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THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF ATTRITION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

ASPECTE TEORETICO-PRAXIOLOGICE ALE UZURII ÎN LIMBĂ ÎN ÎNVĂȚAREA LIMBILOR STRĂINE

*Lilia Petriciuc, lector univ.
UPS „Ion Creangă” din Chișinău
Lilia Petriciuc, university lecturer,
SPU “Ion Creangă”, Chisinau*

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5984-3641>

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Abstract

The present contribution aims at popularizing foreign language attrition by providing a brief overview of what it entails with particular focus on how it may affect language development. The synthesis is based on seminal articles in the field and several hypotheses are discussed as well as the pedagogical implications of the phenomenon, highlighting potential strategies that would lead to language maintenance and development. The conceptual clarifications based on well-grounded theoretical frameworks may serve as guidelines for teachers, course and curricula authors to make their efforts in designing foreign language programs more worthwhile.

Key-words: attrition, hypotheses, circumstances, strategies, language proficiency development, language loss, language maintenance.

Rezumat

Articolul vizează popularizarea conceptului de uzură în limbă străină precizând diverse aspecte ale acestuia și modul în care afectează dezvoltarea competenței de comunicare. Sunt analizate câteva ipoteze precum și implicațiile pedagogice ale fenomenului și se propun strategii didactice care ar asigura menținerea /ameliorarea nivelului de competență de comunicare într-o limbă străină. Clarificările conceptuale în baza de cadre teoretice temeinice ar putea servi drept ghid profesorilor și conectorilor de piese curriculare și programe lingvistice pentru a optimiza procesul de învățare eficientă a unei limbi străine.

Cuvinte-cheie: uitare, ipoteze, condiții, strategii, dezvoltarea competenței de comunicare, abilitati, intretinere

Introduction

Traditionally, language development has been perceived in terms of acquisitions meant to mark the improvement of language receptive and productive skills. However, the opposite

is also true and language loss is a regular occurrence. It is already a cliché that language knowledge and skills are lost unless activated and used to perform a wide array of communicative functions. Foreign language learners face this problem of inevitably losing their language skills on extensive grounds, particularly if usage of the second (L2) or foreign language (FL) is restricted for extended periods of time. After holidays, teachers discover that even the best students have multifarious difficulties to select and use language skills to participate in communicative acts in the classroom, “experiencing word finding problems, such as tip-of-the-tongue states” [2, p.331]. This occurrence is associated with the phenomenon of *language attrition*, a relatively new field of research in language learning. Peter Ecke contends that “language attrition has become a vibrant subfield of applied linguistics” [2, p.321].

The phenomenon of language attrition has been identified ever since the 17th century. However, it received scientific attention only by the end of the 20th century, when it started developing as a sub-field of second/foreign language acquisition, with researchers joining efforts to identify a solution to a whole range of problems dealing with foreign language learning, particularly with boosting communicative competence in those who attempt to study a FL.

It should be noted that initially attrition was considered only from the perspective of L1 and L2. Foreign languages were learnt primarily in formal settings and were assumed to be short-lived, serving the purpose of completing specific educational programs without turning into a permanent skill and did not receive much attention in this regard. Nowadays, due to updated FL teaching/learning policies, interest in attrition phenomena is increasing, significant efforts being made to turn FL learning into a worthwhile, long-lasting achievement [6], [10], [12].

In the present-day context, when bilingualism and multilingualism have become a common feature and a major objective of linguistic policies in modern societies within EU, attrition inevitably affects language development. P. Herdina and U. Jessner, 2002, proposed **the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (DMM)** [5], extensively accepted and capitalized on worldwide, which emphasizes that language development in a multilingual system is characterized by *change of quality, reversibility, stability, complexity, non-linearity and interdependence* which means that any change at any level in one sub-system will generate changes at the level of other sub-systems and these happen randomly and cannot be anticipated [12, p.108]. Accordingly, it can be inferred that there may be various oscillations in language proficiency development. Hence, both progress and regress are sides of the process and should be considered by teachers, researchers, curriculum and material designers to make sure foreign language courses provide enough opportunities for recycling language features in order to activate them. A *language maintenance effort* component is included in the DMM which means that individuals commit to constant increase and improvement of their linguistic repertoire. Otherwise, because of insufficient exposure to a language, linguistic competence is prone to decline. In FL education, gaining an in-depth understanding of language attrition/loss helps teachers, course and material designers to come up with teaching/learning trajectories that would ensure quality interaction with linguistic material so

as to enhance its retention, thus making the efforts of all the factors involved in the process of language learning and education policies more worthwhile.

