A Review of Richard Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis

Do Na Chi*

Faculty of Foreign Languages, An Giang University, Vietnam

*Corresponding Author: Do Na Chi, Faculty of Foreign Languages, An Giang University, Vietnam

Abstract: This paper examines the Noticing Hypothesis proposed by Richard Schmidt in second language acquisition. The hypothesis is widely known for its elaboration on how language acquisition occurs through assistance of a number of factors, among which noticing is seen to be crucial since without it, further stages in language acquisition do not happen. It is explained that noticing is a very supportive element for the creation of intake which is an inevitable stage in the process of language acquisition. However, major research on the hypothesis lies around the works of Richard Schmidt who proposes this theory. Hence, there should be a review of further research on how noticing works in the process of second language acquisition. In this paper, the view of noticing is in-depth explored based on highly recognised research in the field with the hope to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of this assistant for better acquisition of the target language.

Keywords: Noticing Hypothesis, Second Language, Acquisition, Supportive, Intake

1. INTRODUCTION

Theories and frameworks have been proposed to help create better understanding of how the process of language acquisition takes place in order to provide supportive environments and influences on this process (Ellis, 1994; Gass, 1997; Krashen, 1985; Leow, 1997, 2000; Schmidt, 1990, 2001). A theory examines an aspect in the process of language acquisition. For example, Krashen (1985) is exceptionally well-known for his Input Hypothesis indicating the significance of input in language acquisition. Swain (1995) investigated output and created Output Hypothesis which emphasises on output and further explores whether one’s acquisition can be seen through his/her output. However, there is an essential need for a work that can cover the whole process of language acquisition to provide a comprehensive view of this process. Notably, Gass (1997) Framework of Second Language Acquisition is highly appreciated for its relevance in explaining how input as the starting point is further processed to reach the final stage of output. This framework is supported by numerous researchers (Reinders, 2005, 2012; Schmidt, 1990, 2001, Sun, 2008).

Although Gass’s framework is highly acknowledged, some stages in this framework need more supports and clarifications to obtain a clearer view of SLA process. Through reviewing a wide range of works for modifications of the framework, Richard Schmidt with his Noticing Hypothesis, based on his own experience as a foreign language learner, is noted. The hypothesis mainly focuses on how input is transferred to intake under the support of learners’ ability to notice the target features in the provided input. Noticing Hypothesis has received high volume of attention since researchers also agree that it is a very significant issue in order to support the process of language acquisition (Ellis, 1994; Leow, 1997, 2000; Mackey, 2006; Rosa & O’Neill, 1999; Soleimani & Najafi, 2012). Being aware of how important noticing is in SLA, the paper therefore has its primary goal of undertaking an in-depth investigation on this issue in SLA.

2. WHAT IS NOTICING?

The term noticing has been extensively used in many discussions of SLA (Ellis, 1994; Leow, 1997, 2000; Mackey, 2006; Rosa & O’Neill, 1999; Soleimani & Najafi, 2012). It was introduced through the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt & Frota, 1986) and subsequently elaborated by Schmidt (1990, 1993, 1995, 2010). This hypothesis emphasises on noticing as a crucial condition for language learning. In the hypothesis, the term noticing refers to “conscious registration of the occurrence of events” (Schmidt, 1995, p.29). That is to say, noticing can help learners realise the existence of something in the input (Schmidt, 1990, 1993, 1995, 2001, 2010). To illustrate, in the case of oral
input, when a non-native speaker recognises the inflectional morpheme “-s” in “It will take six weeks” spoken by a native speaker (Schmidt, 1993, p.213), it can be concluded that the learner has actually noticed the “-s” in the input. Schmidt (1995, p.30) also provided another example of written input, “He goes to school”. In this example, if learners recognise the “-es” attached to the verb “go”, it can be said that the feature “-es” has been noticed. In Schmidt’s (1990, 2010) work, noticing belongs to the concept of awareness. Schmidt (1990, 1995, 2001, 2010) tempted to classify different levels of awareness and develop a position where noticing is included and seen as occurring at a very low level. Therefore, the concept of noticing is restricted to only learners’ recognition of the existence of a grammatical feature in the input; this noticing does not necessarily include understanding of that feature. The ongoing question is how learners’ recognition of a linguistic feature can assist their language development.

