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Factors Affecting First Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

Language is the means humans use to convey ideas from one mind to another, and the acquisition of language still is one of the most fascinating aspects of human development. Some children learn a new language relatively more quickly and easily than others. It is out of question that language learning is a process under the influence of some factors such as: determination, hard work and persistence. However, there are some other factors affecting L1 acquisition which are beyond the control of language learners. A growing number of studies have begun to illustrate the factors influencing first language acquisition. To some, language acquisition is generally considered to be determined by factors in both the environment and a person's neurobiological structure. Some language experts have tried to categorize these factors as internal and external. Leaver et al (2005) acknowledge that language learning experience will differ depending on whether it is the first (L1), second (L2) or third language (L3), but it is not always clear which elements of the acquisition process are innate or extrinsic. Moreover, the debate in FLA and SLA has, for many years, sought to understand whether strategies are transferred between L1 and classroom learning. Even the effects of external factors on a person's ability to succeed as a language learner have been considered. Of particular interest has been establishing the most influential factors in learning and acquisition; those that determine why the innately-driven, effortless and universal mastery of first languages by children (Lichtman 2013) stands at such variance with the widely differing degrees of success of those seeking to achieve proficiency in a second language (Birdsong 1992; Kellerman 1995; Tavakkoli et al. 2014). During the present paper, the researchers have tried, hopefully, to highlight the major factors affecting first language acquisition.

Keywords: First language acquisition, Language learning, language teaching

Introduction

What is Language Acquisition?

Language acquisition is commonly defined as the process by which humans get the capacity to perceive, produce and use words to understand and communicate (Webster's collegiate dictionary). This process demands mastery of grammatical and communicative competence and is influenced by both biology and socialization as well.

Theoretical Perspectives on Language Acquisition

The realm of child language acquisition is dominated by different competing perspectives. Each perspective provides fundamental accounts for the core elements of language acquisition. Here, we provide an overview of the major perspectives in that regard:

a . Nativist theory.

The nativist theory (known as the biological theory) claims that language is innately derived from a series of genetically programmed structures. A key assumption of this theory is that children are born with certain innate language acquisition structures. Noam Chomsky is a pioneering theorist in this perspective. According to him, human beings are born with a blueprint for language learning and the process of language learning consists of developing this endowment into a grammar. Chomsky maintains that all children have an innate language acquisition device [LAD] which enables children to access the basic rules governing all human languages. To him, it is this apparatus which enables them to develop the grammar and vocabulary for the first language they are exposed to. Studies supporting LAD proved that children make some overgeneralization errors which root back to inappropriate use of linguistic rules. Researchers have also demonstrated children's ability to create new linguistic forms without modeling or reinforcement on the part of the adults.

b) Learning theories

The learning view of language acquisition process is supported by the empiricists and associationists. Behaviorists hold that language acquisition is the result of operant conditioning. Skinner as one of the proponents of behaviorism suggested that children learn through repeated successful associations made between different items. According to Skinner, for language use to be successful the child must be appreciated and rewarded with the desired response from another person. In general, behaviorists believe that words and phrases are emitted responses that are fixed through social reinforcement. Therefore, a child learns to respond to words and phrases appropriately through social reinforcement.

c) Socialization theory

Being the oldest and most widely held approach to language acquisition, socialization theory focuses on the role of caregivers' speech as the main sources of social wisdom. Children are considered as beginners who are taught to act like others so that they can communicate their feelings. According to this theory, grammar emerges directly from social interaction. It also emphasizes that language development is facilitated by corrective feedback provided by adults. This theory emphasizes the important role of tutoring, scaffolding, and corrective feedback as cues that guide the child through every step of linguistic socialization.

d) Cognitive theories

Developmental theorists view language as a mental activity whose acquisition is mediated by cognitive maturity. According to Vygotsky, adults use a combination of cognitive tools to pass modes of thinking and problem solving to their children. Although spoken language is the most important tool, ---- writing, numeracy skills, application of memory strategies and problem-solving also convey information and enable thinking. According to this view of language, a child's ability to use the cognitive tools to accomplish goals is critical in language acquisition.

