


Second Language Acquisition

What is the Study of Second Language Acquisition?



In second language learning, language plays an institutional and social role in the community. It functions as a recognized means of communication among members who speak some other language as their native tongue.



In foreign language learning, language plays no major role in the community and is primarily learned in the classroom.




The distinction between second and foreign language learning is what is learned and how it is learned.

What is the Study of Second Language Acquisition?

It is the study of:

- ❖ how second languages are learned;
- ❖ how learners create a new language system with limited exposure to a second language;
- ❖ why most second language learners do not achieve the same degree of proficiency in a second language as they do in their native language; and
- ❖ why some learners appear to achieve native-like proficiency in more than one language.

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- Learners acquire a second language by making use of existing knowledge of the native language, general learning strategies, or universal properties of language to internalize knowledge of the second language.
 - These processes serve as a means by which the learner constructs an interlanguage (a transitional system reflecting the learner's current L₂ knowledge).
 - Communication strategies are employed by the learner to make use of existing knowledge to cope with communication difficulties.

The Individual Learner

- Individual differences affect L₂ acquisition. These may include: (1) the rate of development and (2) their ultimate level of achievement.
- Learners differ with regard to variables relating to cognitive, affective and social aspects of a human being.
- Fixed factors such as age and language learning aptitude are beyond external control. Variable factors such as motivation are influenced by external factors such as social setting and by the actual course of L₂ development.
- Cognitive style refers to the way people perceive, conceptualize, organize and recall information.
- Field dependent learners operate holistically. They like to work with others. Field independent learners are analytic and prefer to work alone.

Learner Strategies

Learner strategies are defined as deliberate behaviours or actions that learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable.

- Cognitive strategies relate new concepts to prior knowledge.
- Metacognitive strategies are those which help with organizing a personal timetable to facilitate an effective study of the L₂.
- Social strategies include looking for opportunities to converse with native speakers.

Natural Order of Strategies of Second Language Development

- ❖ - Repetition
- ❖ memorization
- ❖ formulaic expressions
- ❖ -verbal attention getters
- ❖ - answering in unison (responding with others)
- ❖ - talking to self (engaging in internal monologue);
- ❖ - elaboration (information beyond what is necessary);
- ❖ -anticipatory answers (completing another's phrase or statement);
- ❖ - monitoring (self-correcting errors);
- ❖ - appeal for assistance (asking someone for help);
- ❖ request for clarification (asking the speaker to explain or repeat);
and
- ❖ -role-playing (interacting with another by taking on roles).

1- Universalist Theory defines linguistic universals from two perspectives:

- The data-driven perspective which looks at surface features of a wide-range of languages to find out how languages vary and what principles underlie this variation. The data-driven approach considers system external factors or input as the basis.
- The theory-driven perspective which looks at in-depth analysis of the properties of language to determine highly abstract principles of grammar. System internal factors are those found in cognitive and linguistic processes.

■ **Several Characteristics of the data-driven approach include the following:**

- It has language typology which delves into patterns which exist among languages and how they vary in human languages.
- Language universals focus on what is common. For example, subject/verb/object.
- Implicational universals which refer to the properties of language such as “all languages have vowels” without looking at any other properties.

■ **Several Characteristics of the theory-driven approach include the following:**

- Language is acquired through innateness. Certain principles of the human mind are biologically determined.
- There are sets of principles and conditions where knowledge of language develops.
- Universal grammar is seen as part of the brain.

2- Behaviourist Theory dominated both psychology and linguistics in the 1950's. This theory suggests that external stimuli (extrinsic) can elicit an internal response which in turn can elicit an internal stimuli (intrinsic) that lead to external responses.

- The learning process has been described by S-R-R theorists as a process forming stimulus-response-reward chains. These chains come about because of the nature of the environment and the nature of the learner.
- The environment provides the stimuli and the learner provides the responses. Comprehension or production of certain aspects of language and the environment provide the reward.
- The environment plays a major role in the exercise of the learners' abilities since it provides the stimuli that can shape responses selectively rewarding some responses and not others.

➤ When the learner learns a language, this learning includes a set of stimulus-response-reward (S-R-R) chains.

➤ Imitation provides the learner with a repertoire of appropriate, productive responses. The learner learns to imitate or approximate the productive responses provided by the environment.

➤ The characteristics of human and non-human learners include the ability to:

1. respond to stimuli in a certain way;
1. intuitively evaluate the reward potential of responses;
2. extract the important parameters that made up the stimulus response (positive reward chains); and
3. generalize these parameters to similar situations to form classes of S-R-R chains.

3- Nativist Theory views language acquisition as innately determined. Theorists believe that human beings are born with a built-in device of some kind that predisposes them to acquire language.

