

LINGUISTIC OVERGENERALIZATION: WHAT PROVOKES THIS PHENOMENON?

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Abstract

Language acquisition is a natural cognitive process that is long-term and complex of human activities. It is a sophisticated structure that makes people different from other beings. From an early age, the human brain struggles to enhance communicative capabilities. Language mastery develops step by step starting with the baby's crying gradually growing into short utterances and eventually producing meaningful speech. Subtleties in the child's language development have been a focus of numerous studies and collections of research.

Introduction

How do children learn their first language? This question has been central to cognitive science. One of the stages of language acquisition is forming generalizations that allow speakers to make their utterances easier to produce, mostly due to their incorrect assumptions. Overgeneralization or "errors in early word use" or "developmental errors" (Wikipedia, 2020) are linguistic mistakes that are made by children in their initial language mastering as well as novel learners of the target language. It is a common phenomenon in language that implies overextension of one rule that incorporates cases for which that rule is not acceptable.

There are behavioral, morphological, syntactical, and semantical overgeneralizations. For instance, in English, there are regular and irregular verbs in the past simple. Novel speakers tend to attach -ed ending to every single verb, without paying attention to its type thus unconsciously making it simpler for them to produce the language. Another example is verb opposites: do – undo, break – unbreak, pack – unpack. Reversative prefixation errors can be found in other non-applicable verbs, like in, unsit, uneat, unblow, etc.

This paper intends to examine the language acquisition process from the perspective of forming generalizations. A plethora of research and studies were conducted on the aspect of language acquisition. Some of the findings were quite convincing while others seemed hypothetical and predictive, so they needed evidence. This research will try to analyze second language acquisition from the angle of making generalizations to demonstrate the fact that it is an inevitable part of a child's second language acquisition and that in a certain time the retreat from overgeneralization takes place. While conducting the research it is reasonable to keep in mind that the participant is undergoing the prepuberty period which is considered to be critical in language acquisition. The proposed study analyzes the following questions. What causes overgeneralization? What are the positive and negative effects of it, if any, on language acquisition? The questions will be discussed through the analysis of work that has been done by the case study participant.

Literature Review

Overgeneralization is a phenomenon in language acquisition that involves the application of one rule to cover the instances to which that rule does not relate. This cognitive trend is utilized to reduce linguistic burden in morphological, semantical, syntactical, and behavioral facets (Saidan, 2011, p.186).

There are countless theories and studies on linguistic overgeneralization. As per Harakchiyska (2011), for learners, overgeneralization is the way to make a learning assignment more convenient by applying the rules to linguistic norms where they are not appropriate. It means that the learners intentionally plan to make up their own linguistic rules even though these rules are probably incorrect. According to Cabrera and Zubizarreta (2005), the errors that the learners make are triggered by their lack of expertise in the field of lexical-semantic elements that define which word classes interchange in a sentence.

As for morphological overgeneralization, Tyler, and Nagy (1987) reported that this kind of overgeneralization is defined as the knowledge of the relational concept. This is the knowledge that two words are morphologically linked to each other; that is, they have shared lexical base (e.g., argue – argument as opposed to off – offer or depart- department) (p.3) The misuse of morphological knowledge may occur when the learners cannot identify the right position of those suffixes and consequently they want to apply it to more familiar grammar structures. Furthermore, learners sometimes confuse countable and uncountable nouns. They commonly add plural inflection to an uncountable noun, i.e. money – moneys.

It is also known from the previous studies that the learners are conscious of making overgeneralization. Baker (1979) found that children are exposed to language structures that they overgeneralize thus forming the general structure of the language. Language learners recover from these overgeneralizations, despite the deficiency of negative evidence and the eternity of acceptable structures that remain unnoticed (Onnis and Robert. 2002, p.1). Learners retreat from their overgeneralization as a part of the language acquisition process.

As per Baker (2011), the child comes with all the instruments that he needs for acquiring, generating, and understanding language whereas other factors are not equally vital. Overgeneralization errors that are not given sufficient support to are eventually shifted with correct forms that accumulate occasional support over a while. For example, unbuild is a rare verb in the input which is why the child gradually comes to the more appropriate forms such as dismantle or knockdown.

Ambridge and Lieven (2011) argue that overgeneralization errors are mainly produced in children's acquisition rather than in an adult's acquisition. When children are exposed to a great deal of new linguistic units, they collect frequently heard words and apply them to refer to other analogous items. As proof, all four-legged animals might be called a dog, cat, horse, etc. by children.

However, there is a different view of children's overgeneralization habit. Plunkett and Marchman (1991) identified in their reproduction of learning English past tense that percentages of overgeneralizations are at a low level. Measuring the overgeneralization ratio from figures of 25 English-speaking children, Markus et al. (1992) claimed as well that it is

relatively low. They also added that overgeneralization still was the case at a low level among schoolchildren and was distinctly sporadic among adults.

