

Theron Muller

MA TEFL

Language Development and Learning—What happens in the Classroom?

Module 2 Essay

PG/02/07

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

Approx. 3,800 words
15 pages

Table of Contents

Section	Page
1. Introduction	2
1.1 Definition of Acquisition and Learning	3
1.2 Implications for TEFL	4
2.1 Process-First Language Acquisition	4
2.2 Process-Classroom Learning	5
3.1 Environment-First Language Acquisition	7
3.2 Environment- Classroom Learning	8
4.1 Exposure - First Language Acquisition	9
4.2 Exposure-Classroom Learning	10
5.1 Age-First Language Acquisition	11
5.2 Age- Classroom Learning	11
5. Conclusion	11
References	13

1. Introduction

English is taught in classrooms throughout the world on the assumption that classroom instruction facilitates and results in correct and efficient language use. Going back in history, foreign languages, particularly Latin, were taught in schools as a form of mental exercise and character building, through a process now referred to as grammar-translation (Brown,2001:18). Later, with the start of psychology as a science language teaching methodology and psychological theory were brought into juxtaposition with the advent of behaviorism in psychology and audiolingualism in ESL/EFL (Brown,2001:23). Audiolingualism considered language a set series of forms which required mastering through repetition and drilling, with rigid control of student language to minimize errors and maximize the usage of correct forms (Brown,2001:23). Audiolingualism as a methodology was discredited by Chomsky's view of language not as a closed set of forms, but as the interaction and setting of language parameters, facilitated through the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) (Brown,2001:24). While behaviorism and audiolingualism drew their roots from the behavior of laboratory animals (Brown,2000:9), Chomsky's LAD drew its roots from studies of first language learning, especially early and late infancy (terminating around age five or six) (Long,1990:259).

Students of English are never lab animals, and rarely children younger than five or six, yet many teaching methodologies still rely on the teaching of grammatical forms (behaviorism) (Sinclair,1991:109-110) or first language teaching (Cook,1986:). While parameter setting is interesting for linguists, many of its most salient analyses of language are easily picked up by learners and therefore don't need to be explicitly taught in the classroom (Willis, Shortall, & Johns,2001:30). This leaves unanswered the question of what content is appropriate for the language classroom.

Before the best classroom content can be determined, it is vital to consider the processes of language acquisition and learning. If learning a second language were the same for adults as children learning their first, everyone would attain native-like fluency and control of their second languages without entering a classroom, provided they received the same amount and quality of second language exposure as developing children. In fact, it has been observed that adults learning their second language informally, outside the classroom, can attain a high level of language proficiency (Lenneberg,1967:176). However, informal adult learners are subject to a higher degree of earlier fossilization in their second language

than learners studying in the classroom (Odlin,1994:13). That is, they exhibit pervasive language errors and tend to be unable to improve on or erase them.

If informal learners exhibit a lower level of ultimate language attainment than learners in the classroom, then language teaching has a positive effect on learners. Still, it is not clear where this effect comes from, what use it should be put to, or how to maximize its benefit. Determining the origins of classroom teaching's effect on learners requires an analysis of the salient differences between learning a first language and learning in the classroom. There are four major differences between first language learning and classroom language learning to consider; process, environment, exposure, and age. Firstly, the process of first language acquisition is unconscious, automatic, and cyclical while the process of second language learning in the classroom must be divided into two parts; the learner's process, and the syllabus process. Second, the environment for first language learning is the child's everyday life, making meaningful interaction automatic, while the environment for second language learners is the classroom, making meaningful interaction a challenge. Third, regarding exposure, first language learners receive abundant exposure to language, while second language learners, particularly in an EFL context, receive a very limited amount of exposure, with that exposure often filtered for complexity and content. Finally, concerning age, developing first language learners gain language through a still-developing LAD, while adult learners already have a fully mature LAD. While a mature LAD doesn't mean adults can't access its facilities to develop second language affinity, it does mean that access to the LAD must be conscious and concerted (Lenneberg,1967:176).

