

Language Rules and the Positive Effects of Learning Language Rules on Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: This paper explores the significance of language rules in governing human language and their impact on second language acquisition. Language, as a unique human feature, is rule-based, enabling individuals to create an infinite number of sentences for communication. The paper delves into the nature of language rules, distinguishing between prescriptive and descriptive rules. Prescriptive rules dictate how language should be used, whereas descriptive rules analyze and describe how language is actually spoken and written. The paper also examines how speakers can use a finite set of language rules to generate new sentences. Furthermore, it discusses the positive effects of learning language rules on second language learners, including facilitating systematic understanding and retention, encouraging analytical thinking and problem-solving, boosting language processing efficiency, enhancing cultural awareness, and providing a foundation for linguistic academic research. Ultimately, this paper emphasizes the importance of recognizing and learning language rules for effective second language acquisition.

1. Introduction

Human language is a unique feature of humans. It is very important for our social communication. When we talk to our parents, lover, friends, teachers, or total strangers, we need to use language to transmit our ideas and desires to each other. When we watch TV, listen to the radio, or listen to the lecture, we receive the message via language. Undoubtedly, language is not necessary for personal communication. However, why people can create an infinite number of sentences to communicate with each other? The answer is that all spoken language is governed by rules, so we can use these rules to create the sentences what we want to speak. In this paper, first, I mainly explain why language is rule-governed. Second, I will be discussing the prescriptive rules & descriptive rules. Third, I will give some examples about speakers can in principle to create an infinite number of new sentences. Finally, I will share my opinions on the effective impact of learning language rules on second language acquisition.^[1]

2. Why Language is Rule-governed

For the language, Robert and Owens (2008, p13) argued that “The relationship between meaning and the symbols employed is arbitrary one, but the arrangement of the symbols in relation to one

another is nonarbitrary. This nonarbitrary organizational feature of language demonstrates the presence of underlying rules or patterns that occur repeatedly.” [2] Moreover, Radford (1988, p19) stated that “... language is rule-governed.” [3] The task of the linguist in seeking to account for this creative aspect of grammatical competence is thus to formulate appropriate sets of syntactic, morphological, phonological, and semantic rules.” According to Robert and Owens (2005), this paper will give some explaining of syntactic rules, morphological rules, phonological rules, pragmatic rules, and semantic rules as following:

1) Syntactic rules: A sentence’s form or structure is governed by the rules of syntax. These syntactic rules specify: (1) sentence organization; (2) word, phrase, and clause order; (3) and the relationship between words, word classes, and other sentence elements. So the syntactic rules can decide which word combination is acceptable, and which word is not (Robert and Owens, 2005). In English, every sentence should be contain a noun phrase and a verb phrase, such as, “Mary cried” a acceptable English sentence, because it contained a noun phrase and a verb phrase. It means that this sentence is following the syntactic rules. However, the following sentences are not acceptable English sentences, even though these sentences are much longer:

- (1) Plan the for revival based upon grandiose the community’s economic
- (2) Please roses me you give love if tonight
- (3) Suburban areas political cooperation of the city and the more affluent

These three examples are not containing a noun phrase and a verb phrase, and the word orders also are not acceptable in the syntactic rules. So we can’t understand the meaning of this strange sentence.

2) Morphological rules: Morphology, which is concerned with the words’ internal organization. Morpheme is the smallest grammar units, and it is indivisible without violating the meaning or producing meaningless units (Robert and Owens, 2005). Thus, “boy” is a single morpheme, because “b” and “oy” are meaningless alone. Morphemes are two varieties, look at Figure 1:

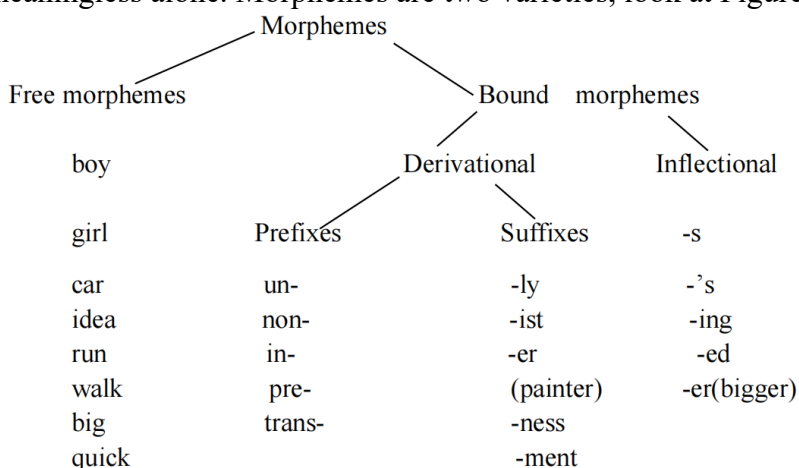


Figure 1: Morpheme Classes and Examples (Robert and Owens, 2005, p21)

