

Second Language: Acquisition or Learning?

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“Language, as human behaviour is basic and systematic in nature. It is spontaneous, rules governed, socially acquired, culturally transmitted, psychologically moderated, pragmatically organized and textually manifested”.

- Yule, George

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As a language is socially acquired and culturally transmitted, the goal of the activities associated with learning a second language (L2) will help learners develop communicative competence in the L2, rather than know about the L2.

A young child can acquire a second language easily in a circumstance similar to that of a first language acquisition. But the vast majority of the teenagers are not exposed to second language easily like a child. A common difficulty experienced by adults in communicating a second language is that their ability to use the first language is rarely matched even after years of study, by a comparable ability in the second language. Another difficulty is the lack of the knowledge of precise words to describe something. It is apparently felt that there is no other system of knowledge that can be learned better at two or three years old than at fifteen or twenty five. It is believed that “There is some innate predisposition in the human infant to acquire language. We can think of this as the language faculty of human with which each new born child is endowed” (Yule, 120). Various proposals have been made regarding this enigma.

Barriers in L2 Acquisition

One major reason for the problems in L2 acquisition is the fact that most people try to learn a second language during their teenage or adult years in a few hours each week of school time.

They attempt to practice the aspects of second language along with a lot of other occupations and with an already known language available for most of their daily communicative requirements.

Another cute reason which has no physical evidence to support it is that adult’s tongues ‘get stuff’ from pronouncing one type of language and just cannot cope up with the new sounds of another language.

Acquisition & Learning

The term ‘Acquisition’, when used with language refers to the gradual development of ability in a language by using it naturally in communicative situations. Activities associated with acquisition are those experienced by the young child and by those who pick up another language from long period spent social interactions in another country.

The term ‘Learning’ applies to the conscious process of accumulating knowledge of vocabulary and grammar of a language. Activities associated with learning have traditionally been used in language teaching in schools and that tend to result in knowledge about the language studied. Those whose L2 experience is primarily a learning, “They tend not to develop proficiency of those who have had an acquiring experience” (Ellis, 48).

But even in some ideal acquisition situations very few adults reach native, like proficiency in using second language. But they are individuals who can achieve great expertise in writing but not in speaking. One example is Joseph Conrad whose novels are classics of English Literature but whose English speech is reported to have retained strong polish accent of his first language. It is reported that some features. (eg., vocabulary & Grammar) of a language are easier to acquire than others (eg. phonology). In support of this view the process of lateralization of the brain is cited as a crucial factor.

Lateralization Of The Brain

The apparent specialization of the left hemisphere for language is often called lateralization. Since the human child does not spring from the womb as a fully articulate language user, it is thought that the lateralization process begins in childhood. Childhood is a period when the human brain is most ready to receive and to learn a particular language. If a child does not acquire a language then she or he will have great difficulty in learning a language later on. One strong reason is that the lateralization process is complete by the time of puberty and language acquisition after that time would present insurmountable difficulties. In this view, it is the part of the left hemisphere of the brain that is opened to accept a language programme during childhood and if no program is provided then the facility is closed down. The optimum age may be during the years from ten to sixteen when the flexibility of the language acquisition faculty has not been completely lost.

Is Teenage a hurdle?

There may exist acquisition barriers of quite a different sort.

Teenagers are typically more self-conscious than young children. If there is a strong unwillingness in attempting to produce different sounds of other languages, then it may override what ever physical or cognitive abilities they have. “If this self-consciousness is combined with the lack of empathy with the foreign culture, then the subtle effects of not wanting to sound like an American may exhibit the acquisition process” (Noam Chomsky 64).

This type of emotional reaction may even be occasioned by dull-text books, unpleasant class room surroundings or an exhausting schedule. Basically if we are stressed, uncomfortable, self-conscious or unmotivated, then we are unlikely to learn anything.

But children are less constrained by this emotional reaction. The literature on child L2 acquisition is full of instances where such inhibitions appear to have been overcome by young children acquiring a second language. Courses on educational approaches and methods which are aimed at fostering L2 learning may provide a partial solution but the inhibitions are likely to return with sobriety.

Approaches & Methods: A Survey

Despite all these barriers, the need for instruction in other languages, has led to a variety of approaches and methods which are aimed for teaching and learning a second language. In 1453 William Caxton, the inventor of printing press produced a book of ‘Right good lernyng for to lerne shortly Frenssh and Englissh’ (Yule 205). Approached in the present century, designed to promote L2 learning, have tended to neglect different views on how a foreign language is best learned.

Grammar – Translation Method:

This approach has its root in the traditional approach to the teaching of Latin. Long list of words and a set of rules have to be memorized, and written language rather than the spoken language is emphasized. The result is that emphasize on learning about L2 leaves student quite ignorant of how the language is used. It is helpful for those who are willing to achieve high grade in a second language class.

2. Audio-lingual method

A different method, emphasizing the spoken language, became popular in 1950s. This involves a systematic presentation of the structures of L2, moving from the simpler to complex often in the form of drills which the student had to repeat. This approach was strongly influenced by a belief that the fluent use of a language was essentially a set of habits which could be developed with a lot of practice. Most of the time is spent in laboratory practice. Ultimately what we get is that isolated practice in drilling language patterns bears no resemblances to the interactional nature of actual language use. Moreover it is boring.

3. Communicative Approach

It is the recent revision of the L2 learning experience. It is against the belief that consciously learning the grammar of a language will necessarily result in an ability to use the language. Lessons are organized in different social contexts rather than the terms of the language (i.e., correct grammatical and phonological structures).

Those changes have provided materials for L2 learning which have a specific purpose. (Eg. English for medical people and Japanese for business people).

These methods and practices are concerned with the teacher, the text books and the methods designed by language experts.

Immediate Concern :

We have to shift the concern with the above to an interest in the learners and acquisition process.

- The radical feature of communicative approach is the toleration of the errors produced by the learners. An error is not something that kinders a student’s progress but is a clue to the active learning progress. In acquiring L1 (first language) children may produce ungrammatical forms. We might also expect that L2 learners produce overgeneralizations at certain stages. (Eg. Womens, Childrens, Mangos, Ladys, Thiefs). These errors may be due to the transfer of expression or structure from L1. A language learning situation that encourages success and accomplishment must be more helpful than one that dwells on

errors and corrections.

- The teacher as far as possible tries to create a circumstance for learning L2 similar to that of the L1 acquisition. For example pupil may asked to converse with each other by creating situations like interacting with Vendors, servants, friends, teachers etc., But in essence it is not easy because as said already adults are self-conscious.
- The input may be comprehensible. It can be made comprehensible by being simpler in structure and vocabulary. Eg. Instead of asking ‘How are you getting on your English class?’ You can ask ‘English, you like it?’.

Thereby slowly give the basic structures of L2 as input.

The opportunity to produce comprehensible output in meaningful interaction seems to be a crucial factor in the learner’s development of L2 ability. Yet it is very difficult to provide it in large class rooms.

One solution is to create different types of tasks and activities, similar to that of the circumstances that the students experience after the classes are over, in which the learners have to interact with each other. This task based learning will definitely develop the communicative competence in the L2.

The task selected must be similar to that of ones grammatical competence and other communicative strategies. In essence, this helps the learners to overcome potential communication problems in interaction.

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