

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract:

The goal of many language teachers is to find the right method and the history of language teaching has done much to support the impression that improvements in the quality of methods will finally result in an effective development of functional language teaching method. Despite their diversity, all methods have one thing in common. They all assume that there is a single set of principles which will determine whether or not learning will take place. Unfortunately, little evidence has been forthcoming to support one approach rather than another, or to suggest that it is the method rather than some other variable which causes learning to take place.

Key words: language acquisition; first language, second language, linguistic system

INTRODUCTION

Large numbers of people never acquire a second language to a high level of proficiency. This has had two interrelated consequences for work on second language acquisition. First is the assumption that acquiring a second language is somewhat different from acquiring a first language, and second, it has brought to the institutionalization of second language learning to a greater extent. Clearly, there are two ways in which the acquisition of a second language must differ from that of a first language. The latter is in some sense the simultaneous development of the faculty of language as well as of the structure of a particular language. Apparently it is a natural and automatic product of a process of socialization with adult human being.

Although neither of these features may appear at first sight to be applicable to second language development, we have to be careful not to be the prisoners of our own constructs. It is true that initial language learning is the simultaneous development of language and of particular language (s), but where children are brought up in bilingual or multilingual environments they will grow up bi- or multilingual as long as several languages are functionally necessary to them. For the purposes of our argument we need simply to note that if the linguistic system is indeed dynamic, and is indeed altered by speakers for their own purposes, then adult's manipulation of codes within and across language boundaries need not be considered as in principle different processes.

However, when the adult learns a foreign

language, the difference will lie in the extent to which the tokens of the system have to be acquired independently, for the adult will be far closer, through the experience of meaning in the world. This he will do via mother tongue and through the interest in the target culture that has led to the choice of the language to be studied for second language learners, as for native speakers, the process of acquisition will often be closely connected with context, both at the level of the social group and individually.

In relation to individual learning, a number of commentators have emphasized the advantages of second language learners operating in a social context similar to the encountered by mother tongue learners. Others have investigated the process of negotiation of meaning by second language learners, and the use of language in context by children and adults as they learn.

All these studies demonstrate language use similar to that observable by first language learners and users. Furthermore, failure to learn may be attributed to an inability or unwillingness to interact. There is little doubt that learners will operate with second languages as they have in their mother tongues, whenever an opportunity is provided, unless there are strong reasons for resisting contact with target languages.

However, most language teaching gives little opportunity for such activity. At the same time, though, it is important to note that the process of second language acquisition is complex at all ages. It is believed that learners have certain characteristics which lead to more

or less successful language learning. We shall discuss this further in our study and consider the factors affecting second language acquisition. Evelyn Hatch notes in her book “Second Language Acquisition” (1988, Rowly, Mass, Newbury House) the variation in the ease with which different young children acquired second languages. Furthermore, frustrations and difficulties, as well as conscious attempt to learn, are reported, in ways similar to those attested to by adults. Hatch concludes that recent studies of second language acquisition “shows overall similarities in acquisition strategies whether the learner is child or adult.”

Another researcher, Barry McLaughlin, (“Second Language Acquisition in childhood”) points out some of the advantages that adults bring to bear on language-learning tasks. They can, for example, use more effective memorization strategies so that they can retain input for longer. They have a greater experience of the resources of their first language and can have recourse to the lexicon as a means of guessing items in the new language; they can process information more quickly and, besides, they have a much greater knowledge of the world. Children, on the other hand, too, make use of these resources as far as they can, and there is enough evidence of similarities between adult and child second language production to suggest that differences between these two groups are not fundamental.

But more intensive second language learning takes place in class rooms, therefore it is worth considering the implications of the modern research position for pedagogical acquisition. A number of comment authors, such as Jacobovits and Gordon (“The Context of Foreign Language Teaching”, chapter 1) have emphasized the undesirable effects of linguistic preoccupations on pedagogy. In this way teaching appears to follow the capacity of linguists to make satisfactory descriptions rather than the capacity of teachers to achieve successful learning. But several factors such as the limited access of the learner to linguistic data, the ways in which educational institutions constrain interaction, and the instinctive processing procedures of normal learners to indicate that learners are in quite different position from linguistic analysts.