3. THE ROLE OF NOTICING IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Schmidt (1990) confirmed the lack of empirical research to prove the role of noticing in learning. Hence, he saw his own study with Frota (Schmidt & Frota, 1986) as a significant proof of how crucial noticing is in language learning. According to Schmidt and Frota (1986), only what is noticed will be learned. Schmidt’s own study of learning Portuguese allowed him to come to the conclusion that if a form is not taught or is absent in input, there is no occurrence of that form in speech. More importantly, there is no guarantee that a form will appear in the production of speech even though it has been taught explicitly, unless it is noticed (Schmidt and Frota, 1986). This study is mainly based on Schmidt’s diaries of what he noticed in the input which he encountered through classroom instructions or daily interactions and subsequently compared to his production. As such, Schmidt (1990) viewed evidence of the relationships that he uncovered as “strong evidence for a close connection between noticing and emergence in production” (p.141). Schmidt’s position in the relation to noticing as a crucial condition for language learning has not changed. In his later works, he in fact became more determined about the importance of noticing in language learning when he stated that learning, in either explicit or implicit form, requires learners’ noticing of the target features before any other processes happen (Schmidt, 1995, 2010).

Later, the role of noticing became extensively researched and accepted as an integral condition in language learning. The point which researchers agree on is that to be able to acquire a target feature in the input, learners should firstly be able to recognise that target feature. This recognition is an initial condition without which there are no further processes for acquisition of that feature. For example, Leow (1997, 2000) examined learners’ learning outcomes in relation to different levels of awareness and concluded that those learners who fail to notice the target features are not able to obtain any awareness of the target forms. Therefore, they do not incorporate those target features effectively in their output. In addition, Mackey (2006) showed the effects of noticing on learners’ performances with the focus on question forms. She documented that those learners, who report their noticing of how questions are formed, are able to produce questions in a target-like manner. However, Mackey (2006) did not make any claims as to whether noticing can support language development in other aspects of grammatical form. Soleimani and Najafi (2012) researched different types of tests (e.g. pop-quizzes and formative tests) and the tests’ effects on learners’ noticing and learning of lexical items. Groups of learners were compared in pre-test and post-test conditions. Their findings were that groups in which noticing is mediated through tests performed better than others where noticing is not mediated. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that in these aforementioned studies, learning is not solely dependent on noticing since there are other factors that enhance or restrict learners’ capacity to notice a target form. These include factors like task types, feedback types, and particular forms that may be more noticeable than other types of forms (e.g. question forms are more noticeable than past tense forms in Mackey’s study).

Other researchers discuss the importance of noticing in helping a learner realise whether or not the target features that learner produces are target-like. To do this, a learner notices how the target features are produced in his/her own output and compares these to how those features are produced by native speakers of that language. So, noticing in this case can be applied to learners’ output phase in comparison to how the target features are provided in the input. This is similar to Schmidt’s (2010) idea of “noticing the gap” where he indicated that when producing the target language, a learner notices the errors compared to features available in the input. To illustrate, Schmidt (2010) studied a non-native speaker of English, named Wes. The speaker was living in an English-speaking
environment. Although Wes was able to successfully communicate, he had problems with his grammar. Schmidt (2010) explained that this was due to the lack of noticing of the differences between the target language produced by English native speakers and Wes’ own production of those grammatical features. Mennim (2007) investigated how noticing fosters a learner’s language development to target-like production of the word “garbage”, which is an uncountable noun. This 9-month study showed that a learner started using the form in a non-target like way as a countable noun but after being exposed to a number of texts in which that word was correctly demonstrated and also through the feedback from his peers, there was an increasing level of accuracy of the target form produced by that learner. Therefore, the importance of noticing as a learner’s recognition of target features or forms is demonstrated not only in the input phase (how those forms are provided) but also in the output phase (how those forms are produced).

