Microslip in EFL: Why can't we use an expression "we know?"

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This paper introduces the concept of microslip and seeks a way to apply it to an EFL context. Microslip was first observed and reported by Reed and Schoenherr in 1992, when they watched a student making coffee. It was a sequence of minor corrections of hand movements. The hand corrected the movements needed to reach a coffee cup before pursuing it, regardless of their consciousness. As for language in use, it is possible to say that we correct what we are going to say while we are uttering it in order to adjust it to the situation surrounding us. We may make "microslips" in utterance while listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The concept of microslip can explain why EFL learners find it difficult to understand or use certain phrases they think they have learned and how they can reduce such difficulties. The modification of the environment surrounding the learner, the unification of subtasks, and repetition practices may reduce "microslips" of language use.

Key Words: microslip, affordance, context-dependent, modification

Speech is many-sided and heterogeneous; straddling several areas simultaneously—physical, physiological, and psychological—it belongs both to the individual and to society. (Ferdinand de Saussure)[1]

1. Introduction

Have you ever failed to use a target expression in a real communication that you learned in class? What prevents you from uttering it? Some may tell you that you cannot do it for lack of practicing the expression in class, so you need to drill in the sentence pattern more and more. Others may say that the more you try in a real life, the better you can use it. Plenty of experiences are required. Such pieces of advice may work, but they don't tell us why we fail to use it. Mastering a certain expression might not only be an internal matter of the brain but also a matter affected by the environment surrounding the learner.

The ecological approach may help us explore the reason for it. If you look around yourselves, you will know the answer.

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[1]Bally, Charles. & Sechehaye, Albert. (1966) Course in General Linguistics. Chapter 3: Object of Linguistics. translated by Baskin, Wade. New York: McGraw Hill Paperback Edition: 9. (first translated and published in 1959, by the philosophical Library, Inc.)

2. Ecological approach

2.1. From input to affordance

Although language learning occurs in the environment surrounding the learners, the environmental factors have been focused on less than the internal factors inside the learners. Kramsch (2002: 1) points out that the language learner has been seen as an information processor that receives input from caretakers, teachers and peers, processes this input into intake, and, ultimately, produces output of a measurable kind. However, language should be seen as a tool for getting other things done, and the focus should be on the way language practices are organized within members of a community of language users (ibid, 2002:2). What learners are exposed to is not "input," but "affordances," from which they select those that best fit their experience, and the activity in which they are engaged, according to the three basic principles of meaning making: mutuality/reciprocity, indexicality[2], and predication (ibid, 2002:7).

2.2. Affordance

Leo van Lier (2000: 257) suggests that the notion of input can be replaced by the ecological notion of affordance.

Affordance is a term which was coined by James J. Gibson in the late 1970s. The concept of affordance implies the complimentary nature of the creature and the environment. The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill (Gibson 1979: 127).

Van Lier (2000: 252) points out that what becomes an affordance depends on what the organism does, what it wants, and what is useful for it. In a forest a leaf can offer different affordances to different organisms. For example, a leaf can be an umbrella for an insect to avoid rain, can be an accommodation to stay, and can be edible. However the leaf does not change at all. Affordances exist and do not disappear. It depends on perceivers whether affordances can afford something to the perceivers.

Parallels to language can easily be drawn. If the language learner is active and engaged, she will perceive linguistic affordances and use them for linguistic action. If the learner is not, she will not perceive any affordances as language.

If we apply the analogy that a forest is an environment for reading, the whole story can be 'forest' and readers can be 'animals living in the forest.' Words can be 'leaves of trees,' 'trunks,' and 'fallen trees.' The words of the story always exist, but their meanings vary from reader to

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[2]Indexicality, which is one of three interrelated realms (planes) of sign (Merrell, 1997, cited in van Lier, 2002: 151), represents linearity, synchronicity, division, otherness, the social world (van Lier, 2002: 151).

reader.

Van Lier gives us a good explanation of the relationship between language learning and its context.