Free morphemes can stand alone and they are independent, such as boy, girl. Bound morphemes are grammatical makers or tags, and they can not function independently. Moreover, bound morphemes can divide into derivational and inflectional in nature, and derivational morphemes included prefixes (which precede the free morpheme) and suffixes (which follow the free morpheme).

3) Phonological rules: Phonology, which is the aspect of language interested with the rules governing the sequencing, structure, and distribution of speed sounds and the shape of syllabus. Every language has a variety of speech sounds or phonemes. A phoneme is the smallest linguistic unit of sound in the language (Robert and Owens, 2005). English has about 43 phonemes. Robert

and Owens (2005, p22) argued that “phonological rules govern the distribution and sequencing of phonemes within a language. This organization is not the same as speech, which is the actual mechanical act of producing phonemes. Without the phonological rules, the distribution and sequencing of phonemes would be random.”^[4] Distributional rules depict which sounds can be used in various positions in words. For instance, in English, the sound “ng” can be found in the word “sing”, which is considered to be a single phoneme / ŋ / , which never appears at the beginning of an English word. The sequencing rules not only determine which sounds may appear in combination, but also address the sound modifications made when two phonemes appear next to each other. For example, the “-ed” end in “referred”, pronounced as /d/, differ from the “-ed” end in “liked”, which is pronounced as /t/.

4) Semantic rules: The meaning or content of words and word combination is governed by the rule of semantics. Semantic rules are concerning with the relationship of language form to people’s perceptions of events, objects, and relationships (Robert and Owens, 2005).

5) Pragmatic rules: Robert and Owens (2005) stated that pragmatic rules are related to language use within the communicative context, it is not concerning the way of language is structured. Pragmatic rules govern a number of conversational interactions since language is transmitted primary via the speech mode. These conversational interactions include sequential organization and coherence of conversations, role, repair of errors, and speech acts (Rees and Wollner, 1981). Role in a conversation will influence the choice of vocabularies and language forms. ^[5]For instance, you may be very formal in your role as chairman at a professional and important conference. However, you may be very informal in your role as a son/daughter talking with you parents. Pragmatic rules were divided into three categories by the linguists: (1) Use of language forms consistent with assumed rules. (2) Selection of the appropriate linguistic form. (3) Use of ritualized forms (Robert and Owens 2005, P25).

So language is not random. It is systematic, and it is rule-governed. These rule systems allow language users to comprehend and to create message.

3. Prescriptive Rules & Descriptive Rules

3.1. Prescriptive Rules

When people speak the rules of grammar, these rules often mean prescriptive rules. Prescriptive rules are intended to tell people how they should write and speak according to some pre-established standard. These rules are no linguistic justification; they are dubious origin and commonly taught in the schools (Schlenker, 2004). The following examples are typical prescriptive rules (only focus on English).

Example 1: Can not use double negation!

- a. Can not say: I haven’t eaten nothing.
- b. Say: I have eaten nothing or I haven’t eaten anything.

Example 2: Can not end a sentence with a preposition!

- a. Can not say: I will go to travel the end of this semester at.
- b. Say: I will go to travel at the end of this semester.

Example3: Can not split infinitives!

- a. can not say: I wanted to patiently explain to my mother why the decision was made.
- b. Say: I wanted to explain to my mother patiently why the decision was made.

The linguist as a scientist is not concern about prescriptive rules. However, knowing some of these rules is like knowing some fine points of etiquette, because the knowledge of these rules might be very useful in some formal situations. Prescriptive rules prefer giving practical advice

about use language. These rules are helping us to avoid making errors. In addition, I want to mention the relativity of prescriptive rules in this paper. The grammatical suitability depends on historical circumstances and sometimes different language. Such as, in French and Italian, double negation is considered:

French: Je ne venux parler avec personne.

I not want speak with no-one

Italian: Non voglio parlare con nessuno.

Not I-want speak with no-one.

English translation: I don't want to speak with any one.