Although the importance of noticing is widely accepted by researchers, it seems too early to come to a definitive conclusion that noticing a form actually leads to mastery of that form. Schmidt (1990) realised that some forms, despite being noticed, did not occur in his own later speech. Schmidt (1990) explained that this noticing only happened momentarily, and he did not maintain retention of the noticed forms. Hence, it was concluded that the noticed features are easily forgotten and may not be further processed. If they are not further processed, they are not mastered or acquired. Consequently, the relationship between noticing and acquisition still requires attention. Researchers in the aforementioned studies focused on learners’ accurate language use in their performances, and this was applied to confirm the important role of noticing in learning/acquisition. An important contention was raised by Gass (1997), who argued that learners’ output does not always demonstrate their acquisition; and in some cases, different types of output show different levels of accuracy in learners’ language use. Mennim (2007) also concluded that although learners had noticed and become aware of the word “garbage” as an uncountable noun, in some cases they still produced it incorrectly in their speech. As a result, non-grammatical features in learners’ output may not be able to prove learners’ non-acquisition of those features; the features may have emerged into the learners’ grammar but not been fully mastered. Furthermore, Schmidt (1990, 2010) pointed out that learners’ accurate performances are not definitive proof of acquisition because although learners may notice some grammatical features in the input, they simply memorise and repeat those features in their output, which can still cause above chance performance. Consequently, Schmidt (1990) did not equate learners’ use of those features with their mastery of those features although learners may have been able to notice those features in the input. It has been mentioned that noticing is a very low level of awareness at which learners are only able to recognise the linguistic features in the input, and this recognition may not be sufficient for language acquisition. In fact, learners after recognition of the features need further processes to acquire those features.

Consequently, while it can be agreed that noticing can facilitate language acquisition, we cannot conclude that acquisition is a guaranteed consequence of noticing. This requires further examination. What can be concluded about the role of noticing is that to be able to acquire a target feature, learners should firstly be able to recognise that feature before any further processes can happen.

4. HOW TO SUPPORT LEARNER’S NOTICING OF TARGET FEATURES

Learners’ noticing of certain features in input is influenced by numerous factors. However, there are the two particular points that Gass (1997) and Schmidt (1990) highlighted to be of vital importance, namely frequency and salience of features. For both researchers, the likeliness of input apperception also depends on the frequency of a form in the input. It is stated that the more frequently a form appears, the more likely it is noticed. Salience is also an important factor. For example, word stress, intonation, and position of a word in a sentence can make a form be more recognisable to learners. Leow (1993, 1995) realised that phonological differences and salience in aural input are more likely to help learners notice linguistic items.

Leeser (2004) further provided another factor which is input mode. In his study, the mode of input, whether in aural or written form, can increase or decrease learners’ attention to and recognition of the target form. Leeser (2004), in contrast to Leow (1993, 1995), concluded that written input provides learners greater chances for comprehension of input content and recognition of the target forms.

Although many factors are mentioned to be influential to learners’ noticing, there is yet another important factor, which is attention. I particularly view attention at a highly important position because “attention is central to any concept of noticing” (Gass, 1997, p.9).
Attention is essentially emphasised due to human beings’ limited capacity that prevents them from absorbing all information provided (Kahneman, 1973). When language learners are surrounded by language input, they need some mechanism to help them separate those input data (Gass, 1997; Sun, 2008). Also, Moray (1969) realised that when listeners overwhelmingly absorb a large amount of input at once, the quality of their performances is low. Therefore, learners need to pay their attention to certain types of input at a time. McLaughlin et al (1983) regarded second language learning as an information process in which learners firstly need to obtain the focus of attention before information can be processed.