- This predisposition is a systematic perception of language around us, resulting in the construction of an internalized system of language.
- Nativists are on the opposite end of the theoretical continuum and use more of a rationalist approach in explaining the mystery of language acquisition.
- Chomsky (1965) claimed the existence of innate properties of language that explain a child's mastery of his/her native language in a short time despite the highly abstract nature of the rules of language.
- This innate knowledge, according to Chomsky, is embodied in a "little black box" of sorts called a Language Acquisition Device (LAD).

McNeill (1966) described the LAD as consisting of four innate linguistic properties:

- ❖ the ability to distinguish speech sounds from other sounds in the environment;
- ❖ the ability to organize linguistic events into various classes that can be refined later;
- ❖ knowledge that only a certain kind of linguistic system is possible and that other kinds are not; and
- ❖ the ability to engage in constant evaluation of the developing linguistic system in order to construct the simplest possible system out of the linguistic data that are encountered.

Nativists have contributed to the discoveries of how the system of child language works. Theorists such as Chomsky, McNeill, and others helped us understand that a child's language, at any given point, is a legitimate system in its own right.

4- Cognitivist Theory

views human beings as having the innate capacity to develop logical thinking. This school of thought was influenced by Jean Piaget's work where he suggests that logical thinking is the underlying factor for both linguistic and non-linguistic development.

□ The process of association has been used to describe the means by which the child learns to relate what is said to particular objects or events in the environment. The bridge by which certain associations are made is meaning. The extent and accuracy of the associations made are said to change in time as the child matures.

□ Cognitivists say that the conditions for learning language are the same conditions that are necessary for any kind of learning. The environment provides the material that the child can work on.

□ Cognitivists view the role of feedback in the learning process as important for affective reasons, but non-influential in terms of modifying or altering the sequence of development.

Language Learning as a Cognitive Process

1. Learning a language involves internal representations that regulate and guide performance.
2. Automatic processing activates certain nodes in memory when appropriate input is present. Activation is a learned response.
3. Memory is a large collection of nodes.
4. Controlled processing is not a learned response. It is a temporary activation of nodes in a sequence.
5. Skills are learned and routinized only after the earlier use of controlled processes have been used.
6. Learner strategies contain both declarative knowledge i.e. knowing the ‘what’ of the language-internalized rules and memorized chunks of language, and procedural knowledge i.e. know the ‘how’ of the language system to employ strategies.

5- Social Interactionist Theory supports the view that the development of language comes from the early interactions between infants and caregivers.

Social interactionists stress:

- the importance of a child's interactions with parents and other caregivers;
- the importance of “motherese”;
- contributions of context and world knowledge; and
- the importance of goals

Glew (1998) claims that learners have to be pushed in their negotiation of meaning to produce comprehensible output. The classroom context needs to provide adequate opportunities for target language use to allow learners to develop competence in the target language.

☐ Comprehensible output provides opportunities for contextualized, meaningful use of language.

☐ Social interactionists believe that:

☐ Human language emerged from the social role that language plays in human interaction;

☐ The environment plays a key role in language development;

☐ Adults in the child's linguistic environment are viewed as instrumental in language acquisition.

☐ Social interactions are the key element in language processing and input from social interactions provides a model for negotiation opportunities.

Krashen's Five Hypotheses for Second Language Acquisition

1- **The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis** claims that we have two independent ways of developing language ability:

- *Language Acquisition* is a subconscious process. It occurs very naturally in a non-threatening environment. The research strongly supports the view that both children and adults can subconsciously acquire languages.
- *Language Learning* is what occurs at school in an academic setting. It is a conscious process. When we talk about rules and grammar of language, we are usually talking about learning.

2- **The Natural Order Hypothesis** claims that we acquire parts of a language in a predictable order. Some grammatical items tend to come earlier in the acquisition than others. For example, the –ing progressive is acquired fairly early in first language acquisition, while third person singular –s is acquired later.

3- **The Monitor Hypothesis** attempts to explain how acquisition and learning are used. Language is normally produced using our acquired linguistic competence. Conscious learning has only one function...as the “Monitor” or “Editor.” After we produce some language using the acquired system, we sometimes inspect it and use our learned system to correct errors. This can happen internally before we actually speak or write, or as a self-correction after we produce the utterance or written text.

4- **Comprehensible Input Hypothesis** contends that more comprehensible input results in more acquisition.

5- **The Affective Filter Hypothesis** claims that affective variables do not impact language acquisition directly, but can prevent input from reaching what Chomsky called the Language Acquisition Device. The LAD is the part of the brain that is responsible for language acquisition.