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## **Second Language Acquisition**

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What are the most important differences between learning a first language and learning language in the classroom?

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## **1. Introduction**

English is the international language of business, Internet and communication alike and, as a result, is being taught in thousands of classrooms around the world at any one time. Many students believe that the classroom not only provides them with the ability to understand the language in its entirety but also allows them to be able to communicate freely and to converse without hesitation. In an ideal world, with the ideal student, an ideal curriculum and an ideal teacher, this might be a realistic expectation, but, in practice, this almost never happens. Years of study can leave students feeling disheartened and disillusioned, making them question why they may have spent so much time, money and effort and still not be able either to understand a native speaker of English or communicate in a coherent way. A second language is categorized by Mitchell and Myles as, "...second languages' are any languages other than the learner's native language or 'mother tongue'" (2001: 11). They also state that second language acquisition (SLA) is something that occurs after acquisition of the first language (FLA) (2001: 11) but there are, as will be discussed further in this paper, many influencing factors that prevent SLA from ever being 100% successful from the learners' point of view.

First language acquisition, which always occurs in the formative years of someone's life, is something that "..., all normal children eventually master..." (Lightbrown and Spada, 2001: 28). Why this is true and what factors can be attributed to the success of children learning their first language, whilst students of a second language are often left floundering, has been the focus of attention for many linguists and psychologists for years but, as yet, there have been no concrete answers that can provide one simple solution.

There are several factors that have been shown to be influential in the learning of both a first language and also a second language and this paper will focus on four frequently discussed areas which are: process, environment, exposure and finally, age. The first area, process, is something that is usually automatic and happens subconsciously in FLA, yet in SLA, it happens in manufactured environments, namely English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms; it is definitely a conscious process for teenagers

and adults, but not so much, as will be discussed later, for young children. The second is the environment in which the language is learned, whether it is the child's everyday life for FLA or the manufactured classroom environment for SLA, and the interaction between both. Thirdly, the amount of exposure that a first language learner has in comparison to a second language learner can be as much as days or even weeks; often, second language learners are in the classroom once or twice a week, sometimes less, yet children learning a first language are usually submerged in the target language all day. Finally, age will be discussed and this, again, is an area that has received a lot of attention over the years. Lightbrown and Spada (1995: 42) say it simply:

“...there is a critical period for second language acquisition....the Critical Period Hypothesis suggests that there is a time in human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning.”

Age and the language acquisition device (LAD) are closely entwined and as FLA invariably happens in childhood and here the LAD is growing at the same rate as the child. The LAD will be discussed further in section 2.2. Conversely, a large majority of second language students are adults and here the LAD may have already peaked and started fossilization; fossilization is recognized as a lack of change in interlanguage patterns, even after extended exposure to or instruction in the target language (Lightbrown and Spada, 1995: 122g). Interlanguage, from the same source, is the learner's developing second language knowledge which continually evolves as learners receive more input.

## **2 First Language Acquisition – Processes**

There are differing views on how a first language is learned with an equal number of arguments contesting each of them. Linguists have been studying this area for years and still haven't arrived at a universally accepted decision. FLA can be split further into different areas, namely *first language*, *native language*, *primary language* and *mother tongue*, although these are often looked at as synonyms of each other (Saville-Troike, 2006: 4). However, two of the more common and discussed approaches in FLA are the behaviourist approach and the nativist, or innatist, approach.

## **2.1 The Behaviourist Approach**

Lightbrown and Spada state that “Traditional behaviourists believed that language learning is simply a matter of imitation and habit formation.” (1995: 1). Brown suggests that a behaviourist might consider effective language learning, or behaviour, to be the production of correct responses to stimuli given (2000: 23). The behaviourist approach considers imitation and practice to be fundamental in learning a first language, L1. Imitation, as stated in the Cambridge Dictionaries Online, is “when someone or something imitates another person or thing” and practice is “to do or play something regularly or repeatedly in order to become skilled at it”. Traditional behaviourists, such as B.F. Skinner (1957) and Kenneth MacCorquadale (1970) believed that language learning is, simply, imitation and habit formation (cited in Brown, 2000: 22-23). Light brown and Spada (1995:1) tell us that children form habits of correct language as a result of their environments.

