Language awareness in a young L2 learner

Machiko Achiba

1. Introduction

There has been a growing body of research on language awareness as a key factor in second language (L2) development; however, most studies about learners' language awareness of second languages from the perspectives of learners have been carried out with adolescent and adult learners (e.g. Dufon, 2006; Hassall, 2006, 2008; Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2010; Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Xu, Wang & Case, 2010). Children's perception of the target language is rarely investigated; and few studies have explored children's own perspectives of their awareness of their second languages.

Hsieh (2011) examined the subjective experiences of three 5- to 6-year old children learning English as a foreign language in a kindergarten in Taiwan, through a seven-month classroom observation, interviews with the children, their parents, teachers, and their drawings. The children did not develop confidence in their English in spite of three years of learning English in class. While they perceived that learning English was fun in part, they felt it difficult and frustrating. Hsieh attributed this to inappropriate English instruction in class. Although Hsieh explored children's perception of language learning, he did not investigate language awareness in any pinpointed way. Simard (2004) empirically investigated the effects of using diaries for promoting metalinguistic reflection in the L2. The participants were 81 Grade 6 French learners of English, enrolled in an ESL course in Québec, Canada. At the end of each class students were asked to write diaries in their first language (L1) for two months. Tests of metalinguistic ability were also administered at three different times. Students were divided into three groups (Enriched, Regular and Controlled) according to their motivation to learn English and their grades, with Enriched students having the highest of those. She found Enriched students wrote explicit comments about the L2 in their diaries more frequently than other students. The Regular group wrote more about content than metalinguistic reflection. Her results from the pre-test showed that the students were able to make language reflections before they started writing diaries; however, her findings also showed that ability to make metalinguistic reflection did not increase over time. Thus, she concluded that the use of diaries did not enhance the students' ability of language reflection.

Both Hsieh (2011) and Simard (2004) showed that children have abilities to reflect and make comments on language or language learning, regardless of whether their comments were explicit or not. However, in these two studies, the children had been in their English programs for some years before the studies were conducted. In Hsieh's study children had been learning English for three years. Simard did not mention but it is assumed children in her study had been in ESL courses prior to her research, since this study took place in Québec, where, at that time, ESL classes were taught from Grade 4.

Trofimovich (2011) pointed out that studies which concern the earliest stages of L2 learning are scarce. In order to gain a deeper understanding of language awareness, research would need to include studies in which children are observed from the very beginning of their L2 language learning experiences. Moreover, both Hsieh (2011) and Simard (2004) focused on educational settings. Research on out-of-school L2 learning is quite limited in the literature. Therefore, the present study aims to provide information on a child's language awareness from the onset of her second language acquisition outside of formal learning settings to expand the scope of second language acquisition research.

2. Conceptual framework

According to van Lier (1998), "language awareness does not require the ability to describe a linguistic feature using grammatical terminology, but rather the attempt to control and manipulate the material at hand" (p. 136). In the present study, any reference to language is regarded as being language awareness. In order to elucidate the L2 child's language awareness, the analyses in this study draw upon Schmidt's "Noticing Hypothesis" (1990, 1993, 1995 & 2001). In proposing the Noticing Hypothesis, Schmidt (1993) claimed that "linguistic forms can serve as intake for language learning only if they are noticed by learners" (p. 27). He also made similar claims about acquiring pragmatic knowledge in the L2. Schmidt's suggestion of the Noticing Hypothesis was based on a diary study (Schmidt & Frota, 1986) of Schmidt's own language experience in Portugal. Schmidt and Frota found that certain features of Portuguese in the target language environment that had been present all along became available to him and became part of his own language knowledge only when he noticed them, suggesting that noticing is essential in language acquisition. With Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis as the conceptual framework, this study attempts to address the following questions:

1) What features does a learner notice in the target language environment?
2) Do the features the learner notices change over time?

