

# **The Role of Instruction, Rate and Route in Second Language Acquisition**

**Ressy Novasyari**  
**The University of Palembang**  
**ecysoeharda@gmail.com**

**M. Fahmi Fadli**  
**The University of Palembang**

## **Abstract**

In this globalization era, English has become a big issue around the English Foreign Learners (EFL). Many people need to use English as tool to communicate with other people from the world as it is considered that English is an international language. Language is the method of expressing ideas and emotions in the form of signs and symbols. These signs and symbols are used to encode and decode the information. There are many languages spoken in the world. The first language learned by a baby is his or her mother tongue. It is the language, which he or she listens to from his or her birth. Any other language learned or acquired is known as the second language. This paper discusses three aspects in second language acquisition. The first is instruction, the second is rate, and the third is route.

**Keywords : Instruction, Rate and Route**

## **1. Introduction**

In this globalization era, English has become a big issue around the English Foreign Learners (EFL). Many people need to use English as tool to communicate with other people from the world as it is considered that English is an international language. Language is the method of expressing ideas and emotions in the form of signs and symbols. These signs and symbols are used to encode and decode the information. There are many languages spoken in the world. The first language learned by a baby is his or her mother tongue. It is the language, which he or she listens to from his or her birth. Any other language learned or acquired is known as the second language.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to the process by which a person learns and acquires a foreign language. It is the product where people do the real interactions around people in target language's environment as an active player while developing the communicative ability. This is the process where people who already acquire their first language, try to add another language. Actually SLA happens in natural environment of the people in target language. This activity focuses on spoken activity because it deals with the international communication. As Edmondson explains that acquiring activity is also called

natural learning when people use their second language in the environment and culture where that language is used (1999, p.5). Therefore, acquiring is different with learning because in learning happens in conscious way while acquiring is in unconscious way.

There are three aspects in second language acquisition. The first is *instruction*, the second is *rate*, and the third is *route*. Instruction is a part of teaching like method or strategy. Rates is how fast the learners learn language. Route is the way the learners learn. Does instruction make a difference? The issue was raised in the conclusions voiced in Felix and Weigl (1991). If you want to ask whether instruction makes a difference, then we have to compare it with something else. Because if you have no comparison, to ask whether instruction makes a difference is ridiculous. People can accept that the speed or rate at which they learn is an important variable, inside which instruction may or may not play a role. But there is another interpretation, which compares natural and instructed learning, not *globally* in terms of degree of progress, but *specifically* in terms of how progress is made. The comparison concerns, not how far you get along the road, assisted by instruction or the environment, but which road you take. The difference between these two ways of making a difference can be voiced in English as a phonological minimal pair: we are either looking for a difference in *rate*, or we are looking for a difference in *route*. Unless a difference in route automatically entails a difference in rate – unless, in other words, taking a different road always makes the journey longer.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Concept of Instruction**

Edmondson stated that the term ‘instruction’ is skewed, and is used ambiguously. It may mean teaching in general, or it may mean a particular kind of teaching. In asking whether instruction makes a difference, we may be asking therefore whether classrooms, institutions, and other formal attempts to further learning – whether any of this whole package “makes a difference”, or we may be asking whether particular elements in the pedagogic package – for example the communication of grammatical rules, the insistence on explicit rehearsal, repetitive exercise – whether these “make a difference”.

There is an experimental scenario, in order to test whether or not instruction makes a difference. In this thought experiment, you have one group of learners, the experimental group, who get instruction. In fact they go to Russian classes offered at a German university. The other group, the control group, don’t – they just live their normal lives. Then after three

months you test both groups to see which one has learnt more Russian. It's a very strong guess that the instructed group would show greater proficiency! This would prove that instruction makes a difference.

### **The Concept of Rate**

Rate is the speed at which learners are learning the L2, or the outcome of the learning process (how proficient learners become), or both. We all know that both speed of learning and range of outcomes are highly variable from learner to learner: some do much better much more quickly than others.

### **Variability in rate**

The rate of acquisition and the outcome of the acquisition process are highly variable, unlike L1 acquisition in which children seem to progress at roughly similar rates (give or take a few months), and all become native speakers of the language they are exposed to.

It is very difficult to predict in second language acquisition what makes some people learn faster and better than others. Some factors have been isolated as playing some part in this. For example, age is one such factor (Singleton & Lengyel 1995). Although the commonly held view that children are better L2 learners is a gross oversimplification if not a complete myth, differences have been found between children and adults, primarily in terms of eventual outcome. Although teenagers and adults have been found to be generally better and faster L2 learners than young children in the initial stages of the learning process (on a wide range of different measures), children, however, usually carry on progressing until they become indistinguishable from native speakers whereas adults do not, especially as far as pronunciation is concerned. Whether this is due to the process of acquisition having changed fundamentally in adulthood (e.g. because UG is not available anymore once the L1 has been acquired), or for other reasons (e.g. the process remains the same but stops short of native competence), is an issue hotly debated today, and the source of much empirical investigation (Birdsong 1999). The fact remains, though, that the route followed by young and older L2 learners is essentially the same, and is similar in many respects to that followed by children learning that language as a native language.