e) Neutral perspectives

Some perspectives to language acquisition are neutral in that they consider the environment and biological influences. The Emergentist theories, such as MacWhinney's competition model claim that language acquisition is a cognitive process that emerges from the interaction of biological pressures and the environment, justifying that the acquisition process is emergent due to the competition of linguistic forms such as syntactic, lexical, and phonological forms. The other middle ground theories are Chunking theories which

assume that the child's input is influenced by the surrounding environment and that the learning process is dependent on the acquisition of meaningful chunks of certain constituents such as phonemes, words, syllables, etc.

Major Biological and Contextual Factors in Language Acquisition

Several biological and environmental factors are important in language acquisition. Below is an overview of the major biological and contextual factors in language acquisition:

a) Maturation and symbolization : The biological concepts of maturation and symbolization are proposed by the structuralists when explaining language acquisition. Finnegan (2008) argues that language is an arbitrary representation of thoughts, actions, experiences, feelings, and objects and it is a system of symbols. So, in order to acquire a language, a child should have the mental capacity to hold in brain a symbolic realization of something else. It is through such capacity that a child masters language features like displacement and spontaneous usage.

b) The critical-age hypothesis: Many factors affect first language acquisition, and there can be significant variation in the age at which children reach a particular developmental stage (Brown, 1999; Michnick Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 1999). Chomsky believes that there is a critical age for learning a language as is true for the overall development of the human body. He assumes that language is biologically based and that the ability to learn a native language develops within a fixed period, from birth to middle childhood. During the critical period, language acquisition proceeds easily, swiftly, and without external intervention. After this period, the acquisition of grammar is difficult and for most individuals never fully achieved. Language deprivation at this age leads to atypical patterns of brain lateralization. Neurological studies show that the brain is most plastic in young children and this plasticity is connected to the critical period. Such studies demonstrated that a typically developing child tends to achieve language fluency by the age of 3 years. However, the environment has an influence in how this influences language development.

c) Language acquisition schedule: Language acquisition schedule is another age-related factor. Yule (2010) argues that all children, regardless of culture, develop language at roughly the same time, along much the same schedule. It has been suggested that language acquisition schedule has the same basis as the biologically determined development of motor skills. This biological schedule is tied to the maturation of the infant's brain and the lateralization process. As children grow, their vocabulary also grows. Child language researchers back this claim by identifying age-specific milestones in a child's language development.

d) The child's health and language disability: Numerous studies on language disorders show how a child's health and language disability influence language acquisition. Certain language disorders that adversely affect language acquisition include Williams Syndrome (WS) Specific language impairment (SLI) and dyslexia. WS is a condition which seems to be caused by deletion of genetic material. Studies of children and adolescents afflicted with WS, show that WS might constitute a genetic dissociation in which grammar develops normally but general intelligence is impaired. WS studies also demonstrate that differences in pragmatics and hyper sociability may be relatively influenced by visual and cognitive deficits and moderate retardation. Specific language impairment (SLI) and dyslexia are also considered as behavioral disorders that primarily affect structural language information, with subtypes emphasizing difficulties in phonology, semantics, or syntax.

e) Exposure to language: A number of studies show that learners' normal brain development depends on early and regular exposure to language. Children are exposed to adult language from birth and this exposure influences their language development. Nyamasyo (2009) did a study on the acquisition of syntax by a four-year old child. She concluded that a child will acquire the language if s/he is sufficiently exposed to. Studies done by Fromkin and others (2003) show that children who do not receive this exposure in their formative years do not achieve native-like grammatical competence. Moreover, behavioral tests and brain imaging studies show that late exposure to language will dramatically change the fundamental organization of the brain for language acquisition.