3. Data and Methods

This longitudinal study, which was part of a larger study, explores language awareness over a period of 14 months in a female Japanese ESL learner, beginning from when the learner was 7 years 2 months old as she started a sojourn in an L2 environment. The participant of this study is Sachiko (a pseudonym), a Japanese girl who was in Australia with her mother, the author. Sachiko's language awareness was examined. The present study used a diary method. As a parent the author was able to observe Sachiko in a variety of social contexts, both in school and out of school. This allowed her to obtain in-depth knowledge of Sachiko's language experience. Diary method was very useful to obtain information on Sachiko's perception of the target language and her reflection of her own language learning.

The author carried a pencil and paper with her from the second day of Sachiko's arrival in Australia to note down her spontaneous utterances as well as her comments related to her L2 learning. At the end of the day the author transferred these to a detailed diary with contextual information, and this was written long-hand in A4 notebooks, and data for this study was taken from 363 pages of the diary.

Any utterances in the diary data which show evidence of the learner's language awareness were first identified, and then categorized into different features. The examples shown below were selected to represent the features found in the data. Utterances were coded "one week", "one month", etc, to indicate at what stage in Sachiko's sojourn she was observed making these comments.

The example utterances include both spoken Japanese and English. Japanese text is followed by English translations. Words and sentences within quotation marks were originally produced in English. In the utterances, double parentheses, (( )), indicate descriptions, such as ((looking a little surprised)) in Example 2. S stands for Sachiko and M for mother. All the names in the data, including Sachiko, are pseudonyms.

4. Results and Discussion

The first research question investigated types of features the learner had noticed in the target language environment. Nine features about Sachiko's language awareness were evident in the data, and these features were found to be either pragmatic or metalinguistic awareness. Pragmatic awareness included awareness concerned with pragmatic expectations; usage; offers; and emotive expressions. Metalinguistic awareness included sound-spelling correspondence; word order; articles; numbers; and puns.

4.1. Pragmatic awareness

Pragmatics refers to "language use and is concerned with the appropriateness of utterances given specific situations, speakers, and content" (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1988, p. 233).

4.1.1. *Different pragmatic expectations*

The same choices of utterances in similar situations can carry culturally and pragmatically different meanings. Example 1 illustrates that Sachiko quickly began to become aware of this. Her following comment was made at dinner time four days after enrolling in a school in Australia.

Example 1. 1 week

S：こっちではね、sit downというのは胡坐なの。日本では正座するけど、こちらでは正座をしていると、sit downと言われるの。(＝To "sit down" here means *agura* that is sitting cross-legged. In Japan it means *seiza* that is kneeling with your buttocks on your heels. When I do seiza, other children tell me to "sit down".)

When the teacher read a story book to her class, children gathered in front of the teacher and sat on the floor. Sitting in the back of the classroom, the author, who was there to acquaint herself with the students and the teacher, observed the exact moment this incident happened. (Later the author was to start regular visits to Sachiko's classrooms to do audio-recording for other research purposes.) When children saw Sachiko doing seiza a couple of them shouted at her, "sit down, sit down!" She looked puzzled at first but noticing all the other children are doing agura, she did, too. Doing agura is considered an inappropriate classroom behavior in schools in Japan. Before this incident, Sachiko was obviously unaware of appropriate classroom behavior in Australia attached to the expression, because "sit down" is different from that in Japan. She is now aware that contextual similarity does not guarantee being able to transfer her L1 knowledge because of different pragmatic expectations. The example also portrays that learning a language in an L2 environment means learning simultaneously a new language and new cultural behaviors. In another words, it requires a learner's "socialization into a different set of pragmatic expectations" (Davis & Henze, 1998, p. 406).

4.1.2. *Usage*

As van Lier (1988) argued, learning a language requires the learner to "be attentive and conscious, focused on language in general as well as in quite specifically pinpointed ways" (p. 138). Example 2 shows that Sachiko is engaging and attentive to other people's speech in the new environment, demonstrating L2 learning is a conscious and active process.