> In terms of learning, language emerges out of semiotic activity. The context is not just there to provide input (linguistic models or objects) to a passive recipient. The environment provides a 'semiotic budget' (analogous to the meaning making activities together with others, who may be more, equally, or less competent in linguistic terms. The semiotic budget does not refer to the amount of 'input' available, nor the amount of input that is enhanced for comprehension, but to the opportunities for meaningful action that the situation affords.
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> Knowledge of language for a human is like knowledge of the jungle for an animal. The animal does not ' have' the jungle; it knows how to use the jungle and how to live in it. Perhaps we can say by analogy that we do not 'have' or 'possess' language, but that we learn to use it and to 'live in it.'
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> (van Lier, 2000. 252–253)

Edward Reed proceeds how to use affordance given from the environment. He claimed that we humans would do things before we could do them. A child's learning of actions often starts before he or she has any real autonomous ability to realize the affordances toward which the activity is directed (Reed 1996:149).

Microslip

3.1. What is mocroslip?

Microslip was observed by Reed and Shoenherr (1992; Suzuki, 2001) as a sequence of minor corrections of hand movements. Reed and Shoenherr watched a university student making coffee and identified four different types of microslips; hesitation, trajectory change, meaningless touch, and hand shape change (Figure 1).

In hesitation, the student extended his hand toward the coffee cup, stopped immediately before touching it for about one third of a second, resumed his action, and finally grabbed the cup.

In trajectory change, the student tried to extend his hand to grab a coffee cup, but changed the direction of his hand and grabbed another cup next to it.

In meaningless touch, the student changed the direction of his hand and slightly touched something he was not aiming at.

In hand shape change, the student first shaped his hand to grab a cup by the top, but suddenly changed the shape of his hand to grab the cup by the handle.

Microslips happen not only in the movements of a college student but also in those of young children and elderly people (Suzuki, 2001: 57–58). The frequency of microslip is different from person to person. Sasaki et al (1998, Suzuki, 2001) conducted a longitudinal study of two children and observed some microslips while they were eating meals. One of them made far more microslips than the other due to the difference in their active behavior of choosing dishes and the role of their

Figure 1. Four types of microslip (Reed and Shoenherr. 1992, cited in Suzuki. 2001).

mothers next to them.

3.2. When do microslips occur most often?

One act can be divided into some segments and each segment is called 'task' (Gibson, E.J., 1997; Suzuki, 2001). For example, Suzuki et al (2001) shows that in the act of making a cup of instant coffee with cream and sugar, there may be five subtasks: put instant coffee into the cup, put sugar, put powder cream, pour hot water in the cup, and stir them up.

Moreover, there are smaller subtasks of each subtask. For example, in the subtask of putting sugar in, there may be another five smaller subtasks: holding a container of sugar, holding a spoon, spooning up sugar, putting sugar into the cup, and putting the sugar container back.

Schwarts et al (1991) devises a method of describing such tasks and subtasks. The subtask of putting sugar is categorized in A-1, while the smaller subcategories such as holding a spoon are categorized in A-2.

Suzuki and Sasaki (2001) used the categorization of A-1 and A-2 and categorized each subtask of making coffee into A-1 and A-2. They found that microslips tend to occur at the point of switching one A-2 to another A-2 (Figure 3).

There are two types of A-1. One is a switch from one A-1 to another A-1 within one A-2 (①). The other is a switch from one A-1 in one A-2 to another A-1 in another A-2 (②).

Microslips occurred 7.3 % of switches in Type ①, while 23.9 % of switches in Type ②. These results show that Type ② had more than three times as many microslips as Type ①. It means that

Figure 2. Tasks of making coffee in simple and complicated situations (Suzuki & Sasaki, 2001).

more microslips occurred at the point of changing tasks which contain some subtasks.

Choices increased at the point of choosing tasks. In the subtask such as putting sugar in the cup, the materials used there were limited. In addition to that, the sequence order was hardly changed in subtasks, so there were fewer choices at each point of switching from one A-2 to another A-2 in the same A-1.

3.3. How can we reduce mocroslips?

People manage to correct the movements just before doing something, which is considered microslip, but it would become difficult to correct them all if there are too many microslips one at a time. They might hesitate to do something, change the directions a lot, try to grab in different ways, however, but in vain.

Sasaki et al. (1994) and Suzuki et al. (1997) made a follow-up research of Reed and Shoenherr (1992; Sasaki, et al) on the hand movements of making coffee by university students. In a simple task, 2.6 microslips were observed on average. In more collaborative tasks, 5.3 microslips were observed. They found that the more collaborative tasks are, the more microslips happened. They also found that they could reduce the number of microslips without decreasing the complexity of the tasks. They arranged the coffee cups and other things in order to do the task more easily. The results were only 2.5 microslips on average in the same collaborative task. It was half as many microslips as in the collaborative task.

