

L1 Acquisition vs. L2 Learning – Native Speaker vs. Non-Native speaker

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The L1 acquisition process is the acquisition of the mother tongue by children from an early age, while second language acquisition is the learning of a language, which takes place after the acquisition of the mother tongue. The two processes, although at first glance similar, are based on different cognitive mechanisms. One of the most significant differences is that the acquisition of the first language occurs subconsciously, whereas in the case of the second language the speaker is actively and consciously involved. Starting from this premise, our article aims to present, in a comparative study, the two processes, addressing both L1 language acquisition theories and L2 didactics theories, by giving some examples related to Romanian as a foreign/native language.

L1 acquisition; L2 learning; didactics; foreign language; native language.

Introduction

The following article aims to present mother tongue acquisition in comparison with learning a foreign language. In doing so, we will present theories of language acquisition 1, the mother tongue, in the first part of the paper, and describe the process of learning a foreign language in the second part, leaving room in the third part for a comparison between the two processes which, although they seem similar, are quite different.

Acquisition and learning are two distinct cognitive processes, determined by different factors. Firstly, in acquisition, the process is carried out naturally, intuitively, without the speaker being aware of all the structures and rigours of the language, whereas in learning a greater cognitive effort is involved, with memorisation. Also, language acquisition occurs in the early years of life, involuntarily, through exposure to language, while learning occurs in a 'controlled', deliberate manner.

L1 acquisition

According to David Crystal (1985), language acquisition is the process of acquiring language structures (phonetics, grammar, syntax), followed by the development of the lexicon through its use in different contexts. The first steps of acquisition occur in the early years of life, developing a whole cognitive process that will form the basis for learning other languages. In studying the phenomenon, there are several research

directions, one of which is behaviorism, according to which the environment in which the child develops impacts language acquisition, being achieved through three processes (Izar, Muslim Nasution, Ilahi 2020):

1. Imitation process - the stage in which children copy language patterns and lexical items used by people close to them.
2. Conditioning process - the stage in which the child responds to external stimuli.
3. Cognitive process - the stage when children become aware of the meaning of words.

According to behaviorism, children develop their language from imitating what they hear around them, and the whole development of their language system is based solely on the influence of their environment. On the other hand, interactionism, another school of thought that has studied language acquisition, puts forward the idea that mental capacity for learning is also involved in the acquisition process. In other words, acquisition is not achieved by continuous exposure to language alone, but requires intelligence that children acquire at birth, including linguistic intelligence. This theory is based on the system that the more often the child interacts with both the internal factor, i.e., the family, and the external factor, i.e., the nursery or strangers, the better the child's linguistic ability.

At the other end of the spectrum, Noam Chomsky debates the issue of language acquisition, arguing that this phenomenon occurs independently of logic or intellect. According to him, people are born with "minds containing innate knowledge about a number of different domains. One of these domains or faculties of mind concerns language" (Hutauruk, 2015, p.51). Chomsky (2009) calls this innate knowledge of language LAD (language acquisition device), whose function is to provide everyone with a set of grammatical and lexical rules. The linguist is therefore of the opinion that, regardless of the environment in which a child develops and the external factors with which he or she interacts, he or she is prone to language acquisition, as this phenomenon is natural. The linguist also formulates the idea that language develops independently of any form of intelligence or logic, thus contradicting the interactionist theory mentioned above. In addition, Chomsky emphasizes three categories of innate ideas that form LAD: substantive ideas (corresponding to relations or operations), formal ideas (expressing relations) and constructive ideas (forming a particular type of grammar, using innate substantive and formal elements based on linguistic data).

The literature delineates six stages in language acquisition:

1. Pre-speech stage (0-6 months), in which the child responds to adults using vowels, interjections or pointing.
2. The babbling stage (6-8 months), when the child begins to communicate by combining vowels and consonants. An example might be the word 'mother', common to several languages, which is a combination of two identical syllables.

3. The holophrastic stage (9-18 months), when the child uses a single word with a sentence function to respond to adults.
4. The two-word stage (18-24 months), when the child forms sentences made up of two words in a syntactic relationship.
5. Telegraphic stage (24-30 months), at this time, children begin to communicate through sentence-like word combinations based on syntactic patterns used by adults around them.
6. More words stage (30 months -), at this stage the child acquires more and more words, can formulate short but coherent sentences, and understands what adults are communicating.

In the early stages of acquisition, children communicate through sounds, then through words, not sentences, so acquisition begins with the lexicon, only later do they form the grammatical structures needed to form coherent sentences.

Learning L2

In language learning, we are dealing with two phenomena: formal and informal learning. Formal learning takes place at school or college and is guided by a teacher, while informal learning is often acquired through exposure to the language, bypassing grammar rules. Also, in formal learning, teaching is guided by the language levels described by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and is common to all languages. In the teaching process, as opposed to informal learning, the aim is to develop all language skills: comprehension (written and oral), elements of communication construction (grammar and vocabulary) and text production (oral and written). In informal learning, the individual focuses on communicative competence, often in the production of oral texts, leaving other aspects on the back burner.

Thus, in formal learning, language acquisition takes place gradually, starting with simple lexical and grammatical elements specific to A1 level and then moving on to increasingly complex structures at higher levels.

