

HOW CHILDREN LEARN A SECOND LANGUAGE

Marta Cristina Piovesan¹PIOVESAN, M.C. How children learn a second language. *Akrópolis*, 12 (2): 41-43, 2004.

ABSTRACT: The ability of children to perform complex rules and construct grammars of the languages used around them in a relatively short time is indeed phenomenal. The similarity of the language acquisition stages across diverse peoples and languages shows that children are equipped with special abilities to know what generalizations to look for and what to ignore, and how to discover the regularities of language. Fromkin & Rodman (1998) asserted that children learn language the way they learn to sit up or stand or crawl or walk. This study has as a goal to show how children learn a second language.

KEY-WORDS: crianças; aprender; segunda língua.

COMO CRIANÇAS APRENDEM UMA SEGUNDA LÍNGUA

PIOVESAN, M.C. Como crianças aprendem uma segunda língua. *Akrópolis*, 12 (2): 41-43, 2004.

RESUMO: A habilidade das crianças executarem complexas regras e construir gramáticas das línguas usadas em volta delas em um período relativamente curto é de fato fenomenal. A similaridade da aquisição da língua passa por diversas pessoas e as línguas mostram que as crianças são equipadas com habilidades especiais para saber quais generalizações procurar e quais ignorar, e como descobrir as regularidades da língua. Fromkin & Rodman (1998) afirma que as crianças aprendem a língua da mesma maneira que elas aprendem se sentar ou se levantar ou engatinhar ou andar. Este estudo tem como objetivo mostrar como as crianças aprendem uma segunda língua.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: children; learn; second language.

The acquisition of language "is doubtless the greatest intellectual feat any one of us is ever required to perform"

Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (1933)

"Just as birds have wings, man has language"

George Henry Lewes (1817 - 1878)

The ability of children to perform complex rules and construct grammars of the languages used around them in a relatively short time is indeed phenomenal. The similarity of the language acquisition stages across diverse peoples and languages shows that children are equipped with special abilities to know what generalizations to look for and what to ignore, and how to discover the regularities of language. Fromkin & Rodman (1998) asserted that children learn language the way they learn to sit up or stand or crawl or walk.

The authors mentioned above, keep on saying that the child seems to be equipped from birth with neural prerequisites for the acquisition and use of human language just as birds are biologically "prewired" to learn the songs of their species. And just as birds of most species cannot learn the songs of other birds, so also children can only learn languages that conform to linguistic principles, like structural dependencies and universal syntactic categories, that pertain to all human languages and that determine the class of possible languages that can be acquired by children. Thus, children born of any nationality parents raised in an English speaking environment will learn English, and vice versa, but no children will acquire a formal language without specific instruction, because there are rules that are not in keeping with universal linguistic

principles. And the different syntactic rules at any stage in acquisition govern the construction of the child's sentences at that period of development.

Learning a second language, he that understands grammar in one language, understands it in another as far as the essential properties of Grammar are concerned. The fact that he cannot speak, nor comprehend, another language is due to the diversity of words and their various forms, but these are the accidental properties of grammar, Roger Bacon (1214 - 1294).

The younger you are, the easier it seems to be to learn a language. Language is unique in that no other complex system of knowledge is more easily acquired at a younger age than at an older one. Young children who are exposed to more than one language before the age of puberty seem to acquire all the languages equally well. Many bilingual and multilingual speakers acquire their languages early in life. Sometimes one language is the first learned, but if the child is exposed to additional languages at an early age they will also be learned.

The critical age hypothesis explains the dramatic differences between a child's ease in learning a first language (L1) and the difficulty in learning a second language (L2) after puberty. It was believed that these differences could not be fully accounted for by the psychological, physical, and sociological factors present in second-language acquisition, which could impede the learning process. Many adults, for instance, who are self-conscious about making mistakes, often find learning L2 very difficult. This is not problem for children who are unaware that they are making mistakes.

The situation in which second language learning

¹Mestre em Língua Inglesa com ênfase em TESOL pela New México State University, New México/ USA). Docente no Curso de Letras da UNIPAR - SEDE.

takes place will also have influence on one's success. Many individuals attempt to learn a L2 by taking a class in high school or college. The student is exposed to the language only in a formal situation and usually for no more than a few hours a week. Even in intensive courses, the learner does not receive constant input or feedback.

On the other hand, due to the universal characteristics of human language, adults who know one language already know much about the underlying structure of every language. This is shown by the stages in second-language acquisition, which are similar to those in first-language acquisition. Carol Chomsky (1969), found that in the earliest years children learning English naively interpret sentences like *John is easy to see as it is easy for John to see*. French speakers learning English seem to go through a similar stage. Yet this cannot be due to any interference from French grammar, because in this sense, French is similar to English.

The acquisition of grammatical morphemes, both bound and free, in learning English as a second language proceeds in similar order as in children's acquisition, no matter what the system is in the native language of the learner. However, interference from one's native phonology, morphology, and syntax can create difficulties that persist as a foreign accent in phonology and in the use of nonnative syntactic structures.

There are alternative theories regarding the acquisition of L2. Stephen Krashen (1982), has proposed a distinction between acquisition - the process by which children unconsciously acquire their native language - and learning, which he defines as "conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them.

A similar view suggests that the principles of Universal Grammar defended by Noam Chomsky (1986) hold only during the critical period mentioned above, after which general learning mechanisms, not specific to language acquisition, operate in learning L2. A second theory proposes L2 is acquired on the same universal innate principles that govern L1 acquisition, which is why one finds the same stages of development even if the complete L2 grammar is not acquired due to nonlinguistic factors at work.

