

First Language Acquisition Vs Second Language Learning:

What Is the Difference?

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Abstract

This paper investigates the potential differences between First Language Acquisition (FLA) and New Language Learning (NLL) in the classroom. It examines the factors that influence language acquisition in the two different environments. This includes explication of the age factor and its impact on progress in language acquisition. It also involves studying the language input in terms of quantity and quality in both cases and the limitations of NLL in the classroom. This paper also studies the individual differences that influence language acquisition. This covers language aptitude, language anxiety, language ego, and motivation. This paper, moreover, studies approaches to FLA like behaviourism, innatism, and interactionist position. It finally explains more explicitly how the teaching techniques influence the progress students achieve in learning a new language.

Key Words: *First language acquisition, second language acquisition, language anxiety, language ego, motivation, language aptitude, behaviourism, innatism, interactionist approach*

1. Introduction

Language acquisition is one of the most impressive aspects of human development. It is an amazing feat, which has attracted the attention of linguists for generations. First Language Acquisition (FLA) and New Language Learning (NLL) have sometimes been treated as two distinct phenomena creating controversy due to their variability in terms of age and environment. Oxford (1990: 4) in distinguishing between FLA and NLL argues that the first arises from naturalistic and unconscious language use and in most cases leads to conversational fluency; whereas the latter represents the conscious knowledge of language that happens through formal instruction but does not necessarily lead to conversational fluency of language. Fillmore (1989:311) proposes that this definition seems too rigid because some elements of language use are at first conscious and then become unconscious or automatic through practice. In another point of view, Brown (1994: 48) argues that both learning and acquisition are necessary for communicative competence particularly at higher skill levels. For these reasons, it can be argued that a learning acquisition continuum is more accurate than a dichotomy in describing how language abilities are developed.

The interrelation between learning and acquisition does not prevent argument around the long list of limitations of NLL in the classroom. Allwright (1987: 209), in his query 'why do not learners learn what teachers teach?', argues that the apparent failure of teaching to have a significant effect on learning can be ascribed to the failure to realise that planned teaching is only one part of the input available to classroom language learners, even outside the four walls of the classroom. Hence, formal and informal language learning are interwoven, acting as the two axes of language fluency. Native speakers' speed of articulation is affected not only by their ability of retention, but also by the amount of prefabricated chunks stored in the long-memory and retrieved when needed, a skill which promotes fluency.

This paper considers five prominent areas of difference between FLA in the pre-school period, and NLL in the classroom. These are as follows: age factor, input, approaches to FLA, classroom methodology, and psychological factors. My discussion of NLL in the classroom is influenced by the progress my own students achieve in their NLL (English) in the classroom, which represents the main source of input for most of them.

2. Differences between FLA and NLL

2.1 Age Factor

Do children learn languages better than adults do? Most linguists believe this is the case. Harley (1986: 4) and Lightbown and Spada (1999) argue that ‘...childhood is the golden age for creating simultaneous bilingual children due to the plasticity and virginity of the child’s brain to make for superior ability specifically in acquiring the early sets or units of language (1999: 29).’ This mental flexibility signifies the privilege attained by children over the adults in learning languages, which is probably also due to the muscular plasticity used in the articulation of human speech by children to produce a natively-like accent. Brown (1994) claims that this ability is almost missing after puberty and this may explain the difficulty encountered by some adults in acquiring a native-like accent, regardless of the way in which they learn new languages.

‘Children who acquire a second language after the age of five may have a physical advantage in that phonemic control of a second language is physically possible yet that mysterious plasticity is still present. It is no wonder that children acquire authentic pronunciation while adults generally do not, since pronunciation involves the control of so many muscles (Brown, 1994: 51).’

According to Brown’s argument, young children can sound similar to their new-language classmates very quickly and if young enough can become native speakers of the new language, with all the cultural background that this implies. Adults, on the other hand, can rarely gain the depth of cultural background that makes a real native speaker of a language. Ehrman (1996:180) renders this

to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which may lead to adult resistance of language learning. According to the CPH, adults no longer have the same plasticity as children that would enable them to cope with new mental activities. The difficulty faced by adults to attain a nativelike fluency could be due to the fact that the developmental changes in the brain that affect the nature of language acquisition after the end of the critical period are no longer based on the innate biological structures claimed by Chomsky (1981) to contribute to FLA or NLL in early childhood. Vygotsky (1978) explains the CPH in a different way. He argues that the adults tend to be more analytical in learning languages unlike children who tend to be more holistic. Children acquire the language as it is formed and produced by others whereas the adults often think of how a construction is formed before using it in conversation.

