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Monitoring Changes Over Time in the Interlanguage of a Long-Term
Resident Second Language Learner

MONITORING CHANGES OVER TIME IN THE INTERLANGUAGE OF A LONG-TERM RESIDENT SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER¹

Susana M. Setillo

The literature on Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) has not addressed the needs of long-term resident second language learners (who could be designated as "fossilized") who are often referred to colleges or English language centers for the specific purpose of improving their English language skills in order to obtain a promotion or arrange for a change in job assignments. As Selinker (1986) clearly states, many scholars working in interlanguage (IL) and second language acquisition (SLA) studies have not paid attention to the advances made by their colleagues working in the field of LSP. This is clearly an unfortunate situation since much descriptive work has been done on scientific, technical and occupational contexts by professionals from a variety of perspectives, such as ethnomethodology, the sociology of science, research communication studies, etc. The importance of making connections between scholars researching phenomena in IL and SLA and those working with implementing strategies of communication in LSP will, in the long run, benefit those of us working directly with large numbers of long-term resident second language learners in major urban areas of the English-speaking world.

My current research investigates two main problems in the teaching/learning process of an apparently "fossilized" second language learner working in a hospital setting. These are: (1) the extent to which it is possible for the language specialist to manipulate the "unique" rules believed to be present in the interlanguage of second language learners (Ellis 1984); and (2) the delivery of instructional services and elaboration of strategies for using the target language for necessary functions in a work setting.

The subject of this study is a 42-year-old Hispanic female, Charo, who has been living in the continental U.S. for the past 26 years. She is presently working in the pediatric section of a large urban hospital located in Philadelphia's downtown area. Charo has been employed as a bilingual nurse's assistant for the past 19 years. Recently, she was told that for the purposes of her job, her English language skills were unsatisfactory. She has agreed to enroll in a two-year social welfare/mental health program at the local community college which will enable her to upgrade her written and oral skills. Charo's present supervisor has strongly recommended that she improve her writing skills, since the written reports she is occasionally asked to prepare when translating for Spanish-speaking patients show that she has yet to internalize the rules for standard English usage. Furthering her education will also allow Charo the opportunity to acquire the necessary credentials in order to retain her current position. Advancement and changes in job assignments will be contingent upon her becoming credentialed. Motivation is therefore strong.

At present Charo's duties include registering patients, translating from Spanish into English, and explaining to doctors and nurses the cultural conflicts that exist in the home environment of many adults and children who are referred to the hospital by case workers or family members. As additional duties Charo takes down vital information uses pre-printed lab forms, answers phones, and follows doctors' instructions. Charo relies primarily on verbal orders in carrying out her duties; although she is expected to prepare short reports describing symptoms of ailments affecting Spanish-speaking patients, her writing skills are seldom reinforced at work. In other words, according to Charo, neither her supervisor nor her co-workers takes the time to provide corrective feedback about the non-target-like features present in her interlanguage.

Charo was administered several placement tests in order to determine her present level of English language proficiency. These are a combination of in-house and commercially available tests that have been field tested on the College's ESL student population, but are not domain-specific and barely tap the subject's multiple competences

as proposed by Selinker (1986). Her scores in reading comprehension (SLEP, Part II) were sufficiently high to allow her to take introductory college-level courses in social welfare/mental health. Her Spanish reading comprehension scores (Inter-American Level 5) were also above the cut-off established for taking college-level courses in Spanish. In contrast, her writing skills in English revealed a high degree of variability in the use of several linguistic forms which she employed over time in both appropriate and inappropriate contexts.

Based on Charo's explicit request that we assist her in improving her grammatical and oral skills in English, a preliminary assessment of her oral and written skills was undertaken. She had agreed to enroll in the Social Welfare/Mental Health Program at the College and was particularly apprehensive about the English language requirements outlined in the program description. Learning to use standard English on the job was another one of her stated goals.

