

A Case Study on the First Language Attrition during the Second Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

Immigration has become one of the reasons for an individual to experience a second or foreign language acquisition, but at the same time, it may also result in language loss, or called language attrition. For this reason, conducting research on immigrants may give a broad insight regarding language acquisition and attrition. This study aims to reveal the language attrition experienced by an Indonesian child born in Japan who acquired Japanese as her first language and moved to Indonesia where she acquired her second language but at the same time also lost her first language during the second language acquisition. This study also investigates the reasons behind first language attrition, and the parent's role to maintain their children's first language. Qualitative research was conducted by using interview and observation techniques to gather information regarding the process of attrition. Overall, the study offers insight into how fast language attrition can happen to a child. This study further reveals the causes of first language attrition which include the language proficiency of the child at the onset of attrition, the decrease of the first language input, the increase of the second language input, and the language proficiency of the parent.

Keywords: first language attrition, language acquisition, language attrition, second language acquisition

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INTRODUCTION

Education has now become one of the reasons for immigration. People view that studying abroad may benefit students in many aspects, including experiencing language immersion or acquisition. The fact that studying abroad causes not only mobility of individuals but also causes the individuals' language and culture to get into contact with other languages and cultures makes many to be interested in researching this field. The field of research in the study abroad learning environment has also increased the involvement of many branches of linguistics study including language acquisition and the four skills in language use (Isabelli-García & Isabelli, 2020).

Despite the fact that studying abroad may benefit individuals in second language acquisition, the danger of individuals' first language attrition may also occur. Language attrition is someone's possession of a language resulting from the disuse of a speaker's language (MacWhinney, 2019). When someone is studying abroad in a foreign country with a foreign language, the contact with the first language disappears which may result in the inactive use of the language. This inactive use of language or disuse of language, if continue to happen for a long time, in extreme cases will cause the ability to speak the language to disappear.

Children are especially prone to language attrition in a study abroad environment. Studying abroad for a master's or doctorate program may also affect the family of the students who bring their families abroad. A child in the family whose first language has not yet built a firm foundation may be affected by the contact of the first language with the second language. There has been evidence that language attrition is not only affected by the degree of language input but also by the age of the speaker (Montrul, 2008). Further, there are three predictors of language attrition. These include the input shift, age factor, and the context of language acquisition (Flores, 2015). The third predictor is relevant to the studying abroad context, this context may severely affect the child's first language if it happens in the second language setting despite the fact that it may previously be the dominant language before the input shift (Flores, 2010).

Considering the fact that many changes may happen during immigration and that children's first language is prone to attrition, this paper examines the attrition process experienced by an Indonesian child who was born in Japan and got the Japanese language as her first language but then lost this first language after being brought to the home country where she had contact with multilingual environment. An interview with the parents and the child was conducted to gather information regarding the first language attrition.

METHODS

This research was conducted by using a qualitative inquiry design. The case study approach in the qualitative inquiry research design was selected to analyze the case of language attrition in a certain individual. A case study is a qualitative inquiry research approach that investigates a case with defined limitations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Defined limitations in this research include the sample that is an individual Indonesian child who has

a unique experience attractive to be studied. In addition, the case is also limited to the language attrition experienced by the child. In conducting the case study, the type of case study applied in the research was the instrumental case study which, according to Creswell, is a study concentrating on a certain problem on which the researcher decides a particular case in addressing the problem. As in this study, the researcher chose the case of an Indonesian child returning from Japan to address the issue of language attrition and investigate the possible causes of language attrition. Thus, steps can be formulated to prevent language attrition.

In deciding on the sample of the research, the researcher decided to use purposive sampling which is a sampling strategy used by a researcher who already has information that the sample will give the researcher access to certain data required in achieving the research purpose (Dattalo & Patrick, 2008). By this, the researcher assumes that investigating information regarding the language attrition experienced by the sample of this study will help the researcher get information in-depth about the process of language attrition, which is the goal of the study.