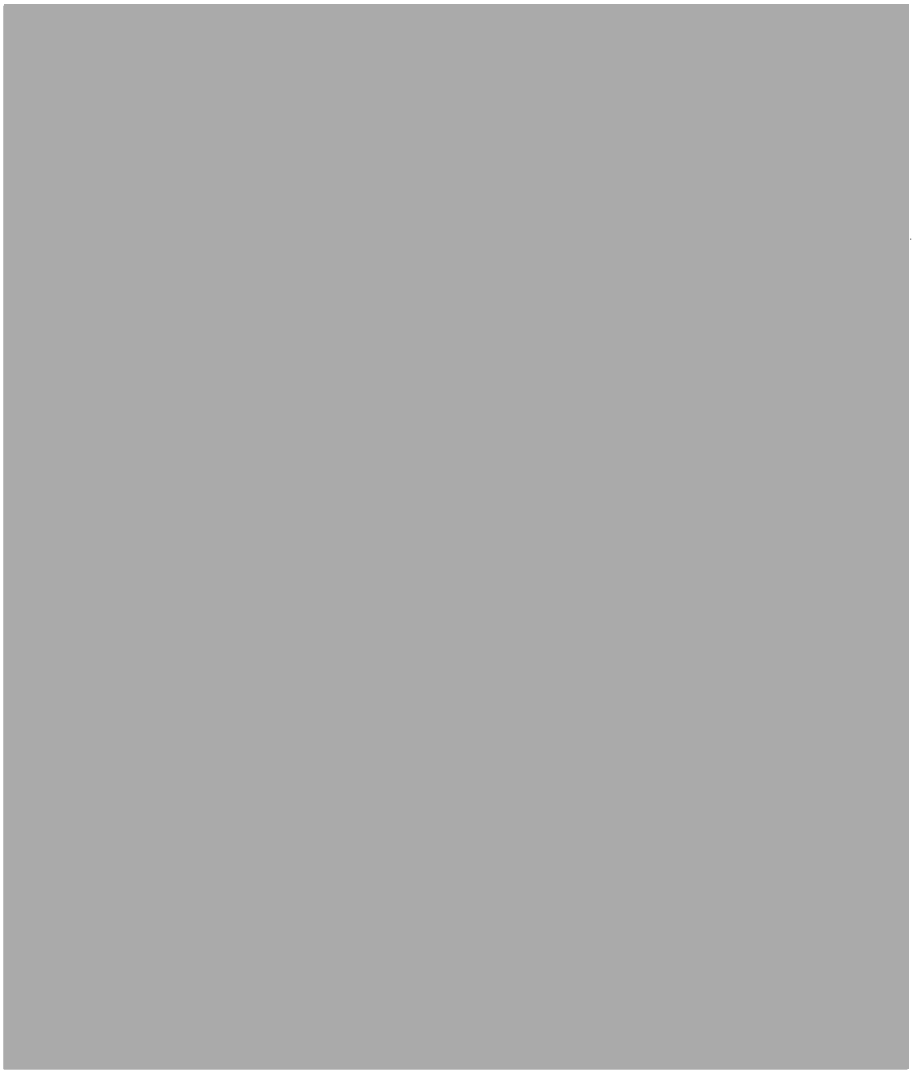

Figure 3. Switch from A-1 to A-1.

They also reported that they could reduce the number of microslips by the repetition of the task trials. In the collaborative task, the university students made 5.6 microslips on average in the first trial. However, in the second trial the number of microslips was going down to 2.0 and in the third trial the number was 1.8.

Sasaki et al. (1994) and Suzuki et al. (1997) claimed that the modification of the task environment and the repetition of the tasks made the choice of behavior smaller.