The impact of the CPH on NLL, nevertheless, does not receive the consensus of all linguists and classroom researchers. Lightbown and Spada (1999: 60) give the example of a study carried out by Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle on a group of English speakers learning Dutch as a second language. This research was especially valuable because it included learners from all age categories, from six to sixty year olds. Surprisingly, according to this study, the adolescents, not the children nor the adults, were by far the most successful learners. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle found that young learners had some difficulty in learning tasks that were beyond their cognitive maturity whereas adolescents learned faster in the early stages of second language development. The study eventually signals that adults and adolescents were able to make a considerable progress in NLL when they used the language on a daily basis in social, professional and academic interaction (1999: 60).

The impact of the age factor on NLL has become a popular excuse. When people run into trouble in language learning, they attribute this to their age when it is really something else that can be treated. I think there are a number of ways in which the adults are advantaged over children. Young children speaking the new language still speak like children: relatively small vocabulary, relatively simple grammar, and generally concrete topics. Adults, on the other hand, have a higher

level of cognitive development, knowledge of the world, and experience of how to learn that helps them achieve satisfactory levels of language proficiency in remarkably short periods. This diminishes the influence of the critical period on language acquisition. A young age can be an advantage in learning languages faster and gaining a native-like fluency; however, it does not hinder the acquisition of new languages for those who have already skipped puberty. Other factors may contribute to this acquisition such as language input.

2.2 Input

The form of the input children get in the home from their parents seems unlimited, constant and variable in terms of quality and quantity. They experience formal, semi-formal, colloquial and chatty forms of language. As they begin to speak, they become more competent in using language as new skills are gained and the degree of interaction increases as they develop different strategies of storage and retrieval. Halliday (1986) argues that children have the advantage to acquire the culture simultaneously while acquiring language because the language children receive from birth onward is contextual and wrapped in a cultural form. They are surrounded by text and there is a constant exchange of meaning going on all around, in which they are on one way or another involved (1986:123). Thus, the linguistic system develops in FLA as children develop their social system. These two systems are interdependent and they mutually facilitate each other.

In the classroom, the type of input is limited and the restriction of the classroom materials increases the infertility of such a soil. The means of input are confined to teachers' talk and course books, whereas the language is often used in isolated settings for fulfilling certain tasks. Lemke (1985: 5) points out that language in the classroom is used: (i) to perform specific kinds of actions and (ii) to create situations in which those actions take their meanings from the contexts built around them. This notion led some linguists, such as Fillmore (1989), to proclaim the unteachability of language in the classroom because of the missing context.

'What happens in school has very little to do with language learning. Language cannot be taught. It can only be acquired. Kids acquire language in spite of what goes on in the classroom – they learn it in the playground and on the street, but not in the classroom (Fillmore, 1989: 313)'

Krashen (1985), maintaining a dissimilar point of view, argues that language can be taught in the classroom if comprehensible input is available and if the teacher is able to create meaningful situations in which this language can live and breathe, besides reducing the 'affective filter' of students to allow the input in. The concept of the affective filter is discussed in more detail in section (2.5) below.

"Comprehensible input delivered in a low filter situations is the only 'causative variable' in second language acquisition. All other factors thought to encourage or cause second language acquisition only work when they provide comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985: 40)".

Teachers may find that the context of situation is missing and course book materials sometimes promote the segmentalisation of the language taught. Ehrman (1996) asserts that the absence of a social semiotic in the classroom may not prevent students from learning the language, but they do not acquire the culture underlying it. They consequently feel alienation in the process of learning a second language. This may not hinder them from achieving satisfactory levels of proficiency in NLL, yet cultural awareness would give this language learning strength and permanence (1996: 92). Hence, if cultural awareness promotes language acquisition, other factors contribute to this acquisition, such as the teaching methodology in the classroom, in contrast to the informal and unconscious ways in which a first language is acquired.

2.3 Approaches to FLA

In FLA, no teaching methodology is apparently used in the pre-school period and children's acquisition of language comes through unconscious exposure to an unlimited amount of input from their parents and elder siblings. The use of a teaching methodology is not seen as a normal part of a parental role in most societies in spite of the conscious attempts parents make to encourage their

young children to talk. Candlin and Mercer (2001: 254) give no prominence to methodology in the pre-school period. They argue that parents' intervention in teaching the primary language cannot be catalogued under certain methodologies and children's acquisition of their first language, in normal cases, is eventually inevitable. However, linguists adopt different points of view on how first language is acquired. Three main theoretical approaches to FLA – behaviourism, innatism and the interactionist position - are outlined in the following paragraphs.

