

Set Phrases From an Evolutionary Perspective

(theory and practice in the classroom)

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Abstract

Sentence starters are the set phrases that are used to perform various language functions by speakers of English. These set phrases are a powerful teaching tool for the L2 classroom due to their multi-dimensional nature. In this paper I will explore the multi-dimensional and evolutionary nature of interlanguage and discuss how sentence starters can help students in learning a foreign language. Finally, I will discuss methods of using sentence starters effectively in the classroom.

Interlanguage

The common view of interlanguage is that of a one-dimensional continuum (a line) along which the student progresses from the level of no second language skill to that of native or near-native fluency. This is the view popularized by Selinker in 1972. (Selinker, 1972)

(see diagram 1)

However, we could look at interlanguage as a system that grows in

many directions. By using what David Deutsch refers to in his book, "The Fabric of Reality" (Deutsch, 1997), as an N-dimensional hypervolume consisting of dimensions labeled "grammar knowledge," "vocabulary," "situational and cultural appropriateness," "fluency," "listening ability," "pronunciational accuracy," etc. we get a clearer picture of what a student's interlanguage actually looks like. These facets of language ability do not all grow at the same rate during the course of the students' language study. The reasons for this will be discussed later in this article. Because of this, they are best represented by separate lines or dimensions in a multi-dimensional model.

(see diagram 2)

Using this model it becomes possible to see how the various facets of the students' interlanguage can relate to each other. It also lets us see how students can become strong in one dimension of interlanguage, grammar knowledge for example, and be weak in other dimensions, such as listening ability or pronunciation accuracy.

The Evolutionary Process of Language Learning

Language learning is an evolutionary process in two senses. First, it is evolutionary in the sense that it is incremental. Secondly, it is evolutionary in the sense that it, like biological evolution, is heavily dependent on the environment in which it takes place. The environment, whether biological or artificial, produces the selectional factors that determine which traits succeed and which traits fail. In evolution the environment produces selectional factors that are either favorable or detrimental to different traits. The organisms with traits that help

them to better adapt and thrive in a given environment are the ones that will be successful. One example of this from biological evolution is a population of moths with different body colorations, light and dark for the sake of simplicity. Supposing we have a group of moths that live in an area with predominantly dark backgrounds. These backgrounds are anything that the moth might rest on such as trees, plants, or rocks. Those moths with darker body colorations will blend into the background more readily than those with lighter body colorations and thus avoid being eaten. Those that do not blend in will have a greater chance of becoming a meal for a bird or other predator. Those moths that avoid being eaten and then go on to reproduce become successful moths. It is important to stress at this point that the dark coloration trait we are discussing, and any other evolutionary trait for that matter, is selected over a long period of time and selected a multiple of times. This is called cumulative selection by the biologist Richard Dawkins, (Dawkins, 1986). Cumulative selection states that, "The end-product for one generation of selection is the starting point for the next generation of selection." (Dawkins 1986, p. 45) How this idea fits into the idea of multi-dimensional interlanguage in the classroom will be seen later.

In the language classroom the selective pressures are slightly different than those in nature. The selective factors that do exist come from the teacher and institution in the form of classroom and institutional expectations. These selective pressures in turn will determine which dimensions of the students' interlanguage grow and which stagnate. We can call this collection of selective pressures an environment.

By examining the students' current classroom environment and by researching what kind of environments the students have been exposed to at previous levels of education, we can create a clearer picture of how the students' interlanguage will have developed and will be expected to develop in the future.

By way of example, a student who has learned a foreign language in a Japanese school setting can be expected to have a very good grasp of grammar rules, a fairly high level of reading and writing ability, and somewhat lower levels of listening ability and fluency in the spoken language. This is due to the environment of the classroom which promotes growth in the areas of grammar, reading, and writing perhaps at the expense of listening and conversational ability.

On the other hand, a language learner who has acquired or learned a foreign language in an L2-only environment, i.e. in the country where the target language is spoken, may have excellent listening comprehension, fluency in speaking, and native-like pronunciation. However, this individual may not have any explicit grammar knowledge of their L2 due again to the selective factors of the environment in which they learned the language.