Microslips may increase when the choice of acts increases and loses the balance between the variety of choices and the factors which decrease the choices like the modification of the environment

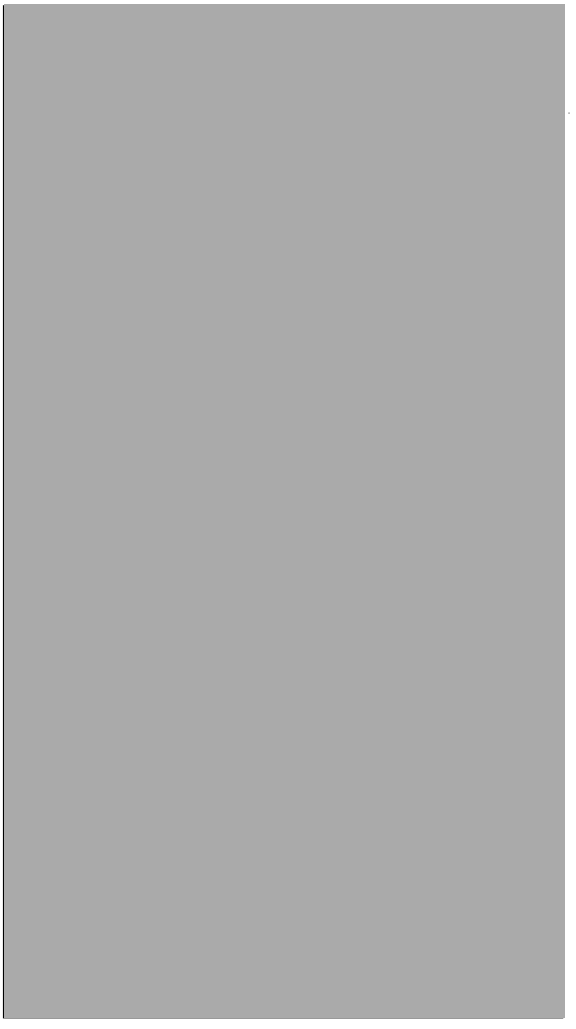

Figure 4. Unite two A-2s.

and the repetition of the acts is lost.

Even when we have the same situation, the affordance of the first time is different from the one of the second time, because we have experienced that situation once and know it the second time, and also because the environment around us is always changing. It is impossible to make exactly the same situation.

There might be another way to reduce microslips. If we unite two A-2s into one, the A-1s in the two A-2s will be in the unified A-2, and we may be able to reduce the possibility of microslips because Type ② will change into Type ① (Figure 4).

4. A contribution to EFL context

If we put the concept of microslip in EFL context, we may make a good explanation of the reason we can't use certain expressions we believe we "know," and of the reason we can use the target expressions more fluently if we have a repetition practice, we have the same situation as we learned the expressions, and use chunks.

4.1. Why can't we use certain expressions we "know?"

The junior high school English textbooks authorized by the ministry's course of study introduce about 1,000 words to the learners in three years, but regrettably, not so many high school students can use them well. They may not recall the meanings of the words in the junior high school level which appear in the context while reading and listening. The words may not come up when he want to speak or write.

One of the major reasons they cannot recall the meaning of the word which they should know is context differences between the situation where they learned the word and the one where they try to use it. When the two situations are different, the learner may not have an access to the meaning of the word they learned. There might be few triggers to reach the meaning. Unfortunately, however, it is rare to have the same context as the one where they learned the word.

Even when we think we set up the same context in language use, we may not recall the word meaning. The environment around us is always changing. We cannot expect exactly the same situation as we had. We need to adjust the knowledge and experiences we have which are similar to the new situation. Microslips occur in such situations. The more different situation from the one where they learned the word or expression, the more microslips they have when they try to use it.

If we make the same situation as the one where they learned the word, it may be easier for us to recall the word meaning when we try to use it. For example, you try to recall the meaning of the word 'permit,' but in vain. You learned the word in the context, *In most exams you are not permitted to use a dictionary*[3]. If you have to recall the word meaning without the sentence shown, it is very difficult. If you are given the sentence *The policeman permitted him to park there.*, it is less difficult. If you are given the sentence you've seen, i.e. *In most exams you are not permitted to use a dictionary*, it is the least difficult.

4.2. Context-dependent memory

Even if you are given a sentence you've seen, you may not recall the meaning of the word. The

[3]Kazahaya, Hiroshi (2004) Vocabulary Building×Rapid Reading Hisshuhen. 4th edition. Z kai shuppan. 58–60.

linguistic contexts are the same, but the context surrounding you may be different from the one where you learned the word. We live in a niche, which is ever changing.

There are two types of context as an episodic-memory trace; semantic or verbal context and environmental context (Isarida & Isarida, 2004). Semantic or verbal context represents semantic or verbal features from the set of items being processed and changes relatively quickly and therefore it can only associate with a limited number of the focal elements of an episode. Environmental context represents environmental features in which an event takes place. It plays important roles in everyday memory.

