Hi guys. How are you doing? I hope you’re good and able to do your daily well. In today’s posting, I’m going to discuss one of the important terms in the field of language acquisition; the logical problem of language learning. Have you heard it before? If you haven’t, let us see what we can know and get benefit from it.

Well, ‘the logical problem of language learning’ has become the main concern of the applied linguists for decades, especially when discussing children first language acquisition. It regains the controversy, when it is related to the field of the second language acquisition. Some linguists say that it happens in both first and second language acquisition, while others believe it only occurs in the former.

Alright, to make this writing easier to understand, let’s begin with an example.

Do you have a toddler little brother or sister? Have you ever impressed by the way they produce their first language? Well, I’m personally ever amazed by the way my one-year-old-nephew produces his first language fast and effortlessly. Every day, he always tells me the names of new things such as telling his grandfather’s name, kinds of cars, names of side dishes, etc. I wonder how he can acquire those words despite of his immature brain and the insufficient input. It seems impossible that the immature boy like him could produce infinite numbers of sentences beyond the input he receives.

Actually, the applied linguists have already discussed this phenomenon long ago. Let’s check out what they say about this.

Children amazingly show the linguistic competence in L1 beyond their brain capacity to acquire such this complex system. The linguists cannot give a comprehensive view on this phenomenon and can only assume that children’s brain is endowed by language faculty that help them acquire L1 positively. This capacity is more than general-purpose intelligence as children’s brain hasn’t matured yet to comprehend this complex system. The linguists call this phenomenon as “the paradox of language acquisition”; children acquire the abstractions beyond their comprehension.

Children’s L1 acquisition that is described in the example above cannot be explained by the simple behaviorist schema; children get the input and then process it and finally produce the language. Very often, many facts show that children somehow produce the language beyond the input they receive. They initially acquire finite numbers of sentences and somehow develop them into infinite ones.

We can prove this argument by observing two evidences. Firstly, in many examples, parents often fail to correct children’s language error. It indicates that children don’t imitate the adults and they produce the language beyond the input they receive. Secondly, many children all-over the world show the universal patterns of development despite of their different L1. It is called the universal principles. It means that these patterns cannot be explained by language-specific input. We name this phenomenon as “the poverty-of-stimulus” argument.

Amazingly, children first language acquisition always shows positive evidence. With some exceptions in those who damage their brain, normal children reach the final state of L1 grammar by the end of five years of his age. They never fail to comprehend this complex system despite some limitations that have been mentioned previously.

So why do the children acquire their L1 effortlessly and always show positive evidence?

Many linguists have proposed many possible answers for this question. One of them is Noam Chomsky, the linguistics professor in MIT, who propose the innateness theory which is the
underlying theory of **Universal Grammar (UG)**. According to this theory, God has facilitated the children with the innate language faculty that somehow make them able to acquire L1. It is exclusively endowed for human being, not for other creations.

This theory can be a possible answer for why children produce a language that is beyond the input they receive and why they are able to acquire the complexity of language system despite of their immature brain. This theory is fundamentally against the behaviorism which lays its foundation on S-R theory.

So what is actually Universal Grammar that becomes the central point of this article? Chomsky defines it, “the system of principles, conditions and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages”. This theory has a great influence in the field of language acquisition till now.

After knowing the existence of ‘the logical problem’ in L1 acquisition especially in the critical period of the children, we may ask another question; does it still exist in second language acquisition?

The answer to this question has been written by Lightbown and Spada in his book ‘How Languages are Learned’.

Lydia White (2003a) thinks that UG theory can be the best perspective for understanding second language acquisition. It means that ‘the logical problem’ may be still found in L2 acquisition as well as in L1. It gives us the hope that L2 learners can enjoy the ease that L1 learners have. This argument, thus, believes that L1 acquisition is similar with SLA.

On the contrary, Robert Brey-Vroman (1983) and Jacquelyn Schacher (1990) have different argument. Both agree that the Universal Grammar is only available for L1 learners and doesn’t exist in second language acquisition. Instead of that, they propose that the general psychological theories may be used to explain SLA.

Vivian Cook (2003) admits that many L2 learners fail to reach the complete mastery of the target language, but he still believes that ‘the logical problem’ still exists in SLA; even say that it is available partly. Many evidences show that L2 learners show a particular language performance; even they have not got enough input on it.

Analyzing these statements, it can be concluded that there are three main hypotheses regarding the answer to above question; some theorists think that the concept of UG exists in both L1 and L2, while others oppose it and believe that L1 is extremely different with L2. Meanwhile, other linguists mediate these contrastive thoughts by saying that UG maybe still exist in L2 even it is available partly. We see most of L2 learners cannot reach the complete mastery of the target language.

Alright, it is the end of our discussion about the logical problem of language learning. I hope it can be useful for you all. Bye for now.

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**References:**