## **2.2 The Nativist Approach**

The nativist, or innatist, approach is one strongly supported by people such as Chomsky (1965) and Lenneberg (1967) and is a theory based on a first language learner having an innate knowledge of language and is, according to Chomsky, likened to a “little black box”. This, in more refined terms, is the LAD which, as cited in Brown (2000: 24), McNeill (1966) says has four innate linguistic properties, namely:

1. the ability to distinguish speech sounds from other sounds in the environment,
2. the ability to organize linguistic data into various classes that can later be refined,
3. knowledge that only a certain kind of linguistic system is possible and that other kinds are not,
4. the ability to engage in constant evaluation of the developing linguistic system so as to construct the simplest possible system out of the available linguistic input.

More recently Chomsky, and his followers, now refer to LAD as Universal Grammar (UG) and have also drawn attention to the fact that many children leave second language learners feeling disheartened as they learn to do something so complicated with ease and

without apparent difficulty. A summary of Chomsky's evidence, as cited in Lightbrown and Spada (1995: 9) reads:

1. Virtually all children successfully learn their native language....
2. Children successfully master the basic structure of their native language or dialect....
3. The language children are exposed to does not contain examples of all the information they eventually know.
4. Animals...cannot learn to manipulate a symbol system as complicated as the natural language of a three- or four-year-old human child.
5. Children (succeed in ) language acquisition without someone...(to) point out...which sentences are 'correct' and which are 'ungrammatical'.

The innatist approach supports the theory that children subliminally come to 'know' and learn things about language simply by being exposed to the target language. This approach is difficult to prove, but when other issues such as the complexity of grammar, are taken into consideration, appears rational.

### **3 Second Language Acquisition – Processes**

Lightbrown and Spada state that "... a child or adult acquiring a second language is different from a child acquiring a first language in terms of ...characteristics and conditions for learning." (1995: 19). Tabors tells us that "...Children who are in a second-language learning situation have to be sufficiently motivated to start learning a new language" (1997: 81). However, younger children do not set goals and targets for themselves unlike adults who have high expectations of attainment and achievement within the area of SLA. Children's mastery of their L1 is, in normal circumstances, usually perfect whilst adult L2 learners only have a small, or even non-existent, possibility of achieving perfect L2 mastery. This is reiterated by Cook who states that L2 learning is different from L1 as many students give up before they get to a level similar to that of an L1 learner (1996: 129).

There is contention as to whether or not a child is a better second language learner than an adult, and there has been extensive research to try and clarify this. Scovel says that on several planes, namely: literacy, vocabulary, pragmatics, schematic knowledge

and syntax, adults are superior learners, thus dispelling the myth that younger is better (1999: 1). However, the two main processes, the linguistic process and the cognitive process, of second language learning in young children are remarkably similar to processes involved with FLA (Brown, 2000: 67). Lenneberg (1967) supports this with the critical period hypothesis in which a claim is made that "...human beings are only capable of learning language between the age of 2 years and the early teens" (Cook, 1996: 108).

The process of SLA is a complicated one and Spolsky attempts to make this easier, as shown in Figure 1. It is a gross generalization, or simplification, of what is otherwise regarded as a highly complex process. It does however have a logical sequence and, as an EFL instructor, I can understand how it may have been constructed, especially when looking at various students that I teach. It is relatively accurate on an individual basis, but as an overall model for SLA, it is certainly ambiguous.