(Fromkin, Blair, and Collins, 2004, p4)

3.2. Descriptive Rules

Rules that govern the way in which people actually speaking are descriptive rules. The linguists are solely concerned in understanding descriptive rules, so modern linguistics is descriptive. Language is governed by rules in this senses, it is not chaotic and haphazard (Schlenker, 2004). When children learn to talk and use language, and they were learning the rules of that languages actually. A number of psycholinguistic attempted to study children's language, they all consented that the young children's languages are clearly rule-governed, even though their language might differ from adult language. At every stage, the children may have their own language's grammar. The children who say "womans" or "sheeps" is observing a regular rule for creating plural forms in English. However, the children will learn the rules of irregular plural forms lately, and these rules will replace the earlier rules. The ability of speaking a language involves an internal knowledge of hundreds of rules. These rules do not need teaching in the schools, because people have learned them when they learn the language. Therefore, when a non-native speaker makes a mistake, we can know immediately, because we know the underlying rules of this language.^[6]

4. Speakers Can in Principle to Create an Infinite Number of New Sentences

Underlying rules of language, any speaker can create infinite sentences, look at the following examples:

(1) a. Tom is singing.

b. The President is singing.

c. The chairman of the Linguistics Department is singing.

(2) a. The person who sits in the first row is singing.

b. The person who sits in the first row and wears red clothes is singing.

c. The person behind the person who sits in the first row and wears red clothes is singing.

(3) a. Tom is singing

b. Jenny notices that Tom is singing

c. Nobody cares that Jenny notices that Tom is singing

d. Sam knows that nobody cares that Jenny notices that Tom is singing.

However, if the sentences of above, which are modified the order of words, or which are omitted some of words, the sentences will be "odd" or "sounds weird", because the rules of these sentences have been violated. Look at the following sentences:

(1) a. *Singing is Tom.

b. *Is singing the President.

c. *The singing of the Department Linguistics is chairman

(2) a. *The person who sits in the first row is.

b. *The who sits in the first row and wears red clothes is.

Not only these sentences are “odd” or “sounds weird”, but also we can not understand what they mean. Just only the rules of these sentences have been violated.

5. The Effects of Learning Language Rules on Second Language Learning

5.1. Acquiring Language Rules can Facilitate Systematic Understanding and Retention of Second Language Learners

In the process of second language acquisition, acquiring language rules not only provides learners with a structured knowledge framework but also significantly enhances their understanding and memory of the complexity of the target language. Mastering the language rules of the language being learned aids second language learners in deepening their comprehension of grammatical patterns, vocabulary organization, and sentence structures, while also promoting long-term memory. By grasping language rules, learners can break down complex linguistic phenomena into manageable units, making it easier to internalize and recall information when needed.

Using English learning as an example, mastering the rules of tenses and voices is crucial. By understanding basic grammatical structures such as the present, past, and future tenses, as well as active and passive voices, learners can more effectively comprehend and utilize English. For instance, knowing the formation and usage of the present perfect tense aids learners in accurately describing past experiences and their impact on the present, enabling confident use of this tense in various contexts. Furthermore, mastering subject-verb agreement rules is fundamental to building grammatical accuracy. By understanding the principle of consistency in number between the subject and verb, learners can construct sentences more precisely, reducing grammatical errors. For example, in the sentence "The dancers are rehearsing in earnest," the plural subject "dancers" necessitates a plural verb "are." This clear understanding of rules ensures grammatical accuracy in different contexts for learners.

Similarly, in learning Chinese, grasping the rules of Chinese character construction and Chinese pinyin system is also key. By understanding the radicals and stroke order of Chinese characters, learners can more effectively memorize and write them. Meanwhile, Chinese pinyin system provides learners with an accurate pronunciation guide, helping them correctly sound out each Chinese character. Additionally, there are numerous classifiers (or measure words) in Chinese, and their collocations with nouns are highly specific, such as "One smartphone", "two books", "three pens", "four trees", "five flowers", "six lutes (or Pipas)", "seven cars", "eight buildings", "nine laptops", "ten songs". By systematically learning these rules, learners can not only express quantitative concepts accurately but also appreciate the unique linguistic beauty of Chinese. In the process of memorizing and using these classifiers, learners' knowledge of Chinese is enriched, and their long-term memory is effectively strengthened.

In short, learning language rules not only aids learners in systematically understanding and retaining the complexity of the target language but also enhances their deep understanding and long-term memory of the language being learned by breaking down complex linguistic phenomena. This is fully demonstrated in both subject-verb agreement in English learning and classifier usage in Chinese learning.