Park posits that from a practical perspective, language attrition research is becoming increasingly important for its potential to provide language maintenance strategies and curriculum strategies. "Given such a prospect, it comes as no surprise that the aspects of language attrition receiving attention in recent literature concern topics such as maintenance and re-learning, which have the potential to inform both researchers and practitioners alike" [11, p.10].

Definition of Terms

Language attrition describes the gradual reduction or loss of linguistic knowledge and skills in an individual [11, p.2]. It is defined as "the non-pathological decrease in proficiency in a language that had previously been acquired by an individual" [6, p. 3], [2, p.322]. In keeping with the above definition, it is clear that attrition refers particularly to loss of linguistic skills in an individual unaffected by brain deterioration rather than a group or linguistic community.

Similarly, according to Köpke's definition, attrition is mainly an individual phenomenon and is *intimately linked to social aspects of language use, brain mechanisms and cognitive processes* [6, p.10].

Hence, we believe it is a pivotal aspect in foreign language education as extensive knowledge of the phenomenon could contribute to designing better language learning programs and curricula. Köpke stated that "attrition refers to the natural (non-pathological) loss of a language in bilinguals; in his view, generally speaking, changes in the linguistic environment and termination of an instructional program may lead to attrition"[6, p.15].

In specialized literature, different terms are used with reference to the phenomenon: *language loss, language attrition, language regression*. Consequently, as it is usually the case, this lack of terminological unification causes confusion and ambiguity. Later on, as a result of an increasing body of research *language loss* was suggested as a general term to be used with reference to any type of decline in linguistic skills. However, in specialized literature, language loss and attrition are used more or less interchangeably to refer to loss of linguistic skills both at individual or group level, whereas *language regression* has shrunk to denote regress in linguistic ability in previously normally developing younger children, typically associated with disorders of the brain (ex: autism, aphasia).

In language studies, attrition is normally divided into two broad categories: *Language 1(L1) attrition*- describes losing language skills in mother tongue as a result of migration and integration into a new linguistic community and *foreign language attrition*, occurring because exposure to the foreign language has been reduced or (L2) skills are no longer needed/applied.

Schmid and Mehotcheva, 2012, argue that differences between L1, L2 and FL attrition should be taken into account since they are acquired/learnt under different conditions. In the case of FL we refer to the process happening due mainly to instruction and quite limited input, exposure and use, unlike L1 and L2 where language is naturalistically acquired [12, p. 5-6]. Considering previous works in the field (*Cohen (1989), Nakuma (1997), Starren (1998), Weltens, van Els and Schils (1989), Weltens and Grendel (1993)* as cited by Schmid and

Mehotcheva), L2 attrition is perceived as the attrition of a second language that was acquired naturalistically after L1, whereas FL attrition deals with a school/university learnt language [12, p.2].

Theoretical perspectives and pedagogical implications of attrition

So far, scientific research has failed to explain the reasons behind this phenomenon. Some suggest it is directly proportional with individual variation. However, it is not totally clear or comprehensively explained what factors and features determine and contribute to language attrition in healthy individuals. It should be noted here that attrition does not refer to individuals who suffer from language learning impairments.

Attrition in the field of instructed foreign language education is an under-studied aspect and more research is needed to determine and clarify the dimensions that affect language learning and how it is influenced by societal and neuro-linguistic features. Moreover, the extant studies are small scale and cannot be extended to larger populations to cast more light on how attrition impacts the effective use of foreign language skills later in life, particularly in those contexts where individuals do not use the target language on a daily basis. This lack of contact with the FL for a certain period of time causes reduced levels of language proficiency as the subjects begin losing vocabulary or grammar knowledge. Attrition, according to some views, seems to be enhanced by the need to use a different language for communication (L1 or a completely new language, which naturally will push the foreign language on the backstage).

