

Learning and acquisition in language

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Abstract

All languages are used for communication. In order to express anything we need language. Language plays a great part in the mental, emotional and social development of a person. Language is essentially a skill. It is not a content-subject like science, commerce, etc. which aims at imparting information and fill the human mind with knowledge. Language is one of the unique possessions of human beings. We cannot imagine a human society without a language. All human beings acquire at least one language. This paper deals with the process of learning and acquisition of the second language.

Keywords: language, communication, acquisition, ELT

Introduction

Acquisition means learning or developing a skill. As a second language acquisition began as an interdisciplinary field, it is hard to pin down a precise starting date. In contemporary theory on language learning and teaching, the identity of the language learner addresses the ways in which language learners understand their relationship to the social world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the learner understands possibilities for the future. The identity of the language learner is theorized as multiple, a site of struggle, and subject to change. The diverse conditions under which language learners speak, read, or write the second language are influenced by relations of power in different sites; learners who may be marginalized in one site may be highly valued in another. For this reason, every time language learners interact in the second language, whether in the oral or written mode, they are engaged in identity construction and negotiation. However, structural conditions and social contexts are not entirely determined. Through human agency, language learners who struggle to speak from one identity position may be able to reframe their relationship with their interlocutors and claim alternative, more powerful identities from which to speak, thereby enhancing language learning.

The relationship between identity and language learning is of interest to scholars in the fields of second language acquisition (SLA), language education, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics. It is best understood in the context of a shift in the field from a predominantly psycholinguistic approach to SLA to include a greater focus on sociological and cultural dimensions of language learning what has been called the "social turn" in SLA.

Thus while much research on language learning in the 1970s and 1980s was directed toward investigating the personalities, learning styles, and motivations of individual learners, contemporary researchers of identity are centrally concerned with the diverse social, historical, and cultural contexts in which language learning takes place, and how learners negotiate and sometimes resist the diverse positions those contexts offer them. Further, identity theorists question the view that learners can be defined in binary terms as motivated or unmotivated, introverted or extroverted, without considering that such

affective factors are frequently socially constructed in inequitable relations of power, changing across time and space, and possibly coexisting in contradictory ways within a single individual.

Language learning is a deep puzzle that our theories and machines struggle to solve but children accomplish with ease. How do infants discover the sounds and words used in their particular language(s) when the most sophisticated computers cannot? What is it about the human mind that allows a young child, merely one year old, to understand the words that induce meaning in our collective minds, and to begin to use those words to convey their innermost thoughts and desires? A child's budding ability to express a thought through words is a breathtaking feat of the human mind. The learning processes that infants employ when learning from exposure to language are complex and multi-modal, but also child's play in that it grows out of infants' heightened attention to items and events in the natural world: the faces, actions, and voices of other people.

Language learning is a complex endeavor that involves the mastery of different processes divided basically into two main categories: comprehension that, understands the context and intent of what is said, and production. The production of language engages different processes such as phonology (perceiving, producing and combining sounds into words), semantics (connecting words to specific objects and events) and syntax (specifying relationships between words). With the use of brain-imaging techniques, researchers have found that the different processes related to the production of language utilize diverse neural pathways, with discrete anatomy, physiology and location. When a person reads words that provide semantic information (such as "cat" or "house"), the posterior lateral regions of the brain on the right and left hemispheres are activated.

If the words provide grammatical information (such as "up" or "from"), only more frontal regions of the left hemisphere are activated. The pathways used for processing semantic information are the same no matter what the age of the learner is. A child who starts learning a new language at the age of four will process semantic information through the posterior regions of both hemispheres. An adult who starts to learn that same

language at the age of forty will use exactly the same process. In contrast, the acquisition of grammatical information is tied to a sensitive period within which learning is optimized. When a four-year old child is learning grammar, the lateral region of the left hemisphere is activated. For the same activity, an adult will recruit the same areas but in both hemispheres. Twelve-years seem to be the age when the sensitive period for grammar acquisition closes and the use of bilateral activity begins. The older the person is at the first exposure to a language's grammar, the more bilateral the brain activity, and the harder the mastery of the subject. In other words, individuals who learn a foreign language at young ages (12 years or younger) have an easier time to master the new grammar than individuals who start the process later in life (although through persistence and hard work the older learners achieve success). The ability to discriminate and produce phonemes (or speech sounds) is also related to period sensitive mechanisms.

As Neville comments: "When you hear someone speaking your language with a non-native accent, you can be sure that he learned it after the age of 12." For deaf children, as it happens with children who have normal hearing, learning a new language, such as Sign Language, at an early age facilitates the acquisition of other languages. Different from other processes of language acquisition, the learning of Sign Language relies on visual, rather than auditory systems. However, the processing of grammar and semantic information seems much in line with the pathways used to learn other, auditory-dependent languages. Research shows that deaf children who learned Sign Language before coming to school have higher scores in English tests than deaf children who did not learn any language until entering school.

Language learning is a curious enterprise, effortless for children while often effortful for adults. This intriguing dichotomy has been the subject of intense research in linguistics and psychology, and this dissertation focuses on how children could accomplish the difficult task of language learning with such unconscious ease. Understanding the mechanism of language learning is vital once we consider the complexity of the system to be learned. Like many other systems, the linguistic system is comprised of many different pieces. In addition, again like many other systems, the linguistic system often has a non-transparent relationship to the observable data points generated by it, which is what a learner has access to. Both of these conspire to make language learning a non-trivial undertaking. One way to address this problem is to constrain the systems the learner could acquire by defining a finite set of parameters the learner must set in order to "learn" the language(s) of the surrounding environment. This serves to ease the learner's burden since only systems with particular features will be considered. However, this does not solve the problem of language learning. Krashen experimenting with adults learning second language came forward with learning – acquisition distinction. According to him, adults learn a second language in two distinct ways. The first way is via language acquisition that is using language for real communication. The second way is by learner's learning about the language. Learning is a sub conscious process taking place when the learner's attention is not on language but on communication which he is engaged in.

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