Informal learning, being a phenomenon that happens subconsciously, through exposure to the target language, through the phenomenon called "language bath", is closer to acquisition. Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell (1998) propose a distinction between learning and acquisition. In their view, L2 acquisition is similar to L1 acquisition in children, it is a subconscious process, it is based on "catching the language" (p. 27) and on implicit knowledge, eliminating the study of that language. At the opposite pole, the two researchers believe that L2 learning is achieved through formal teaching, learning about the language and explicit knowledge.

The researchers cited before (1988) delineate five stages of L2 learning:

1. Pre-production, when speakers learn vocabulary but cannot elaborate long responses. At this stage, listening activities, based on TPR (total psychic

response), can be carried out, in which learners use 'signs' to perform tasks aimed at demonstrating simple actions such as *to dance, to eat, to drink*.

2. Early production, when speakers learn up to 1000 words in the target language and can last up to "six months in the case of children" (Krashen, Terrell 1998: 78), whereas in adults this phase of learning takes less time. Here, the teacher's exercises target simple vocabulary items, short answers (such as answers to questions like: *who are you, where are you from? how old are you?*). The topics discussed may also deal with daily routines or descriptions of pictures, in which objects often used by the speaker are found.
3. Speech emergence, when the speaker can formulate less extended but coherent speech sequences, although they may defend grammatical inadequacies. At this stage, the individual learns 3000 words. The teacher's suggested homework may involve writing short messages about the holiday (*Write a message to a friend and tell them what you are doing on holiday*), or topics of immediate interest.
4. Intermediate fluency, at which point the speaker has about 6000 words in his/her vocabulary, can formulate more extended speech sequences, and grammatical accuracy increases. At this stage, more abstract topics of discussion can be introduced, and vocabulary items become more complex.
5. Continuous development of language/advanced fluency, a stage specific to higher levels, where the capacity for abstraction increases, the speaker also has knowledge of specialised language specific to his/her field, can converse on various topics, from the simplest to the most complex. They will also be able to formulate sentences directly in the target language without having to pass through the filter of their mother tongue.

Learning a language is a continuous process in which several elements are involved, such as motivation, intrinsic and/or extrinsic, and memorization. The first of these is particularly important, as an individual's actions are guided by one or another type of motivation, so the stronger the motivation, the easier the learning process will be.

The distinction between acquisition and learning processes

In the previous pages, we have briefly outlined some theories about two different processes of language acquisition. Following a review of the literature, we can state that the significant difference between acquisition and learning is that the two processes involve distinct mechanisms of vocabulary acquisition. The fundamental difference between an individual learning a foreign language and a child acquiring language originates in the fact that for a child the world is not bounded in concepts, he perceives things around him as objects that he cannot name, and language appears as a mechanism for 'putting labels' and learning to communicate. For a foreign language learner, on the other hand, external reality is already delimited by language, and the process is one of reconceptualizing the world and memorizing grammatical rules.

For example, when the child learns to speak and tries to remember the word "apple", the child sees the fruit in different poses - sliced, whole, grated and mixed with other fruits - and in different colors. As a result of interacting with the fruit in different forms, the child will be able to recognize it and distinguish it from other concepts. On the other hand, when a learner learns Romanian, he already has the concept of "măr" delimited in his own language. When he is presented with the word, it would be better not to give him the equivalent in the language shared by him and the teacher, but to make direct contact with the target language, which can be done with the help of a picture. Even if the learner sees the picture, when he writes down the new word in his notebook, he will write an equivalent in one of the languages he already knows. Although he will have the picture of the apple, the memorization of the words will be mediated by one of the known languages. This mediation process is hard to avoid because most of the time, learning something new is done through correlations with what we already know. In the case of children, this mediation is non-existent, because for them the first language they acquire is the starting point towards the delimitation of external reality, the grammar they acquire is automatically made aware of the different inflectional rules and forms. For foreign language learners the process of learning grammar can be difficult, sometimes made more difficult by the differences between the languages they speak. In this case, we can also discuss the category of gender, which is non-existent in some languages (such as English and Hungarian), or with differences in others (for example, in Romanian, the word chair is neuter, but in French it is feminine: *la chaise*). In addition, learning relies on memorization and exercises, which children do not have. At the same time, in the case of learning, an important factor, as mentioned above, is motivation, an aspect that is missing from the acquisition process, as it occurs naturally, without effort on the part of the child or any form of willpower.

Conclusions

Our article aimed to present, in brief, some key distinctions between L1 acquisition and L2 learning processes. Thus, the first part was devoted to a synthesis of several theories on acquisition, and the second focused on learning. As stated in the previous lines, L1 acquisition occurs early in life and is not guided by need or motivation, being a naturally occurring process, whereas learning occurs after acquisition, encompassing a range of factors and based on conceptualization of the world already achieved through mother tongue acquisition. We can say that L1 is the necessary foundation for learning foreign languages, as new vocabulary items specific to the latter go through translation into the mother tongue before being memorized. Linguistic interference from the L1, caused by the lack of an equivalent in the target language, or linguistic misunderstandings to convey the message, may also occur in L2 communication.

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