Although the role of attention is admitted, the question is how attention happens and how it is related to learners’ apperception. Gass (1997) claimed attention as a major factor in a learner’s noticing process but did not clarify how attention supports noticing and how it fits in her framework. Attention, as conceptualised by Tomlin and Villa (1994), involves alertness, orientation, and detection. If alertness has been previously mentioned as a preparation for receiving input, orientation helps learners decide what parts of the input can be processed at further stages. For example, when learners are provided information which can lead to two ways of interpretations, orientation will focus the learners in one way and therefore, the other way is not activated. Detection is defined as the selection of specific parts of information. At this stage of detection, the information registered is stored in memory and processed for learning. Comparing to how Tomlin and Villa (1994) justified attention and its processes, it seems that Gass’s (1997) apperception and Schmidt’s (1995, 2001) noticing closely relate to the stage of detection.

5. **Implications**

Leeser (2004) claimed that mode of input strongly affects the possibility to notice the target features. Hence, he further suggests that input providers modify the provided input to make it more accessible to learners. Besides, Gass (1997) and Schmidt (1990) also reminded of making the target features salient enough to be supportive of noticing and, by extension, language acquisition. Hence, input modifications are of high importance so as to help learners recognise the features in language input.

Regarding input modifications in language learning, Long (1982) suggested (1) modifying the speech using structures and lexis which are familiar to interlocutors, (2) linguistic and extra-linguistic information, and (3) interactional structure of the conversation. Long (1985) simply provided this as a strategy to help language learners understand meaning of messages more easily. However, it should be noted that input modifications in this case are to support learner’s recognition of the target features. The idea input modifications, if not being well-understood, can lead to the omission of the new target features. Krashen (1985) emphasised that input, which is relevant for acquisition, must contain new features or be at a higher level in accordance with learners’ current language level, illustrated by “i+1”. As a result, modifying input with the elimination of unfamiliar or new structures that are essential for language learning will not efficient for acquisition. That is to say, this modification can improve comprehension of the meaning messages delivered to learners but hinder learners’ acquisition of linguistic forms (Oh, 2001). Therefore, among three ways of input modifications, Long (1982) found the second and third ones effective to language acquisition since those two ways aim at making unfamiliar linguistic forms comprehensible to learners but not replacing them with familiar and simple ones. Holding the same concern on learners’ inability to either comprehend input or recognise target features, in educational settings, explicit instructions can be of great help for learners’ noticing ability (Rosa & O’Neill, 1999). This explanation can assist learners in comprehending the input without eliminating new features in input for acquisition. Learners may start by noticing the features and subsequently form an underlying rule or hypothesis retrieved from the features under support of teachers.

Besides, Tomlin and Villa (1994) expected learners to be ready or alerted to receive input, which they believe will be supportive of noticing. For the researchers, input may contain a huge number of new language features for acquisition, and learners may not be able to direct their attention to notice a specific feature. Thus, the point is to help direct learners to the target features of noticing. To do so, Mackey (2006) emphasised teachers’ design of tasks and exercises that can guide learners’ attention to particular forms implicitly. In her belief, a task with such focus on a feature will make that feature more salient to learners, which is previously confirmed by Gass (1997) and Schmidt (1990).
6. CONCLUSION

Input contains many features that cannot all be utilised. As a result, after learners are exposed to input, the significance of noticing is indicated as a device to help learners filter certain aspects of the input for further processing. One point that can be agreed on is that noticing is an initial condition and facilitative for further stages in the process of SLA. However, Schmidt himself admits that noticing has not been a definite guarantee to be sufficient for language acquisition. Therefore, further research is needed to expand the view of language acquisition process occurring after the stage of noticing and to identify factors that may support or hinder noticing in second language acquisition.

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AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Mr. Do Na Chi is currently a lecturer in English at An Giang University, Vietnam. His research interests include second language acquisition, curriculum design, material development, EFL learners’ identity, and discourse analysis.

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