It is worth emphasizing that, language attrition is somewhat perceived as a negative event with multiple disastrous consequences for the foreign language learner that could cause a sense of inferiority or inadequacy in the learner. However, this narrow, reductionist view should be eliminated since attrition is a normal, natural process and it deserves scientific attention in order to minimize its effects, where possible, and to ensure that foreign language learning produces lots of long-lasting and long-term benefits for the learner. In keeping with the DMM both positive and negative growth describe the process of language learning/acquisition. When time and effort are devoted to language, it develops as a system and positive growth is achieved. On the other hand, negative growth occurs when there is a decrease in the time and effort devoted to language study/use associated with language attrition/language loss. In Herdina and Jessner's view, attrition often passes unnoticed particularly because students do not participate in communicative acts on a regular basis [5, p.91]. In relation to this, DMM emphasizes the need to focus on language maintenance, in an effort to maintain language "alive", more than on language attrition.

Similar to foreign language learning, language attrition in itself is an extremely complex phenomenon and multiple theories and hypotheses have been advanced to explain the multi-dimensional intricacies of its processes. One of these, **the regression hypothesis** is based on the order or sequence of attrition. According to it, attrition functions on the principle: "*the last in, the first out*", meaning that "language will be lost in the reverse order in which it was acquired" [11, p.4]. Accordingly, those language aspects that were first internalized will be more resistant to loss, in contrast with those that were added later on during the process.

However, there is not enough empirical evidence to support this hypothesis both in L1 and in FL.

Another hypothesis that received outstanding acclaim in foreign language learning/acquisition is the **critical threshold hypothesis** according to which it is not what was first learnt that is less susceptible of loss, but what was best learnt (*best learnt, last out* [11, P.5]). This hypothesis is founded on the notion of frequency of reinforcement which states that it is not what is learnt first but what is learned best that is least vulnerable to language loss, i.e. it emphasizes the relevance of quality and frequency of exposure to the language [Berko-Gleason, 1982; Jordens et al.,1986; Lambert, 1989, Apud 11, p.7]. Studies in the field reveal that after a certain period of quality interaction with the language, there is some stabilization and attrition is minimal.

The **interlanguage or the interference hypothesis** concerns cross-linguistic influences on the retention/ loss of language knowledge and skills and it is believed that the dominant language will cause the other language(s) to lose their vitality and relevance. In this regard, those linguistic features that are mostly different from those of the dominant language will be first affected and susceptible of being lost (ex: present perfect in English in the case of Romanian speakers). The influence/interference of L1 on L2/FL occurs both quantitatively and qualitatively (lexical attrition is more or less similar in any language, with unfrequently used items being lost).

The last hypothesis to be mentioned is the **dormant language hypothesis** according to which language knowledge and skills are not completely lost because of specific conditions and circumstances; traces of these continue to exist in the foreign language learner's mind. The subject, in this case, has difficulty to access particular knowledge or specific skills, unlike complete erasure from their mind. This hypothesis is founded on the psychological concept of forgetting according to which information sometimes becomes inaccessible in the mind of particular subjects because of the influence of some factors. It may become available and retrievable only if those factors have been eliminated and the right triggers are applied. In FL learning this position has enjoyed significant attention due to numerous studies that showed that when the right cues are applied and appropriate conditions created, linguistic knowledge and skills are reactivated and become functional [3], [4].

From a psychological perspective, in Ecke's view, language attrition happens at three different levels:

1. **encoding**-capturing and acquiring new linguistic information;
2. **storing**-the integration and permanent representation of information;
3. **retrieval**-the access to information when it is needed by the speaker,

All the processes happening at these levels are activated by short and long term memory [2, p.323]. Scientists seem to have contradictory opinions about the relevance of encoding in language attrition. Some contend that only information that has been stored can be forgotten or may be difficult to retrieve [Baddeley, 1986, 1999; Spear & Riccio, 1994, Apud 2, p.323], whereas others insist that "there is a possibility that linguistic structures have not been acquired (encoded) completely and that the instable storage of these structures may have

contributed to poor performance and a sensation of forgetting [Isurin, 2000; Levine, 1996; Montrul, 2002; Saville-Troike, Pan, & Dutkova-Cope, 1995 Apud 2, p.323].

