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VARIATION IN INTERLANGUAGE: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

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6.1 INTRODUCTION

For the past three decades, there has been a growing number of empirical and theoretical works dealing with variation in interlanguage. What emerges from research in this area is a conviction that learners' language is both systematic and variable. The term **interlanguage** was introduced by Selinker (1972), to refer to the type of language produced by language learners who are in the process of learning a language. Several alternative terms have been used by different researchers to refer to language learners' language; Corder (1971) speaks of **idiosyncratic dialect** and Nemser (1971) refers to **approximate systems**. These terms refer to the same phenomenon but they emphasise different aspects of it.

Since many second language acquisition researchers have made the study of interlanguage (IL) their main interest, a great deal of attention has been paid recently to the concepts of systematicity and variability in second language acquisition theory. Researchers have tried to investigate the systematicity underlying learners' variable production by drawing on related fields of linguistics, social psychology and language pedagogy. Different approaches have been adopted to account for variation and systematicity in learner language. The first approach follows the Chomskyan homogeneous competence model which aims to account for general, abstract developmental patterns of learners' linguistic competence. Variation, in this approach is regarded as a feature of performance rather than of the learner's underlying knowledge system.

The second approach is that practised by sociolinguists. Researchers within this tradition are interested in the study of language in its social context. Unlike linguists who believe in Chomsky's approach, the main objective of sociolinguists who work within the SLA research is to describe what the learners know about the second language (L2) system and how they use this knowledge in different contexts.

The third approach is a psycholinguistic one. This approach is concerned with variation that results from psychological processes that influence learners' language under different conditions of use. The main aim of researchers who work in this area is to show