

An Introduction to the Acquisition of a Second Language for Young Learners

Natalie Regina Monteiro dos Santos*.

* School of Education, Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP), Campinas, Brazil, msantosnatalie@gmail.com

Abstract. This paper is an introduction to the acquisition of a second language for young learners. The main focus is to answer some questions and concerns about the topic raised among teachers and families, through my pedagogical practice. This paper comes out through bibliographic review. The attempt is to have the first approximations, focusing on the general understanding of this wide area, passing through the main aspects that may affect without any claim to covering this issue exhaustively, but rather describing first assimilation and findings. Two of the most remarkable authors of the topic are brought and, as they have different perspectives, this paralleling offers a counterpoint. Skinner discusses behavior aspects, and Chomsky adds the learning dynamics. Next, recent studies which corroborate Chomsky assumptions about predisposition for the human brain to be able to recognize patterns of language, also debating topics just as: what language is and what is the importance for human beings; practical issues of effectiveness of bilingualism and multilingualism, such as exposure time; difference between acquiring a language as an infant or adult; tools for the teachers to rethink the current practices; the importance of the interaction, and context; macro aspects, such as politics and history.

Keywords. second language acquisition, young learners.

1. Introduction

Working with younger learners, some aspects of the acquisition called my attention. Also, I have realized some worries both families and other teachers (colleagues, most of them working with adults or are starting their path in Education) have when talking about 2L acquisition for young learners. To be able to answer some questions and concerns, this paper comes out as an overview and introduction with insights and thoughts.

These are the issues debated on the paper: what is the importance of exposing babies and toddlers to a second language? What are the elements involved in the acquisition of the first and second language? Does contact with other languages delay the development of cognitive skills and the acquisition of them? The students use native language more than 2L, should I be worried? How should I proceed?

The issues above are discussed during the paper without any claim to covering this issue exhaustively, but rather describing first assimilation and findings.

The starting point is clarifying what language is and

its importance for human beings. To better understand, a timeline was made revisiting two of the most remarkable researches in the field of linguistics. Then, to answer some questions about acquisition, the neuroscience's point of view was evoked. Some differences between young learners and adults will also be highlighted.

During the reading, keep in mind that bilingualism and multilingualism are complex situations and can be seen from the different usages each person or group of people has of the languages. That is why learning aspects of the persons are explored, such as macro aspects of language acquisition.

1.1 Abbreviations

1L = first language.

2L = second language.

2. Method

This paper comes out through bibliographic review. The attempt is to have the first approximations, focusing on the general understanding of this wide area, passing through the main aspects that may

affect the learning of a 2L.

3. Discussion

To understand the content better, we shall start with what language is and why it is important. According to Davies and Uzodike, it can be both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Humans are naturally sociable and curious (Freire), that is why there is the natural tendency to connect.

It helps us connect with other humans, “orient ourselves in both new and familiar environments, explore and adapt to our environment”, and pass the culture on. For this reason, language is important.

“Through self reinvention, experiences or suffering the tense relation between what is inherited and what is received or acquired from social context which is created and recreated that the human being has become this being who, in order to be, has to be being. This historic and cultural being who cannot be explained only through Biology or Genetics, nor only through culture. Who can neither be explained only through their consciousness, as if it were the almighty creator of the world that surrounds instead of being socially built and transforming the body into a conscious body, nor can be explained as only simple results from transformations which were operated in this world. This being who experiences the dialectic between the social – without which could not be – and the individual – without which they would be dissolved in purely social, without remarkable characteristics or profile.” (FREIRE, free translation)

It is commonly said that babies and toddlers are just like sponges, absorbing everything around. It gives us a clue of the importance of exposing them to other languages. Though, it has not always been like this. Next, a short visit to important milestones on the field will be made to, then, see how the conception changed through the time.

3.1 Timeline

The book Verbal Behavior by B. F. Skinner was the first to cope with linguistics from a behaviorist framework, analyzing how external commands affect the outcome of a language (Chomsky 48).