5.2. Acquiring Language Rules can Encourage of Analytical Thinking and Problem-Solving of Second Language Learners

Learning language rules fosters analytical thinking and problem-solving skills in second language learners. By breaking down language into manageable components and analyzing patterns, learners develop a deeper understanding of language structures and learn to apply this knowledge to

solve linguistic challenges.

Take English learning as an illustration. When confronted with an unfamiliar grammatical structure, learners who have mastered language rules might dissect the sentence for clues, such as pinpointing the subject and verb. For instance, when encountering a long sentence with multiple clauses, learners first identify the subject and predicate of the sentence, which serves as the foundation for comprehending the entire sentence's meaning. Subsequently, they meticulously analyze the types of clauses (e.g., adjective clauses, adverbial clauses) and the logical relationships between the clauses and the main sentence. Throughout this process, learners not only review and apply previously learned grammar rules but also engage in logical reasoning to ascertain the function of the clauses and their impact on the sentence's overall meaning. Through consistent practice, learners gradually cultivate sensitivity and analytical prowess towards intricate grammatical structures. This analytical approach aids them in deciphering new linguistic phenomena and elevating their overall language proficiency.

In the study of Chinese, the rules governing the construction of Chinese characters similarly offer learners an opportunity to develop analytical thinking and problem-solving skills. Chinese characters, as one of the oldest writing systems in the world, feature intricate and varied structures that encapsulate a wealth of cultural significance. Yet, it is these complex structures that ignite learners' curiosity to explore the patterns underlying the formation of Chinese characters. Taking the radical system as an illustration, by acquiring knowledge of the meanings and applications of radicals, learners can decompose seemingly intricate Chinese characters into simpler components, thereby simplifying the process of memorization. For example, when encountering a character with the "wood" radical, learners can instantaneously associate it with meanings pertaining to trees, lumber, or wooden products, as the "wood" radical typically conveys concepts related to wood. This analytical method grounded in the radical system not only enables learners to memorize new Chinese characters more efficiently but also assists them in comprehending the cultural context and principles behind character creation, ultimately enhancing their ability to grasp the overall structure of Chinese characters.

In essence, learning language rules holds immense significance in fostering analytical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Whether it's grammatical analysis in English learning or the study of Chinese character formation rules, both can ignite learners' interest and motivation, fostering their intellectual development and skill enhancement.

5.3. Acquiring Language Rules can Significantly Boost the Language Processing Efficiency of Second Language Learners

Mastering language rules can enhance the language processing efficiency of second language learners. By acquiring these rules, second language learners can speed up their language processing, enabling them to comprehend and produce language more efficiently. This increase in efficiency reduces the cognitive load during communication, allowing learners to focus more on the meaning of the language rather than its form.

For example, when second language learners first encounter English, they often spend a significant amount of time understanding and memorizing words, phrases, and sentence structures. However, when they begin to systematically learn English language rules, such as tense, voice, and clause structures, their learning efficiency undergoes a notable transformation. As learners deepen their understanding of English language rules, they can more rapidly capture key information when reading English articles, grasp the main ideas and details, and in oral communication, they can fluently organize language using the grammatical rules they have learned. Additionally, in writing, learners can more accurately employ vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Similarly, for second language learners of Mandarin Chinese, learning language rules is equally important. Initially, learners may find Chinese tones, stroke order, and complex grammatical structures difficult to master. However, as they gain a deeper understanding of Chinese language rules, it not only aids their reading comprehension but also enhances the efficiency of their spoken and written expressions.

In conclusion, learning language rules plays a crucial role in enhancing the language processing efficiency of second language learners. Regardless of the language being learned, mastering language rules is key to improving learning efficiency, enhancing communication skills, and raising the level of language proficiency. Therefore, in the process of second language learning, learners should focus on the study and application of language rules to better master and utilize the language they are learning.

5.4. Acquiring Language Rules Enhance Cultural Awareness and Facilitates Cross-Cultural Communication for Second Language Learners

Language and culture are intricately intertwined, mutually dependent, and influential. For second language learners, mastering language rules is not merely about grasping the formal aspects of the language; it is also about deeply understanding the cultural connotations embedded within it. This process holds immense value in enhancing learners' cultural awareness and facilitating effective cross-cultural communication.