2.3.1 Behaviourism: Say What I Say

Proponents of behaviourism, such as Ingram (1989: 58), consider that FLA is the result of imitation, practice, habit formation and appropriate feedback. In their first attempts to speak, children imitate the sounds and patterns they hear around them and receive positive reinforcement for doing so. These imitations are not random. Unlike a parrot, children's imitation is often selective and based on what they are currently learning. Ingram's theory is closer in its features to the psycholinguistic approach, which depends on two axes in language learning, namely stimulus / response. Children pick out patterns of language mainly through input from adults and other caregivers and then try to create new forms and new uses of words until they finally figure out how the forms are used by adults. Their new sentences are often comprehensible, but not necessarily correct. This view of FLA, however, is strongly opposed by innatists.

2.3.2 Innatism: It Is All in Your Mind

According to the innatist approach, children are biologically programmed for language and are born with an innate special ability to discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system through the 'Language Acquisition Device' (LAD), later referred to as 'Universal Grammar' (UG) or the imaginary 'black box'. The role of the environment is to stimulate the LAD as claimed by Chomsky (1981: 71).

'For the LAD to be activated, it only needs to be triggered by samples of the target language at the right time before the end of the Critical Period. Once it is activated, the child is able to discover the structures of the language to be learned by matching innate knowledge of basic grammatical relationships to the structures of the particular language in the environment (1981: 71).'

This theory is not encouraged by proponents of an interactionist position such as Piaget (1953) since it neglects the social side of language acquisition, which depends on exposure and interaction. Children who are born with a hearing defect or kept isolated for any reason are unlikely to develop their language system in the same way as those who are surrounded by language.

2.3.3 The Interactionist Position: A little Help from My Friends

This is the sociocultural theory of human mental processing in which Piaget (1953: 131) and Vygotsky (1978: 63) take an intermediate position between the ideas of Ingram and those of Chomsky. This theory emphasises the interrelation between environment and language development. Real language, according to Vygotsky, is language, which children have acquired through physical interaction with the environment. Vygotsky cited the story of Jim, the hearing boy with deaf parents, who was abnormally delayed in FLA because of the lack of one-to-one interaction. Hence, exposure is not the only factor affecting FLA, but also interaction among children and their caregivers. Though parents do not appear to use any conscious methodology in helping children learn the first language, such learning nevertheless is successful in most cases.

2.4 Classroom Methodology

The methodology applied by teachers in the classroom is a crucial factor in NLL because it may underpin or undermine it. Teachers adopt different approaches to language teaching from the Grammar Translation Method to the Reflective and Communicative Approaches. Lightbown and Spada (1999: 91-95) categorise these approaches into three categories as they given below:

2.4.1 Form-Focused Instruction

Teachers adopting traditional approaches such as the Grammar Translation Method emphasise the presentation of clear grammatical forms with great concentration on metalinguistic instruction in order to attain high levels of language accuracy. They may differ among themselves in how grammar is approached, whether deductively or inductively. The priority, then, is to 'how to say' with further attention to the input. Some teachers prioritise this technique in language teaching because they are affected by the notion that form-focused instruction emphasising input processing may be very effective. Errors are not tolerated and language violations are condemned as wrong and immediately corrected. Learners hereby are always aware of the accuracy of their language production on the account of fluency and interaction.

2.4.2 Learner-Focused Instruction

In learner-focused instruction, teachers focus on meaning rather than form. Teaching techniques highlight the presentation of listening and speaking skills over other skills and no particular aspect of language is targeted. The priority, then, is to fluency through 'what to say' with attention to the output. Similarly, feedback in learner-focused instruction is only given in response to the content and surface errors are tolerated. Learners are constantly encouraged to produce language with less concentration on forms of speech, which are supposed to be learnt through practice.

2.4.3 Communication-Focused Instruction

The communicative approach takes an intermediate position between the other approaches. It emphasises communication, yet language forms are given attention particularly when the form is difficult in terms of saliency. Teachers support the covert presentation of grammar items through discovery learning, sometimes described as 'consciousness-raising'. In communicative teaching, moreover, the teacher interrupts briefly to provide students with feedback in the form of

clarification of requests and elicitations, but none of these corrective strategies interferes with the overall focus on meaning and communication.

