

Second Language Acquisition

Theory, Applications, and
Some Conjectures

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
Insurgentes Sur 1196, piso 10, Mexico City 03200, Mexico

www.cambridge-la.org

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Printed in Mexico.

ISBN 978-1-107-92109-2

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Language Acquisition and Application

Language Acquisition Theory

The following five hypotheses summarize current theory on language acquisition. (For technical discussion and supporting evidence, see Krashen 1994, 2004.)

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis

We have two very different ways of developing ability in another language: We can acquire language, and we can learn language.

Language acquisition occurs subconsciously. While it is happening, we are not aware that it is happening. We think we are having a conversation, reading a book, watching a movie. Of course, we are, but at the same time, we might be acquiring language.

Also, once we have acquired something, we are not usually aware that anything has happened; the knowledge is stored in our brains subconsciously.

The research strongly supports the view that both children and adults can subconsciously acquire language. Also, both oral and written language can be acquired.

Acquisition is sometimes referred to as “picking up” a language. When someone says, “I was in France for a while, and I picked up some French,” it means he or she acquired it.

Language learning is a conscious process: When we are learning, we know we are learning and we are trying to learn. Language learning is what we did in school; in everyday language, when we talk about “rules” and “grammar,” we are talking about “learning.”

Error correction is supposed to help learning. When we make a mistake and are corrected, we are supposed to change our conscious version of the rule. If a learner says, “I comes to school every day,” and a teacher responds with, “No, it’s ‘I come to school’,” the learner is supposed to realize that the -s doesn’t go on the first person singular form of the verb.

The Natural Order Hypothesis

We acquire (not learn) the parts of a language in a predictable order. Some grammatical items, for example, are acquired early while others are acquired

later. The order is not exact: Not every acquirer proceeds in exactly the same order. But the variation among acquirers is not extreme.

In English as a second language, for example, the *-ing* marker, the progressive (“John is playing the violin.”), is among the first grammatical markers (function words) to be acquired, while the third person singular *-s* is acquired later. In fact, some adults who speak English as a second language very well have not acquired this marker.

Research has come up with some surprising facts about the natural order. First, it is not true that “simple” rules are acquired early and complicated rules are acquired later. Some rules that look simple (e.g., the third person singular) are acquired late. Others that appear to linguists to be complex are acquired early. This presents a problem to curriculum designers, who present rules to language students from “simple” to “complex.” A rule may look very simple to a grammarian, but may actually be late-acquired.

Second, the natural order cannot be changed. We cannot alter the order in which students acquire language by providing explanations, drills, and exercises. A teacher can drill the third person singular for weeks, but it will not be acquired until the acquirer is ready for it. This explains a great deal of the frustration that language teachers and students experience.

The Monitor Hypothesis

Consciously learned language is only available to us as a Monitor, or editor.

The ability to produce language fluently and easily comes from what we have acquired. The grammar rules that we learned in school have only one function: They act as a Monitor, or editor.

When we are about to say something in another language, the sentence pops into our mind, thanks to our subconsciously acquired competence. Then just before we actually produce the sentence, just before we say it, we scan it internally, inspect it, and use our consciously learned system to correct errors. Sometimes we realize that something we said is incorrect after we say it, and we self-correct using the conscious Monitor.

It is extremely difficult to use the Monitor. In order to use the Monitor successfully, three very stringent conditions must be met:

- The Monitor user must know the rule. This is a very difficult condition to meet. Linguists tell us that they have not yet described all the rules of any language. Authors of grammar texts know fewer rules than the linguists. Language teachers do not teach all the rules in the texts. Even the best students don’t learn all the rules that are taught, even the best students don’t remember all the rules they have learned, and even the best students can’t always use the rules they do remember: Some are simply too complicated.

- The acquirer must be thinking about correctness, or focused on form. This is very difficult to do. It is hard to be thinking about what you are saying and how you are saying it at the same time.
- The acquirer must have time. For most people, normal conversation doesn’t provide enough time to think much about grammar rules. A few language experts can Monitor to some extent while conversing, but these are very advanced acquirers who only need to Monitor an occasional rule here and there, and who have a special interest in the structure of language.

Research indicates that we use grammar – that we Monitor – only when all of these three conditions are fully met (Krashen 1982, 2003). For most people, this happens only when they take a grammar test.

The Comprehension Hypothesis

We acquire language when we understand messages.

The Comprehension Hypothesis is the centerpiece of language acquisition theory. It attempts to answer the most important question in the fields of language acquisition and language education: How do we acquire language?

The answer is simple: We acquire language when we understand what people tell us or when we understand what we read. And there is no other way it can happen. While people differ in many important ways, they do not differ in the way they acquire language.

To be a little more precise, we acquire language when we understand messages that contain aspects of language (vocabulary, grammar) we have not yet acquired, but that we are “ready” to acquire.