1.1 Definition of Acquisition and Learning

Before discussion can begin, the terms acquisition and learning must be defined. Acquisition is the "picking up" of a language naturally, specifically what all children do when learning their first language and, more broadly, the informal "picking up" of language that adults do as they travel the world. Grammar, lexicon, and function are internalized and automatic, meaning a speaker doesn't concentrate on how they want to speak, but on the message that they want to convey. Learning is the study and practice of language, including grammar, lexicon, and function. While ESL/EFL teaching contributes to language learning and acquisition, the link isn't necessarily direct (Long,1983:359). Many teachers and students assume they facilitate acquisition in the classroom when, often, they are instead

concentrating their efforts on learning; focusing on how to speak rather than on the message they want to convey (Brown,2000:63).

1.2 Implications for TEFL

The intended audience of this paper is those interested in second language learning/acquisition from the perspective of trainer, teacher, or student. The EFL classroom is a primary focus, with limitations of conventional classroom language learning considered, and identification of remedies and compensations for these limitations a priority.

The author teaches informal, conversational EFL at a private English school, therefore EFL is focused on throughout the paper. While ESL is also intriguing, and some research from ESL applies to EFL, a salient difference between them is the amount of interactive exposure students receive to English. In ESL students leave the classroom and directly apply new language forms in everyday encounters, and in turn encounter language in their daily environment and bring it to the classroom. In EFL students navigate in their native language throughout the day and interact in English almost exclusively through the classroom. While they may be exposed to English through TV programs and books, the interactive and meaningful value of those encounters is questionable and variable (Long,1990:257).

2.1 Process-First Language Acquisition

The process of first language acquisition seems, at least at first, very straightforward, and proceeds in three general stages. The first is memorization. For example, the past verb forms “ate”, “went”, and “played” are used. Next a rule is noticed and generalized, like “-ed” for past verbs, making “eated”, “goed”, and “played”. Finally, the rule is modified to account for its exceptions, bringing the child back to “ate”, “went”, and “played”, but allowing for application of the rule to new verbs. For example, were the child to hear, “I’m going to apply myself”, the construction “I applied myself” would be possible, despite having never heard or experienced the past tense of the verb before (Lightbown & Spada,1999:10-14). With a large, though finite amount of input, a first language speaker is capable of producing and comprehending an infinite variety of language. Aitchison (1989) offered the improbable example, “The aardvark cleaned its teeth with a purple toothbrush”.

A principle element of generalization is that it is unconscious (Lightbown & Spada,1999:10-14). Therefore ESL teachers, having learned English unconsciously, are often intimidated by students who expect verbal explication of use and function rules, plus

grammars based on intuition generally fail to reflect actual language use (Johns,1991:297). While the above verb tense rule is enlightening, first language learners don't continue to over-generalize to the extent that second language learners do. In the sentence "They are *likely* to win" a first language learner won't attempt the generalization *"*They are probable* to win", though second language learners may (Westney,1994:88).

In summary, first language acquisition is automatic and follows maturational development (Lenneberg,1967:178). There is no evidence for accelerated language development in children, nor are there "...isolatable variables that predictably affect language development in children" (Lenneberg,1967:135-6).

2.2 Process-Classroom Learning

The process of learners acquiring their second language is similar to first language acquisition, in that they access meta-grammar which, through meaningful interaction, is evolved, modified, and generalized (Brown,2000:72). Two differences between the second language learner and the first language learner are that the second will continue to over-generalize in places where the first wouldn't (Westney,1994:88), and with the second language learner there is no discernible end point. While first languages are eventually said to be mastered, many teachers and students would do well to remember no first language speakers ever "master" language either, especially if historical figures like Shakespeare are the standard for mastery.

While first language development proceeds in tandem with motor and other skills (Lenneberg,1967:178), second language acquisition is not biologically linked since the learners are already developmentally mature. In fact, in many early stages adults outperform children in second language learning, as they are better at memorization and cognitive rule formulation (Brown,2000:69). The difference between adults and children rests in the nature of their linguistic assimilation; adult rule formation is conscious, even if the rules become acquired and unconscious at later stages. Adults also bring an expectation of learning to second language acquisition (Brown,2000:72), while children learning their first language don't set developmental schedules for themselves. Second language learners may perceive their language progress as linear, even though research contradicts this assumption; progress is the cyclical product of formulation, generalization, and consolidation (Brown,2000:72). Pointing out this discrepancy between perception and reality could help increase student understanding, motivation, and morale.