It can be noticed that the linguistic competence of learners is influenced by not only the type of language, but also how this language is approached. Teaching students, for example, how questions are formed with no real context to develop their understanding can rarely promote their communicative ability to produce correct questions, let alone the other informal types of requesting, offering or inquiring. NLL in the classroom is greatly affected by the teacher's view of what part of language should be developed and how it should be taught. Hence, language fluency is the outcome of effective teaching methodology in addition to the psychological factors in FLA and NLL.

2.5 Psychological Factors in FLA and NLL

The affective domain is the emotional side of human behaviour, which may be linked to the cognitive side. Students' feelings, motives, needs, and emotional states have as much power to affect their learning success as their styles and strategies. Some of these feelings are positive whereas others can be the damaging effects of perfectionism. The affective filter works highly in promoting FLA because children are constantly encouraged for any language production. Brown (1994: 51) in justifying this argues that though young children are egocentric, they are not self-conscious: they have not yet developed the ego boundaries described by Ehrman (1996), as they still see the world as an extension of themselves. Children simply are not aware of mistakes and are not demotivated if they make mistakes. Brown argues that:

'Very young children are totally egocentric. The world revolves about them, and they see all events as focusing on themselves. As children grow older, they became aware of themselves, more self-conscious as they seek to both define and understand their self-identity. They therefore develop inhibitions about this self-identity, fearing to expose too much self-doubt (Brown, 1994: 51).'

According to Ehrman (1996), the psychological factors influence language input largely particularly in the classroom. Depending on learners' state of mind or disposition, the affective filter limits what is noticed and what is acquired. A learner may put the filter up when stressed, or unmotivated, and let the filter down when relaxed and motivated. This hypothesis clarifies why some learners given the same instructional opportunities may be successful while others may not. Everyone uses a variety of ways to defend himself but sometimes these defence mechanisms become dysfunctional in the face of language anxiety, language ego, and motivation.

2.5.1 Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is the fear or apprehension of using the new language and it ranks high among the factors influencing formal language learning. Ehrman (1996: 92) and Oxford (1999: 6) differentiate between two types of language anxiety: 'situational or state' anxiety, which arises in response to a particular situation like making a presentation in front of the class, and 'trait anxiety' which exists when the repeated occurrence of state anxiety causes students to associate anxiety with language performance. Oxford points out that state anxiety diminishes over time as the learner gains self-esteem in using the language (1999: 6). In my classes, language anxiety works strongly in discouraging learners from voluntarily participating in oral tasks since their participation is going to be heard, evaluated and even criticised by other classmates.

2.5.2 Language Ego

Language ego refers to the very personal nature of NLL and is associated with the fear of making mistakes. These mistakes work as internal and external threats to one's ego. Ego boundaries, according to Ehrman (1999), are the degree to which individuals tend to compartmentalise their experience, which affects receptivity to outside influences such as new languages and cultures. Learners, like others, try to build sets of defences to protect the ego. In classrooms, students' learning preferences depend on how thick or thin their ego boundaries are. Students with thin ego

boundaries enjoy content-based learning where the focus is on what is being said more than how it is said. Many of them prefer non-linear approaches to learning and enjoy unexpected learning events. Students with thick ego boundaries, on the other hand, prefer a clearly structured curriculum and display some discomfort with role-playing and similar suspensions of everyday identity (1999: 69). Brown (1994) points out that language ego can be damaging to language learning.

‘At puberty, these inhibitions are heightened in the trauma of undergoing critical physical, cognitive and emotional changes. Their egos are affected not only in how they understand themselves, but also on how they reach out beyond themselves, how they relate to others socially, and how they use the communicative process to bring on affective equilibrium (Brown, 1994: 70).’

2.5.3 Motivation

In the pre-school period, children pick up their first language voluntarily as they grow up, and develop it integratively as they learn to walk and play. In their early attempts to converse, children make countless errors from the point of view of adults' grammatical language; however, their language violations are rarely ever criticised. Instead, children get endless extrinsic motivation from their parents and other caregivers for any language production.

Learners undertake NLL and maintain it for a variety of reasons. The degree of development in NLL is influenced by whether the learner is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. Some learners are interested in the language and culture, some may want a tool for increased interaction with native speakers, and others may learn a new language for some kind of external benefit such as increased pay or meeting organisational or academic requirements. Ehrman (1996: 138) considers intrinsic motivation as powerful and likely to lead to deep learning. An intrinsically motivated learner will take every opportunity to satisfy the motivation-driven needs to expand and deepen knowledge, whereas an exclusively extrinsically motivated learner is vulnerable to a kind of disaffection.

