

First Language Acquisition and Classroom Language Learning: Similarities and Differences

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

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1.0 Introduction

Language is the means we use to convey ideas from one mind to another, and the acquisition of language remains one of the most fascinating aspects of human development. From the first monosyllabic utterances to the use of complex, nuanced and context-specific structures, both the rate of progress and the stages of language acquisition have been the focus of innumerable research studies in developmental psychology, linguistics and pedagogy.

Though SLA research is said to still be in its infancy (Brown 2007), theories continue to be postulated and challenged by both educators and linguists as to how additional languages are learned in relation to the first. Leaver et al (2005) acknowledge that the 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. Likewise, the discussion in FLA and SLA has, for several decades, sought to understand whether strategies be transferred between L1 and classroom learning, the effect of external factors on a person's ability to succeed as a language learner.

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).

This paper identifies and addresses the most important differences between the learning strategies, mental and physiological mechanisms and developmental milestones found in first language acquisition and within second language instruction environments. It seeks to better understand the nature of language acquisition by exploring linguistic, social and affective factors such as environment, motivation and age, and by examining the interrelation between the two processes. The paper also presents possible implications for language learners and reflections on classroom practice.

1.1 Acquisition and Learning

Before identifying the differences attributed to FLA and classroom learning, it is necessary to establish the meaning of two key terms that will be used throughout this paper: acquisition and learning.

Krashen (1982) hypothesised that the process of *learning* a second language is distinguished from *acquisition*, with the latter being a subconscious process of gradual development of ability through use in natural communicative situations with other speakers. The focus is not the form of the speaker's utterances, but meaningful interaction through the act of communication itself, meaning that language users are largely unaware of the rate or sequence of their development. Lightbown and Spada (2001) observe that acquisition occurs during the formative years of one's life - usually commencing in early childhood before age three - and that it is learned as part of growing up among people who speak it fluently. In contrast, learning is differentiated as a more conscious and explicitly sequenced process of 'accumulating knowledge of linguistic features such as vocabulary, sentence structure and grammar, typically in an institutional setting' (Yule 1985:163). The difference between these ways of developing language competence is manifest most clearly in their outcomes: through acquisition the contextual understanding of the language is gained, and through learning, knowledge 'about' the language: 'knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them' (Krashen 1982:10; also Schmidt 1983).

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Initial states and language transfer

A major difference in first and second language acquisition stems from the initial position of the learner in each instance. Simply put, the initial state of L1 learning reflects an innate capacity and desire for language acquisition, but the prior knowledge of L1 cannot be negated when considering the 'initial state' for L2 learning (Saville-Troike 2012).

In contrast to L2 learners, those acquiring L1 possess no real-world knowledge or proven skills, and hence have no pre-existing awareness of many language functions – for example, how to request, demand or command – and have no expectation of the format and flow of such interactions. Nemati and Taghizadeh (2013) assert that the properties of and processes surrounding the first language directly inform the means by which the second is learned. Similarly, the work of Houmanfar, Hayes, and Herbst (2005) concludes that the history of the first language is a major component and participatory factor in the acquisition of the second language and its maintenance. This prior knowledge of how language works and the features of the specific L1 will undoubtedly be transferred and used as part of the foundations for learning other languages - even if not all the L1 tools are of relevance in L2 production (Candlin and Mercer 2001).

It is not just in speech production that the issue of language transfer arises. Macaro (2001) remarks that for L2 users, the language in which they choose to think may significantly impact their overall competence. This can be an asset, in that being able to compare and connect linguistic features or categorise vocabulary alongside existing knowledge can reduce affective barriers; however, it can also cement problems such as false friends and homonyms (words with similar spellings or pronunciation that have different meanings), and inadvertently foster the idea that L2 can simply be ‘decoded’ through translation from L1 (O’Malley and Chamot 1990; Lee and Macaro 2013).

2.2 The behaviourist approach

Behaviourist learning theories posited principally by Skinner (1957, cited in Lightbown and Spada 2013) state that the fundamentals of language are essentially developed through conditioning and the formation of good language habits (Mitchell, Myles and Marsden 2013). Competence is achieved as the learner responds to stimuli (primarily the speech of caregivers) and receives feedback in the form of positive reinforcement or correction (de Bot, Lowie and Verspoor 2005). In practical terms, it is an oral-situational approach where the child imitates and memorises language used in context and along with specific behaviours. Errors made during FLA are viewed as bad habits that can be eliminated with sufficient amounts of rote learning and drilling (Candlin and Mercer 2001). Thus the

acquisition and understanding of grammar becomes an inductive process, rather than an instinctive one.

