Differences between Second Language Learning and First Language Acquisition

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Abstract

This paper explores the differences between the first language acquisition and the second language learning and its limitations. According to Krashen, first language (L1) acquisition is the process of natural assimilation, whereas learning a second language (L2) is a conscious one. Acquiring a second language can be a lifelong learning process for many as the second language learners are rarely successful. However, children by around the age of 5 have more or less mastered their first language with the exception of vocabulary and a few grammatical structures. First language can be an impediment or an aid depending on the methodology the teacher uses and the seriousness with which the teacher follows the method to teach the second language.

This paper also discusses a few language teaching methods and techniques that may impart insights to the teachers to adopt various methods in the classroom to enable the learners' master competency in the target language. It suggests that, the language teachers need to break the traditional classroom environment and make the second language teaching very innovative, interactive and interesting for the learners to acquire proficiency in L2 as learning of L2 is the outcome of relentless effort and practice in real context.

Keywords: L1- natural assimilation, L2 - conscious learning

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Acquisition versus Learning

Many have discussed on second language acquisition and first language learning. Second language learning is the process by which people learn a second language in addition to their native language. The term "acquisition" and "learning" are not treated as synonyms, instead used to refer to the subconscious and conscious aspects of learning a language.

Language acquisition is the ability of the brain in its cognitive development & process to conceptualize concepts, structures and semantics in a language, while learning is the active participation and effort to learn a language. Language teachers devise methods as components of language acquisition, while learners use them to learn. Language learning involves receiving information about the language, transforming it into knowledge through intellectual effort and storing it through memorization.

Language acquisition involves developing the skill of interacting with foreigners to understand them and speak their language.

The Defining Difference

According to some researchers, the defining difference between a first language (L1) and a second language (L2) is the age which the person started learning the language. For example, Eric Lenneberg used second language to mean a language consciously acquired or used by its speaker after puberty.

According to second language acquisition (SLA) research, L1 acquisition is completely successful, L2 learning is not. Very few L2 learners appear to be fully successful in the way that native speakers are (Towell & Hawkins 1994: p.14); unfortunately, language mastery is not often the outcome of SLA (Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991: 153). The evidence for this deficiency is held to be the lack of completeness of L2 grammars (Schechter 1988) or the fossilization in L2 learning where the learner cannot progress beyond some particular stage (Selinker 1992).

Many Factors

While there are many similarities between L1 and L2 learning, the variation in situation and other factors also produces many differences. One difficulty is filtering out differences that are accidental rather than inevitable. L1 children mostly acquire language in different settings with different exposure to language than L2 learners and they are at different stages of mental and social maturity (Cook 1969). It may be inherently impossible to compare equivalent L1 and L2 learners. However, this article may provide the language teachers, a clear understanding of the differences between acquisition and learning and to adopt apt methods to teach second language.

Need for Learning a Second Language

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Every member who is aspiring to work in a multicultural society needs to learn a second language. It is very essential because of globalization; connections are becoming inevitable among nations, states and organizations which create a great need for knowing another language. The uses of common languages are in areas such as trade, tourism, international relations between governments, technology, media and science. Therefore, many countries such as Japan (Kubota, 1998) and China (Kirkpatrick & Zhichang, 2002) create education policies to teach at least one foreign language at primary and secondary school level. However, some countries such as India, Singapore, Malaysia and Philippines use a second official language in their governing system. Today many countries like China are giving enormous importance to foreign language learning, specially learning English Language.

Language Acquisition & Language Learning

Language acquisition is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive, produce and use words to understand and communicate. This capacity involves the picking up of diverse capacities including Syntax, Phonetics, and extensive Vocabulary. This language might be vocal as with speech or manual as in sign. Language acquisition usually refers to first language acquisition, which studies infants' acquisition of their native language, rather than second language learning, which deals with acquisition (in both children and adults) of additional languages.

To be clearer, language acquisition refers to the process of natural assimilation, involving intuition and subconscious learning, which is the product of real interactions between people where the learner is an active participant. It is similar to the way children learn their native tongue, a process that produce functional skill in the spoken language without theoretical knowledge. It develops familiarity with the phonetic characteristics of the language as well as its structure and vocabulary, and is responsible for oral understanding, the capability for creative communication and for the identification of cultural values. Teaching and learning are viewed as activities that happen in a personal psychological plane. The acquisition approach praises the communicative act and develops self-confidence in the learner.

Classic Examples

A classic example of language acquisition involves adolescents and young adults who live abroad for a year in an exchange program, attaining near native fluency, while knowing little about the language in the majority of cases. They have a good pronunciation without a notion of phonology, don't know what the perfect tense is, modal or phrasal verbs are, but they intuitively recognize and know how to use all the structures.

Language Learning

The concept of language learning is linked to the traditional approach to the study of languages and today is still generally practiced in high schools, colleges worldwide. Attention is focused on the language in its written form and the objective is for the student to understand the

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structure and rules of the language through the application of intellect and logical deductive reasoning. The form is of greater importance than communication.