Szupica-Pyrzanowska, 2016, contends that language attrition happens quite often because of negligence and lack of effort to maintain language levels and quite often it begins long before learners get to master the language [13, p.109].

Lambert and Freed, 1982, consider that attrition is determined by two main categories of variables: **linguistic and extra-linguistic**. Linguistic variables pertain mainly to the content and process of language attrition [8]. Extra-linguistic variables, on the other hand, pertain to other factors that influence the rate and quality of attrition, including the attriter's *age at the onset of attrition, their attitudes and motivation, initial proficiency* [10]; [13], *course grades and number of courses taken, their literacy in the attriting language*, to name a few [11, p.7]. Schmid and Mehotcheva, 2012, synthesize findings provided by a significant body of research to conclude that higher initial proficiency, higher course grades and higher number of courses are associated with better retention of the language [12].

An important aspect of language attrition which requires extensive attention deals with what exactly is lost in terms on knowledge and skills, i.e. what components are mostly prone to loss. A significant number of studies in the field, concerned particularly with how skills are affected by attrition, revealed that receptive skills are more resistant to the phenomenon than productive ones, which are more vulnerable. Knowledge of language areas has less been investigated from the perspective of attrition. However, extant studies suggest that productive vocabulary is most significantly affected, followed by productive grammar. According to these studies, lexicon that is not regularly activated or is quite long, is easily forgotten both in L2 and L1. P. Ecke states that the bulk of research in language attrition focuses on lexical loss, though it affects all levels of language acquisition: phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic [2, pp.322-323]. Marefat and Rouhshad investigated the problem of vocabulary attrition and concluded that according to the findings provided by an increasing amount of studies in this area, abstract vocabulary in a foreign language appears to be more prone to attrition, followed by grammar [9, p. 87]

In line with Schmid and Mehotcheva, 2012, who argue that long-term disuse of a language affects first of all declarative knowledge (lexical items) and only later procedural knowledge (grammar aspects) in line with the threshold hypothesis: if attrition is to be detected in early stages of the attrition process, it is going to be on the lexicon" [12, p.11].

In Kupske's view, in the case of beginners, grammar is more likely to be attrited than lexicon [7]. Anyway, according to theoretical views, if there is a lack of contact with a language and reduced language input, language loss occurs inevitably. H.D. Brown (1994) argues that not only learning but language forgetting is systematic process [Apud 13, p.115]. This ascertainment should be considered by FL teachers in order to create learning conditions for language recycling to happen continuously, assuming simultaneously that language development is a dynamic process open both to gains. The point is to ensure that there is a balance between the processes.

Research in the field of attrition in FL is rather scarce, especially in regard to *morphology, syntax, pronunciation and pragmatic features*; further research to confirm/infirm

the veracity of the above mentioned is definitely needed, thus clarifying what aspects are liable to attrition and what factors play an important part in reducing its effects. With a view to FL learning, gaining a deeper understanding of what attrition entails may help to produce better learning theories and show how language knowledge and skills can be maintained. In the same vein, Szupica-Pyrzanowska, 2016 highlights that it is paramount for language teachers to be familiar with language attrition and with its manifestations in order to be able to propose preventive measures, as they are the ones who provide an adequate remedy [13, p.114].

Schmid and Mehotcheva, 2012, conclude that it is rather problematic to generalize the findings provided by studies in the area of attrition in FL since foreign language teaching and learning have changed considerably in the last several decades and are determined by socio-political and economic factors. Another aspect to be thoroughly considered refers to the teaching/learning method(s) [12]. The latter is believed to play an important role in reducing attrition and yield better retention/maintenance rates. Although attrition rates in FL are determined by numerous variables (literacy levels, motivation and engagement, duration of studies, age) our attention here will focus on instruction and how it can contribute to reducing its negative effects. Findings provided by studies suggest that certain methods and strategies are more efficient in ensuring long-term retention of linguistic knowledge, particularly those based on explicit meta-linguistic presentations as opposed to those promoting implicit learning of language features and norms.

