

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION — WHY DO CHILDREN LEARN FASTER THAN ADULTS?

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Human beings seem to have an innate language acquisitional ability in that "the structures of human languages (are) such that they can be processed by the brain for the purpose of acquisition" (Wode, 1981). Most theories approach language learning from the perspective of studying the internalization of a structured system, externally contrived and imposed. In fact, language is a uniquely human creation, which one therefore assumes has its origin in the human brain, and thus logically is an inevitable product or expression of existing neurological potential. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious supports the notion that man has unconscious access to the archetype and roots of language.

Given a universal human neurological language 'programme', it can be predicted that all children will learn language at a reasonably even rate, and in a fairly regular pattern. The innate capacity is given structure by the environmental input, and so a particular language is acquired. The rapidity and regularity of this process in children are remarkable (pathological exceptions aside), and teachers worldwide despair at the restricted rate and proficiency attained by their adult second language students. Studies of the ways in which children and adults learn languages have attempted to pinpoint the differences and similarities between these processes in the hope of being able to prescribe successful teaching environments and techniques.

There are universal characteristics to the way that children learn their first language. Babies progress through a stage of babbling, to formulation of the first words, used singly for a certain period of time. Two and three word utterances follow, and

it is during this stage that children begin to acquire the morphemes of a language. Morphemes and syntax are acquired in a regular pattern at a fairly predictable rate. Typically, children learn their first language in an interpersonal, natural environment, where the input (from caretaker or playmates) is simple and straightforward, dealing with issues relevant to the child in the here-and-now ('Would you like a cookie?'; 'Can I come and play?'). The target is communication, and learning is regarded as play. Correct responses are immediately and powerfully reinforced by the delight and satisfaction of communicating successfully. Failure to utilize the language is negatively reinforced by isolation from the group or person with whom the child is attempting to relate.

Adults usually learn a second language in a classroom, or similar artificial situation. The target is the language itself, learning is regarded as a taxing intellectual task, and correctness is reinforced by a grade on a test paper. Input is complex on the one hand (the teacher could be talking at a rate and degree of phonological, syntactic and lexical complexity baffling to students), and simplistic on the other (a grown man reduced to words of one syllable and repeat-after-me phrases), and often deals almost exclusively with artificial, contrived communication, and issues which have little personal relevance. Failure to acquire the language is not regarded as crucial, as the learner can retreat to the comforting bastion of his mother tongue. It is therefore not surprising that children learning their first and second languages in a natural setting should learn faster and acquire greater proficiency than an adult learning a second (or third) language in a classroom.

It is not only the environment and input that differentiate child from adult language learning. Researchers have identified other factors which play a role in the manner and rate of child and adult language learning. Much has been made of the fact that the young child's brain has a unique receptivity and plasticity which are lost when lateralization of the brain takes place. The resulting localization of language in the left hemisphere seems to suggest that adults learning a language do not have entirely the same advantage of the bispherical input and processing that children have. However, as the brain has a potential that is barely tapped (an estimated 85% to 99% unused potential), and assuming that the acquisition of the first language does not 'use up' the brain's propensity and potential for acquiring language, it would seem that adults have the neurological capacity to acquire, at the very least, one other language.

In their cognitive approach to learning, children are highly centred and focused on the here-and-now, while adults are

decentred, and their focus is diffuse. However, adults have the advantage of cognitive 'fluency' (having already acquired one language) that can work to their advantage in learning a second language. Adults can draw on a more comprehensive background of knowledge, use acquired reasoning skills, and can make educated use of available sources of instruction. Children, on the other hand, have a certain cognitive 'innocence' of the contradictions, ambiguities and sheer volume of the task of language learning, and are therefore less susceptible to demotivation, frustration, and discouragement. This last statement gives an indication of why adults, with their seemingly superior cognitive 'equipment', do not learn at the rate and with the ease that one would expect. Obviously, language learning is not merely a cognitive or neurological process, but involves the entire personality.

Personality factors seem to be crucial to second language learning. While children are acquiring a personality simultaneously with their first language, adults have a relatively stable personality construct and affective filter. Inhibitions, embarrassment, defensiveness, negative attitudes and demotivated response can handicap or retard language learning, and all these are more likely to affect adults than they are to affect children. Adults are also more susceptible to the influence of social factors, such as prejudice, involving their interaction with the target language group. Issues like culture shock are also almost solely confined to the adult language learning process.

Linguistically, adults can be said to have the 'edge' in language acquisition, as they already have a basic linguistic skeleton or framework. Their knowledge of the first language can transfer positively to the learning of the second, and they can consciously learn and apply rules. While children are good deep structure imitators, adults are better at perceiving and imitating surface structures. While it is tempting to overgeneralize and preach a language programme modelled on child first language acquisition (with long periods of babbling, and a progression from one word utterances to sentences!), the adult's obvious cognitive maturity should not be ignored, but rather used to the advantage of the process.

Given that physiological, cognitive and linguistic factors seem to even out in the differences between child and adult language learning, and seem not to be able to account for the slower rate and lower level of proficiency attained by adults in a second language, the major areas of influence for teachers would seem to be in the areas of affective factors and the teaching environment and input. The two are interrelated in that, while personality factors like introversion and inhibition are probably sufficiently entrenched as to be beyond the influence of a teacher, an

accepting environment of trust between student and teacher will facilitate maximum participation in the learning process and therefore maximum reception of input. The ideal would be an individualised student-teacher environment, modelled on the child-mother relationship in its focused attention and empathic interest in communication, rather than in correctness. Input should be simple, without being simplistic, and have semantic immediacy, interest, and relevance. Total immersion programmes might offer a close parallel to the type of natural environment in which children learn.