Regarding the data collection method, a structured interview was administered consisting of 18 questions divided into four categories of questions: Demographic Questions, First Language Questions, First Language Maintenance Questions, and Language Attrition Questions. These questions were asked to the mother since as the witness of the language attrition process while the child is still too young to describe her own attrition process. In addition, an observation was also conducted in order to witness the knowledge currently possessed by the child regarding her first language, either at word level or sentence level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

To make the discussion chronologically structured, the results of the research will be presented according to the questions category in the interview. The interview began with the demographic question. The questions in this part are intended to gather information regarding the background language of the child. The questions include the mother language, the first language, the second language, the language that the parents use in communicating with the child in Japan and in Indonesia, and what language was/is the child in contact with

when in Japan and in Indonesia. In this part, the researcher is able to know that the child's mother language is Indonesian, while her first language is Japanese, and her second language is Indonesian. What makes the subject interesting is that the first language of the child is different from the mother language. When in Japan, the mother communicated with the child in Japanese while in Indonesia the mother communicates in Indonesian. This probably contributes to the failure of maintaining the child's first language when moving to Indonesia since the mother language is different from the child's first language and thus the mother language becomes gradually acquired by the child as her second language. Moreover, when the child moves to Indonesia, the child does not get enough contact with her first language and gets more contact with Indonesian and Javanese language.

The second part of the interview consists of questions related to the child's first language. In this part, the mother reveals that before experiencing attrition her daughter has been acquiring her first language for three years, since she was born and raised with the language until three years old. This means that the language ability of the child was limited to the typical three-year-old children. The mother said that the ability possessed by the child at that age was basic level meaning that she speaks mostly at word level and the most advance was the ability to form incomplete sentences. This response illustrates how prone the child's first language is to attrition as it has not strongly developed even though before moving to Indonesia, the mother only use Indonesian on rare occasions.

During the interview, the researcher found that the language attrition happened not because there is no effort from the parents to prevent this to happen. The parents did make an effort by talking in Japanese to the child until approximately 6 months after the family moved to Indonesia. The parents stop using the child's first language because the child had begun communicating in her second language, she acquired from the environment she lives in, the grandmother and father, the aunts and uncles, and the daycare she was spending the daytime. These increasing contacts with the second language and the less input from her first language have been contributing factors to the language attrition. In addition, the mother reveals that the Japanese proficiency of the parents is another factor. The parents are not highly competent in using Japanese for daily conversation. The parents were communicating in English with their fellow international students when they were in Japan and used Japanese with their professor and with limited local people.

Regarding the language attrition process, the mother stated that it happened so fast. Based on her observation, in 7 months the child has lost her ability to speak in her first language. About this process, it is revealed that attrition can be divided into three steps. The first steps can be observed 3 months after moving when the child was still able to communicate and understand people talking in her first language but the chance in using it was rare since only the parents who occasionally communicate with the child using the language while the child had begun to spend more time with people other than her parents. The next step is the fourth month after moving when the child can still understand when people are talking in the language but is unable to speak in the language actively. The last is the total loss of the language in the seventh month after moving. This means that after seventh months, the child was unable to speak and understand people talking in her first language. However, interestingly the child was still able to mention several common things in her first language. This has continued to the present time when the study was conducted, two years after the child moved to Indonesia. Evidence of this was found in the observation process when the mother was asked to mention several vocabularies and the child was asked to pick the correct objects. Among them were Suberuka, Tombo, Onigiri, Oyasumi, Ohayo, Sensei, Tamago, Ichigo, and Aomushi. Another interesting fact is that according to the mother, the child can recall other Japanese vocabularies, even more, when singing her favorite Japanese song.

Discussion

From the results, the researcher attempts to discuss further the language attrition experience by the child divided into the process of first language attrition, the causes of the first language attrition, and language maintenance.

1. The process of the first language attrition

In the process, a language attrition of a community happens across generations which means that the process can be describe as a slow process, however, on cases where the second language is used as the dominant language, or the primary language replacing the first language, the attrition occurs fast (Anderson, 2012). That phenomenon is also experienced in this research, in that the participant when she moved to Indonesia from Japan, thus Bahasa Indonesia became more dominant and eventually replaced the first language of the participant. This demonstrates that, especially in this research, the

language attrition do not happen across generation but rather it happened even less than a year, seven months after the participant lost input of the first language.

