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Similarity and Difference in First Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning: What Implications for Teaching?

What are the areas of similarity and difference between first language acquisition and second language learning?

Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the terminology used in the above sentence. We speak of first language acquisition but of second language learning. The *Shorter Oxford* gives as the meaning of acquisition "the action of acquiring", a thing acquired or gained, and for learning "to get knowledge of or skill in by study, experience or teaching". Acquisition therefore would appear to be a process which is gained slowly over a long term, without any conscious or deliberate effort on the learner's part. Learning requires an active, deliberate attempt on the part of the recipient. It may be learnt formally or informally but it is not gained without conscious effort.

In general, second language teaching situations are all structured learning situations. The mode of cognitive thinking which takes place will therefore be markedly different from that which takes place in an unstructured setting. It is doubtful whether there would be any similarities therefore between the two processes of gaining competence in a language.

It is possible to analyse these differences more precisely, but firstly let us look at the variables involved. Most researchers, e.g. Cook (1971), Donaldson (1970), Rivers (1972) and others take the second language learner to be 12 to 16 years. This is vastly different from the child learning his first language at 2 to 5 years. Also, the learning environment of the home is quite different from the learning environment of the classroom and the mother will teach with quite a different style from the teacher.

Implicit in the age difference between the first and second language learner is a cognitive and a linguistic development difference. The young child is at a stage where his linguistic development correlates with his cognitive development. He has a kinaesthetic approach to the environment. He perceives the world globally and classifies broadly. He uses his senses to collect infor-

mation from the environment. His environment is limited by his locomotion, his caretaker and his ability to communicate. He accomodates information gradually; his assimilation is itinerant and unstructured. Because of this, categorisation is often transient. Categories are continually modified, revised and extended. He may call all animals "dogs" for a long time before he differentiates between a dog and a cat and it may be much longer before he distinguishes a cat from a kitten. He learns to apply verbal labels and this helps categorisation.

The young child also starts to communicate in single words as a progression from crying, babbling and sound repetition. Between 12 and 18 months he is producing recognisable words and it is at this stage that language becomes instrumental. He begins to form simple sentences. He experiments, produces language according to his own set of rules. He will say "I runned" even though he has not heard anyone in his environment say this. What has happened is that he has heard other verbs being inflected with the marker "ed" and in applying the rule, has applied it to the stem of an irregular verb. Even if he is corrected he may still persist in saying "I runned". He can differentiate between a question, a command, a statement and a description. He applies his own rules of grammar to make his own negatives, plurals, verb tenses and questions. From the second year on, the capacity for language grows until it reaches the end of its primary development at 13-14 years. Through all of this development his mother or primary caretaker corrects, expands and repeats to him in correct form what he has said. He is in an environment where his language is developed informally at his own pace and usually in a one-to-one situation. He is free to utter what he pleases. He is praised for his efforts and encouraged to attempt more. Roger Brown *et al.* (1968) propose a cycle of three basic processes which are present in the linguistic interactions between parents and children:

(i) Imitation and reduction, whereby the child hears the adult model and produces an

abbreviated version such as "I tall" (2 years 4 months) from hearing "I am very tall".

(ii) Imitation and expansion, whereby mothers interpret what the child has uttered in abbreviated form and expand it to a correct adult utterance, e.g. child: "Baby high chair"; adult: "Yes, Baby is in the high chair".

(iii) Induction of the latent structure, where the child constructs a hypothesis about language and produces an utterance to test this, e.g. "two tooths" instead of "two teeth". There is no doubt that adult stimulation and encouragement are important factors in the growth of language skills in young children.

Language development, cognitive development and the social environment are all intermeshed and they all develop simultaneously.

Contrast this with the environment of the second language learner. Firstly, this learner will be at the Piagetian stage of formal operations. First language development will have reached the end of its primary development and will be moving into sophistication. Second language learning will be subject to the formal level of cognitive development. The learner already has a set of rules for his first language. He cannot regress to expression at a threshold level but must automatically adapt his language to his communication level. He is used to communicating efficiently and fluently. He does not wish to produce utterances which are incorrect or clumsy.

