Child Language Acquisition versus Second Language Learning: Any Bearing on Teaching

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Abstract

This paper investigates language acquisition both of children leaning their first language and of adults learning their second language. This is done by examining recent studies in this field led by a group of post Chomskyian linguists and psycholinguists who have covered the process of language acquisition with great detail focusing on the four tendencies and developments within psycholinguistics that have bearings on language teaching. These are: the creative aspect of language; the abstractness of linguistics representation; the universality of underlying structures and the role of intrinsic organization in cognitive process.

A review of the methods of teaching second languages (L2) in the past decades shows that psychological theories and cognitive studies popular at the perspective times had a great deal of influence on the choice of text books, classroom materials and other digital means. Therefore, the significance of studying the current theories on child language acquisition and cognitive developments and learning lies in the fact they can positively influence the selection of the methods of teaching English as a second language throughout our schools and universities. This paper observes the poor command of L2, English in this case, on the part of the undergraduate students starting their first year of study at universities and colleges, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, bearing in mind that as of 2015 these students would have received 12 years of English, mainly studying a new series of English language textbook, ‘Sunrise’ (Arif, 2016). The ‘Sunrise’ program adopts a communicative approach in language teaching; however, the outcome is not satisfactory as reflected in the performance of the student completing twelve years of studying English through the Sunrise program. The aim of this paper is to come up with recommendations that would lead to improved language skills for the graduates of preparatory schools.

Keywords: Language, Acquisition, Teaching.
1. Introduction

The theoretical principle adopted in this paper is based on Jean Piaget's developmental psychology, which although is not concerned with language development as such but the assumptions concerned with cognitive development, the procedures and the findings are very useful to any research on language acquisition. Piaget's theory does not consider language as constructive factor in cognitive development. Instead, he emphasized the relevance of cognitive structures for language acquisition and the fact that, human beings need more than expressing time and space of actions and that they need to express abstracts and events in the past, present and future (Kanniloff-Smith, 1979). Other sources that the paper depended on are a group of post Chomskyian linguists who introduced such concepts as the input hypothesis or the monitor model (Dulay & Krashen, 1982), (Greg, 1984) and others.

2. Language Acquisition and Language Learning

The major distinction between the first language acquisition and second language learning is that the former is unconscious and results in an utterance-initiating linguistic system while the latter i.e. second language learning is a conscious process which results in a "monitor" (Dulay & Krashen, 1982). The monitor is that part of the learner's internal system which takes responsibility for conscious linguistic processing. That is when the learner is trying to produce utterances in accordance with the rules that have been learned. The mental age differences between first and second language learners play a major role. The fact being that the learning of a first language is inevitable, while the learning of the second language is subject to various personal and social factors.

Cognitive development in children goes through various stages throughout the child’s growth. Researchers think in terms of these four stages (Piaget, 1950):

1st stage: the sensory motor stage (0-1)
2nd stage: the pre-operational stage (2-7)
3rd stage: concrete operations (7-11)
4th stage: formal operations (12-15)

Therefore, around the age of twelve the adolescent can think purely in abstract terms and relate one abstract concept to another. This age being the onset of adolescence displays the on-start of “the critical period for language acquisition” (Krashen, 1975b). So there is a correlation between the age at which the child is able to understand abstract concepts: thereby becoming more conscious of abstract grammatical rules, and the subsequent inability to acquire a language unconsciously.

It has long been noticed that children could acquire a native-like pronunciation of a second language while post pubic language learners always remain with a foreign accent. One aspect from which one could draw a conclusion regarding the on-start of learning a second language in schools is that it should be done earlier than the age of twelve at which time a child’s language acquisition capability decreases due to biological and cognitive factors. This could
be explained in term of the centralization of language functions in one hemisphere of the brain as well as localization of specific functions within hemispheres and associated gradual loss of plasticity for the complete acquisition of specific language abilities (Krashen, 1981).

It is worth mentioning that until the introduction of the “Sunrise” series in the Kurdistan Region, around fourteen years ago, primary school children would start learning English at exactly that critical age period when it would be very hard for them to learn it without a foreign accent. Having said this, it should be mentioned that the problem has not been solved positively simply be introducing English at grade one and throughout the twelve years of schooling.

2.1 First Language Acquisition

The human brain is not merely a reception centre that can be filled with words, phrases and sentences. The structure of the brain shapes the way children internalize the language that they are exposed to i.e., their mother tongue.

“Language acquisition is known to be an interaction between the child’s innate mental structure and the language environment, a ‘creative construction’ process” (Dulay & Krashen, 1982, p. 8)

Therefore children have an inborn language faculty and this faculty is peculiar to the human race and copes with any human language to which it is exposed. This implies that all human languages have common properties - universals- which are basically biologically determined. This inborn language faculty doesn’t operate evenly throughout one’s growth but rather there is a gradual loss of plasticity/flexibility for acquisition in the part of the brain that is in charge of language acquisition that comes to a ‘critical period’ (Krashen, 1981) and this critical period is proven to be the most important variable among the factors that influence the learner of a second language that is much more important than educational background, years of second language study and desire to improve accent. The fact that we are not happy with the English language skills of our school graduates, despite the fact that they had started learning it at the right age is certainly due to other factors that are also relevant to effective language learning and teaching, like the professionalism of the teachers, the insufficiency of the class hours and the lack of exposure of the students to native speakers of English, all of which should take place in the right cognitive age of the child (Singleton, 2004)

Recent studies in this field indicate that the majority of language functions are concentrated in the left hemisphere of the brain and that there is localization of particular language functions. The process of localization continues with age as is the loss of plasticity but a degree of plasticity remains for particular brain functions. However the localization process does not occur suddenly but rather it affects different aspects of language at different periods in one’s life.