2.3 Age and maturational constraints: The Critical Period and the LAD

Many theories have suggested a neurological basis to language acquisition; of these, Lenneberg's Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) published in 1967 remains the framework for much of the research undertaken on age related aspects of language learning (Savile-Troike 2012). According to the CPH, there is a finite period during which it is possible to acquire a language flawlessly. The mastery of morphology, phonology and syntax is limited to those who do so in the years before puberty, regardless of the amount of time spent later. From this notion stems the generally accepted view that children are better at achieving native-like pronunciation in second languages (Hakuta 2001).

In recent times, behaviourist thinking has garnered less support from scholars, who believe a child's knowledge of language will 'typically cover more than they could reasonably be expected to learn through hearing alone' (Lightbown and Spada 2013:20). Rejecting what he considered to be an overemphasis on environmental factors, Chomsky (1981) proposed a system with a more internal focus. The Nativist approach hypothesises that all children possess a biological predisposition for learning languages, and that this innate knowledge allows them to achieve total mastery with minimal effort (Lightbown and Spada 2013). Termed the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), this internal mechanism enables the systematic perception of language: identifying speech sounds; categorising linguistic data and refining these classifications over time; establishing acceptable linguistic structures and those which deviate from them; and continually streamlining the details of the emerging language system (Brown 2007). Within the LAD are principles of what is considered a Universal Grammar (UG), a set of internal rules that govern the initial state of the language faculty and determine one's ability to comprehend and produce language (Palmer 2000). Once activated through exposure to speech in the child's surroundings, UG initiates a process of aligning what is heard to this pre-existing knowledge of grammatical structure (White 2003).

Following on from this Nativist approach is the perception of the child's first language as a system in itself. In contrast to the behaviourist view of FLA, the aligning process within Universal Grammar is not the gradual eradication of mistakes, but rather the continual development, trial and appraisal of hypotheses in speech and comprehension based on input received (Meisel 2011).

CPH is related to the Nativist approach in that it implies the existence of the LAD and UG. Lennenberg also contends that access to them is constrained by the process of lateralization: as the brain's plasticity decreases, cognitive functions are allocated their final positions in the right or left hemispheres. Numerous studies (Krashen, Long and Scarcella (1979), Hadley (2002), and Hopp and Schmid (2013) amongst others) document a notable decline in acquisition ability and an increased sensitivity to affective factors such as perceived difficulty. It should be noted, however, that post-Critical Period, the differences are mostly qualitative; arguments are mainly based on issues with pronunciation and certain domains of grammar (Mayberry and Lock 2003; Leaver et al 2005; Meisel 2011).

How this phenomenon relates to SLA in later life is still debated (Marinova-Todd et al 2000), but if there is indeed an optimal phase of responsiveness in the early years, a principal difference should be that in light of maturation and the relative inaccessibility of UG, language learning in later life requires a number of alternative strategies in the brain. Birdsong (1999) asserts that learning outside of the Critical Period and in different circumstances (e.g. the classroom) triggers or at least necessitates the activation of other neurological mechanisms that yield advantages such as more advanced analytical and pragmatic skills.

2.4 Language egocentrism

According to Tavakkoli et al. (2014) there are psychological factors that differentiate first and second language learners. These affect not just the learner's ability to acquire language, but also attitudes to learning and the perception of one's self as a learner.

Focusing on issues of self-confidence and inhibition, the research of Young and Gardner (1990) into acquisition and acculturation documents how the progress made by French Canadians learning English was affected by factors including anxieties over L2 use and the formal learning environment, as well as unfavourable self-perception, and that these are significant distinguishing features between L1 and classroom L2 learners. Conversely, young children are highly egocentric: they consider themselves the centre and sole focus of the world and exhibit concepts of 'self' and 'other' such that they are unaware of any vulnerability in their self identity (Heo et al 2011, Moinzadeh, Dezhara and Rezaei 2012). This view is said to be inextricably bound up with language and language acquisition (Brown 2007), as the egocentrism enhances young children's ability to absorb and adapt language without fear of mistakes, and allows them to confirm and shape their identities without compromising their sense of self (Guiora et. al. 1972).

This attitude becomes a 'language ego' that develops in tandem with the knowledge of L1. When learning languages in later life, there is tension between the established identity and the developing ego associated with L2. This internal conflict is compounded from adolescence onwards, when cognitive and emotional changes cause the development of inhibitions about this identity. L2 learners must contend with much greater levels of self-consciousness and are more anxious about the learning process. Mistakes are perceived as risks that pose a direct threat to the burgeoning language ego and it becomes imperative to protect this by clinging to the security that the first language provides (Hulya 2009; Moinzadeh, Dezhara and Rezaei 2012). The adoption of this defense mechanism only highlights the stark contrast between the fragile L2 ego and the assured, fully formed L1 ego. Hence, the fear of negative evaluation and failure can pose genuine obstacles to progress in learning in the language classroom (Brown 2007, Nemati and Taghizadeh 2013).