In an academic context, teachers usually regard students' overgeneralization errors as an absence of progress. Van Patten and Benati (2010) note that these errors are, on the contrary, markers of learners' linguistic growth. Selinker (1972), likewise, points out that overgeneralization is seen as a positive cognitive process in the improvement of students' interlanguage knowledge. Therefore, educators are not recommended to view the errors of overgeneralization as a "step back" and blame themselves for ineffective teaching methods, but rather, they should encourage learners and provide corrective feedback.

Participant Profile

As a participant of the study, a ten-year-old schoolgirl was selected. Laylo originates from an Uzbek family whose native language is Uzbek. Parents as well as grandparents are bilingual; they speak both Uzbek and Russian interchangeably. Early years were spent in kindergarten where most of the children were Russian speakers. Therefore, she developed communicative skills in both languages.

As for the cultural background, the subject of the study is a representative of the eastern culture, where liberal and critical views are not common. Laylo speaks three languages appropriate to her age level: Uzbek, which is native, Russian, which is a second state language, and English, as a foreign language. Hence, she is multilingual. Uzbek is mostly spoken within the family and neighborhood; Russian is practiced at school, home, and with friends. English is being learned by the participant in a language center. At the age of one and six months, she began to go to kindergarten, and ever since that time she has acquired the Russian language and gained elementary level so far.

From an early age, Laylo has picked the words from her surrounding processing them in her brain and producing the final product. She was exposed to the dialogues, instructions in all the three languages through which she has been learning the grammar structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation. She has both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn English; she was never forced to learn this language, the desire comes from within; she is eager to communicate in this language and find out a lot about English people and their culture. As regards to extrinsic motivation, she strives for a better future to enter the university and get a good job. Parents play an important role in her life since they encourage her at every step and one of the parents is a speaker of English, which in turn, is a great benefit for her.

Learning English at the language center gives her great pleasure; as she says she is fond of playing games, watching videos, listening to music, and singing songs. At the center they practice an up-to-date approach of integrated skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Laylo demonstrates great interest in listening to English songs, watching movies and cartoons in English, and reading books. She is keen on communicating with her friends and family members in this language to practice the language and improve speaking skills. She does a lot of writing in English and finds it interesting to retell short stories.

I found that Laylo is an appropriate candidate for the research being conducted because she is going through her prepuberty period where the study of overgeneralization would be of enormous value.

Research Design

To examine the existing competence of the subject a pre-test was assigned in the form of a grammar quiz. The quiz consisted of several gap-filling exercises that focused on present simple, past simple and plural nouns. In most of the exercises, the beginning of the sentences was given, and the subject had to complete these sentences. One of the exercises asked to study the information first and then produce appropriate sentences. In the table, there was information regarding two people, and the participant was asked to make up sentences in the present simple using the third person singular. In another exercise, it was required to make singular nouns plural.

The initial test results showed that the participant had difficulties in the usage of the third person singular suffix in the present simple. The past simple was also an issue for the participant in terms of regular and irregular verbs. Even though the subject was provided with the list of irregular verbs, she was eager to affix irregular verbs. As for the plural nouns, the problem occurred with the irregular plurals that do not follow any conventional spelling. Nearly 50 percent of the quiz was done with mistakes.

To improve the participant's proficiency series of lessons were conducted. The lessons aimed at working out the strategies that would help the participant comprehend the peculiarities of the given topics. Laylo was given the lists of irregular and regular verbs, irregular nouns, and the chart of present simple verbs with pronouns. She had to learn those lists, therefore she carried them everywhere and whenever she had the chance, learned them.

For better memorization of irregular verbs, she was taught to group alike irregular verbs with the help of the video in which an English instructor sings a song, *take took taken, shake shook shaken*. Irregular nouns list contained unique words that do not follow conventional rules. Again, to make it easy to learn those nouns the participant was exposed to the video where the native speaker presents irregular nouns in a song form. Present simple was taught and explained by me explicitly along with providing examples and subjecting to a great deal of practice. To increase competitiveness, I initiated a gamified lesson on a website, quiz.com, where she was asked to do a multiple-choice task.

While doing these activities, Laylo expressed great interest and demonstrated commitment, however, learning long lists of irregular verbs and nouns seemed challenging from time to time. To make it easier for the participant to handle the list of irregular verbs, I reduced the number of verbs to be learned to match her age and adapted them appropriate to her level. She felt joy and enthusiasm towards learning as the videos created a positive atmosphere. She found the rhyming irregular verbs song especially hilarious because the instructor was so professional that he could easily grab her attention. Online multiple-choice tasks on the present simple also fostered interest since she was competing with others. Overall, she enjoyed the lessons and the activities that were given to her, though it seemed a bit tiring and difficult at times.

