a solitary source of contact. Critically, however, within two years Isabelle had developed a regular IQ and lexicon of around 2,500 words (Tartter, 1998).

Although initial evidence is limited, these cases point to a CP for FLA that fades around the onset of puberty, or after the brain has reached full lateralisation. Seemingly then, a FLA CP, once activated, appears to be an "abrupt, initially strict and narrow phase, impervious to environmental influence" (Dong & Ren, 2013, p. 3). It should be noted, however, that *comprehensive* study into the phenomena of an L1 CP is constrained by both a dearth of appropriate test subjects, and ethical limitations associated with the experimentation required to empirically prove its existence (Singleton & Ryan, 2004). This has led to some researchers (Hurford, 1991) questioning the validity of the CPH in regards to L1 acquisition.

Proponents of CPH have since attempted to apply its principles to SLA. Notably, Johnson & Newport (1989) found a *gradual* age-related decline in

proficiency for migrants learning English as an L2 prior to puberty. Whilst their findings initially support a CP, crucially, results for learners that had already undergone puberty were extremely variable. In their own study on the subject, Hakuta, Bialystok, & Wiley (2003) attributed this fluctuation to a host of socioeconomic factors, the most important of which was an exposure to formal education. It was also noted that adult considerations such as family, jobs, motivation, & cognitive ageing ultimately affected SLA attainment, yet were evidently unrelated to the existence of a CP.

Hakuta (2001) & Birdsong (1992) compound this rejection of a CPH, providing compelling evidence by drawing attention to cases of adults who acquire native-like L2 competence, often performing at a level that is similar to, or far exceeds, that of youngsters. Importantly, however, previous studies by Oyama (1976) and Patkowski (1980) indicate that age is a crucial factor when acquiring a second phonological system. Whilst young (up to 6 years of age) learners are significantly more likely to achieve a native-like accent, the task is almost impossible for those who commence study over the age of 12 (Granena & Long, 2013). Furthermore, Patkowski also found that factors such as motivation and length of residency had little effect on overall phonological competence, indicating that age is the “independent variable most highly associated with eventual achievement” (Patkowski, 1980, p. 461).

Given the individual variability across age groups & skills, environmental influences, and cumulative nature of the offset (Johnson & Newport, 1989), perhaps the term *sensitive period* is more applicable in regards to SLA. Although the adage “the younger the better” may ring true in *both* FLA & SLA, it is clear that the concept of the CPH cannot be fully applied to SLA. Unlike L1 learning, there is no finite window of opportunity in which to attain an L2. The task may be harder both cognitively and socially; however, it is

fundamentally possible for adult learners to acquire near native-like command of an L2 post-CP. As the (albeit, limited) case of Genie indicates, those unfortunate enough to have been deprived of L1 stimulus have no such luxury.

2.4 Universal Grammar

As previously mentioned, the rejection of behaviourism as an explanation for FLA would lead to the proposal of a universal grammar (UG), the innate biologically driven faculty for language acquisition (Radford, 1997). Why then, is UG not as effective during SLA as it is in FLA? One potential explanation, and differentiator between the two processes, is the *level* of access available to L2 learners (Cook, 2010).

Bley-Vroman's (1989) Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (FDH) takes an extreme view, claiming that FLA & SLA are two radically different processes. Whilst L1 acquisition is the result of UG and UG alone, L2 learners have no access to its parameters and must acquire their target language via general (i.e. non-language specific) cognitive processes. Although a study by Schachter (1989) further endorses the FDH, she also notes that it may be possible to *partially* access universal properties during SLA via L1 grammar, suggesting that the term *no access* is somewhat of a misnomer (White, 2003, p. 16).

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the direct access position, which postulates that UG is as significant an influence in SLA as in FLA. This may be apparent if parameters not applicable to the learner's L1, yet connected to their target L2, constrain the user's interlanguage grammars, thereby providing evidence of universal governance (Farahani, Mehrdad, & Ahghar, 2014, p. 300). However, this theory fails to explain why SLA is far more cognitively demanding than FLA, and why many adult learners experience fossilization in

both phonology and morphosyntax, regardless of their efforts (Matsuoka & Smith, 2008). Logically, the difference would not be so great if UG were equally available to both processes.