An important question to ask at this point is, "Can learners go from one type of learning environment to another smoothly?" In the case of Japanese learners of English as a second language who go from the grammar-intensive environment of junior high school and high school English classes to the communicative-oriented conversation classes in college it seems that they can if they are given the right kind of intermediate steps in their learning environment.

The Importance of Environment

Up to the time when they enter college, Japanese students are in a language learning environment that emphasizes test taking and the assimilation of knowledge towards the goal of passing tests. Once they are in a college level English conversation classroom, the emphasis turns to communication. From this we can see that students entering college level English conversation classes are well equipped as far as grammar and vocabulary go, and have good reading comprehension, but, for the most part, they have a great deal of difficulty taking part in conversations, due to lack of practice.

Closing the Gap Between Ways of Learning

One way to help bridge the gap between the test oriented and communication oriented environments is sentence starters or set lexical phrases. Sentence starters were first put to extensive use by Lewis (Lewis, 1994). They are set phrases that are used by native speakers in everyday communication. By giving the students these set phrases organized around themes, the teacher of communication classes can help bridge the gap between what the students are familiar with, and where they should be heading in terms of being good communicators. Sentence starters and set phrases represent an intermediate step between using completely pre-written dialogs and pure improvisational speaking. In this paper pre-written dialogs refer to the conversations found in many beginner level text books. These dialogs are similar to scripts for plays. They allow for no, or very little, deviation from the topic and usually do not allow for any linguistic creativity on the part of the language learner. Pure improvisational speaking on the other hand is what you

would find in a conversation between two native or near-native level speakers of a language. The conversation shifts between topics and points frequently and is unbounded by any constraints on language ability.

The advantage of using sentence starters and set phrases is that they fall somewhere between the pure repetition of a written dialog and a totally improvised conversation. They are not as rigidly structured as the pre-written dialogs and, therefore, offer more flexibility and freedom for the student in expressing themselves. On the other hand, they are more structured than a completely improvised conversation. This structure offers students a convenient "handle" to grab on to. This handle is of great importance to students who may have basic conversational ability, but who have difficulty in creating more complex conversations due to either insecurity in their speaking ability or due to a lack of knowledge of key words and phrases.

More about Cumulative Selection and Set Phrases

At this point it is a good idea to return to the idea of cumulative selection and its effect on students' interlanguage. Simply put, cumulative selection is the repeated sifting or sorting of a group of items. It may be traits in biological organisms, it may be beads of different colors in a craft class, or it may be separating good internal rules from bad ones in a students' interlanguage. Remember that in cumulative selection the end result of one generation of sorting or sifting becomes the starting point for the next generation. In biology the offspring of one generation become the parents for the next generation. In interlanguage the ending set of internal linguistic rules

from one generation of sifting (learning/acquisition) becomes the starting point for the next generation of rules.

Cumulative selection works on students' interlanguage in much the same way that it works on traits within a population of organisms. In the case of interlanguage it is necessary to think of the units of selection as memes (units of information or ideas) instead of genes (the units of biological information contained in DNA in living organisms), (Dawkins, 1989). In both cases however, the basic idea is the same. These selectional units are sifted and sorted through cumulative selection which is influenced by the environment in which the selection takes place. The end result of each generation of selection then becomes the beginning point for the next generation. Those selectional units that thrive in the given environment are passed on to successive generations and those that do not are discarded.

For the memes associated with interlanguage the selection process works in the following way : A facet of a student's interlanguage is at point A. This point represents their understanding of the target language with regard to rules or conventions. For the sake of illustration let us use the simple past tense. The student's internal interlanguage on this point contains the rule, "All verbs in the simple past tense end with the bound morpheme '-ed.'"

This rule is only partially correct, but it has so far served the student in their use of the English language, and as such has not come under any selective pressure to change. Now, however, the student is corrected for using an incorrect form of a verb in the past tense. The exchange might go something like this:

Student : "Yesterday I goed to the store."

Teacher : "Yesterday I WENT to the store."