Skinner first studied the behavior in animals to, then, figure out the methods could be extended to human behavior. The investigation focused on the incentives used – through *stimulus, reinforcement* and *deprivation* – and responses gotten from them. The conclusion is that a specific stimulus has a specific outcome. The interaction and manipulation with the physical environment is in the spotlight.

Going against it, Chomsky (51) argues “behavior has not been demonstrated to be lawful”. Following, the author explains it is not possible to predict what the verbal behavior will result from determined stimulus by reason of it is not possible to identify the current stimuli until obtaining the response. (52)

In a nutshell, Skinner’s research is focused on observables (input-output relations) (49). Chomsky realized there is a gap in the study: it does not contain the way the brain works inside. That is an important aspect to be looked at because the characteristics of the organism influence the way we learn. The responses are not only obtained due to the input, there are other complex aspects of the brain mechanism to be considered. Also, the commands described were in a controlled environment, so it does not necessarily reflect the whole reality.

Even before recent scientific discoveries explored in the next section, Chomsky supports the argument that it is possible to understand a sentence even if the words come in a sequence never heard before due to the comprehension of what the author calls grammar, referring to the structure of each language. This comprehension is a “complicated product of inborn structure, the genetically determined course of maturation, and past experience”.

3.2 Neurological and development perspective

Most of the linguistic studies are focused on the acquisition of a 2L for adults. This is a problem because there are core differences of the learning over the lifetime (Rhonda).

Davies and Uzodike highlight that the main difference between young learners and adults is that this first group is in the phase of language acquisition, therefore learning a 2L is easier than in adulthood.

Corroborating with the assumptions preceded by Chomsky, the study done by Zeynep Saygin and reported by Soares explains that the area of the brain responsible to discern words, named Visual Word Form Area, is more developed than other neuronal regions nearby in newborns. It indicates this zone is ready to see words even before being exposed to them. The study also suggests that this area continues to be developed during growth and contact with literacy.

It is important to highlight that some abilities might be lost through time as they are not used and, consequently, considered not important for the current tasks. Six-month-old babies can recognize sounds of their mother tongue, but also from almost all languages of other tongues than mother one. However, as they grow older, this ability is lost. By the age of 9 to 12 months, instead of being sensitive about sounds in general, babies focused on their native language to become specialists (2002).

Davies and Uzodike argue human beings start to learn a language at twenty-three weeks of pregnancy because it is the moment when they start hearing sounds. According to the authors, from this moment on, babies are building their own collection of words and, at some point, they will be able to use

it (p.118).

Another important data the authors bring is that the brain is 80 percent formed by the age of three. Going back to the common sense affirming young learners are sponges, it is reaffirmed for science insofar every stimulus has impact on their development. As the brain is not completely formed, it also explains the fact that it is easier to learn other languages.

These are strong reasons why babies have to be exposed the most to the languages wanted to be acquired.

3.3 Interaction

Calling attention to the importance of interaction, the recent study ran by Colomer showed that babies and toddlers who were exposed to something other than their mother tongue, even before acquiring the domain of it, can identify when a different language is used.

Furthermore, this research suggests that for babies within the age of 14 month, it is possible to identify that the communication depends on the use of the same language. The author affirms it is a proof that cognitive skills related to the language are directly influenced by experiences people absorb in the beginning of life (Colomer qtd. in Soares).

Skinner says that each action has a result, this might be the moment he differs from the other authors used on the paper. As he is focused on specific stimuli, the situation and context are not considered. (Chomsky).

Davies and Uzodike affirm that, as the different languages are learned and used, infants understand in which place and situation each language must be used. For example, if the language used at home is not the same used on the street, at a certain age, they will be able to differentiate the correct situation to use each language.

The argument Baker and Wright convey to what was explained above. The authors explain that the level of a 2L is not static, it may change according to the topic, context and target audience.

3.4 Learning aspects

To debate the concerns of delaying learner's development, Davies and Uzodike explain the performance in language skills is the same for bilinguals and monolinguals. Illustrating, if it is expected for a toddler to have 10 words in their personal vocabulary at a specific age, bilinguals will split this between/among languages spoken, for instance, this baby might have 7 words in a language and 3 in another.