2.5 Input, interaction and environment

Input is defined by Richards et al. (1989:143) as 'language which a learner hears or receives and from which they can learn'. Scholars broadly acknowledge the significance of input in language acquisition (Tucker 2003) although the focus and nature of the learning environment will influence the type and quantity of language input. In the course of L1

development, O'Neill (1998) and Brown (2007) both hold the view that, in itself, the quantity of input is not the dominant factor in determining a person's capability to acquire L1. Although Chenu and Jisa (2009) estimate that a toddler in an English-speaking environment is exposed to between 5000 and 7,000 utterances a day, even with minimal input the full grammatical code of the first language can be attained during pre-pubescent development. Much greater credence is given to the *quality* of input, even during the non-verbal period (Lightbown and Spada 1999); here, one-to-one communication using child-initiated topics and child-centered questions are common (Krashen 1982; Chenu and Jisa 2009). The combination of parental and social interaction with frequent exposure to practical language in use can greatly assist language learning and positively affect the linguistic competence of the child in later life (Krashen and Terrell 1983; Kuhl 2004).

Lightbown and Spada (2013) describe three types of environment that expose the learner to:

1. Natural interaction (e.g. in work or a social forum)
2. Traditional acquisition (e.g. conventional EFL/ESL classrooms, where form, grammar and vocabulary are emphasised)
3. Communicative teaching environments (where interaction is emphasised over form)

Of these, both the natural and communicative environments are, to some extent, in keeping with the Interaction Hypothesis put forward by Krashen (1981), which states that successful transition from exposure to assimilation is facilitated by collaborative and social efforts in the target language (also Lightbown and Spada 1999). However the reality of many L2 classroom environments is reflected in the 'traditional' setting, where exposure in the target language is limited to only a few hours each week. In addition, this interaction comes through the instruction of teachers, rather than being learner-driven as in the case of L1. Although L2 learners bring highly transferable social, contextual and linguistic knowledge to the classroom, working to a syllabus that is 'forced on the learner from outside' (Nemati and Taghizadeh 2013) may mean that the learning experience fails to meet the learner's immediate goals with the same efficacy as in the L1 setting.

Cummins (1991) observes that even with a sufficient amount of educational resources, L2 learning experiences are too often based on an isolated, task-oriented outlook with an insufficient awareness of context and culture. In addition, the instructor is ultimately just one sample of the speech community he or she represents. When these factors are combined, the opportunity to experience a diverse range of communication styles similar or equal to L1 is not always available to the L2 classroom language learner.

Pedagogical and cultural factors also come into play at this point. Students in education systems that favour control- and rule-oriented strategies or rote memorization may receive adequate amounts of exposure to L2 (O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Grainger 1997), but Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1977) finds that success in language learning requires access to input that is modified to make it comprehensible and, by extension, functional in nature. In this way, information about grammar is automatically available because the input is understood in context – this is similar to the process of L1 acquisition, where 'the child discovers, interprets and ascribes meaning through contextualised behaviour' (Nemati and Taghizadeh 2013).

While it is possible to create situations where different varieties of speech are taught and spoken, as an educator there are expectations of the role that will be manifest in the adoption and/or omission of certain linguistic features. When viewed in this manner, the L2 classroom represents an artificial construct that is constrained in the types of input available and somewhat removed from any 'naturalistic' environment or usage. It is unsurprising then, that 'L2 learners typically acquire second languages slowly, with some effort and incompletely' (Towell and Hawkins 1994).

2.6 Motivation

Though the driving forces behind learners' efforts are diverse, Gardner and Lambert (1972) categorise them as being either instrumental or integrative. Instrumental motivations are utilitarian and often found in typical classroom environments. Examples include overseas employment, or high school English test that determine access to further education. Those with integrative motivations are led by largely affective factors, having a desire to learn

about the culture associated with the target language, to associate themselves with its users and to integrate in the L2 speech community (Saville-Troike 2012). Dörnyei's Motivational Self System (2009) further developed these ideas with a third set of 'executive' and motivations related to the immediate process of learning: these include the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group and the experience of successful engagement with the language.