The ESL classroom is partly to blame for learners thinking language development is linear. Many syllabi and textbooks work linearly, covering grammatical items with increasing complexity. For example, a typical syllabus might start by teaching the simple present verbs, add present progressive, introduce irregular simple past then regular simple past, and finally the regular and irregular simple past together, proceeding until students are formulating the hypothetical future progressive (If I had a boat I would be going fishing tomorrow). The increasing complexity syllabus can, hypothetically, continue until all possible permutations of the verb forms have been covered, but there is little guarantee students will be more facile with English at the completion of this syllabus (Brown,2000:73). There are several reasons for this, as learners language doesn't progress linearly, there is more to English than verb forms and permutations, and the functional aspects of the language aren't considered.

The progression of learners' language has already been discussed as a process of information sorting and consolidation (Ard & Gass,1987:249). In the above linear progression there is little opportunity for the learner to test and consolidate, as items are covered then finished. Also, the verb forms are being taught as set grammatical rules even though students are unable to internalize the rules written in their books, and fail to apply them in spontaneous production (Westney,1994:88). Westney (1994:84) noted that students and teachers have limited access to grammar therefore concentrating teaching on grammar may limit the range of material available for study.

Another criticism of traditional linear syllabi is verb form complexity is a small part of English. Sinclair (1991) proposed that collocation and idioms are just as, if not more important than grammatical permutations. That is, words that occur in association should be taught in association. Sinclair (1991:117), in analyzing "back" shows it has a strong association with the prepositions "at", "down", "from", "into", "now", "on", "then", "to", "up", and "when". So, in a lesson concentrating on "back" as a vocabulary item the associated prepositions should be addressed. Sinclair (1991:110) argues in favor of a new type of grammar, labeled *the idiom principle*, which is contrasted against the *open-choice principle* (Sinclair,1991:109-110). The traditional grammars, or open-choice grammars, contend lexical items fill slots in grammatical phrases, and use constructs such as "I (simple past verb) (noun phrase) last weekend" (I saw a baseball game last weekend). An argument against such constructs is "I got back to the books last weekend" can't be fit into an open-

choice framework, yet it accepts, “I ate my table last weekend”, while Sinclair’s idiomatic framework can encourage the first and discourage the second form.

A final criticism of linear syllabi is that teaching verb forms may be good grammar practice, but does little for functional, interactive understanding of the target language. Language doesn’t occur in isolation, but is a means for and product of interaction between people. The nature of the interaction, pragmatic constraints, determine the language used (Brown,2000:258). For example, “I went to the grocery store last weekend”, has little meaning without a framework around which to operate. If the speaker’s fiancé asked, “Do we need milk?” the phrase serves as a negative answer, even with no preceding “no”. Additionally, if the speaker’s fiancé proffered a five-dollar bill and said, “We need milk”, then the speaker is offering an excuse. In both examples, the same sentence serves two disparate functions, and the meaning of the exchange isn’t couched in one person’s utterance, but in the overall discourse as an interaction between two speakers.

The influence of the discourse setting on conversational meaning will be further discussed in section 3, Environment.

3.1 Environment-First Language Acquisition

The environment for first language acquisition is characterized by constant immersion and meaningful interaction. First language acquisition studies show parents unlikely to correct grammatical errors. Instead they focusing on true utterances, thus centering the conversation on meaningful subjects (Lightbown & Spada,1999:10-14). Even if parents do occasionally concentrate on language form, children seem instead to concentrate on meaning (Brown,2000:39). Audiolingualists derived their theory of learning from meaningful input (Lightbown & Spada,1999:9); if every time an infant sees mommy she hears “mommy”, then an association forms and eventually the child produces the utterance “mommy”. Chomsky explained how children pick up word order (SVO, SOV, etc.) automatically and identify word classes (verbs, nouns, etc.) through the LAD and universal grammar parameters (Lightbown & Spada,1999:15-22). All these factors combine to produce native-level language users without formal instruction or study, though it should be remembered that from age six children often spend significant portions of their lives devoted to study of reading, writing, and other scholastic skills.