Thinking about concerns related to bilingual schools, Baker and Wright affirm it is not necessary to pass through the same content in the languages spoken because the language system is only one, so people learn independently of the language used.

The authors also explain comparing monolinguals and bilinguals is like comparing a hurdler to a sprinter or a high-jumper, the hurdler has both but in different intensity, suitable for the use. That said, it would be unfair to require that bilinguals or multilinguals have the same abilities and development in all the languages.

In order to truly learn a 2L, it is necessary to use, produce meaning, create memories, i.e. the interaction must be the backbone of the 2L acquisition. (Rhonda)

Davies and Uzodike emphasize that, to make a language meaningful and considered important for the neuronal system, the exposure time must be at least thirty percent of the hours awake.

3.5 Teachers' role

Rhonda provides relevant issues to rethink teachers' role in the acquisition of a 2L. She compares the implicit and explicit feedback for students and suggests that, instead of always giving explicit feedback, it is possible to give implicit feedback in order to not interrupt the conversation and maybe cause insecurity in the learner. The biggest advantage is because it is through interaction, approximating to the way it happens in natural conversations when the listener seeks for clarification. Even so, being careful to not be ambiguous is necessary.

The teachers also have to let the control go, the interaction between students and teachers is important, however, the class doesn't need to be centered on them. Interaction with peers has brought good results.

On the other hand, peers might be more direct and, in some cases, even rude. (Rhonda) From a certain point of view, it is not a problem, as this behavior would not cause the same effect as if the teacher were giving feedback in the same way. This is due to them being on the same level, and the teacher, as an authority, would cause constraint.

If the acquisition starts after the 1L is set, it is not a problem if learners can use it as a support. As long it is only the starting point to understand the grammar and compare it to the 2L. It becomes an obstacle when the 1L is the only source.

Bringing it to daily routine, it is not a barrier for the learning to use 1L to explain a specific grammatical topic, so you can step out of language to step in again when the content is understood and let them practice what was learned.

Repetition is a tool which has shown good results. When used, the need for the 1L decreases. It occurs owing to the familiarity with the activities done. As a result, students could accomplish the activity more effectively, fluently, and confidently. In addition, more opportunities to speak the 2L are given to users, deepening the domain of it.

3.6 Macro aspects

So far, exclusively psychological and linguistic aspects have been explored. Nevertheless, other important aspects, such as society, history and politics, cannot be put aside.

To clarify, the need of acquiring other languages can have different natures. For instance, the demand of immigrant children to learn a 2L, the problems they handle and the prejudice faced are different issues from children whose families enroll them in courses.

Also, places where the language required at school is not the same as the one spoken at home or in the community is a clear example of how political aspects affect the acquisition of a 2L. The most important example in Brazil is the fight for indigenous bilingual education. According to Medeiros (12), indigenous languages were used at schools only with the intention of involving students in the national language (Portuguese). It was the reality until the 1990s, when the movement for indigenous rights got stronger, becoming possible to debate a truly bilingual education in which languages and culture are respected.

4. Results and Conclusions

Previous researchers, such as Chomsky, started drawing suggestions of predisposition for the human brain to be able to recognize patterns of language, and how external aspects are important for development of communication in young learners. However, only more recent surveys have confirmed hypotheses from this nature.

Even with recent findings described in this paper, it lacks information on the area of acquisitions of 2L for young learners, especially from neuroscience. As there are some questions not answered yet, there are also new horizons to achieve, helping to understand better how the functioning of the acquisition of a 2L is.

Bringing what Freire teaches us about human need for interaction, young learners exposed to a 2L will naturally seek for tools that enable them to reach communication. These tools will be refined as they use the language, as a result, developing their language skills.

Additionally, not any type of interaction or repetition suits for the purposes written above. They must be utile, bringing the language closer to the context and needs of the specific group of work.

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