After presenting some theories about second language acquisition, a special case of a five-year-old Japanese girl who learned English very fast, without formal instruction will be addressed.

Everything starts in the early 1970s, when Kenji Hakuta (1986), met a visiting scholar from Japan. Mr. Tanaka, as Hakuta called the scholar not to say his real name, invited Hakuta home to dinner to meet Mr. Tanaka's family. The Japanese family had just moved into the first floor of a typical multifamily unit in a working-class, English-speaking neighborhood in Somerville, Massachusetts. Mr. Tanaka did not have remarkable English at all; his wife had studied English in college and was quite fluent. However, the most interesting member of that family who called Hakuta's attention was their five-year-old daughter, that Hakuta called her Uguisu, "nightingale" in Japanese.

When Hakuta first met Uguisu, she had just been enrolled in a neighborhood public kindergarten and had begun to make friends with children on her street. Since she was receiving no formal instruction in English at school,

Uguisu made for a nice comparison with children who acquire English as their native language. At first evening Hakuta tried unsuccessfully to get Uguisu to speak English. According to Hakuta's observation, her one English phrase was *not in particular*, which she had picked up from her mother.

The next few months were difficult ones for Uguisu. Her parents reported that she complained of headaches and was generally cranky, which they attributed to the pains of being in a new environment and coping with an unfamiliar language. She played well, sharing toys with her friends, and she occasionally used a few English phrases - usually imitations of what her friends had just said. For instance, she learned to say *I'm the leader*, which her friends used to yell out as they stormed around the house, and she used it frequently in a variety of contexts, such as when she wanted to show her friends how to play with toys. When asked in Japanese what she thought that meant, she translated it as "I am the big sister", that is, a show of authority. It was not until almost seven months after her initial exposure to English that Uguisu's English really blossomed. Her parents felt that this flowering was triggered by a lengthy automobile trip that the family had taken. On the trip, an American adult, with whom Uguisu got along well, accompanied them and this may have given her the needed confidence to use the data that she had stored up over the months.

From that point on, her rate of development was awesome; a nightingale had been turned loose, stated Hakuta (1986). During the next six months, English became her predominant language. She even started talking to her parents in English, which they did not actively discourage, although they usually responded in Japanese. And she used it when playing on her own, such as in the bathtub with her toys. Hakuta (1974, 1976), suspected that within eighteen months after her initial exposure to English, only a trained ear would have been able to distinguish her from a native speaker. At the end of two years, the family returned home to Japan. During Hakuta's two-year acquaintance with the Tanakas, they became close friends. Every two weeks or so, he would visit their home with a tape recorder and record Uguisu's conversations. Hakuta transcribed the recordings, which ran roughly two hours apiece, into protocols written in traditional orthography, with notes on the context. The transcription process was laborious, but it was the only way Hakuta (1986), could really grasp the details of Uguisu's second-language development.

A natural question to ask about second-language acquisition is the extent to which it is influenced by the native language of the learner. It seems logical that learning would be easiest in aspects of language in which the native and target languages share similarities. In fact, the emphasis on the role of native-language transfer has varied greatly over the years. Language transfer has been an active part of the debate among differing views of language acquisition.

Uguisu's development in English contained some intriguing examples of transfer from Japanese. Her use of the English word *mistake* is an example. In English, the word is most frequently used as a noun, as in *You made a mistake*. In Japanese, the word is most frequently used as a verb, *michigau*. Uguisu's initial use of *mistake* was as a verb, the way she used the concept in Japanese. She used utterances such as *Oh no, I mistake. Don't give me more because you're mistaking.*

Because I just mistake it, gradually changing to the more native-like use, such as *I made a mistake*. Uguisu was making an inference about the “verbness” of the concept of “mistake”, based on her knowledge about Japanese grammar.

Another example of language transfer from Japanese could be found in her relatively late mastery of aspects of English grammar that indicate subtle meanings that are not made in Japanese. One of them is the plural/singular distinction, as indicated by the *-s* added to the end of most nouns to indicate plurality (*cow, cows*). Japanese makes no such distinction, although the concept of number certainly exists. Another distinction is that between definite and definite reference, as marked in the English article system (*Go and read the book* carries a distinctly different meaning from *Go and read a book*). Japanese, like many other languages, does not mark this distinction.

Such instances of native-language transfer could be interpreted in any number of ways, but it is important to note that, historically, transfer came to be associated with the behaviorist’s view of language acquisition as habit. Rivers (1964), claimed that since first-language acquisition was seen as the building up of habits, second-language acquisition was seen as the process of overcoming those first-language habits where the two languages differed and retaining and making good use of the old habits where they were similar.

Whether second-language acquisition is similar to first-language acquisition is an interesting question, but one that has no simple answer. It depends on what aspects of language acquisition you consider to be important.

Theorists who emphasize the importance of nonlinguistic, cognitive principles in the acquisition of language, however, would focus on the differences, for second-language learners are generally more cognitively developed than first-language learners. Slobin (1973), stated that one might characterize first-language acquisition as an interactive process, where the development of cognitive notions triggers a search for linguistic expressions of that notion, and the existence of specific and salient linguistic features stimulates the development of the cognitive notions that they express.

First-and second-language acquisition is similar in that they are both examples of the entity called language undergoing change in the context of different mediums. First-and second-language learners represent two such contexts, different in what they bring to the learning situation but similar in their capacity to acquire language and similar in what they end up with through the acquisition process.

It is clear that children acquire their first language without explicit learning. A second language is usually learned but to some degree may also be acquired or “picked up” depending on the environmental setting and the input received by the second language learner. And Uguisu was a successful second-language learner, because she received this input in her school and at home with her parents while she interacted with them, and while she was observed by them.

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