3.2 Environment- Classroom Learning

The EFL environment is radically different from a first language learning environment, particularly regarding the amount of meaningful language exposure. Especially in a foreign language learning context, where students don't regularly use their second language outside the classroom, they often receive only one or two hours per week of exposure to the target language. Also, the classroom, while allowing for intensive focus on language, hobbles the meaningful interaction so omnipresent in a first language learning context, as classroom influence is powerful and pervasive across cultures (Hofstede,1991), counteracting attempts to create meaningful information exchange. Students attend to their language production and attempt to derive grammatical forms whether the teacher presents them explicitly or they are implicitly incorporated into the lesson (Westney,1994:93).

The affect of the classroom on teachers and learners is one of a host of variables, termed *affective filters*, that inhibit learner proficiency. Brown (2001:61-69) offered a list of variables that affect L2 learning; language ego, or a person's perception of themselves as a language learner; self-confidence, either strong or weak; risk-taking, or the ability to "take the reins" of personal language development; language-culture interrelationship, or pragmatic constraints; and L1 interference in the L2. The last two items, pragmatic constraints and L1 interference deserve further explanation, and will be considered together, as one has an effect on the other.

Pragmatic constraints consider the situation in which language is being used, where the literal meaning of a phrase doesn't necessarily indicate appropriate usage in conversation. Two examples, one from the author's experience and one from literature, will clarify this concept.

Students have responded well to limited contrastive analysis through comparing differences between phrase order in their L1, and phrase order in the target language. A simple, yet poignant example is the phrase order for introducing oneself. In Japanese a speaker begins with "Hajimemashite", states their name, then "Dozo yoroshiku." The literal translation of "Hajimemashite" is "We are meeting for the first time." There is no pragmatically correct corresponding phrase in English. Instead the speaker states a greeting, their name then "Nice to meet you". Before pointing this difference out students often used "Nice to meet you" as a substitution for "Hajimemashite". After an explanation of the contrastive difference students were more consistent and natural in using the English phrase

order while in the classroom (Muller,2002). Brown gives a different example, also citing Japanese students:

Learning the organizational rules of a second language are almost simple when compared to the complexity of catching on to a seemingly never-ending list of pragmatic constraints. Pragmatic conventions from a learner's first language can transfer both positively and negatively. Apologizing, complimenting, thanking, face-saving conventions, and conversational cooperation strategies often prove to be difficult for second language learners to acquire. Japanese learners of English may express gratitude by saying "I'm sorry", a direct transfer from "Sumimasen", which in Japanese commonly conveys a sense of gratitude, especially to persons of higher status. (2000:258)

So the pragmatic situation in which a conversation occurs has a significant effect on language, and often students' L1 may call for expressions that aren't appropriate in the L2, or vice-versa, making an awareness of the differences between the target and first language an important objective of the classroom.

There is also a strong case for the explicit consideration of learners' internal language structure as at certain points a student may need to reformulate their internal logical grammar system. Willis (2001), citing DeBono (1971), used an example of 2-dimensional shape arranging to give an elegant explanation of how original hypotheses can persist and result in a less harmonious system than is actually available. Methods for counteracting inefficient hypothesis formation and increasing classroom meaningfulness will be addressed in Section 4, Exposure.

4.1 Exposure - First Language Acquisition

There is little left to say regarding language exposure in first language acquisition. Parents adjust the language they use with their children and focus on factually correct utterances at the expense of grammatical correctness (Lightbown & Spada,1999:34). There is evidence that parents will often give their children the "reins" of the conversation and let them pursue the topics and items that interest them (Lightbown & Spada,1999:12-14). As previously stated, children are constantly exposed to their first language, use it at every level of interaction throughout their development, and seem to concentrate on meaning even when their parents attend to grammatical structure (Brown,2000:39).