Survey of Interlanguage Features

Since both the job and school situations demanded grammatical accuracy, Charo's initial written and oral output was analyzed with an emphasis on grammatical development over time. Written and oral data were collected over a period of ten months. For purposes of analysis, the data were divided into three time periods: Time I (pre-test writing sample and March writings); Time II (April and May writings); and Time III (June, July, September, October, and November writings). Thus, a total of 12 written samples plus the initial taped interview were analyzed. During each of the time periods identified above, Charo's verb phrases were analyzed for marking of number, negation, and tense.²

Our preliminary analysis shows that Charo has the concept of marking singular and plural in the verb phrase with present tense BE, in all time periods. She consistently uses "is" and "are" with the appropriate noun phrases. The variability encountered through time involves presentational sentences that use "there" + a form of BE" in standard English. In Charo's output there is typically an element at the beginning of the

sentence before the verb (e.g., a prepositional phrase or an adverb) that apparently makes it harder for her to see that the subject is missing. In other words, something else is in its place. In addition, she consistently uses a plural verb with certain singular noun phrases. In sentences with predicate nominatives, she sometimes makes the verb agree with the PN.

Concerning her use of HAVE throughout the three time periods, a pattern of systematic variability is observed in Charo's interlanguage with respect to the use of HAVE/ HAS. As a general rule, Charo uses HAVE in affirmative sentences with singular NP subjects 50 percent of the time (i.e., in five out of ten sentences). When using HAVE as modal, Charo's written and oral output systematically shows that she has yet to approximate target-like usage.

Following three months of individualized, job-specific instruction, which included taking dictation, writing job-related, content-specific assignments, as well as audiotaping and transcribing pronunciation exercises (i.e., short reading assignments), Charo's use of modal HAS exhibited changes. It is shown that her use of modal HAS in the first- and third-person plural is mainly target-like, although her production of modal HAS in the third-person singular remains non-target-like. At Time III, a backsliding process (i.e., returning to a previous state of IL development, characterized by the use of non-target-like constructions) is in evidence with respect to the use of modal HAS/HAVE in the first-person plural.

In contrast to the uses of modal HAS, usage of lexical HAS/HAVE in Charo's IL constructions shows change over time. From the outset, Charo's utterances were characterized by a systematic target-like use of lexical HAVE in first-person singular and in first-person plural, a pattern that persists throughout Time II. Target-like usage of lexical HAS also extends to the third-person plural. Her usage of lexical HAS/HAVE in the third-person singular exhibited a high degree of variability through time, as it approximates target-like usage.

By Time III, she had reached target-like performance with respect to the use of lexical HAVE in the third-person singular, but at times she seemed to backslide, producing non-target-like constructions which had been initially present at Time I. This may constitute an integral feature of her IL or be part of the IL modification process alluded to by Ellis (1985). We need to develop procedures in LSP/IL in order to be sure.

It is difficult to explain the variability in Charo's use of the third-person "-s"; its usage is variable, which means that she senses that the "-s" should be there for regular verbs, but does not always put it there. Perhaps she has "frozen" at an early stage of second language development, since there is a relatively low frequency with which these verbs occur in her oral and written interlanguage. The stem form seems sufficient in the majority of cases.

In the samples analyzed for the three time periods, Charo's basic method of negating is "DON'T + Stem"; she uses "DON'T + Stem" as her means of negating 7 out of 11 times when negation is performed. She also uses inflected forms ("doesn't" rendered as "dosn't"), but in a non-target-like manner, demonstrating that she is aware that she should be inflecting the verb in some way, but does not yet control the target-like patterns of inflection in negative structures.

In comparison to the overall pattern of BE inflections in Charo's IL, it seems evident that her use of "HAVE + Negation" shows much less control. One explanation could be that she has overlearned the inflections of BE relative to the rest of her English competence, or has "frozen" at some level of cognitive awareness on negation and the other irregular inflections such as HAVE. Another plausible explanation for her non-target-like use of DOESN'T and HAS is that these could be instances of hypercorrection; that is, they may represent developmentally advanced forms of which Charo is aware, but she has not yet acquired rules for their appropriate distribution. Since these are definitely more marked forms, these deviations from target-like usage would not be easily explained as "spontaneous" acquisition errors. The acquisition of rules for the distribution of target-like forms in appropriate contexts would hopefully be accomplished in an instructional

program that focuses on achieving target-like usage in job-related or context-specific situations.