In English learning, by grasping language rules, learners can gain a deeper insight into the cultural backgrounds, social customs, and values of English-speaking countries. For instance, when learners understand that in English culture, people often use polite expressions like "Please" and "Thank you" to show respect and gratitude to others, they can more appropriately use these expressions when communicating with native English speakers. Additionally, English address terms, greetings, and farewells also contain rich cultural connotations. By learning and practicing these language rules, learners can better integrate into the social environment of English-speaking countries, avoiding cultural conflicts and misunderstandings.

Likewise, in learning Chinese, by studying and practicing the language rules, learners can gain a deeper understanding of Chinese cultural traditions. The respectful language and modest expressions in Chinese embody the politeness and humility that are important in Chinese culture. For instance, the Chinese respectful term "high opinion" is used when inquiring about or quoting someone else's views or opinions, showing recognition and respect for the other person's wisdom. The Chinese modest expression "humble abode" is used when referring to one's own home or residence, indicating that one's dwelling is simple and not luxurious. These respectful and modest expressions all reflect the humility and politeness of Chinese culture. Furthermore, idioms, colloquialisms, and other expressions in Chinese also contain rich cultural connotations. After understanding these language rules, learners can use these expressions more appropriately in communication, thereby enhancing their ability to connect and understand Chinese people.

To summarize, learning language rules plays a crucial role in enhancing the cultural awareness of second language learners and facilitating effective cross-cultural communication. By studying and practicing language rules, learners can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural backgrounds, social customs, and values of the target language, thereby establishing deeper connections and participating in more meaningful cross-cultural exchanges.

5.5. Acquiring Language Rules as the Foundation for Second Language Learners to Conduct Linguistic Academic Research

In the field of linguistics, the study and research of language rules are pivotal avenues for

uncovering the essence and patterns of language. For scholars who aspire to delve deeply into the realm of linguistics, acquiring an understanding of language rules serves as an indispensable foundation for conducting academic research in this field. Mastery and deep comprehension of the rules of a target language are essential steps towards academic excellence. By delving into the study of language rules, scholars can more accurately describe and analyze linguistic phenomena, thereby revealing the internal structures and operational mechanisms of language.

For instance, in English language learning, second language learners need to grasp grammatical rules such as tense, voice, and subject-verb agreement. These rules not only aid learners in accurately using the language in practical communication but also constitute the bedrock for linguistic research. Through the study of these rules, scholars can explore topics such as the evolution of English grammar and the varying applications of grammatical rules across different contexts.

In the same way, in Chinese language learning, second language learners also need to master the grammatical rules of Chinese, including word classes, sentence components, and syntactic structures. Learning these rules not only helps learners enhance their proficiency in Chinese but also forms the basis for research in Chinese linguistics. By studying the grammatical rules of Chinese, scholars can uncover the unique aspects of the language, such as the structural patterns of Chinese characters and the tone system of Mandarin, thereby providing insights and methodologies for research in Chinese linguistics.

To conclude, the acquisition of language rules by second language learners lays a solid foundation for academic research in linguistics. By mastering and deeply understanding the rules of a target language, second language learners can more accurately describe and analyze linguistic phenomena, revealing the essence and patterns of language. Additionally, the study of language rules can provide scholars with innovative research methodologies, driving continuous progress and development in academic research.

6. Conclusion

Any spoken language is rule-governed, it is not random and it is systematic. The speaker can use a finite number of language rules to create an infinite number of new sentences. We need to distinguish two types of language rules: descriptive rules and prescriptive rules. Descriptive rules are mainly analyze and describes the language people actually use, the investigation of these rules are based on authentic, and mainly spoken data. Prescriptive rules are intended to tell people how they should write and speak according to some pre-determined standards. These rules have no relevance for the linguists, because they are solely concerned in descriptive rules. Learning language rules is crucial for second language learners in acquiring a language. Firstly, acquiring language rules facilitates systematic understanding and retention of the second language by providing a structured knowledge framework and enhancing learners' comprehension and memory of the target language's complexity. Secondly, it encourages analytical thinking and problem-solving skills by breaking down language into manageable components and fostering a deeper understanding of language structures. Thirdly, mastering language rules boosts language processing efficiency, enabling learners to comprehend and produce language more efficiently and reducing cognitive load during communication. Additionally, learning language rules enhances cultural awareness and facilitates cross-cultural communication by promoting a deeper understanding of the cultural connotations embedded within the language. Lastly, acquiring language rules serves as the foundation for second language learners to conduct linguistic academic research, enabling them to accurately describe and analyze linguistic phenomena and reveal the essence and patterns of language.

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