### **3.1 The Behaviourist Approach**

The behaviourist theory can also be applied to SLA. In the view of a behaviourist, habit formation is the main process for successful learning and, through linguistic input, Second language students will be able to remember and repeat structures and language. Interlanguage, cited in Lightbrown and Spada (1995: 55), is the name given by Selinker (1972) to a learners' developing second language knowledge. This interlanguage should be reinforced and corrected as there will be influential and sometimes damaging interference from the student's L1 knowledge. These habits are systematic with the student's L1 and new habits should be formed as a result (Lightbrown and Spada, 1995: 23). The behaviourist theory, for both FLA and SLA is however incomplete and open to too much misinterpretation.

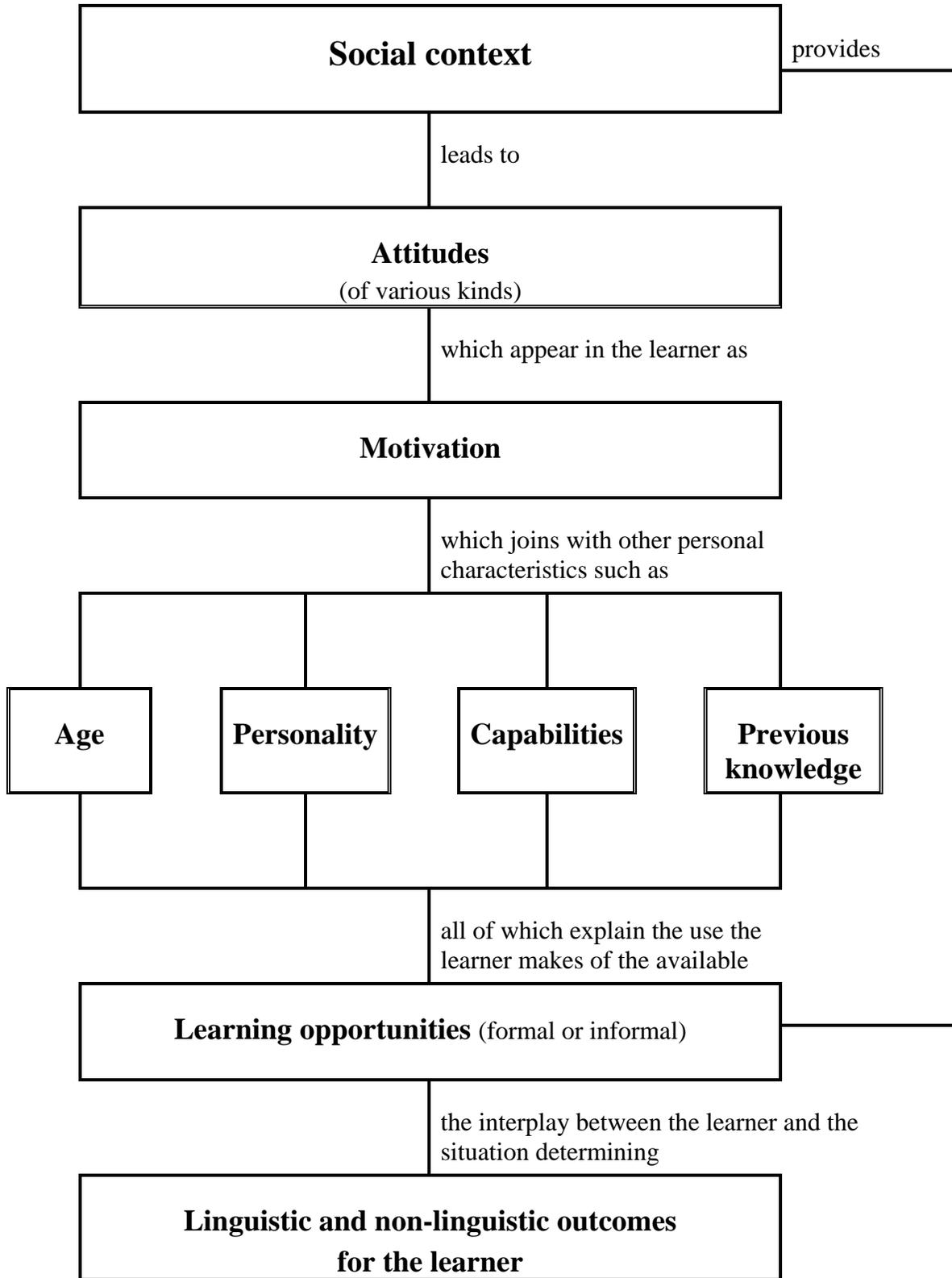


Figure 1: Spolsky's general model of second language learning  
 Source: Spolsky 1989: 28