Looking at her tense usage in the compositions examined over Time Periods I, II, and III, we find that there are 39 clauses in which a past form of the verb was clearly needed. An inspection of her verb usage over time shows that she marks past tense with irregular verbs much more frequently than with regular verbs. This is in keeping with the results of previous studies in second language acquisition (Krashen 1982). These and other findings, as reported on by Wolfram (1985), suggest that tense marking is favored with irregular verb forms in the earlier stages of second language learning. We may thus speculate that Charo's IL has become "frozen" at an early stage of second language development.

The possible intersection of the phonological process with the grammatical process in accounting for surface unmarking in Charo's IL is also being investigated. It was hypothesized that the past tense morpheme was influenced by the succeeding phonetic environment, but we did not find any evidence of phonetic conditioning of past tense usage. The main factor conditioning the presence of the past tense appears to be whether the verb is one of the set of irregular verbs for which she knows the lexical past tense form. One may speculate that for her, these lexical forms represent semantic memories relating to the affective domain (family/home environment); these are easily accessible as semantic schemata when she is faced with the challenge of performing a meaningful task, such as writing a composition on a familiar topic (Hamilton 1983).

In her use of the present perfect, she uses the forms BEEN and BEING in the expected present perfect context. It appears that she is not explicitly aware of the actual target form HAS/HAVE BEEN. Her consistency in using this non-target-like form BEEN seems to derive from exposure to spoken non-standard Philadelphia English. In Charo's case, reinforcement of the non-target-like usage comes from daily verbal exchanges with her neighbors (primarily Blacks and Hispanics), and from face-to-face interaction with

low-income Black, White, and Hispanic patients at her place of employment. The existence of these conditions has been verified by site visits to her work place.

Discussion

The data we have to date show that there has been limited development in most areas of Charo's IL over time. This may be due to the input available to her in most discourse domains, i.e., home, neighborhood, work. As this researcher has been able to establish, Charo uses her IL in three principal domains: the home/family environment, where codeswitching constitutes a regular feature of daily interaction; the hospital setting (or work environment); and the racially-mixed neighborhood. Charo reports that she codeswitches 25% of the time when interacting with her three children, who are primarily English dominant; Spanish is used at all times with her husband. In dealing with her neighbors, Charo uses varieties of both languages, Puerto Rican Spanish and non-standard Philadelphia English. The functions for each language in the workplace have been described above.

The verbal input available to Charo at her place of employment is also limited in terms of exposure to standard English grammatical features. She reports that the doctors and nurses often rely on her to interpret for them when treating Spanish-speaking patients. However, she has little ongoing interaction with native-speaker staff, and they seldom correct her IL non-target-like utterances.

In our data the subject shows a growing tendency toward overinflection of certain forms (e.g., HAS and DOESN'T) which may be related to the availability of these features in input from the tutor. It is indeed the case in our data that HAS and DOESN'T are emphasized by her tutor in the rewriting process.

In terms of dealing with the problem of the extent to which it is possible for the language specialist to manipulate the "unique" rules present in the IL of a second-language learner, it is clear from our data that we have barely begun to scratch the surface. Charo, as well as many other apparently "fossilized" learners, needs considerably

more time and exposure to individualized and group instructional programs. Since her experience at the College with the traditional ESL curriculum and remedial courses had not been fruitful, initially we were at a loss in coming up with a suitable instructional format that would meet her job-specific and career-related language needs. Hence, lack of adequate teaching materials, unavailability of properly trained personnel, and time constraints hampered the initial delivery of appropriate instructional services needed for dealing with "fossilized" second-language learners. To deal with the need for materials we are presently preparing an ESP manual which we hope will provide us with an opportunity to experiment with teaching materials that are job-related and that contain communicative exercises stressing functional uses of language in context-specific situations (Widdowson 1981).

Given the fact the Charo's situation is representative of a large number of our students, we look forward to preparing language-specific materials to be used in conjunction with several of the instructional strategies described above. Attempting to destabilize the "unique" rules and features of a "fossilized" learner's IL presents a tremendous challenge for most of our ESL professionals.

Now that we have some preliminary IL descriptive results in a non-LSP context, the next step is a comparison of the IL in the actual LSP work context; here, it will be recalled, success in producing documents in standard English is crucial to her job. We plan to investigate how IL forms related to success and non-success in the workplace match up with the pedagogical input we are providing.

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