The final attainment model asserts that L2 learners may access UG indirectly, carrying over parameter values from their L1 to the target L2 (Cook, 1994). Initial access to UG is provided via the grammar of the L1 only, followed by the possibility of subsequent grammar restructuring after L2 exposure (White, 2003). Several studies, notably Flynn (1987), White (1989), & Cook (1994) seem to confirm this theory, which appears to be, perhaps, the most plausible line of inquiry to date.

If the FDH is accurate, then the differences between FLA & SLA are clear. Essentially, they are two unconnected processes, with UG governing the acquisition of a learner's L1 then providing no input during SLA. This seems unlikely given the evidence to the contrary, especially that of Schachter (1989) & White (1989). Therefore, it appears that in both FLA & SLA UG influences learning, be it directly through UG alone or, as is more likely, indirectly via the learner's L1. This provides a highly significant similarity, not just in UG theory, but also in the comparison of FLA & SLA in general. One compelling disparity, however, is FLA's employment of UG and UG alone as its basis for learning. Contrarily, SLA utilizes several mental processes including prior language schemata (potentially resulting in both positive and negative language transfer) and general learning strategies.

3. Conclusion

This review has presented some of the main features in comparisons

between FLA & SLA, as presented in key literature. Whilst it is evident that the two processes share certain parallels, there exist several notable differences that must be taken into consideration. Significantly, it is undeniable that the affective requirements of L1 & L2 learners are vastly contrasting. FLA requires relatively few motivating factors and is never opposed nor abandoned by the learner. Additionally, the L1 learner remains unburdened by anxieties and inhibitions due to the typical levels of egocentrism and inquisitiveness that are present in young children. This is in stark contrast to L2 learners, who are motivated to undertake SLA for a multitude of diverse reasons and may disregard their studies or have them affected by a vast number of distractions, of which anxiety is a notable example.

Furthermore, there are also a number of compelling cognitive distinctions between FLA & SLA. As noted, the L2 learner's command of higher cognitive functions, metalinguistic awareness and ability to think in abstract terms are clearly distinguishable from FLA processes. Moreover, SLA is a non-essential mechanism that requires conscious effort from the learner. FLA, however, is a natural and unconscious component of human growth that is dependent on neither individual intelligence (Skehan, 1998), nor processes rated highly on Bloom's (1956) learning taxonomy.

It is unequivocal that age of acquisition is an important variable affecting both L1 & L2 proficiency; with the respective severity of those effects demonstrating significant variation. Whilst the critical period of FLA is characterised by an abrupt and finite stage in which to acquire an L1, the sensitive period for L2 acquisition is less clearly defined, and certainly more forgiving. Although a noticeable age-related decline in responsiveness remains, it is identifiably more gradual and, crucially, allows for the acquisition of an L2 post-brain lateralisation. Nonetheless, the fact that both processes share a

finite window for optimum language acquisition (including phonology) is plainly of great consequence. The final and perhaps most significant similarity, however, is UG's ability to influence both L1 & L2 acquisition. Whilst UG provides the solitary basis for FLA, it may also be possible to access its principles during SLA, albeit in a limited capacity. In conclusion, whilst it is categorical that the significant differences between FLA & SLA far outnumber the similarities, the existence of both a limited period in which to acquire a native standard L1 & L2, & universally constrained acquisition systems clearly indicate that FLA & SLA are somewhat interrelated processes.

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<국문초록>

제1언어 습득과 제2언어 학습의 공통점과 차이점에 관한 문헌 연구

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이 논문은 제1언어 습득과 제2언어 학습에 관한 주요 연구들을 고찰한다. 특히 제1언어 습득(FLA)과 제2언어 학습(SLA)의 유사점과 차이점을 중심으로 주요 연구들을 살펴보았으며, 이를 통해 FLA와 SLA에서 공통되는 과정들의 존재 여부와 이들의 의미를 살펴보았다. 이를 위해 주요 문헌들을 심리적 측면, 인지적 측면, 결정적 시기 가설(Critical Period Hypothesis) 측면, 보편문법(Universal Grammar) 측면에서 분석하였다. 결론적으로 FLA와 SLA은 공통점보다 차이점이 많다는 것을 알 수 있다. 그러나 원어인 수준의 제1언어와 2언어를 습득/학

습하기에는 제한이 있다는 점과 FLA와 SLA에서 보편문법의 영향을 받을 수 있다는 점에서 FLA와 SLA는 연관되어 있는 과정이라 할 수 있다.

주제어 : 제1언어습득, 제2언어학습, 보편문법, 결정적 시기 가설

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