“Because localization does not take place at once, but affects different aspects of language at different periods of life, one would expect a different time table to evolve in terms of different language abilities. That is there would be many critical periods, successive and perhaps overlapping, lasting probably throughout one’s lifetime, each closing off different acquisition abilities” (Dulay & Krashen, 1982, p. 16)
Hence, the phonology of a second language, a subsystem of language is perfectly acquirable by children under the age of twelve, but not far beyond that (Krashen, 1981). Other aspects of language could in fact be acquired far beyond that age so long as intellectual capabilities still exist. It should follow that the English language curricula focus on pronunciation and phonology in the early stages of the child’s schooling and consider changes as to the programme of ‘Sunrise English’ from this point of view. The first few years of schooling could prove to be sufficient to acquire native like accent provided the process is implemented appropriately, by providing exposure to audio-visual films, nursery rhymes and one on one dialogue, in relatively small classrooms, with natural learning environment.

Once localization of functions takes place and the child arrives at some critical age concerning these language functions then there is a regressive ability to language unconsciously the way children do. Adult second language learners utilize the right hemisphere of the brain to memorize and learn language units and structures without mastering the internal system of the target language (Krashen, 1981). We all recall how the behaviorist school of psychology presented as a methodology for teaching second language through learning dull drills where language forms were deprived from their meaning and though learners were able through repetition to achieve some success with pronunciation in the classroom, they were unable to incorporate these imitations into active language performance.

2.3 Second Language Learning:

Second language learning is defined as the process of learning another language after the basics of the first have been acquired starting at about five years of age and thereafter. This is not to be compared with bilinguals who learn two languages simultaneously. There are four environmental features that affect the speed and the quality of the acquisition of adult’s second language and these are (Krashen & Terrell, 1983):

1. The naturalness of the environment;
2. The learner’s role in communication;
3. Availability of concrete referents;
4. The target language model.

The Naturalness of the Environment is when the focus is on the content of the communication rather than the form of the language. Research has shown that natural exposure to the second language triggers the subconscious acquisition of communication skills in the target language (David Marsh, 2000). Hence, it would be beneficial to consider teaching one of the modules in English, rather than have all classes focus on learning the second language. One good example is represented by students at the colleges of science and for this matter, students at the medical colleges in Kurdistan and in Iraq, as the they display a good command of English, through having learned it as a language of instruction rather than having received proper language classes.

2.4 The Learner’s Role in Communication

The learner’s role in communication can be one-way in which the learners listen to or read the target language but do not take part. It could be restricted two-way communication where the
learner responds in his/her mother tongue or with gestures. And finally it could be in full two-way communication where the learner receives and sends verbal messages. Recent research shows the benefits of allowing one-way and restricted two-way communication during the early stages of the learning process and waiting until the student is ready to take an active part in the communication procedure (Krashen, 1981). Research here shows how language teaching could benefit from language learning process. Children have always been observed to go through a period when they can understand the language but are unable to produce it. That is they opt for one-way or restricted two-way communication. Observant language teachers and curriculum developers have come to the conclusion that adult second language learners could also benefit from going through this phase which is now referred to as the ‘silent period’ and that this knowledge could benefit teachers of the second language. This also suggests that comprehension and productive skills are independent and so ordered and that it is not a good idea to force full two-way communication when the students are not ready for it. In fact the enforcement of early two-way communication could cause inhibition on the part of the learner.

This point should be taken particularly seriously in the Kurdistan schools as children need sufficient amount of listening before they should be forced to perform especially when they are not confident of the proper pronunciation and have not acquired the skill to produce phrases and sentences properly.

2.5 Availability of Concrete Referents

Beginner second language learners must have the kind of environment where the content of the language could be figured out by reference to some concrete subjects and events that can be seen, heard or felt while the language is being used. This is referred to as the relevance of the language that is being taught or called the ‘here-and-now principle’ (David Marsh, 2000) which suggests that language environments rich in concrete referents appear to be a necessary environmental characteristic for beginner language learners. This is a critical point to be considered in the KRG schools and question the reality of the schools from the point of view of whether they provide such an environment.

2.6 The Target Language Model:

Learners of a second language do not learn everything they are exposed to and they do not in fact attend to everything they are exposed to. Learners are selective in the choice of their speaker models. Research on the attitude of second language learners has shown that they prefer certain speaker model over others and that this preference has obvious effects on the quality of the learner’s speech. This is the order of their speaker-model preferences:

a. Peer over teachers;

b. Peers over parents;

c. Own ethnic group members over non-members.