As discussed in the interview results, the language attrition process in this research is divided into three phases, 1) the change of the first language use intensity resulted from the more contact the participant got with the second language; 2) the change of the first language ability from active speaker to passive speaker; and 3) the total loss of the first language where the participant was no longer able to use the language either actively or passively. However, this language attrition is greatly influenced by sociolinguistic factors in that the language exposure from the surrounding environment plays an important role both in the language acquisition and language attrition.

2. The causes of the first language attrition

The inexistence of an agreed causes to the language (Schmid & Köpke, 2004) makes research in investigating the causes of language attrition interesting to be performed although the uniqueness of language attrition process experienced differently by each individual and its close relation to the sociolinguistic factors may results in the difficulties of the generalization of results to be proposed as a theoretical framework in language attrition. However, the results of this study related to the causes of the language attrition can contribute to strengthen the previous research. Research done by Köpke & Schmid for example, age in the onset of the second language acquisition and age in the onset of the first language attrition are two of several factors which are significant to be considered in the language attrition (Schmid & Köpke, 2004). The result of this study, then, is relevant to the result on Schmid and Köpke that the child in this study was three years old at the onset of the language attrition and at this age the first language proficiency may contribute to the causes of language attrition. This age factor consequently can be the representation of the language proficiency of the child at the onset of the first language attrition. Thus, the first factor causing the language attrition in this research is the language proficiency of the child at the onset of the language attrition.

The second factor found in this study is the language use. This factor has been found in the research done by Flores that revealed the role of the language use in the process of language attrition (Flores, 2012). In this case, the decrease of the first language use and language input as well as the increase of the second language input cause the second language acquisition and the increase of the second language use. Although

language use is important in the context of language attrition, in this research the decrease of the first language input became the main problem as at the onset of the language attrition the child had not yet been proficient in the first language or in the other hand the child was still in the process of the first language acquisition. Thus, the decrease of the first language input causes the first language acquisition process stopped and it was replaced by the second language acquisition.

The third factor found in this research is the language proficiency of the parent. This finding has not yet been found in the previous research. This parent language proficiency on the first language of the child which was different from the first language of the parent became the main cause of the failure in maintaining the child's first language. The inability of the parent to provide sufficient first language input to the child and the discontinuity of giving input to the child by the parent are among the key factors on the first language attrition in this case.

3. Language maintenance

The results show that in the context of language attrition experienced by the sample, the parent holds an important role in providing language input to the child if the language maintenance is meant to be successful. Furthermore, the continuity of providing the input needs to be assured that the child is given continuous language input. Aside from the parent's role and continuous language input, the environment is as important as the two mentioned factors in language attrition. As in this study, the parent failed in providing an environment that can support language maintenance. Thus, in this case, the absence of a supportive environment in maintaining the first language contributes to language attrition. While language maintenance cannot be achieved, the child was more supported by the environment supportive to the second language acquisition. This, as a result, causes the language attrition happens so fast in the context of the sample.

CONCLUSION

Language attrition is a dynamic process, different from case to case. In this case, the language attrition process happened fast, as fast as the change of language input in the child's environment. The results of this research strengthen previous findings on the causes of

language attrition, among them are the language proficiency at the onset of the language attrition (Schmid & Köpke, 2004) and the decrease of the first language input as well as the increase of second language input in the child's environment, which can be related to the language use (Flores, 2012). This study has further revealed new finding on the causes of language attrition that is the language proficiency of the parent on the first language of the child, since it was different from the first language of the parent. This has been considered as the major cause in this case as the parent's language proficiency on the first language of the child made them failed in providing sufficient language input, thus, causing language maintenance failed.

This study was limited only to one individual case, which may not be able to contribute to the generalization of results to all context. Thus, further research needs to be conducted with more samples of similar cases for it to be generalized as a firm theory. However, the results of this study have offer new insight on the factor causing language attrition to be considered when the first language of the child and the parent are different. Further, it is essential, then, to conduct further research, giving the fact that new findings on different context of similar cases may be encountered which may contribute to the formulation of a firm theory on the causes of language attrition and the steps toward the language maintenance or prevention toward language attrition can be generated.

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