In Example 2, Sachiko and her mother were eating dinner. There was *nori* (seaweed) on the table.

Example 2.　3 weeks

S：　のりってなんて英語で説明すればいいの。(＝How do you explain nori in English?)

M：のりは海藻だからね、seaweed って言うより仕方がないかしらね。(＝Maybe you could say it's "seaweed".) This is made from seaweed.

S：　From? ((looking a little surprised)) I'm from Japan.

M：さちこ、よく知ってるね。どうして分かったの？ (＝I'm impressed, Sachiko. How did you know?)

S：　だってお母さんが言っているの聞いたも。(＝I heard you say that.) I'm from Tokyo. というのはどう聞かれた時言うの？ (＝To what question do you say, "I'm from Tokyo"?)

M：Where are you from in Japan? って聞かれた時ね。(＝You say that when you are asked, "Where are you from in Japan?")

When Sachiko's mother said, "This is made from seaweed," to explain nori in English, Sachiko repeated the word "from" with a bit of surprise in rising intonation. Then she added a sentence, "I'm from Japan" in which the preposition "from" is also used. She had apparently heard her mother say this sentence often when the mother introduced herself. She must have attended closely to her mother's speech and remembered it. The preposition "from" has now become salient to her and she notices that this preposition can be used in a different sentence with a different meaning from the sentences she has heard before. Further, this awareness motivates her to ask her mother how you are asked (in English) for the answer, "I'm from Tokyo."

Six weeks after Example 2 was produced, Example 3 was uttered at breakfast. In both Examples 2 and 3, "where are you from?" is referred to, but in Example 3 Sachiko's question is more perceptive. She seems to be actively and consciously listening to what people say in the environment. She notices two different forms in the same contexts and tries to make sense of them. Her question is a specific aspect of English language use.

Example 3.　2 months and 1 week

S：　お母さん、“where do you come from?” と “where are you from?” とどう違うの？（＝Mum, what’s the difference between “where do you come from?” and “where are you from?”）

4.1.3.　*Offers*

Similarly, Example 4 shows that L2 language learning is an active and conscious process. In the example, Sachiko’s mother was making the bed and Sachiko offered her help.

Example 4.　7 months

S：　May I help you? おかしいね。（＝It’s not right, is it?）
　　Do you want me to help you?
M：“May I help you” でもいいのよ。（＝“May I help you” is ok, too.）
S：　店員さんが言うんじゃないの？（＝Salesclerks use it, don’t they?）
M：それもあるけれど、今みたいに「手伝いましょうか」と言う時も使うの。（＝Yes. But you can also use it when you offer your help such as in this situation.）
S：　あ、そう。（＝Oh, I see.）

When Sachiko offered her help to her mother who was making the bed, she first said, “May I help you,” but quickly changed it to “Do you want me to help you?” She apparently connected the expression, “May I help you,” back to the utterance of a sales clerk in a store. Sachiko may also have heard this expression used in other situations. Otherwise she would not have said first, “May I help you?" to help her mother. She seemed to be aware of her own language use as well as others. She noticed a gap between what she understood about this expression and what her mother said. Then, she clarified the use of the expression with her mother and revised her own knowledge about the use of "May I help you?" It appears that her attention is focused in pinpointed ways as argued by van Lier (1988).

Example 5 is a dialog between Sachiko and her mother which occurred eight weeks later in the same situation as in Example 4, where Sachiko's mother was making the bed and Sachiko offered her help.

Example 5.　9 months

S：　May I help you?
M：Yes, please.
S：　What can I help you?
M：じゃあ、pillowcase に pillow を入れて。(＝Could you put the pillows in the pillow cases, then?)

This example shows that by this time she has internalized the expression, "May I help you?"