Bearing in mind how children learn from peers in the first place, second language teachers should give priority to group work where a capable student could take the lead in his/her group to teach the rest of the group.
The above FOUR environmental features are the broad overall characteristics of the language environment and had been referred to in recent relevant literature as the macro-environmental factors.

Some linguists have introduced another set of macro-environmental factors that affect L2 learning as being 1. Context, 2. Input, 3. Produce and 4. Product. (Stufflebeam, 2003). The context refers to the content of the curriculum and its connection with daily life situation; Input refers to different material that the curriculum is made of; Process refers to implementation of the teaching and learning process and finally Product means the actual performance of the student and his/her linguistic capabilities in the second language.

There is also what has been referred to as micro-environmental factors. Research suggests that these do not have a major effect on learning a second language as was expected earlier. The micro-environmental factors could be summed up by the following three points:

1. Salience or the ease with which a structure is seen or heard. That is some particular characteristics of the spoken or the written language seem to make an item more visually or auditorily prominent than another. An example is that the English article ‘the’ which is a full syllable, is more easily heard than the past-tense ‘-ed’ which is only a sound tacked onto the last syllable of a verb as in talked /t kt/.

2. Feedback, the listener’s or reader’s response to the learner’s speech or writing. Feedback is varied; one kind is “correction”, another is approval or “positive feedback”. And yet another kind of feedback is to expand or modify the learner’s speech without consciously calling attention to the modification. This sort of feedback is called “expansion”.

The outcome of the experiments carried out in this field is quite surprising as it shows that the effect of “correction” of a learner’s errors is negative. It has been found that correction of errors has no significant role on students written or spoken performance and that in fact it has caused inhibition and frustration on the part of the learners and that speech errors are not very responsive to correction. These experiments also show that simply allowing the students more uninterrupted time to rephrase their responses is more fruitful in improving their performance. Even the effect of expansion which involves modeling the correct version of the learner’s utterance or producing the more complete version of it, has been shown to be negative or else ineffective.

3. Frequency is the number of times the learner hears or sees a given structure. It has been suggested that the more a learner hears of sees a structure, the sooner it will acquired. Recent research has shown that frequency of occurrence is not directly related to the order in which structures were acquired. However, one effect of very frequently occurring forms is that some of them will be represented in the learner’s performance as repeated patterns while the structures themselves are far beyond their ability to integrate. However, frequency helps to increase the probability that learners will hear structures which they are ready to process; therefore, increasing the chances that they will be able to attend and process them. Frequency is regarded as provision of appropriate information which serves to increase cognitive development only when a learner has reached a cognitive level that permits the formulation of certain kinds of judgments. From the point of view of developmental psychology it is interesting to
point out the interaction between external factors and mental factors in the explanation of learning.

4. The Recommendations for English Language Teachers Using the ‘Sunrise’ Series:

It is coming to the surface that the curriculum adopted for the twelve years education in schools in the Kurdistan region, is not accomplishing its objective of providing basic English for the students during the primary, intermediate (both in most cases combined into basic education schools) and secondary schools (Kawther, 2016). Most lecturers who teach at the various colleges in Kurdistan face this reality of the poor performance of first year students in the colleges and universities throughout Kurdistan, with exception of students who have had the privilege of having attended private schools where the language of education has been English. Based on the cognitive and the psychological studies, it would be recommended to adopt the following points as regards teaching English as a second language in the Kurdistan region:

1. Ensure that the age factor is taken care of and thus intensify English language classes during the first few years of the child’s schooling;
2. Since the critical period for acquiring the phonology of a language comes earlier than the critical period of other skills, an emphasis should be made to have native like fluency on the part of the English teachers of the first few years of schooling;
3. In order to abide by the suggestion of the above mentioned cognitive studies that emphasis the naturalness of the environment, at least in some of the classes use English as language of instruction. It would be wise to continue to have one or more items of the curriculum be taught in English besides taking the regular English classes;
4. Children learning a second language should be given considerable time during which they listen and understand before they are forced into communicating in the L2. This is based on the fact that learning L2 does have some resemblance to acquiring the L1 in that babies go through a period when they understand before they actively communicate;
5. Teachers of the ‘Sunrise’ programme in the different levels will have to make the teaching material as relevant as possible to the student’s life. Therefore, apart from the fixed reading and the audio material that comes along the curriculum programme of the ‘Sunrise’ series, the teacher will have to use his/her creativity to relate to ‘here and now’ approach and connecting with the student’s real life.
6. Unlike teachers of regular subjects of the curriculum, teachers of L2 should attempt to create a friendly environment in the language classrooms as it has been proven that when the atmosphere is pleasant the students are more responsive and vice versa students get inhibited and their learning is impaired when under stress in the absence of friendly classroom environment;
7. Since studies have shown that children learn the language of their peers over the language of teachers and adults, those assigned to teach the ‘Sunrise’ programme should resort to group work in the English classes. Each capable student could become a team leader of a group.
8. Accepting the fact that the majority of school teachers in the KRG and Iraq do not have an excellent command of the English, it is imperative to resort to audio-visual aid in order to provide reliable exposure to target language model/L2 on the part of the learners.
References


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