Another salient difference when comparing L1 and L2 outcomes is that whereas native competence is the norm in the L1 context, it is the exception in the case of L2s. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as fossilization. Some structures seem very difficult to

acquire in the L2, even when there is plenty of input. In immersion programs in Canada, in which English-speaking children are taught the normal curriculum through French and are therefore exposed to large amounts of input within a communicative focus, end results have been mixed. Although these children become very proficient and fluent in French, their accuracy in some areas (e.g. gender, adverb placement etc.; White 1996; Harley 1998; Hawkins 1998) remains far from native-like, suggesting that some aspects of language resist spontaneous acquisition.

In order to explain variability in rate and outcome, SLA researchers have focused primarily on the role of external factors in the acquisition process. As we have seen, one line of research inquiry has addressed questions about the nature of the input and the role of interaction in the learning process. Other lines of inquiry have investigated the role of learner variables, such as intelligence, aptitude, motivation, attitude, as well as the social and sociolinguistic variables which impact on them (Skehan 1989; 1998; Berry 1998; Dörnyei 2001; Sawyer & Ranta 2001). These variables have been found to play an important role in determining how successful learners are. For example, recent motivation research has witnessed something of a boom since the nineties, with research questions becoming more sophisticated and addressing more directly language teaching issues. Motivation is now seen as situation-dependent as well as a relatively stable learner trait, and much work has been carried out investigating issues such as the role of tasks in motivating learners, the role of the teacher in motivating learners, or the role of learning strategies in enhancing motivation (Dörnyei 2001 and 2002). If motivation, as well as other learner variables, is now widely recognized as playing a determining role in SLA, more research needs to be carried out on its pedagogical implications, i.e. on how to motivate learners.

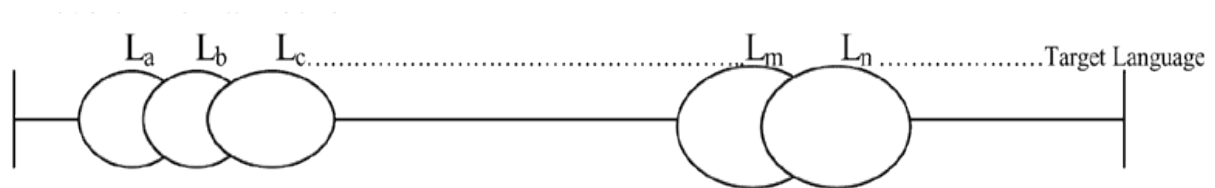
### **The Concept of Route**

Route is the nature of the stages all learners go through when acquiring the second language - L2. This route remains largely independent of both the learner's mother tongue (L1) and the context of learning (e.g. whether instructed in a classroom or acquired naturally by exposure).

A substantial part of the SLA research community has concentrated on documenting and trying to understand the discovery that language learning is highly systematic. A defining moment for the field was in the late 70s / early 80s when it became evident that L2 learners follow a fairly rigid developmental route, in the same way as children learning their L1 do,

and not dissimilar in many respects from the L1 route. Moreover, this developmental route, crudely represented below as a series of interlocking linguistic systems (or interlanguages:  $L_a, L_b, \dots L_n \dots$ ), sometimes bore little resemblance to either the L1 of the learner, or the L2 being learnt.

### Developmental route



Crucially, these interlanguages are linguistic systems in their own right, with their own set of rules. For example, Hernández-Chávez (1972) showed that although the plural is realised in almost exactly the same way in Spanish and in English, Spanish children learning English still went through a phase of omitting plural marking. It had been assumed prior to this that second language learners' productions were a mixture of both L1 and L2, with the L1 either helping or hindering the process depending on whether structures are similar or different in the two languages. This was clearly shown not to be the case, even if the L1 of learners does of course play some role, especially in early stages and more persistently at the level of pronunciation (more about this later).