In a similar vein, the work of Schumann (1986) focused on the L2 learner's need for self-identity and assimilation into a target language culture, linking attitude, progress and success to a desire for 'acculturation'. His hypothesis considered the attitude towards L2 in terms of its social and cultural dominance, the similarities between L1 and L2 communities, and the extent to which integration into the L2 society occurs (Lambert 1963, 1967).

These motivations, being informed by social, cultural and economic aspirations, differ greatly from the neurological mechanisms that underlie FLA, which occurs at a crucial stage of development along with a number of other vital life-skills. The conscious or unconscious resistance to L2 learning that gives rise to these theories of motivation is simply not present in FLA (O'Neill 1998), where the main impetus is the innate desire to interface with the immediate world – the family and social group. In the classroom, learners must *find* the same motivation to achieve the same goal.

2.7 Educational context

The contexts in which FLA and SLA take place have a significant bearing on learning, and specifically in the case of the language classroom, pedagogical considerations should be taken into account as these can greatly alter the expectations and outcome of learning (Hulya 2009). A first language is 'taught' by native speakers in the social group into which the child is born and is expected to fully integrate. In this purely natural environment, the learner interacts with others, receiving and communicating information, entirely in the target language. In effect, they are taught through a process of full immersion – one that is simulated to varying degrees in the communicative approaches adopted in contemporary classrooms (Mohammed Al-Anisi and Karunakaran 2013).

Second language learners receive instruction in a much more formal manner (Medgyes 1999; Hayes 2009). In the majority of language education settings, instruction is given primarily by a non-native speaker; in some cases this may be in cooperation with a native speaker with whom different areas of learning are divided (for example, grammar and spoken conversation) (Choi 2008). Research by Árvai and Medgyes (2000) suggests that in the second language classroom, significant differences can be found in the teaching behaviour of both native and non-native speaking teachers in terms of communicative competence and the balance of content. Some areas of learning are given greater focus than others, and educators may favour the use of L1, either alongside L2 or as the primary means of teaching the L2 (Park and Abelman 2004). Such variation can affect the level and quality of engagement with the language, and ultimately the learner's proficiency (Meadows and Muramatsu 2007; Butler 2012).

2.8 Errors and feedback

Approaches to correction distinguish FLA and SLA, as well as the perceived significance of these errors. On a basic level, the efforts made by small children to express themselves using language are encouraged and seldom corrected, despite the utterances being largely inaccurate in syntactic and phonological terms. It is only in subsequent stages of language development – possibly years later – that corrective feedback is routinely given. In the classroom, however, teachers are expected to implement a wide range of error correction strategies from the outset. A more controlled and form-focussed learning atmosphere such as this can, at its extreme, produce more remote and stilted classroom interactions in comparison with those experienced during FLA (Nemati and Taghizadeh 2013).

Scholars also observe that within SLA there remains a systematicity to the type of errors made, parallels for which can of course be found in the early stages of L1 production (Towell and Hawkins 1994; Saville-Troike 2012). Notably, not all of these are attributed to the interference of the first language. Rather as with L1, there is a developmental pattern that second language students often follow in key areas, as they learn to manipulate language and move from deviant or rudimentary versions of the L2 to more complex forms.

Studies documented by Candlin and Mercer (2001) find that in the formation of negative sentences, for example, this progression is common.

3.0 Conclusion

Although the goal of those acquiring a first language and those learning in a classroom are essentially the same - 'to map form and function to produce meaningful utterances based upon their language experiences' (Chenu and Jisa 2009:18) - it is clear that there are many differences, and that learning a language is too complex an undertaking to be explained through a list of factors alone. These combine and influence each other to make learning experiences that vary within and across different groups of learners. The learning of a second language is not merely a second instance of acquisition. In fact, many of the explicit strategies used in classroom instruction are in direct contrast to the conditions surrounding FLA, inextricably intertwined with the developing mind of a child. whereas the acquisition of a second language in the classroom is often done at a stage where the mind is more (if not fully) developed.

Classroom learning is more syntactic in nature than L1 acquisition, and requires a more conscious and sustained effort. In addition, seemingly positive attributes found in one learning process are not always of benefit when applied in the other. In fact, the previous experience of acquiring L1, the comprehension of structures and linguistic devices, and even the accumulation of knowledge about how these are deployed in social settings can become genuine barriers to successful L2 learning. This brings into focus the importance of L2 classrooms being set up to address and reflect both the similarities and differences between first and second language acquisition. Even though these earlier experiences should act as the foundations for later developments, it is an awareness of how the underlying knowledge systems are distinct, and a increased sensitivity to the innate capabilities and limitations of L2 learners that can be used to improve the classroom language learning experience.

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