To be even more precise, let us assume a simplified version of the Natural Order Hypothesis, that we acquire the rules of a language in a linear order: 1, 2, 3 The question “How do we acquire language?” can be restated this way: “How do we move along the natural order? How do we move from rule 3 to rule 4, from rule 987 to 988?” More generally, if “i” represents the last rule we have acquired, how do we move from “i” to “i+1,” where i+1 is the next structure we are ready to acquire?

The Comprehension Hypothesis claims that we move from i to i+1 by understanding input containing i+1. We are able to do this with the help of language we have already acquired, our knowledge of the world, and context. For beginners, pictures are a great help in making input comprehensible, as are the body movements that are at the core of Asher’s Total Physical Response method.

Here are two amazing facts about language acquisition: First, it is effortless; it involves no energy, no work. All that is necessary is to understand messages. Second, language acquisition is involuntary. Given comprehensible input, you must acquire – you have no choice.

Corollaries of the Comprehension Hypothesis

If the Comprehension Hypothesis is correct, several “corollaries” follow.

Talking is not practicing.

According to the Comprehension Hypothesis, we acquire language by input, not by output. Thus, more output, more speaking (or writing) will not result in more language acquisition. If you speak French out loud to yourself every morning while driving to work, your French will not improve. Rather, the ability to speak is the result of language acquisition, not the cause.

Speaking can help language acquisition indirectly, however. First, it is part of conversation, and conversation is an excellent way to obtain comprehensible input. What is important in conversation, however, is what other people say to you, not what you say to them. Second, actually using a language, actually speaking it, I suspect, can make you feel more like a user of the second language, like a member of the “club.” We return to this topic later.

Given enough comprehensible input, $i+1$ is present.

If we provide students with enough comprehensible input, the structures they are ready to acquire will be present in the input. We don’t have to make sure they are there, we don’t have to deliberately focus on certain points of grammar. If this corollary is correct, it means the end of grammatically-based language teaching. It means the end of classes in which students focus on one rule at a time, “master it,” and then go on to the next. It means the end of boring lessons and texts, stories whose real objective is to provide practice with the relative clause. It means all that is necessary for language acquisition is input that is interesting and comprehensible.

Language classes should not introduce grammatical rules even along the “natural order”: The syllabus should not be based on any grammatical order. Rather, students will acquire the language in a natural order as a result of getting comprehensible input.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

Affective variables prevent input from reaching the “Language Acquisition Device.”

The Affective Filter Hypothesis claims that affective variables do not impact language acquisition directly but prevent input from reaching what Chomsky has called the “language acquisition device,” the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition. If the acquirer is anxious, has low self-esteem, does not consider himself or herself to be a potential member of the group that speaks the language (see Smith 1988 for discussion of this last factor), he or she may understand the input, but it will not reach the language acquisition device. A block – the affective filter – will keep it out.

The presence of the affective filter explains how two students can receive the same (comprehensible) input, yet one makes progress while the other does not. One is “open” to the input while the other is not.

Application

The Goal of Language Classes

The goal of language classes is to bring students to the point where they can begin to understand at least some “authentic” (real-world) input. When they reach this point, they can continue to improve on their own.

The Beginning Level

At the beginning level, there are several methods that work. They are consistent with the underlying theory outlined here, and the research confirms that they work. Here is what they have in common:

The classroom hour is filled with aural comprehensible input. Teachers help make input comprehensible in several ways. First, they provide context in the form of pictures and realia, and in the use of movement. In the powerful Total Physical Response method, language is taught using commands. The teacher gives the command, models the movement, and the student performs the action. Students are not asked to speak, only to try to understand and obey the command. The teacher’s modeling of the movement is the context that helps make the command comprehensible.

Teachers also help make input comprehensible by modifying their speech. The adjustments they make, however, are not rigidly imposed. Rather, teachers naturally tend to talk a little more slowly and use somewhat less complex language as they try to make themselves understood.

The syllabus is organized. A comprehensible input-based method does not mean that we simply go in and talk to students. Comprehensible input-based classes have lesson plans and syllabi, but the syllabi are not based on points of grammar. Rather, they are based on activities (e.g., games, discussions of topics of interest, stories, projects) that students at that level and with that background will find interesting and comprehensible. Thus, an activity that might work for a university-level French class in Boston may not work for an elementary school EFL class in Taiwan.

All that is required of activities in comprehension-based classes is that the activity be interesting and comprehensible. There is no requirement that the activity provide practice with a particular grammatical structure. As the second corollary to the Comprehension Hypothesis stated, given enough comprehensible input, $i+1$ is automatically provided.

In comprehension-based classes, demands for output are low and students are not forced to speak in the second language until they feel ready. Of