### **3.2 The Nativist Approach**

As with FLA, there have been studies into SLA from an innatist approach. This approach claims that acquisition happens through construction of “internal representations of the language being learned” (Lightbrown and Spada, 1995: 26). This is sometimes called the *creative construction* hypothesis and claims that the learner does not need to speak or write the target language in order for SLA to happen. Krashen (1978), as cited in Saville-Troike (2006: 45), claims in his *monitor model* that there are five main domains in SLA which are:

1. *Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis*. ...Acquisition is subconscious, and involves the innate LAD. Learning is conscious and ...takes place in many classroom contexts.
2. *Monitor Hypothesis*. What is learned is available only as a monitor, for purposes of editing or making changes in what has already been produced.
3. *Natural Order Hypothesis*. We acquire the rules of language in a predictable order.
4. *Input Hypothesis*. Language acquisition only takes place because there is comprehensible input.
5. *Affective Filter Hypothesis*. Input may not be processed if... conscious learning is taking place and/or individuals are inhibited.

This model has been influential in the communicative approach of language teaching, but has also been “heavily criticized for failing to meet certain minimum standards necessary in scientific research and writing” (Lightbrown and Spada, 1995: 29).

### **4 First Language Acquisition – Environment**

Children learning L1 are exposed to their target language in a very different environment from that of L2 learners. Parents are probably the biggest influence on children in their formative years when it comes to L1 and it is here that Lightbrown and Spada recognize the interactionist theory (1995: 12). Modified language is used which suits the ability of the learner and this, they state, is essential in acquiring the target language. Parents focus on utterances made by their children and will then respond with truthful rather than grammatically correct sentences. The child’s direct environment is used for discussion and it is here that give-and-take is essential in L1 development. By

encouraging children to express themselves through building on knowledge they have already gained is an effective way to develop their language skills (Cuevas, 1996). Brown states “What children learn about language is determined by what they already know about the world” (2000: 28). Mercer expands this view by saying “Education...must be a developmental process in which earlier experiences provide the foundations for making sense of later ones” (2001: 248).

Studies in FLA have found that children focus not only on meaning, but also association, when learning language. If they see a dog and hear “dog”, the child will then link and remember the utterance to the image, and thus they become associated. Here Chomsky again uses the LAD in his research and demonstrates the innate human ability to understand language. This is something that I am currently experiencing with my 18 month old son as he is being subjected to both English and Korean and he has recently started to associate words in both languages with items around the house. His speaking is non-existent but his understanding is very good when he is asked for things or asked to do things, in either language. Bilingualism, or the acquisition of two languages in childhood (Deuchar and Quay, 2001: 1) is another area discussed at great length and is also one that De Houwer, as cited in Deuchar and Quay (2001:1), breaks down further into ‘Bilingual First Language Acquisition’ and ‘Bilingual Second Language Acquisition’ depending on whether or not the baby had input from two languages before the age of 1 month or after 1 month but within two years (1995: 223).

#### **4.1 Second Language Acquisition – Environment**

The majority of EFL learners, internationally, will have very limited simultaneous exposure to both the language and a native speaker of English. As Myles and Mitchell (2001: 16) tell us, environmental circumstances for L2 learning differ systematically from L1 unless the child is reared in *multilingual* surroundings. A large percentage of these learners may only have exposure in an EFL classroom and even here, meaningful interaction is often limited. There are three different classroom environments as recognized by Lightbrown and Spada (1995: 70) and they are:

1. natural acquisition environments where the learner is exposed to language in either a work or social setting where natural interaction occurs.
2. traditional acquisition environments where language is being taught to EFL or ESL students whilst paying attention to form rather than meaning with emphasis on grammar and vocabulary.
3. communicative teaching environments where interaction and conversation is key rather than language form.

