

Verbal Behavior and Perspective Analysis: the second language learning context



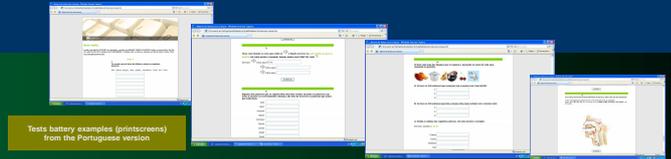
1. Research project presentation

The scientific discussion in the second language learning area is very recent and less structured than the literature developed as part of the investigation into the first language acquisition subject (Richthie & Bhatia, 1996), especially not observed in the Portuguese domain, regarding the second language acquisition and, in other hand, with respect to the specific level of cognition achievement. First, theorize about the language development as human skill and ability, becomes easier within the knowledge of the language disorders with brain areas determined, good predictions, identification of causes and concepts formulation that directly applies to a public more or less clearly defined. Secondly, theorize about the normative language development and linguistic decoding generates less consensus among theorists and researchers in the area. On the issue of second language acquisition the controversy becomes by itself a prerequisite for the literature and empirical studies development. It is very important scientifically and, above all, on a social way (pedagogical application) to produce knowledge and suggest solutions enabling an answer to the main research problem of this PhD project: "How to identify and thereby develop prevention methods addressed to overcome learning disabilities of children, adolescents and adults, second language learners, in academic context, taking into account the premise of different cognitive performance (at the highest level of ability and skill) and, verbal behavior, determined by psychological, cognitive and linguistic factors? We started by developing a tests battery to assess reaction time and accuracy on Portuguese Second Language.

Materials and Procedures

Tests battery, in electronic format, composed by the following tasks: dichotic hearing, perception of rhyme, alliteration and syllable, grapheme write conditioned, phoneme blending, alphabetical ordinance, phoneme discrimination and sequencing, words spelling, detection of *minimum pairs*, syntactical awareness, lexicon, reading, and phonetic identity judgement. The second language learners (sample) were assessed, between January and April 2007, in their schools. The application of the battery of tests was done individually, taking each application 35 to 100 minutes, at school of the individual, who must fulfil the test in computer. For the application of the test, it was necessary, besides the computer, headphones and microphone. All procedures were previously carried out to get the necessary authorizations from the schools, teachers and tutors of the students.

2. Method



Tests battery examples (printscreens) from the Portuguese version

Participants

Experimental group: 61 second language learners, different languages speakers, and with different nationalities, arrived in Portugal not more than four years ago (most arrived during 2006), with proficiency levels in Portuguese between A1 and B1 (QECL, 2001). The sample was selected in order to integrate three age groups - children (7-12 years), adolescents (13-17 years) and adults (18-30 years). Within each of these groups there are sub-groups (7-9; 10-12; 13-15; 16-18; 19-23; 24-30). The individuals are students of Basic Education (all the cycles), High School and Higher Education, from several Portuguese schools.

Control group: 82 native (Portuguese) monolinguals. The sample was also selected in order to integrate three age groups - children (7-12 years), adolescents (13-17 years) and adults (18-30 years). Within each of these groups there are sub-groups (7-9; 10-12; 13-15; 16-18; 19-23; 24-30). The individuals are students of Basic Education (all the cycles), High School and Higher Education, from several Portuguese schools.



3. Theoretical revision

In the literature, frequently, the concept of 'environment', which we must apply as 'context', is considered as a different factor when we consider the other variables such age, gender, previous linguistic knowledge and cognitive profile. The context (the social, political and linguistic background) must be understood as a set of all the events. The factors mentioned above are, for some authors, the most implied in the explanation of the differences between the several learning-subjects. Nevertheless, other authors consider the affective filtering factor as the main one. The role assumed by each factor on the verbal behaviour analysis generates the fundamental criterion that divides authors states on the adoption of two important theoretical frameworks: the structuralism (the mental structures as cause) and the behaviourism (context and functionalism).

The genesis of the language repertoire is always explained in the light of these two poles. The notion of "inatness" (structuralism) could not be considered as a single argument for the explanation of the language development. The innate ability of human being is developed as a mental structure (private events difficult for the direct observation, Botomé & Souza, 1982) which, in turn, is a result from the external stimulus. The verbal behaviour depends on the relation of various factors and among them we find the mental structures, which along with other events, help to form the set of stimuli: the context.

This dynamic analysis of verbal behavior is the principle of radical behaviourism of Skinner is a philosophy that does not neglect the mental structure theory into the explanation of verbal behavior, however, is not allowed to consider the mental phenomena and the "gene determination" as a cause of language performance. According to the principles of the Universal Grammar Theory (Chomsky, 1957), children could develop language skills due to their *language acquisition device*, a mental dispositive as the trigger to "make language" without the external input as the main stimuli. The Generative Grammar Theory fits in the principle of genetic determination (or inatness) which implies the basic principles governing the organization in the brain: programs and neural mechanisms of representation and processing. In fact, are the linguistic/verbal communities (Skinner, 1978) that control the human repertoire, outlining the language profile of the speaker. The second language learner is between the conflict of several verbal communities, language rules, and the external context within the brain areas state the skill and the ability.

The insights from the two main theories could engage a consistent research that analyse and explain the differences in the verbal behaviour of children and adults: second language learners.



4. Considerations

In the first acquisition of language context, the biological factors (mind) are involved effectively, but not constituting key factor in the acquisition of second language. This means that the elements (gender, age, culture, first language, formal education, verbal community) that constitute what we call the 'context' and are essentially external (not depending exclusively from the internal structures of the human mind) will act with greater emphasis in the development process of L2. Thus, the maternal language is acquired in a separate acquisition of the second language, when occurring in different ages, not simultaneously, regarding the greater or lesser influence that several factors take the course of life.

The instrument developed (electronic battery in Portuguese and English versions) is a very important dispositive of diagnostic assessment regarding the proficiency of students in second language. On the other hand, allows to understand how the individuals perceive and produce in the Portuguese Second Language, outlining the profile of verbal behaviors, with written or oral samples, and further information or guidance to educational programs of support.