Nine weeks after Example 5 was produced, another form became available to her to express the same intention in exactly the same situation as in Example 5. She said, "Shall I help you?" instead of "May I help you?" to offer her mother to help to make the bed as in Example 6.

Example 6.　11 months and 1 week

S：　Shall I help you?

Examples 4, 5, and 6 reveal that language learning seems to be happening.

4.1.4. *Emotive expressions*

In Example 7, when Sachiko and her mother were talking about her school at home, Sachiko told her mother that Janet and Linda, her classmates, often whispered to each other and they used the expression, "it's none of your business", when Sachiko asked what they were talking about.

Example 7. 10 months and 2 weeks

S: Janet は、よく Linda とこそこそ話しているの。だから、"What are you talking about?" って言うとね、必ず "It's none of your business." って言うの。だから "Why do you always say none of your business?" って言うとね、" 'cause it's none of your business." って言うんだよ。全くいやになってしまうよ。"none of your business" って「あなたには関係ないよ」って言う事でしょう。いつもそう言うんだもの。さちこ curious だから何を言っているか知りたいだけなのにね。

(＝Janet and Linda are often whispering to each other. When I ask them, "What are you talking about?", they always answer, "It's none of your business." So, I say to them, "Why do you always say none of your business?" Then they say, " 'cause it's none of your business." It's really frustrating. "None of your business" means it has nothing to do with you, doesn't it? They always say that. I just want to know what they are talking about because I'm "curious.")

Through this situation, she grasped how this expression, "It's none of your business" is used. This example can be explained from a pragmatic perspective. In the situation with Janet and Linda, Sachiko appears to have experienced the emotions of unhappiness, frustrations, annoyance, and even alienation and rejection. From her comments with her emotive reactions in the event, it is possible that she is aware of impoliteness associated with this expression.

4.2. Metalinguistic awareness

Metalinguistic awareness is defined here as an individual's "conscious knowledge of the rules and forms of language" (Thomas, 1988, p. 236). Dillon (2009) stated that "the concept may be simply explained as having an insight into how language, in general, is used and organized" (p. 186).

4.2.1. *Sound-spelling correspondence*

Example 8 is a comment on the English sound-spelling correspondence.

Example 8. 4 months

After Sachiko came home from school, she wanted nori in the cupboard.

S: Can I have nori?

M: どうぞ。(＝go ahead.)

S: Can you get it for me, please? P.L.E.A.S.E? ((spelling out the word, please)) "please" は [z] で終わるのに、書く時は "e" が付くね。(＝The word "please" ends with the sound [z] but is spelled with "e" at the end.)

Example 9 is also a comment on the English sound-spelling correspondence in the same period as in Example 8. She suddenly made the following comment at dinner.

Example 9. 4 months

S: Sarah も Hannah も [ə] で終わるのに、書く時は "h" で終わるんだね。(＝Both "Sarah" and "Hannah" end with the sound [ə] but end with the letter "h".)

Examples 8 and 9 reveal that Sachiko is aware that the sound of a word does not necessarily correspond to its spelling. This lack of sound-spelling correspondence is different from her L1.

4.2.2. *Word order*

Eating breakfast, Sachiko suddenly made a comment about word order as in Example 10.

Example 10. 6 months and 1 week

S: "I have an apple." を日本語にしたら「私は　持っています　りんごを」になるね。(＝If you translate "I have an apple" into Japanese, it would be "watashi wa motte imasu ringo o".) (Achiba, 2003, p. 56)

The word order of "I have an apple" in English would be "I apple have" in Japanese as Sachiko explained. This example shows that she noticed a difference in word order between the two language systems: English is SVO and Japanese is SOV. She provides metalinguistic explanations of it.

4.2.3. *Articles*

Eating breakfast, Sachiko suddenly asked her mother a question about articles as in Example 11.