Correction of errors is an essential part of both FLA and SLA. However, in a natural environment, this rarely occurs and might even be deemed unacceptable on the part of the interlocutor. The traditional environment finds errors frequently corrected whilst in the communicative classroom, meaning is emphasized over everything else, resulting in few corrections.

Effective SLA occurs, according to Krashen (1982), in an environment where anxiety is low and defensiveness is absent (cited in Brown, 2000: 278). This Krashen names the “affective filter” and is one of many hypotheses Krashen, a firm innatist, puts forward. Hofstede, who carried out extensive research into cultural differences between 1967 and 1973, would liken this situation to a small power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance environment (1991: 159-174). Hofstede’s definition of power distance involves the less powerful people in a given society accepting inequality in power and do in fact deem it to be normal. Uncertainty avoidance is defined as being the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by unstructured and unpredictable situations (1986: 308/9). Finch tells us that that the promotion of a low stress, non-threatening language learning environment is priority for the EFL teacher (2001).

## **4.2 Second Language Learning – Cultural Implications**

The cultural environment can also be an important factor in effective SLA. Brown (2000: 182) touches on this and states that “Second language learning...involves the acquisition of a second identity”. This has been named acculturation yet, adversely, the phenomenon of culture shock can be a negative factor where the student feels anything from slight annoyance to panic and fear. As Jin and Cortazzi tell us:

“...culture ...is more than simply a background influence. It has a deep effect on classroom processes because it is a significant factor in how teachers and students perceive language learning...Learning a foreign language implies a degree of intercultural learning...” (1998: 98)

Another cultural issue that occurs is what has been defined as a ‘culture bump’. As described by Archer, this occurs when individuals have expectations of one style of behaviour but get something totally different (1995: 170). Unlike culture shock, a culture bump is something that happens instantaneously and has three possible outcomes: negative, neutral and positive. A negative outcome comes from unexpected situations; neutral when accustomed to certain behaviour and positive comes from being pleasantly surprised (Archer 1995: 171). As Politzer says (1959: 100-1), cited in Brooks (1995: 123), “...if we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols...”

## **5 First Language Acquisition – Exposure**

In any normal situation, FLA happens long before a child goes to school and this normally occurs without any conscious effort (Saville-Troike, 2006: 12). Children have constant exposure to their first language from their immediate environments and the people they meet therein. Whether it be indirect exposure from overhearing others or direct interlocution, a child is surrounded by their L1. The exception to this rule of is if parents are raising a child in a country where the native language is not the child’s target L1. The rate of development differs in each given case, and it might also be dependent on how much parental correction the child receives but, by the age of three, a child will have mastered all the distinctive sounds of the first language and an awareness of basic discourse patterns (Saville-Troike, 2006: 12).

A child, in the process of FLA, will focus primarily on meaning and expressing feelings, but an adult will focus on truthfulness rather than grammatical errors; yet children manage to successfully learn their L1 successfully at a period in their lives when they would not be expected to do anything else so complicated (Chomsky, 1959) and also without being constantly corrected. Learning a first language is part of a child’s

development cognitively, socially and physically and it is through exposure to the L1 that the child is able to do this. The grammatical knowledge a child learns is something that happens in predictable sequences as a child gets older (Lightbrown and Spada, 1995: 54).

### **5.1 Second Language Learning - Exposure**

With the communicative approach evolving from the audiolingual and situational method of ESL teaching (Richards and Rogers, 2001: 6), the input for students is changing and becoming more relevant and topic oriented rather than the rote method found in a grammar translation classroom. Breen and Candlin define communicative teaching as "...language learning may be seen as a process which grows out of the interaction between learners, teachers, texts and activities" (2001). Interaction is key in this definition. Two main functions are identified for the teacher in the EFL classroom, with the first being the facilitation of the communicative process between all involved and to also act as an interdependent participant within the learning teaching groups (Breen and Candlin, 2001). Krashen and Scarella (1978) dispute this direct method of communicative teaching, suggesting that conscious input has little or no effect on the student's creativity and therefore cannot be embodied into the student's acquired knowledge.