From this correction the student realizes that their theory for this particular interlanguage rule needs to be refined. The revised theory might look something like this: "All verbs in the simple past tense end with the bound morpheme -ed, except for 'go,' which changes to 'went.'" This particular theory will then go through successive refinements, or generations of cumulative selection, until the student receives no more input that would give them reason to change this particular internal rule.

Please note that this illustration is extremely simplified for the sake of brevity. The students would probably receive input on many separate occasions and from a variety of sources. In addition, there are a plethora of internal rules that work together to make up a student's interlanguage. We can assume that several interlanguage rules are being modified simultaneously by input that the student receives.

Using a process like that demonstrated above, the student is able to keep refining their theories through cumulative selection based upon the input provided by their language environment. These continually changing theories make up the students' interlanguage.

What is the connection between cumulative selection and using set phrases in the classroom? The answer is that by providing the students with a set phrase the teacher gives them a meme that has already been sorted and selected for its correctness, communicative worth, and cultural appropriateness among other things. By getting this preselected, prepackaged information the students' interlanguage rules take a giant leap forward. By cutting out several generations of cumulative selection during which a set phrase would have to be

evolved, the students' interlanguage should be able to grow at an accelerated rate when compared to students whose interlanguage grows by standard generation by generation cumulative selection. In addition to the leaps forward, the student can also work backwards from the prepackaged set phrase to decipher the underlying grammar rules and exceptions as well as look at situational and cultural appropriateness and a variety of other dimensions in their interlanguage. This working backwards represents the use of primarily deductive reasoning as opposed to inductive reasoning, the former being more efficient than the latter.

Memes Revisited

Let's return to the idea of memes for a moment. In order to be successful a meme must have the following traits : longevity (having a long lifetime), fecundity (replicating many times) and copying-fidelity (each of the replications produced is an accurate copy of the parent meme), (Dawkins, 1989, p. 194).

Giving students a meme in the form of a set phrase that they can immediately work with gives the meme a higher fecundity because it can replicate itself faster and spread through a class or become part of a student's interlanguage more quickly than a phrase generated by a series of cumulative selections. Preconstructed set phrases also have a higher rate of copying-fidelity because they are learned as unanalyzed chunks of language and then imitated (used) as a single unit. The cumulatively selected phrase, i.e. one in which the words are not learned as a group but are instead put together by the learner, has a chance for error at any of the steps in its selection process, it also has a greater

chance for these errors to be passed on in its imitation because each word is selected and memorized separately rather than as part of a pre-packaged phrase. These advantages are primarily on the grammatical level. Another facet of the student's interlanguage to consider is the situational and cultural appropriateness of their utterances. For instance, "Give me a hamburger." is a grammatically correct sentence, but it is not situationally or culturally appropriate when ordering food in a restaurant if it is compared to other phrases such as, "I'll have a hamburger, please."

So far we have seen that set phrase memes have the attributes of high fecundity and high copying fidelity. They have these two attributes because they are pre-constructed chunks of language that can be memorized and used as a whole without any selection processes being involved. These memes/phrases are then easy to use and so should be repeated in students' speech frequently. It follows then that these set phrase memes should remain in the students' interlanguage for a long period of time due to frequent use. Thus we have the third attribute of a successful meme, that of longevity.

Classroom Use

Up to now we have seen an argument for using set phrases as a way of improving students' interlanguage from the standpoint of meme evolution. What kind of concrete things can we do as teachers to use set phrases effectively in the classroom?

In order to use set phrases in a meaningful manner it is important to first organize them around a central theme. These themes can be a language function for a situation that the students might encounter.

Having done this, the next step is to find some way of further organizing the phrases. A good way to do this is along a cline or gradient. An example of set phrases organized along a cline is shown in appendix 1.

Organizing phrases along a cline, instead of providing them to the students as an unorganized group, gives the students a further cognitive handle to work with and will help them with parts of their interlanguage such as social appropriateness.