4.2 Exposure-Classroom Learning

Classroom exposure to English was partially considered in Section 3, Environment, though it is necessary to contrast first language exposure with EFL by considering the focus of students and teachers, the nature of the language used, and the level of language exposure.

While parents focus on factually correct information at the expense of grammatical accuracy (Lightbown & Spada,1999:34), language teachers often focus on grammatical accuracy at the expense of factual correctness (Willis,2001:59), a process called *focus on form*. Focus on form is often encouraged by students who ask their teachers to correct grammatical errors during class, and is a source of frustration for teachers attempting to implement a functional syllabus, especially when a student stops the class for the third time to ask whether “a pen” or “the pen” is appropriate. As Brown (2000:72) noted, “Adults learning a second language might do well to attend consciously to truth value and to be less aware of surface structure as they communicate”.

The nature of the language used is more important than repetition or frequency. According to Brown:

Most cognitive psychologists agree that the frequency of stimuli and the number of times spent practicing a form are not highly important in learning an item. What is important is meaningfulness. Contextualized, appropriate, meaningful communication in the second language seems to be the best possible practice the second language learner could engage in. (2000:73)

While it is arguable to what degree classrooms can emulate real experience, it is important for teachers to encourage spontaneous, functional interaction. In extreme forms of this implementation the English classroom can resemble geography or math classrooms.

The Monitor model states learners should be exposed to language at a level higher than their current proficiency, or “i+1” (Long,1983:377). While determining what “i” level a given learner has, and what level “i+1” might be is problematic, the argument is useful in stating that learners shouldn’t be overwhelmed with incredibly difficult new material, nor should they be exposed to language forms that are easy for them. Learners progress through exposure to language forms slightly above their current level. However, there are a lot of indications that natural English, or English as it is used, also needs to be presented to students (McCarthy & Carter,1995).

5.1 Age-First Language Acquisition

First language learners acquire language as they develop, and have usually mastered the basic grammar of their first language by the age of five or six (Long,1990:256). A child's motor and cognitive skills evolve along with language (Lenneberg,1967:178). Despite children being linguistically unaware, research has determined they do formulate general rules at early ages and are able to apply these rules to artificial nonsense words in making plurals and past tense verbs (Lightbown & Spada,1999:2).

5.2 Age- Classroom Learning

Adult learners gain proficiency in the universal aspects of second languages, like nouns, verbs, and general word order (SVO, VOS), but have more difficulty with less universal parts of their second language. A stark example is the English article system, "a/an" and "the", which are often problematical in EFL.

Goldin-Meadow (1982) divides language into sensitive and resilient forms. Resilient forms include word order, nouns, verbs, etc. and sensitive language includes movement rules (for example, in making questions in English), closed class items (pronouns, prepositions), and so on. Sensitive aspects of language tend to be learned consistently only by FL learners and SL learners who begin studying their SL before the age of 6 (Long,1990:257), yet the existence of resilient and sensitive aspects of language doesn't mean adult learners can't consistently learn sensitive parts of their second language. A position taken by many researchers into corpus-based learning (Willis, Shortall, Johns, 2001:118-136) is that the sensitive forms of language require better explanation for effective second language learning. Using the "a/an" and "the" example from above, if the articles are considered part of the larger determiner system and taught with the determiners class and not in isolation, their usage becomes less complex and easier to apply (Willis, Shortall, Johns, 2001:118-136).

5. Conclusion

In summary, the most salient differences between first language learners and second language learners are divisible into four categories, the process of learning, the environment where learning occurs, the level and type of target language exposure, and the age of the learner. These factors are difficult to differentiate, and Cook (1986) expended considerable effort showing several authors had, in fact, failed to adequately isolate them. Still, their

discussion helps to highlight important implications for the language classroom, mainly a need for meaningfulness and a focus on underlying linguistic and pragmatic form.

The two most important approaches to classroom language teaching also appear, on the surface, to be mutually exclusive. A focus on language as a means of communication apparently excludes the possibility of concentrating on the forms in which that communication fits. Language as communication means language used in pragmatic interaction, attending primarily to meaning. Language as form encourages learner analysis of language, and conscious formation and articulation of the underlying rules and forms. An ultimate attainment objective would be the former approach while conforming to the pragmatic and idiomatic constraints embedded in the latter, yet different students and teachers may find themselves drawn toward one approach more than the other, unsure which may be more important.