Teaching and learning are technical and governed by a formal instructional plan with a predetermined syllabus. One studies the theory in the absence of the practical. One values the correct and represses the incorrect. There is little room for spontaneity. The teacher is an authority figure and the participation of the student is predominantly passive. The student will be taught how to form interrogative and negative sentences, will memorize irregular verbs, study modal verbs, etc. The student later learns to construct sentences in the perfect tense, but hardly ever masters the use of it. It's a progressive and cumulative process, normally tied to a preset syllabus that includes memorization of vocabulary. It seeks to transmit to the student knowledge about the language, its functioning and grammatical structure and grammatical structure with its irregularities, its contrasts with the student's native language, knowledge that hopefully will produce the practical skills of understanding and speaking the language. This effort of accumulating knowledge becomes frustrating because of the lack of familiarity with the language.

Thousands of graduates with arts degrees in English are classic examples of language learning. They often are trained and theoretically able to teach a language that they can communicate in only with extreme difficulty.

Differences between L1 & L2 Acquisition/Learning

The distinction between acquisition and learning is one of the hypotheses established by the American Stephen Krashen (1988) in his highly regarded theory of foreign language acquisition known as the Natural Approach. There are many differences between first language acquisition and second language learning. According to Krashen, the acquisition of native language is a natural process; whereas learning a second language is a conscious one. In the former, the student needs to partake in natural communicative situations. In the latter, error correction is present, as is the study of grammatical rules isolated from natural language.

It is easier for the child to learn a language that is spoken by his/ her ancestors, parents, relatives, intimates. Another fact is that children simply learn language easier than adults. Children do indeed seem to develop better pronunciation skills than do adults who learn language later in life. In fact, it is nearly impossible for adults to develop completely native-like pronunciation. However, adults are just as capable of learning language as are children. The reasons it seems easier for children has less to do with age than with other factors that go along with age.

Children and Language Learning and Acquisition

Fortunately, a child is in a very special privileged position in society. Errors which seem cute when made by a child are odd or weird when made by an adult. We are glad to smile and talk "baby-talk" with a child, but reluctant to do this for adults. Children are happy to babble away to themselves, while adults may be more self-conscious. Overcoming some of this

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reluctance to appear child-like may significantly improve the success of second-language learners.

Differences between first language second language

1st Language	2nd Language
constantly acquired	regularly learned
incessant interaction with caregiver	infrequent interaction
stimulus to comprehend	less motivation
no emotional barrier	may be emotional barrier
no "inter-language"	dependence on "interlanguage"
booming	rarely booming

(Source from Denaina Qenaga…Acquisition and learning)

Second Language Teaching Methods

In learning languages, a distinction is usually made between mother tongues, second languages, and foreign languages. A mother tongue is the first language one acquires as a child. When immigrants come to a new country and learn the language of that country, they are learning a second language. On the other hand, when English-speaking students in the United States learn French or Spanish in school, they are learning a foreign language. The acronyms ESL and EFL stand for the learning of English as a second and as a foreign language.

First language can be an impediment or an aid depending on the methodology the teacher uses and the seriousness with which follows the method. A number of methods and techniques have been evolved for the teaching of second and foreign languages in the recent past. Some have fallen into relative obscurity and others are widely used; still others have a small following, but offer useful insights.

Principal Views Relating to Second Language Learning

There are three principle views related to Second language learning:
1. The structural view treats language as a system of structurally related elements to code meaning (e.g. grammar).
2. The functional view sees language as a vehicle to express or accomplish a certain function, such as requesting something.
3. The interactive view sees language as a vehicle for the creation and maintenance of social relations, focusing on patterns of moves, acts, negotiations and interaction found in conversational exchanges. This view has been fairly dominant since the 1980s.

Examples of Structural Methods

Examples of structural methods are Grammar Translation and the Audio- Lingual Method. The Grammar Translation Method is the oldest method of teaching in India. It maintains the mother tongue of the learner as the reference particularly in the process of learning the

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second/foreign languages. In this method, while teaching the text book the teacher translates every word, phrase from English into the mother tongue of learners. Further, students are required to translate sentences from their mother tongue into English.

These exercises in translation are based on various items covering the grammar of the target language. The method emphasizes the study of grammar through deduction that is through the study of the rules of grammar .There is no emphasis on speaking and listening comprehension. This teaching method is still common in many countries and institutions around the world, and still appears to those interested in languages from an intellectual or linguistic perspective. However, it does little to improve your ability to use the language for oral communication. But make the students to have a greater knowledge about the native language, than gaining a good mastery of the target language for communication purpose.