Researchers in FL attrition, in order to make things at least a bit easier on the learners, insist that material designers and policy makers must make sustained efforts to offer FL learners linguistic input that ensures repeated encounters with high frequency language units and structures embedded in meaningful contexts. Just learning interesting vocabulary, for example, does not mean that the students will fully internalize it and retrieve it whenever necessary. D. Ausubel posits that mechanic repetition, imitation or other memory-related habits impede the learning process, are detrimental to the development of communicative competence and obstruct long-term retention [Apud 13, p.114]. In fact, multiple opportunities should be created for students to activate linguistic elements as often as possible by involving them in communicative acts, both orally and in writing. It is also deemed that written practice is optimal in this regard [7].

Bardovi-Harlig and Stringer, 2010 found that oral speaking skills are extremely susceptible to attrition [Apud 7]. According to their study, students whose curricula was primarily oriented to developing oral productive skills lost their abilities much faster than those who focused on developing receptive skills and writing, which reinforces the need for paying more attention to written production and exploring authentic materials in foreign language education.

Kupske considers that extensive exposure to written foreign language may compensate for lack of spoken input and reading in FL does not only promote language development, but also prevents attrition [7]. In this trend of thought, it is crucial that teachers engage foreign language learners in various activities to reinforce linguistic knowledge and skills. Thus learning situations which unravel in a spiral, meaning there is plenty of recycling and repetition of language dimensions already acquired are created. University students, after

having studied EFL for a certain number of years, show different levels of language proficiency. Some lexical acquisitions and grammar knowledge may already belong to latent memory and require activation. From this perspective, storytelling is highly effective and efficient since it allows for language units to be retrieved from passive knowledge and activated to convey various semantic subtleties. Students master sufficient skills to be involved in this type of very complex activity.

Another aspect that requires teachers' attention deals with helping students to stay motivated and diminish their language learning anxiety. When overly anxious, students may resist participating in communicative acts and consequently this may cause language deterioration and loss. In line with St. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (1985) and D. Asten's Involvement hypothesis, in FL development it is crucial that learners experience low anxiety levels and engage actively in miscellaneous tasks that promote authentic learning, not rote memorization.

To wrap up the discussion on meaningful strategies conducive to better language retention, it is worth emphasizing that attrition in FL learners begins as soon as they have finished the lesson. Respectively, the importance of homework should not be trivialized. Doing homework in FL means another opportunity of recycling and reinforcing language. Thus, producing authentic contents in the target language is the best way to fight attrition and contribute to positive growth.

Attrition deserves particular attention in language learning as it has significant pedagogical implications. Just like acquisition, attrition is an ongoing process, and these are perceived as opposing poles of the same phenomenon. The idea behind it can be summed up by the following statement: you use a language or you lose it, as there is no final stage in learning a language. Therefore, in-depth understanding of how language attrition affects foreign language learning can feed language teaching [7], thus facilitating the identification and implementation of strategies that would optimize the process.

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USEFUL STRATEGIES IN TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

STRATEGII EFICIENTE LA PREDAREA PRONUNȚIEI

Larisa Usatîi, lector univ.,

UPS „I. Creangă” din Chișinău

Larisa Usatîi, university lecturer,

„I. Creangă” SPU, Chisinau

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-6083-0311

CZU 811.111:378.147

Rezumat

Prezentul articol descrie o tipologie a strategiilor didactice ce sunt eficiente la predarea-învățarea pronunției în limba engleză. Pronunția este învelișul sonor al limbii și o pronunțare corectă este o măsură a succesului și un indicator al competenței de comunicare a vorbitorului. Pentru a fi eficienți în procesul de învățare, atât cadrul didactic universitar, cât și studentul trebuie să posede o gamă largă de strategii generale și particulare. O strategie didactică este eficientă atunci când antrenează studenții, când se adaptează la particularitățile psihologice ale învățării, când duce la o învățare creativă. În contextul problemei de cercetare realizate, am abordat procesul de formare a competenței fonologice din perspectiva strategiilor expositive, algoritmice, euristice și comunicative.

Cuvinte-cheie: strategie, pronunție, expositive, algoritmice, euristice, comunicative.

Abstract

The present article describes a typology of didactical strategies which are efficient in teaching-learning the pronunciation in English. Pronunciation is the cover of the language and correct pronunciation is a measure