f) Family factors in language acquisition: The language of parents and other significant family members at home will determine the language their children would speak in future. The interactions within the family and the relationships that exist within a home will play a vital role in offering a child verbal contacts and the

opportunity to use language in meaningful ways. For this reason, the attitudes and multilingual ability of the family members bear on the child's choice and use of language. Many other factors like the type of schools children attend also play a role in their language biases. A child's success in acquiring language is also directly related to the child's search for identity, first with members of the immediate family and later with members of the larger speech community. It has been found that interacting with others via the language being acquired is crucial in language acquisition.

g) Prior linguistic experience: It has been shown that prior linguistic experience may affect second language acquisition. Some scholars have suggested that a child's command in mother tongue including whether they are literate affects progress in the second language. Cummins (1994) also developed interdependence hypothesis which predicts that the development of the second school language is partially dependent upon prior level of development of first school language. According to this hypothesis, there is a common underlying proficiency which makes possible the transfer of school skills across the student's two languages.

h) Personal factors in language acquisition : Some personal factors that have been found to influence language acquisition include gender, birth order and nature of birth. Studies show that girls have an advantage over boys in language acquisition. Some students learn a new language more quickly and easily than others. This simple fact is known by all who have themselves learned a second language or taught those who are using their second language at school. Clearly, some language learners are successful by virtue of their sheer determination, hard work and persistence. However there are other crucial factors influencing success that are largely beyond the control of the learner. These factors can be broadly categorized as internal and external.

Internal factors

Internal factors are those that the individual language learner brings with him or her to the particular learning situation.

Age: Second language acquisition is influenced by the age of the learner. Children, who already have solid literacy skills in their own language, seem to be in the best position to acquire a new language efficiently. Motivated, older learners can be very successful too, but usually struggle to achieve native-speaker-equivalent pronunciation and intonation.

Personality: Introverted or anxious learners usually make slower progress, particularly in the development of oral skills. They are less likely to take advantage of opportunities to speak, or to seek out such opportunities. More outgoing students will not worry about the inevitability of making mistakes. They will take risks, and thus will give themselves much more practice.

Motivation (intrinsic): Intrinsic motivation has been found to correlate strongly with educational achievement. Clearly, students who enjoy language learning and take pride in their progress will do better than those who do not. Extrinsic motivation is also a significant factor. ESL students, for example, who need to learn English in order to take a place at an American university or to communicate with a new English friend are likely to make greater efforts and thus greater progress.

Experiences: Learners who have acquired general knowledge and experience are in a stronger position to develop a new language than those who have not. The student, for example, who has already lived in 3 different countries and been exposed to various languages and cultures has a stronger base for learning a further language than the student who hasn't had such experiences.

Cognition: In general, it seems that students with greater cognitive abilities (intelligence) will make faster progress. Some linguists believe that there is a specific, innate language learning ability that is stronger in some students than in others.

Native language: Students who are learning a second language which is from the same language family as their first language have, in general, a much easier task than those who are not. So, for example, a Dutch child will learn English more quickly than a Japanese child.

External factors

External factors are those that characterize the particular language learning situation.

Curriculum: For ESL students in particular it is important that the totality of their educational experience is appropriate for their needs. Language learning is less likely to take place if students are fully submersed into

the mainstream program without any extra assistance or, conversely, not allowed to be part of the mainstream until they have reached a certain level of language proficiency.

Instruction: Clearly, some language teachers are better than others at providing appropriate and effective learning experiences for the students in their classrooms. These students will make faster progress. The same applies to mainstream teachers in second language situations. The science teacher, for example, who is aware that she too is responsible for the students' English language development, and makes certain accommodations, will contribute to their linguistic development.

Culture and status: There is some evidence that students in situations where their own culture has a lower status than that of the culture in which they are learning the language make slower progress.

Access to native speakers: The opportunity to interact with native speakers both within and outside of the classroom is a significant advantage. Native speakers are linguistic models and can provide appropriate feedback. Clearly, second-language learners who have no extensive access to native speakers are likely to make slower progress, particularly in the oral/aural aspects of language acquisition.

Gender: Male children generally reach language development milestones later than female children (Michnick Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 1999). Some researchers believe that girls get more language input than boys, while others believe that differences in brain specialization are responsible for the discrepancy (Michnick Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 1999).