Willis (1990: iv) states that exposure needs to be organized in three ways if it is to be effective. The first way states that the target language should be graded in such a way that learners do not become demotivated by associated difficulties and complexities in the L2. Secondly, the learner should not be exposed to rote language but rather language they are likely to face outside the classroom. Finally, itemization of the learners' syllabus, allowing us not only to "...expose students to language, but also to highlight important features of their language experience, and to (gauge) what language we might reasonably expect them to have learned from their experience".

What also has to be taken into consideration in the EFL classroom is that language is not only the method but also the focus of the content (adapted from Cook, 1996: 124). The communicative approach certainly lends itself to this definition. Every EFL classroom serves a different purpose and it is often down to the individual learner as

to what they want to gain from the class. Careers that require a second language, higher education, research and information and travel are the main reasons, internationally, that people learn English (Cook, 1996: 144-5). Exposure in the classroom therefore has to be tailored to suit the learner when SLA is in progress, and with this must come appropriate correction from the teacher, but not to the point where the learner might lose confidence and motivation. The communicative method would suggest very little, but the grammar translation method would lay heavy emphasis on correcting students (Lightbrown and Spada, 1995: 72). Breen (2001: 123) defines the language classroom as: "...The primary function of the language classroom...is that the learner...can be exposed to linguistic input...with certain desirable learning outcomes".

Through Hofstede's work (1986: 313), we are reminded that classroom environments change from country to country and even from one classroom to the next. A Korean teacher in a British school would have vastly different expectations from those of the students and, comparatively, a British teacher will have very different views on what is deemed acceptable in an ESL classroom in Korea. Teachers are expected to change their methodology and pedagogy rather than expecting a whole class of students to change their learning styles (Hofstede, 1980: 301).

Krashen suggests that a beneficial learning environment is one in which the students are exposed to language which is marginally higher than their current proficiency level. He tells us that a language acquirer who is at "level i" must receive comprehensible input that is at "level i+1." We learn, in other words, only when we understand language that contains structure that is 'a little beyond' where we are now (1981). This level of input, as research, starting with Burt and Dulay in 1973, has shown that anything deemed easy by the learner will result in boredom and loss of interest. Conversely, if the level in the classroom is too complex, then that often leaves the learner intimidated and ultimately disheartened. However, as Breen (2001: 124) highlights, and also personal experience has shown "...learners are unpredictable, inconsistent, and sometimes seemingly inefficient processors" so applying any particular formula often proves to be a fruitless task on the part of the teacher.

Complete immersion in a language is something that is believed to be one of the best ways for SLA. Students are sent, by their parents, to countries where English is the native language, and, in some cases, is actually a country's second language, such as the Philippines. Swain and Lapkin, as cited in Skehan (2000: 12), tell us that children who learn through immersion as opposed to traditional methods taught in their native countries, reach much higher levels and will often perform, in certain areas, in a manner comparable to that of native-speaker children.

## **6 First Language Acquisition – Age**

The critical period hypothesis (CPH) has been shown, over the years, to be relevant to both FLA and SLA. Lightbrown and Spada highlight one such case involving sign language and at what age certain individuals were exposed to it as their first language (1995: 13). Other rare cases are discussed and used as models for the CPH in FLA, but, as is widely recognized, a child, in a normal situation, will acquire fluency in their first language without any formal tuition. Again, Lightbrown and Spada state that:

“...as children continue to be exposed to opportunities to hear and use their language, they are able to revise these systems which gradually develop towards the system of an adult” (1995: 54)

By the age of three, Brown states that a child has the ability to comprehend “...an incredible quantity of linguistic input, (with) this fluency (continuing) into school age as children internalize increasingly complex structures (and) expand their vocabulary...” (2000: 21). A bilingual child, through case studies made by Deuchar and Quay (2001: 14), show that children of about 2 years of age are able to distinguish between two languages and their respective phonology, vocabulary and morphosyntax – the name used to describe whether or not a morpheme can indicate whether a form functions as either a subject or an object in a sentence.