Example 11. 6 months and 1 week

S: "a" と "the" の違いって何なの。どういう時 "a" と言うか、どういう時 "the" と言うか分からない。(＝What is the difference between "a" and "the"? I don't know exactly when you are supposed to use "a" and "the".) (Achiba, 2003, p. 56)

About seven months after Example 11 was produced, Sachiko asked her mother a question again about articles.

Example 12.　1 year and 2 months

Sachiko saw the advertisement of a newspaper called “The Age” from the car she was riding.

S：“Age” の “A” は “vowel” だから、“An Age” となるはずなのに、どうして “The Age” なの？（＝“A” in the “Age” is a “vowel”. So it should be “An Age”. How come it is “The Age”?)

She used a grammatical term, vowel, when she focused on the English articles in this example. Prior to her comment her ESL teacher touched on vowels and consonants in class. Examples 11 and 12 show her knowledge about English articles at these different stages. Learners from Japanese language backgrounds often struggle with articles even at advanced levels. She may have far to go before she accurately manipulates the articles.

4.2.4.　*Numbers*

Sachiko saw two movies on TV, “Honey, I blew up the kid” and “Honey, I shrunk the kids” at two different times. After watching the latter, she gave the following comment.

Example 13.　9 months

S：この間は一人の男の子だけが大きくなるので “the kid” だけど、今度は小さくなるのは子供たち 4 人なので “kids” になっているんだよ。(= Last time only one boy grew big, so the title says “the kid”. This time it is four children who were shrunk, so it says, “kids”.)

In Japanese, you do not necessarily make a distinction between singular and plural. Therefore, the clear distinction between the two in English may have become salient to her.

Four months and two weeks later, she asks a question which refers to number again but this time it is about countable and uncountable nouns.

Example 14. 1 year, 1 month and a half

S: sugarとかsaltには、sugarsとかsaltsとか言うことがあるの？(= Are there any situations where you say “sugars” instead of “sugar” or “salts” instead of “salt”?)

She seems to know that sugar and salt are uncountable nouns. She is attentive to the speech of others and it can be speculated that she may have heard some adults say such as “How many sugars in your coffee?” or “I want two sugars in my coffee.” Nonetheless, at this stage as in Example 14 her questions about English rules have become sophisticated and more perceptive.

She asked the question in Example 14 as she watched TV, but neither “sugar” nor “salt” appeared on the program she was watching. As in this case, her questions and comments arose often when they were not directly related to what she was doing at those moments. A possible explanation for this is the following. She pays close attention to what people around her say and on some occasions she notices some linguistic features in the input and makes some comments on them after internalizing them. That is, they are now part of her language knowledge. On other occasions she may notice something in the input but cannot quite understand it but can verbalize the problems. She thinks it over before she makes questions.

4.2.5. *Puns*

Metalinguistic awareness also includes playful manipulation of language. Sachiko puns on the meaning of a word “rich” in Example 15.

Example 15. 11 months (Part of this example is cited from Achiba, 2003, p. 65.)

In this example, Sachiko and her mother were eating chocolate given by a friend at Easter.

M：このチョコレート rich ね。(＝This chocolate is “rich”, isn’t it?)
S： Helen is rich so she bought it.
M：その意味の rich じゃないわよ。(＝I didn’t mean that meaning of “rich”.)
S： I know. I know what it means. バターやなんかがたくさん入っていて rich なんでしょう。(＝This chocolate has a lot of butter and stuff, so it is “rich”, isn’t it?)

When Sachiko said, “Helen is rich so she bought it,” her mother doubted whether Sachiko knew the meaning of “rich” that her mother meant about the chocolate. Only after Sachiko’s explanation about the word, her mother realized that Sachiko already knew two different meanings of “rich” and skillfully manipulated the word, making a pun.

The above examples related to metalinguistic awareness show that Sachiko became aware of formal aspects of language. She noticed differences between the formation of Japanese and English. She was able to verbalize her thoughts and was able to provide metalinguistic comments. This evidences her understanding of some of the L2 rules which are different from her L1.