Data collection and findings

According to the aim of the study, the participant was pre-tested after she had given her consent to participate in the study. To keep the track of the dynamics that occurred in the subject of the research, I chose note-taking as a strategy. Bearing in mind the fact that the participant was in her critical period of language acquisition, linguistic overgeneralization of the participant was not as much of the issue as it seemed before starting the research. Undoubtedly, learning long lists of verbs and nouns was a great challenge, and digesting the third person singular in the present simple proved to be an uneasy task; however, she demonstrated perseverance and was able to manage the difficulties to a large extent.

Pre-test results revealed linguistic overgeneralizations of morphological structure. In simple past and present as well as in irregular plural nouns the participant produced several errors.

The online quiz appeared to be engaging at first, the participant demonstrated interest and excitement, however, seeing that she is not among the top three leaders discouraged her a bit. She was assigned to complete present simple and past simple quizzes, with 11 and 15 questions, respectively. Doing the quizzes on this website requires not only knowledge of the subject, but also an ability for speedy answers and dexterity. For a ten-year-old, it seemed a bit challenging to do the quizzes, but she persisted for the sake of competition.

After failing the quiz several times, gaining unsatisfactory results, that is 60 percent of overall performance, finally, she was able to succeed. The results showed that she had 9 correct answers out of 11 for simple present, and 12 correct answers out of 15 for simple past, equating to 80 percent of overall performance. The quiz provided a retaking option that was beneficial for the participant to review her mistakes. I watched her as she retook the test and commented on each question and answer providing corrective feedback.

Home culture and mother tongue greatly affect the learner's foreign language acquisition process, especially in our country, where most of the families are bilingual, as Russian is considered a second state language. The participant of the study is not an exception; she has been learning Uzbek and Russian simultaneously, making comparisons and language transfers to both languages. Throughout the study it was noticeable that she tried to make shifts from her mother tongue to the target language, like in "qiladi, qilasan, qilaman – I doing, you does, he does". Here she tries to affix the verb to indicate its belonging to different pronouns. Post-test results revealed marked improvement.

As can be seen, at the initial stage, generalizations were common; nonetheless, after a series of conducted lessons, guidance, and corrective feedback the situation improved for the greater part. The subject demonstrated positive dynamics in the retreat from making overgeneralizations due mostly to a great deal of practice and commitment. The process of overgeneralizations step by step led the participant to retreat from it leaving out most of the errors, after all, it is not said in vain, that one should learn from the mistakes.

Conclusion

In sum, this research was essential to examine second language acquisition from the point of view of making overgeneralizations. The research found that this phenomenon is caused largely by the young novel speakers of language because certain linguistic forms are subject to complex neurological processes in the brain. These processes trigger young learners to simplify these forms to make it easier to produce.

The participant was able to retreat from overgeneralizations because she is in her prepuberty age that proves to be a favorable period to acquire languages. As CPH states, there is a period in human life in which the brain can successfully attain language proficiency like in no other period. (Lenneberg, et.al., 1967). Referring to the focus of the research and the posed questions, it can be said that linguistic overgeneralizations are bound to happen in a child's second language acquisition process, carrying both positive and negative connotations. Negative effects do not outweigh the positive ones because failures eventually lead to success.

Having worked with the participant for a certain time, I have concluded that language acquisition is a complex process that requires an ample amount of time, perseverance, and attention. As Crystal (2013) reports, there is no other more complex facet of human behavior than language. Language consists of intricate phonetic systems, grammar, and vocabulary, and teaching them is the most difficult job in the world.

Teaching young learners can be difficult at times, however, it is worth doing it because the reward will not keep you waiting, as it is connected with the critical period of language acquisition. It is recommended for educators not to be discouraged by learners' overgeneralizations as it is one step forward, not a leap back. As I have found out from my research, a combination of constant observation, cultural awareness, a variety of activities, and corrective feedback served its purpose. Videos, songs, interactive games make immense contributions to the improvement of language skills.

Even though perfect mastery of present and past simple, as well as plural nouns, was not achieved during the research period, I believe that adequate knowledge and experience was gained by the participant. To reiterate the above-mentioned words, it is recommended to language trainers be tolerant with the young learners in terms of their linguistic overgeneralizations and provide high-quality instruction and feedback.

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Appendix

Simple past	Simple present	Irregular plural nouns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>sing – singed</i> <i>fight – fought</i> <i>become – becomed</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bill and Rosie <i>likes</i> dogs. They <i>doesn't</i> sell newspapers in that shop. She doesn't <i>works</i> very hard. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>child – childrens</i> <i>fish – fishs</i> <i>sheep – sheeps</i> <i>tooth – tooths</i> <i>foot – foots</i>

Simple past	Simple present	Irregular plural nouns
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>sing – sang</i>• <i>fight – fought</i>• <i>become – became</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bill and Rosie <i>like</i> dogs.• They <i>don't</i> sell turtles in that shop.• She doesn't <i>works</i> very hard.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>child – childrens</i>• <i>fish – fish</i>• <i>sheep – sheep</i>• <i>tooth – teeth</i>• <i>foot – feet</i>