The teacher is different also — not the encouraging, forgiving mother who endlessly corrects and guides him, but a teacher who has a syllabus to teach, an examination to teach for and a limited time in which to attain a certain standard. The learner, therefore, is not free to make mistakes in the same way as the child. Mistakes may form bad habits which will not be easily corrected. Mistakes show that a grammatical structure has not been learnt correctly. The teacher does not have the confidence a mother would have that the mistakes will gradually be outgrown. He or she does not have the time to allow for the slow, gradual progression which would occur if the second language was learnt as the first. Many studies have stated that exposure time is the essential ingredient for successful language learning (Carroll, 1975). The teacher cannot control exposure time or content.

From the study of first language acquisition, there are a number of important implications for second language teaching. The obvious implication is that we should spend as much of our time as possible in linguistic interaction with our students. Much of the time spent on rote memorisation and

drills could be used more productively in active situations where the pupil practises oral skills as part of a verbal exchange. If the second language learner is 12 years or more, then he cannot be expected to progress through phonology, baby talk, holophrastic (single word sentence) and telegraphic speech in the same way a young child would; and neither would a teacher be expected to accept such utterances or reinforce and exemplify in the same way a mother would. But would it not be better to encourage pupils to experiment with language and produce novel utterances in a variety of situations? Is a meticulous insistence on correctness of expression in second language learning really justified? Teachers can also be aware of the progression of acquisition of the mother tongue, and adapt their methods to approximate the natural learning situation at the level appropriate to the learner. Not more than 10 per cent of the verbal responses that children learn can be attributed to imitation alone, so manipulation of the elements of language in pattern drill sessions and directed dialogue does not automatically lead to fluency in spontaneous communication, as audiolingual theorists such as Brooks, Politzer and Lado claim. If transfer from classroom situations to real life situations is to be effective, classroom practice must stimulate the requirements of real-language interchange as closely as possible.

To promote this, the teacher firstly needs to be aware of the need for progression from listening to speaking to reading and writing, and secondly needs to provide the opportunity for pupils to listen to the second language in many different situations. He or she can allocate time for the pupils to speak the second language both in formal and informal situations, and on a one-to-one basis. An example of this would be involving the students in directed conversation among themselves on topics of current interest, then involving them in self-correction, in tape-recording and playback for evaluation of their pronunciation and intonation. Suggestions for informal situations are dramatisation of:

1. coffee bar scene with children taking the roles of waiter and customer and engaging in conversation with friends,
2. hawker centre scene (similar to above roles),
3. film show — discussion of film, making travel arrangements, etc.

Suggestions for formal situations are:
1. news reading over radio,
2. introducing guests,
3. formal speech at school prize giving.

Extra-curricular activities could be organised where the students meet together to share an experience which is later talked about in the classroom and about which they may write a composition. These would be original writing situations, not textbook translations. The students would attempt to develop their own language style in the second language, and would be involved in a constructive, personal learning experience. In this way the learner can make useful errors which can be corrected, explained and modified for the next learning situation. These mistakes may approximate the errors the young child makes when forming his own language rules. The teacher must allow for the adequate correction of errors and reinforcement of learning, both in oral and written form.

Dakin supports this active-learning approach. In *Language Laboratory and Language Learning* (1973), he summarises cognitive principles of learning under three headings: the need for experience, the twin processes of assimilation and accommodation, and developmental stages. Applying these principles to second language learning, he proposes (i) giving children maximum exposure to the language they are learning, (ii) giving children activities to do, (iii) not sticking too rigidly to a predetermined language syllabus. This is what is provided for in the illustrations above. Let the course the activities take, the varying needs of the children and the mistakes they make influence the vocabulary and structures that are introduced or practised in each lesson.

Obviously, we must spend as much time as possible in linguistic interaction with our students. We must allow them to experiment with the language. The young child acquiring his mother tongue and the older child learning a second language both need maximum active involvement in the learning situation for learning to progress most effectively. ℰ

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