The second important point to remember when giving students set phrases to work with is that of variety. The students must be given a sufficiently large number of set phrases in order for them to have a useful variety in their interlanguage. The exact amount should be left up to the teacher's discretion. However, it is always a good idea to give the students enough phrases to give them a workable variety to use while avoiding overburdening them with new material. Important factors to consider are the ability level of the class and the language function involved. You would not want to provide students with 20 different ways to discuss the time it takes to accomplish a task when three or four will do. In addition, you would not want to overburden students by giving them more set phrases than they can possibly assimilate or work with.

Moderation is the key idea here. On the subject of moderation, it is important to point out that set phrases are not a universally useful tool for learning language. If the main thrust of a student's learning is to acquire new vocabulary, then sentence starters should not be used. Also, if a class is focused heavily on the grammar of a language, the set phrases should not be used as extensively, or perhaps used and then

dissected in order to provide students with grammar patterns and rules. Set phrases are helpful in classes where communicative ability is important and where it is good for the student to be able to use a wide variety of language to fulfill a desired function.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the idea of the evolutionary progression of student interlanguage and how it can be helped along by the use of set phrases. The supporting ideas used in this paper come almost exclusively from outside of the study of second language acquisition and linguistics. By looking at language acquisition using ideas from outside the field a new perspective can be gained on this subject.

The second part of this paper discussed the practical applications for sentence starters in the ESL classroom and also mentioned some caveats that anyone wanting to use this method should be aware of.

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no language ability

near-native language
ability

Diagram 1. Selinker
Interlanguage Model

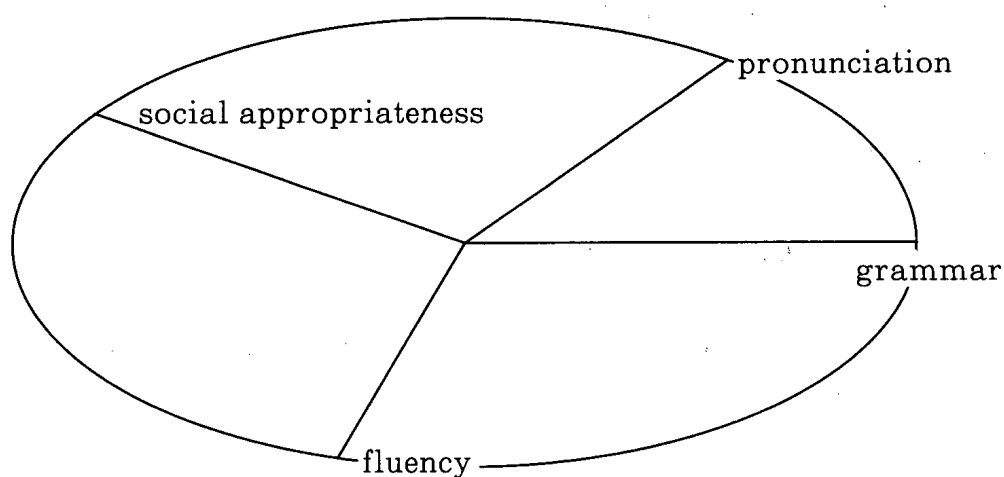


Diagram 2.
Multi-dimensional
Interlanguage Model

Expressing ability and inability

Name _____

Number _____

Look at the following list of phrases. They will help you when expressing ability and inability.

Ability

	Informal	Formal
Strongest	I am very good at... I am quite good at... I'm pretty good at... I can _____ very well. I can...	I excel at... I am able to _____ very well. I am able to...
Weakest	I'm OK at...	

Inability

Weakest	I'm not (very) good at... I can't... I can't _____ at all.	I'm unable to _____ very well. I'm unable to...
Strongest	I'm terrible at...	I'm completely unable to...

Role Play

You and Your friend are trying to decide what to do this weekend. You both want to play a sport of some kind (tennis, basketball, bicycle riding, swimming, etc.). Ask each other what sports you are able or unable to play in order to help you decide what to do this weekend. Finally, make a decision on what you will do.

Ability Survey

Interview four of your classmates. Ask them, "Can you _____?" questions about any of the following topics (you can make your own topics if you like): playing volleyball, running, playing piano, singing karaoke, using a computer, speaking English, driving a car, cooking Japanese food. Write down your classmates' answers on the back of this sheet.