Godden & Baddeley (1975; Takano, 1995) and Isarida & Isarida (1999a) explored the effects of contextual changes by comparing the recall rate of words which were learned in one context and were recalled in another one.

In the research of Godden & Baddeley the subjects learned words on the land and tried to recall them on the land or under water and the results were compared. They also tried the other way round. The results show that different contexts might damage the recall of words.

In the experiment of Isarida & Isarida (1999a) three naturalistic experiments were conducted to investigate the context-dependent memory induced by contextual changes between class and intermission. The results revealed clear context-dependent memory.

4.3. To reduce microslips in EFL context

A different context surrounding you may affect you when you recall a target word. The more different the contexts are, the more microslips can happen. We need to contrive a way to learn words or expressions in order to reduce microslips. There are three possible ways to decrease such microslips.

4.3.1. Modification of environment

One is to modify the environment surrounding you for recalling. Make the environment around you easier to recall the target word. In the experiment of Suzuki and Sasaki (2001), a switch from one A-1 to another A-1 within one A-2 (①) is easier to do than a switch from one A-1 in one A-2 to another A-1 in another A-2 (②). It is better to have more switches of ① type than of ② type. Even when you don't seem to be able to recall the target expressions, try to arrange the environment where you try to recall it. Asking what kind of context the expression was/is used is one way. This act is 'negotiation' in conversation. Of course it is almost impossible to ask it in tests, but you can do it in a real communication.

People have been modifying the environment surrounding them (Reed, 1996: 117–122; Sasaki, 1997). There are three categories of modification. The first one is the transformation of objects. The second one is the transformation of places. The third one is the transformation of events.

The transformation of objects in EFL is like changing a difficult expression into an easier one. Suppose you want to say '*In most exams you are not permitted to use a dictionary*,' but you suddenly forget the word 'permit.' You can use 'allowed' instead of 'permit' or 'can't' instead of 'are not permitted to.' It may be possible to bring the written copy of the instructions concerning taking the exams. You will just read the instruction aloud.

As for the transformation of places or events, choose the right place for you to tell the information to the students. The above instruction should be given at the guidance for exams. Then the students will understand it more.

4.3.2. Repetition

The second way to reduce microslips is to have more repetition practices. It is a matter of course that we need to rehearse the target expressions. However, it may work more effectively if you consciously rehearse the practice in order to automatize switches from one A-1 in one A-2 to another A-1 in another A-2 (②). In doing so, the act of A-2 may become larger and the ① type may increase.

Moreover, repetition practices in different contexts may facilitate decontextualization, in which episodic memory is transferred into semantic memory (Smith, 1988, Isarida & Isarida, 1999b). It is almost useless if you can only use the target expression exactly in the same environmental context as the one where you learned it. When you decontexualize the target expression, you reach the level of utilizing it.

4.3.3. Unification: making chunks and automatizing

The third way to reduce microslips is to unify subtasks into one. If we unify some subtasks into one, the ② type will be the ① type. We may be able to decrease the possibility of microslips. Suppose a student reads the passage "This is the house that Jack built" word by word like "This - is - the - house - that - Jack – built." A possible suggestion to the student is to let him read the words 'this is' just like one word. In other words, let him read the sentence in chunks. Reading a sentence in chunks can change the ② type into the ① type. Those words such as 'the house' and 'that Jack built' will be read in chunks.

5. Conclusion

It is unnatural to think that language is the only media for communication, though it is the most powerful one. If we can only get to the essence of language such as vocabulary and syntax when we consider it away from any context, it means that we can get to the real onion if we peel away all the layers (van Lier, 2002: 158). The environmental factors surrounding us should be taken into

consideration.

Microslips occur when language users, consciously or unconsciously, adjust their words or the way of using them both of which they have used or seen before. The more different or unfamiliar environmental context surrounds the language user, the more microslips tend to occur.

In order to reduce microslips, it would be effective to modify the environment surrounding us and repeating the same task will help. To unify subtasks is another way to reduce microslips. Reading in chunks has been considered to be an effective way to read English. The concept of reducing microslips may be the reason for this. We need to use a case study approach to explain more about how we can reduce microslips in using a target language.

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