In the Audio Lingual Method, the use of students' native language is totally avoided in the classroom. The emphasis is not on the understanding of words, but rather on the learning of structures and patterns in common everyday dialogue. These patterns are elicited, repeated and tested until the responses given by the student in the foreign language are automatic.
(Source 'The Audio-lingual Teaching Method' by TJ Taylor Language Training)

Examples of Functional Method

Example of functional method is Situational language teaching or Oral Approach. The Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching relied on the functional view of language. Both speech and structure were seen to be the basis of language and, especially, speaking ability. One of the outstanding features of the method is its emphasis on vocabulary and reading skills learning. This leads to the development of principles of vocabulary control. It holds a behaviorist stand to language learning. It deals with the processes rather than the conditions of learning.

These processes enclose three stages:
1. receiving the knowledge or material
2. fixing it in memory by repetition
3. and using it in actual practice until it becomes a personal skill.

Situational Language Teaching aims at the achievement of these objectives:
- a practical command of the four basic skills of a language, through function
- accuracy in both pronunciation and grammar
- ability to respond quickly and accurately in speech situations
- automatic control of basic structures and sentence patterns.

Interactive Methods

Examples of interactive methods include the Direct and Communicative Language Teaching method. Direct method is also known as the 'oral' or 'natural' method, originated

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around the 1900s as an alternative to the traditional Grammar Translation Method. This approach is based on the direct involvement of the student when speaking, and listening to the foreign language in common everyday situations. Consequently, there is lots of oral interaction, spontaneous use of the language, no translation and little analysis of grammar rules and syntax. The focus of the lessons is on pronunciation, often introducing learners to phonetic symbols before they see standard writing examples. This method continues to provoke interest and enthusiasm today, but it is not easy methodology to use in a classroom situation. It requires small classes and high student motivation from the part of a language teacher.

Some of the characteristics of this method are:

Lessons are in the target language
- There is focus on everyday vocabulary
- Visual aids are used to teach vocabulary
- Particular attention is placed on the accuracy of pronunciation and grammar
- A systematic approach is developed for comprehension and oral expression

(Source 'The Direct Method' by TJ Taylor Language Training)

Communicative Language Teaching

Noam Chomsky in his book Syntactic Structures (1957) and the British Applied linguistics stressed on the need to focus on "Communicative Competence" and it is the goal of Communicative Language Teaching. In CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) every activity is done with the communicative intent. This method is presently accepted as 'standard' in English language teaching. In this approach, students are the centre of learning and authentic materials are used for interaction in the classroom. Students are given an opportunity to share their ideas and opinions on a regular basis. It emphasizes the ability to communicate the message in terms of its meaning, instead of concentrating exclusively on grammatical perfection or phonetics. Therefore, the understanding of the second language is evaluated in terms of how much the learners have developed their communicative abilities and competencies. Here Students work on all 4 skills (LSRW). Judicious use of the students' native language is permitted in CLT.

This method has various characteristics that distinguish it from previous methods:
- Understanding occurs through active student interaction in the foreign language
- Teaching occurs by using authentic materials
- Students are exposed to many fluency- based activities to develop their communication skills
- Students not only learn the second language but they also learn strategies for understanding and expressing their ideas
- Importance is given to learners' personal experiences and situations, which are considered as an invaluable contribution to the content of the lessons
- Using the new language in unrehearsed contexts creates learning opportunities outside the classroom

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(Source The Communicative Method by TJ Taylor Language Training)

Different Methods for Different Purposes

A language teacher must always try to adopt different methods observing the learning abilities of the learners. We need to analyze and understand the various learning skills of the students and enable them learning the second language better. If we understand the relation between the language and the thought we will be able to assess the needs of the students in learning a new language. When the learner is the centre of our classroom activity, his goal of learning the target language becomes the goal of the language teacher. However, acquiring a second language can be a lifelong learning process for many.

Thus, a child learns the mother tongue or the first language naturally and able to form the concept and grasps the situation and learns the meaning and use it spontaneously according to the need. Whereas the second language learners acquires the rules systematically, understand the meanings and try to put it in real contexts. As a result success is not guaranteed for a second language learner as in L1. In the first language, children do not respond to systematic correction. Furthermore, children who have limited input still acquire the first language. In L2 correction does not seem to have a direct influence on learning. Acquiring competence in L2 is possible only when the traditional teaching environment changes into more interactive one, where the individuals are involved in more pair and group work. In such environment, the learners feel less anxiety and they get more language practice.

To Conclude

This article discussed the differences between second language learning and first language acquisition. The earlier studies proved that the acquisition of L1 is a natural process; whereas learning L2 is a conscious one and argued that though one may not be fully successful in learning a second language, it is inevitable today to master competency in second language to work in a multicultural society. Therefore, a few approaches and their constraints as well as feasible teaching methods that can   be adopted by the ESL teachers are discussed. Using these insights, the language teachers could further explore his/ her innovative methods to teach the second language. Flexibility to the situation is more important than mere following the traditional method of teaching. Suggestions to improve second language include: judicious selection of text books, focus on spoken English, use of Audio- Visual Aids, comfortable classroom atmosphere and extension of vocabulary.

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