Her metalinguistic reflection seems to reveal that noticing plays a vital role in learning an L2. She has already acquired her own native language. Due to this prior knowledge, she has an idea of how languages work (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). That is, she knows that "verbal utterances have to be constructed in accordance with certain grammatical rules" (Felix, 1978, p. 477).

The second research question addressed whether the features that the learner had noticed changed over time. The time when each of the examples was produced shows that comments and questions related to pragmatic awareness appeared from the very first week of the sojourn, while those concerning metalinguistic awareness did not appear until the fourth month. This may suggest that her conscious noticing of L2 features were present from the beginning, but as she became better at using English, she noticed more L2 rules in the input than she had before. In turn, her reflection tended to be more on metalinguistics rather than on language use.

Sachiko's comments on language and language use show that she noticed some of the features in the input and that her conscious reflection on them may have facilitated her learning the L2. In turn, her awareness of them eventually becomes her language knowledge. It should be noted, however, that her mother was a resource person for Sachiko when she made comments and asked her mother questions. Therefore, her mother may have served as a "scaffold" (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976; Ohta, 2005; Achiba, 2012) also to facilitate Sachiko to look for the English features in the unfamiliar environment.

5. Implications of the findings for primary school English education

van Lier (1998) argued that "we must understand learning before we can teach. …we can only study teaching in reference to learning, and we can only understand teaching if we understand learning" (p. 130). Evidence of language awareness in the child's learning English found in the data in the present study has some implications for primary school English Education in

Japan.

Since 2011 the Ministry of Science and Education in Japan has implemented the teaching of English to fifth and sixth graders in primary schools. At present, the contents of the English lessons in primary schools are limited to games, songs and conversations which consist of formulas. However, fifth and sixth graders, aged between 10 and 12 years, already have fairly good cognitive abilities and they would soon lose their interests in learning English under the present curriculum.

Unlike the L2 learner in the present study, learners in Japan have few opportunities for contact with English outside the classroom. However, they have already acquired one language, Japanese. This prior knowledge helps foreign language learners to understand how language generally works. The young L2 learner, 7 years 2 months old at the beginning of this present study, noticed some elements of English, differences between English and Japanese and frequently made explicit comments on them. These facts suggest that fifth and sixth graders in Japan are likely to become active, perceptive, attentive and conscious learners of English if they were taught using a more age-appropriate pedagogy. This, in turn, would facilitate their learning English. They might benefit more from models of foreign language learning such as those proposed by Vanderplank (2008):

> (The models) would need to include more explicit teaching and learning, more emphasis on memory, conscious effort, rehearsal and reflection, more emphasis on reading and writing, in addition to oral communication and interaction (p. 721).

Teaching English only through games, songs and very simple conversation will most likely not to lead to the level of basic communicative ability which the Ministry advocates. Simple exposure to such input is very unlikely to be sufficient for language learning to occur.

6. Concluding remarks

Adopting Schmidt's noticing hypothesis, this study explored a young learner's awareness of her target language. The findings indicate that the learner noticed a wide range of features about the L2. Furthermore, her comments and questions on the L2 features related to pragmatic awareness appeared from the very first week of the sojourn, while those concerning metalinguistic awareness did not appear until the fourth month, suggesting that her conscious noticing of L2 features were present from the beginning, but that as she became better at using English, she noticed more L2 rules in the input than she had before.

It should be noted, however, that the present study is about one learner's language awareness. The extent to which learners make comments concerning language awareness may be related to individual differences in perceptual and cognitive abilities, motivation to learn, willingness to assimilate culturally and even parents' interests in the target language and culture. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable and further studies with other learners are needed to understand fully and uncover the nature of language awareness. Nevertheless, analyses of the data provided rich evidence of language awareness in one child's learning English as a second language and revealed a very important aspect of paths to L2 acquisition.

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