Socioeconomic Status: SES has been correlated with vocabulary growth and literacy development in some studies (Michnick Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 1999; Hart & Risley, 1995). Differences may arise because of different use of language by caregivers or because of differential access to quality schools and literacy materials (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Multilingualism: The use of two or more languages at home can affect language development. Some researchers claim that multilingualism can lead to a slight delay in early language development, but others have not found support for such a delay (Baker, 2006). Multilingualism may lead to earlier development of meta-linguistic awareness (Gass & Selinker, 2001).

Education: Development of literacy skills and academic language depends on access to formal schooling. Early childhood programs may promote language development (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Speech and Language Disorders: Children with speech and language disorders may have difficulties with the comprehension and/or production of language. They may also have difficulties with pronunciation. Speech therapy and alternative and augmentative communication devices can help these children to communicate.

Hearing: Babies who are hard of hearing and whose hearing difficulties are not detected can experience a delay in language development (Michnick Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 1999). Babies who are deaf and are raised with sign language have normal language development (Michnick Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 1999).

Moreover, **Affective factors** are emotional factors which influence learning, such as:

1. **Self-Esteem:** It refers to a personal evaluation and judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the individual's attitude towards himself or herself or his or her capabilities.
2. **Low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety:** These can lead to a raise in the affective filter and form a 'mental block' that hinders comprehensible input from being employed for acquisition. (Krashen cited by Schütz, 2007)
3. **Inhibition :** Inhibition in a person emerges when he/she attempts to defend or protect his/her self-image. If the learner considers the mistakes he/she makes in the second language as a threat to his/her emotional well-being and self-perception, then acquisition will not take place or will occur much more slowly.
4. **Risk Taking:** One of the characteristics that has been found to exist in "good" language learners is the willingness to guess. If the learner is less inhibited, he/she is more willing to take a chance on producing a "correct" utterance in the second language.
5. **Anxiety:** Anxiety is associated with the feelings of uneasiness, self-doubt, worry or fear that a person feels under certain circumstances. A threatening environment does not promote language

acquisition. Factors such as an emphasis on competition between students or forcing students to produce in the second language before they are ready can cause anxiety.

6. **Empathy:** Empathy refers to an individual's ability to put himself/herself in the other's shoes. When a learner is acquiring a second language, he or she is also acquiring, in a sense, a new personality, and a new culture. It is essential in the language acquisition process to open yourself to new cultural experiences and adopt these experiences as your own.

Conclusion

The acquisition of language is doubtless the greatest intellectual feat any one of us is ever required to perform. (Leonard Bloomfield, Language 1993). The capacity to learn language is deeply ingrained in us as a species, just as the capacity to walk, to grasp objects, to recognize faces. It is out of question that language learning is a process under the influence of some factors such as: determination, hard work and persistence. However, there are some other factors which affect L1 acquisition which are beyond the control of the language learner. A growing number of studies have begun to illustrate the factors influencing first language acquisition. To some, language acquisition is generally considered to be determined by factors in both the environment and a person's neurobiological structure. Some language experts have tried to categorize these factors as internal and external. Leaver et al (2005) acknowledge that language learning experience will differ depending on whether it is the first (L1), second (L2) or third language (L3), but it is not always clear which elements of the acquisition process are innate or extrinsic.

Being successful in second language acquisition depends on many factors. Age and motivation factors are among the most important ones. In studies, it has been found that if a learner has a competency in his or her own language, he or she is more advantageous than those who lack competence in their first language. As to motivation, it has been revealed that motivated students are more successful in second language acquisition than those who are demotivated. Also, the role the psychological aspects play in gaining an extra language cannot be denied.

Each of the three theoretical approaches explains a different aspect of first language acquisition.

Behaviorism: (learning through imitation, practice, reinforcement, habit-formation) – the acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical morphemes.

Innatism: (LAD/UG/CPH) – the acquisition of complex grammar (structure of the language).

Interactionism: (social interaction) – the acquisition of how form and meaning are related, how communicative functions are carried out, and how language is used appropriately.

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