I would like to quote from Kari Sajavaara’s “Psycho-linguistic Models, Second Language Acquisition, and Constructive Analysis” University of Jyväskylä. He says: “... production and reception are creative processes, and the establishment of communication between the two interactants is based only partially on rules which exist in the speech community and are available to its members through socialization and language

acquisition. As important as such rules are various negotiation processes which are created ad hoc in each individual communicative situation. The linguistic description of the linguistic system functioning in such an interactive process cannot catch the creative aspect, the rules that are made by participants...”

Such a dichotomy in principle has led to a distinction which has been proposed for language learning and for pedagogy in a number of forms. To my opinion the most fully developed and sophisticated version of the distinction is that expounded by Krashen (in his critical survey “How Important Is Instruction”) as between learning and acquisition. He himself has drawn attention to three other versions of the same general distinction, and I propose two other versions so that we get the table which follows:

CREATION OF MEANING	CREATION OF LANGUAGE FORMS
Mechanisms that guide automatic performance	Mechanisms that guide problem-solving performance
Skill using	Skill getting
Acquisition	Learning
Implicit knowledge	Explicit knowledge
Expression rules	Reference rules
Fluency	Accuracy

These are learning and acquisition-type distinction).

In this table, column (1) refers to the creation of meaning and is utterance based, whereas column (2) refers to the creation of language forms, and is sentence based. Anyway, such grouping is quite loose because some of these dichotomies are primarily psychological in motivation and others pedagogical. Some have wider relevance than language teaching and some are specific to that activity. Nevertheless, whether we are thinking of the description of the process of the activation of the process, it is important to know that a number of authors have found it helpful to distinguish those mechanisms which are largely cognitive.

We have seen, then, that linguists, sociolinguists, psycholinguists, and sociologists are increasingly concerned with the operation of language in social relationships, and the possible interaction between linguistic form and social situation. A concern for such interaction has direct implications for a definition of the nature of language acquisition and probably for second language development.

THE PROCESS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

The total process of teaching is a complex phenomenon which depends to varying degrees not only on the specific pedagogical behaviours of teachers, but also on the administrative and social context of their students. But teaching is an institutionalized activity in a way that learning cannot be, so that it is possible to identify and intervene in the formal teaching process with some precision, for there are conventional sets of behaviour which constitute approved practice for teachers of particular subjects. It is such conventional sets of behaviour that are usually developed in teacher training institutions, exemplified in textbooks and syllabuses, and debated in professional journals. The characteristics that set teaching apart from learning spring mostly from the fact that these behaviours can be observed, adapted, and evaluated. The important difference for our argument can be summarized as follows:

TEACHING	LEARNING
1. causative by intention	1. may occur willingly
2. consist of a linear sequence of observable events	2. is internal and unobservable
hence:	
can be	cannot be
3. planned	
4. directly related to conscientious	
5. based on a syllabus	
6. observed, evaluated, and accredited	
7. administratively controlled	
but:	
8. effectiveness in normal conditions cannot be measured.	8. effectiveness can be measured by observation of subsequent performance.

If we accept this position, then it makes sense to see what the teacher does as something that contributes to learning. It certainly does not make sense to regard teaching as simply the obverse of learning. While teaching strategies

need to take into account their relationship with learner's potential strategies, there is no sense in which they can reflect these directly. This is partly due to the fact that learner strategies have a wide range of variation that we cannot possibly predict, and partly because of the necessity to allow learners the freedom to create their own grammar. The teacher's traditional function may be seen as analogous to that of a textbook writer: i.e., as a presenter of language as tokens to the learner. This is what occurs when the presentation and formal practice activities are being operated, and also when the teacher is correcting the student's output comprehension. These are all aspects of the teacher's activity that can be guided and planned, but the direct relationship between these and the process of learning remains obscure.

CONCLUSION

Learning in this way will be dependent partly on the teacher's ability to stop teaching and become simply one among a number of communicators in the classroom. Without such an ability, teachers will prevent their learners from ever having the opportunity to convert tokens that have been formally "learnt" into communicative systems that have been acquired.

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