While the language teaching profession and classroom methodologies evolve, teachers should feel they are implementing classroom procedures based on more than good intentions. The evolving hypothesis, cyclical development of students' language systems seems to accommodate a lesson style that focuses on language form embedded in pragmatics and idiomatics, then the application of that form in a meaningful context within the classroom. At the first stage the teacher may want to be a guide, attending to the level of the language considered, then at the application stage a focus on meaning should override students' usual focus on form. Finally, students would be encouraged to consider the lesson as it affected their own internal grammar, and to consolidate the new information with their existing internal grammar. McCarthy and Carter describe this process as the "three 'I's':

...standing for Illustration-Interaction-Induction. "Illustration" here means wherever possible examining real data which is presented in terms of choices of forms relative to context and use. "Interaction" means that learners are introduced to discourse-sensitive activities which focus on interpersonal uses of language and the negotiation of meanings, and which are designed to raise conscious awareness of these interactive properties through observation and class discussion. "Induction" takes the consciousness-raising a stage further by encouraging learners to draw conclusions about the interpersonal functions of different lexico-grammatical options, and to developing a capacity for noticing such features as they move through the different states and cycles of language learning. (1994:217)

Such a syllabus might utilize conscious memorization and problem-solving ability to discern patterns then apply the discerned patterns in an effort to make them unconscious and automatic through exposure and practice.

References

- Aitchison, J. (1989) *The Articulate Mammal*. London:Routledge, as referenced in Willis, Shortall, & Johns (2001:68).
- Ard, J. and S. Gass (1987) 'Lexical Constraints on Syntactic Acquisition'. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 9:233-52
- Brown, H. (2001) *Teaching by Principles*. White Plains: Longman Press.
- Brown, H. (2000) *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. White Plains: Longman Press.
- Cook, V. J. (1986) 'Experimental Approaches Applied to two Areas of Second Language Learning Research: Age and Listening-Based Teaching Methods'. In *Experimental Approaches to Second Language Learning*, V. Cook (ed.). Oxford: Pergamon.
- DeBono, E. (1971) *Lateral Thinking for Management*. London:Penguin, as referenced in Willis (2001).
- Goldin-Meadow, S. (1982) 'The Resilience of Recursion: A Study of a Communication System Developed Without a Conventional Language Model'. In E. Wanner & L. Gleitman (eds.), *Language Acquisition: State of the Art* (pp.51-77). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, as referenced in Long (1990).
- Hofstede, G. (1991) *Cultures and Organizations*. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Book Company Europe.
- Johns, T. (1991) 'Should you be Persuaded: Two Examples of Data-Driven Learning'. In Johns & King (eds.), *Classroom Concordancing* (pp.293-313). Birmingham: ELRJ 4.
- Lenneberg, E. (1967) *Biological Foundations of Language*. New York:Wiley.
- Lightbown, P and N. Spada (1999) *How Languages are Learned: Revised Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Long, M. (1983) 'Does Second Language Instruction Make a Difference?' *TESOL Quarterly* 17:359-82.
- Long, M. H. (1990) 'Maturational Constraints on Language Development'. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 12(3): 251-85.
- McCarthy, M. and R. Carter. (1995) 'Spoken Grammar: What is it and how can We Teach it?' *ELT Journal Volume* 49(3):207-218.
- Muller, T. (2002) *Classroom Teaching Journals*. Unpublished.
- Odlin, T. (1994) *Perspectives on Pedagogical Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sinclair, J. (1991) *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Westney, P. (1994) 'Rules and Pedagogical Grammar', in T. Odlin. *Perspectives on Pedagogical Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 72-96.

Willis, D. (2001) *Second Language Acquisition*. Birmingham: The Centre for English Language Studies.

Willis, D., T. Shortall, & T. Johns (2000) *Pedagogic Grammar*. Birmingham: The Centre for English Language Studies.