Ellis (1997: 75) suggests that there are at least four different types of motivation often experienced when learning a new language. The first is 'instrumental motivation', which, for example, helps to pass an exam or hunt a better job. The second is 'integrative motivation', which helps people who are interested in the people and culture represented by the target language group to be more integrated in the society. The third is 'resultative motivation' when motivation is the result of learning. Learners may become more or less motivated (frustrated) according to the degree of success they achieve. The last type is 'intrinsic motivation' when learners find the learning tasks they are asked to do intrinsically motivating. Hence, motivation can ebb and flow according to their interest in learning activities.

From the discussion above, it can be seen that motivation plays a crucial part in language learning. Children benefit a lot from the motivation they receive from their parents and the social context. Language teachers can help motivate learners through varying activities and using co-operative techniques rather than competitive ones. Teachers who have a positive attitude towards teaching can be very motivating to learners. This would be reflected in, for example, creating additional sources of input that can substitute for a shortage of classroom materials. However, teachers cannot be mentors all the time in the face of the unacceptable behaviour of some learners: a phenomenon, which most teachers experience sometimes and which accordingly affects their motivation to teach and the learners' motivation to learn.

3. Learning Abilities Affecting NLL

It has been observed in NLL that some students in the same classroom setting progress rapidly through the initial stages of learning a new language while others struggle along making very slow progress. This variation can be ascribed in part to personality characteristics and in part to learning strategies, language aptitude, and first language interference.

Learning strategies are specific actions that tend to make learning easier, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations. Students differ in their abilities of storage, retrieval and use of information, which affects the degree of language acquisition. Oxford (1990: 36) argues that more highly motivated learners use a significantly greater range of appropriate strategies than do less motivated learners. This perhaps explains why learners attending the same classes and exposed to the same language input have different rates of progress in NLL. Language aptitude is another factor that distinguishes students in NLL because people differ in the extent to which they possess a natural ability for learning languages. Skehan (1989: 15) relates this to general intelligence whereas Ellis (1997) considers success in learning languages involves certain abilities. The first is phonemic coding ability, which relates to the ability to identify and memorise new sounds. The second is grammatical sensitivity, which relates to the ability to deduce grammatical rules from examples. The third is inductive learning ability, which relates to the ability to understand the function of words in sentences. The last is rote-learning ability, which relates to the ability to memorise new words (1997: 73).

The learners' first language can also influence the acquisition of a new language. Learners sometimes become confused because they are affected by the notion that a word or a structure that works in their first language can be used similarly in the new language. In addition, they can find it difficult to accept the metaphorical use of certain idioms as unique to a particular language. In English, “the wave broke on the shore” can be quite confusing compared with “He broke the cup” for a new language learner. The first language can however work positively in NLL because students have already learnt how language rules are formed. This intervention of existing concepts, whether negative or positive, is not experienced in FLA.

4. Conclusion

The argument presented in this essay indicates that the differences between FLA and NLL are complex, but the latter represents a further difficulty for most people. Despite the importance of the teacher's role in facilitating NLL in the classroom, learning needs to take place outside the classroom, for example in occupational settings, to reach its full potential. Moreover, maintaining satisfactory degrees of accuracy and fluency does not imply communicative competence. Lightbown and Spada (2001: 25) argue that the ability to communicate is the ability to use the appropriate lexis for the situation and the ability to use various types of language in terms of formality and informality. It also includes the ability to employ idioms and fixed expressions in reasonable contexts and the ability to use various discourse genres; and the ability to manipulate the light side of language.

In studying the differences between FLA and NLL, I tried to concentrate on age factor, language input, the methodology applied in both FLA and NLL in the classroom, and the psychological factors. I think the impact these factors have on both FLA and NLL is great particularly for adults learning a new language in the classroom. I also believe that enough exposure to quantitative and qualitative input and interaction with proficient language speakers are the fundamental elements in creating a proficient new language learner, and that this is not impossible.

Examples of successful language learners are numerous. One often sees reference to Joseph Conrad, a native speaker of Polish, who became a major writer in the English language, and to Henry Kissinger, the former US minister, who has a noticeable German accent, but has a fluency that may surpass many American native speakers. However, one would probably enquire: does NLL represent the same complexity for students from different cultures? Are introversion and extroversion influential factors in undermining or underpinning language acquisition? These points, and other unresolved issues such as the critical period, would need to be explored in a further essay.

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