### Variability in route

Despite the relative rigidity of the L2 learning route, transfer does occur in so far as the L1 has an impact upon L2 learning, even if it remains true that it is primarily in the sense of speeding up the learning process in the case of closely related languages or similar linguistic structures, rather than changing the route of development itself (i.e. learners still follow the same stages, but at different speeds, depending on their L1). For example, Italian learners of French will acquire the idiosyncratic placement of object pronouns in French more quickly than say English learners because it is similar in both languages, but they will still go through the same stages, when in fact transferring their L1 structure would lead to acquisition of the correct system. In fact there is ample evidence, in the literature, of transfer not taking place when it would help, and conversely of transfer taking place when it leads to errors. Moreover, transfer often occurs one way and not the other, with English learners of French, for example, producing *la souris mange le* (the mouse eats **it**) rather than *la souris le*

*mange* (the mouse **it** eats), but French learners of English never produce *the mouse it eats* in their interlanguage, which one would expect if transfer was taking place (Hawkins 2001a). But there are also areas in which the L1 gives rise to structures not found in the language of other L2 learners (see e.g. Odlin 1989; Selinker 1992). The impact of the L1 on interlanguage development needs to be better understood, even if its potential influence on SLA remains limited since we know that only a small subsection of structures from the L1 are likely candidates for transfer.

### **The Role of Instructions, Rates and Routes in Second Language Acquisition**

If the students learn without instruction, it means that they have no clear target in their learning process. But for the students who learn with instruction, it must be they have clear target and the teacher will facilitate them to achieve the target. In other words, instruction makes difference in students' rate or speed. The students who learn with instruction can achieve their target faster than the students who learn by themselves.

From the teacher's point of view, the role that formal instruction plays in SLA is important. It has been left to the end because it is an issue that is related to many of the issues discussed in the previous sections. It must be considered in two parts - the effect that instruction has on the route of learning and the effect that it has on rate of learning. There has been little direct study of either of these aspects, largely because of the pedagogic assumption that it is possible to determine both route and rate through teaching.

It has been pointed out that learners may pass through a relatively invariable route in acquiring linguistic competence in a L2. This may be the result of the operation of universal learning strategies which are part of the human faculty for language. Alternatively it may be the result of exposure to particular kinds of input which models at different stages of development just those features which the learner is ready to acquire. If SLA is the result of some kind of 'language acquisition device', which is triggered off only by the linguistic environment, then the learner must be credited with his or her own 'syllabus' which is more or less immune to influence from the outside. If, however, SLA is the result of attending to those features that are frequent and salient in the input, then the possibility arises that there is more than one 'syllabus' for SLA and that a specially constructed input, such as that provided by formal instruction, can influence the order in which the grammar of a L2 is acquired.

The few studies of the effects of formal instruction on the developmental route suggest that the 'natural' route cannot be changed. These are not conclusive, however. Formal instruction can take many different forms and it is possible that the route of development is

amenable to influence by certain methods but not by others. The research undertaken so far may not have investigated the right methods in the right conditions. It is also possible that the 'natural' route reflects a particular type of language use--free, spontaneous conversation--and will be found whenever this is investigated. Formal instruction may not easily influence this type of language use, but it may aid other types, for example those associated with planned speech or writing. Such a view is in accordance with what is known about contextual variability in SLA. Formal instruction may help learners to perform in some types of situation but not in others.

Instruction makes difference in terms of students' rate but not for students' route, because it depends on students' readiness in the classroom. The students are ready to learn, if they can focus on what they learn. This is teacher's responsible to make the students ready to learn.

Irrespective of whether formal instruction affects the order of learning, it may enhance SLA by accelerating the whole process. Learners who receive formal instruction may learn more rapidly than those who do not. The experience of countless classroom learners testifies to this. Even if the L2 knowledge derived from formal instruction is not immediately available for use in spontaneous conversation (a common enough experience), it soon becomes serviceable once the learner has the opportunity to use the L2 in this kind of communication. Formal instruction can have a powerful delayed effect. There is also some research that suggests that formal instruction speeds up SLA.

## **Conclusion**

If we wish to compare natural acquisition without teaching support and natural acquisition with teaching support, then teaching certainly can make difference in terms of rate. But, essentially, if the question "does instruction make a difference in terms of rate of learning?" is to be answered satisfactorily, it has to be reformulated more precisely, and an answer would seem to presuppose a theory of second language acquisition (both enablement and achievement).

The more interesting interpretation of the question "does instruction make a difference?" in terms of route or mode, it is not easy to give a snap answer. Clearly, there are aspects of the human mind that will necessarily come into operation given any learning task, such that to say that you can do anything via teaching is clearly nonsense. More concretely, it seems plausible that rather complex bundles of rules in language learning may well be learnt in a particular sequence, or at least in a preferred sequence.

## References

- Edmondson, W. (1999). *Twelve lectures on second language acquisition*. Germany. Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen.
- Ellis, R. (2005). *Instructed second language acquisition*. Wellington. Ministry of Education, New Zealand.
- Myles, F. *Second language acquisition (SLA) research: its significance for learning and teaching issues*. Retrieved from <http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/421> . Accessed on December 14, 2012.
- Ryfdnet. (2007). *The role of formal instruction in second language acquisition*. Retrieved from <http://ryfdnet.wordpress.com/category/the-role-of-formal-instruction-in-second-language-acquisition/> . Accessed on December 14, 2012.