## **6.1 Second Language Acquisition – Age**

There are two methods for SLA as described by Lightbrown and Spada: a natural acquisition method or the traditional instruction method. Natural acquisition happens through exposure to the target language either at work or social interaction and the traditional instruction environment is invariably one where the language is consciously being taught to a group of learners (1995: 70). Both methods are applicable to all age ranges, maybe through total immersion for natural acquisition or the EFL classroom for a more traditional instruction approach.

Adult learners are often in a more advantageous position for L2 learning as they can use varying learning strategies, such as “(utilizing) various deductive and abstract processes to shortcut the learning of grammatical and other linguistic processes” (Brown, 1994: 90). Spolsky (1989) as cited in Cook (1996: 112) highlights three factors for L2 learning with regards to age:

1. ‘Formal’ classroom learning requires ‘skills of abstraction and analysis’ ( and it may be) better for the student to be older.
2. The child is more open to L2 learning in informal situations.
3. The natural L2 situation may favour children...(where) language spoken to small children ...is concerned with the ‘here and now’ rather than the absent objects or the abstract topics that are talked about in adult conversation...(as) ordinary speech spoken by adults to adults is too sophisticated for L2 learning.

Young children are different in numerous ways from adults, as recognized by Brown (2000: 61-67). Children are not necessarily aware that they are actually learning a language, nor are they conscious of the societal values and certain attitudes associated with either language. Also, younger children do not have the inhibitions that preadolescent children and teenagers develop, effectively nullifying any embarrassment barriers. Finally, very young children have no prejudice against or attitudes towards other cultures and races.

Second language learning, simply by the fact that it is a *second* language, implies that the learner has already acquired a first language. Younger L2 learners do not have the inherent understanding of the rules of their L1 when compared to older L2 learners. However, younger learners will not be forced into interaction in their L2 environment, unlike their seniors who, in an EFL classroom, are forced to use their new found language describing varying day to day situations (adapted from Lightbrown and Spada, 1995: 21). Brown (2000: 68) highlights though that L1 often interferes with SLA as “Adult second language linguistic processes are more vulnerable to the effect of the first language on the second...and (often) manifest more interference”.

## **7 Conclusion**

The reason as to why second language learners are usually much less successful than first language learners has been, and will continue to be, an issue that will provoke argument, debate and discussion and, ultimately, there may never be a conclusion that is universally agreed upon. Having already learned a first language, Brown (2000: 43) states “It is said that the second time around on something is always easier. In the case of language, this is not necessarily true”. As Lightbrown and Spada highlight, SLA is influenced by multiple factors such as “personal characteristics of the learner, the structure of the native and target languages, opportunities for interaction with speakers of the target language, and access to correction and form-focused instruction” (1995: 116). Monitoring these factors and their influence is, however, difficult as definitions and methods may not be instantly clear or satisfactory (1995: 50).

To try to understand the issues and complexities associated with learning a second language needs a broad perspective on the topic as a whole and also the need to integrate, modify and develop approaches studied over the years. *Who* is being taught; *what* is being taught; *why* is it being taught; and *how* is it being taught are all hugely important when considering both SLA and FLA. However, as we are told by Cook, “...we do not yet possess a single overall theory of second language acquisition” (1996: 204).

Teachers in the classroom and parents as teachers constantly need to monitor and customize their approach accordingly to become effective facilitators of language.

Ongoing research, both formal and informal, by EFL teachers will enhance both their teaching ability and also the resultant learning by the student. Language development can be enhanced through both a stimulating and linguistically rich environment. These in turn should lead to global improvements in EFL teaching and second language acquisition.

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