Differences between language acquisition and language learning

Nowadays, it is common to draw a distinction between the acquisition of a first language and the learning of a second language. In this section, I would like to look at some reasons why this distinction is maintained and whether there are in fact any similarities between the two.

It has been suggested that the conditions under which a child acquires his/her native tongue (L1) are so different from those under which we learn a second language (L2) later in life that no transfer occurs between the two. Some of the main differences are:

1. Language acquisition takes place when the child is mentally and physically maturing in other ways. This means that there are likely to be some connections and interactions between the acquisition of general skills and language skill. The major stages of language acquisition, as discussed above, tend to coincide with other more physical milestones in a child's development.

2. There is little evidence to suggest that a very young child's language development will move on even if intensive training is given in the language. It seems that the child will only proceed to the next stage of language acquisition when s/he is mature enough to do so.

3. A child's motivation for acquiring the native language is fundamentally different from that of a second language student. A very young child simply appears to learn the language around him/her because it is *there* and life with language is simpler than life without it. By contrast, a second language learner may be motivated by

a) a desire either to join the linguistic community whose language s/he is learning (integrative motivation) or,
b) the need to pass examinations (instrumental motivation).

4. There is a big difference in the data that a child has available for acquiring a language. The growing child is bombarded by disorganised samples of the language and s/he has to impose some kind of order on this. There is no nicely structured syllabus of language items that need to be learned as there usually is in a TESOL/TEFL classroom. As mentioned above the young child appears to have an in-

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built facility (Language Acquisition Device or LAD) for learning any language to which s/he is exposed and no amount of overt instruction is likely to speed up this process.

5. This leads on to the fifth difference between acquisition and learning; L2 learners, generally speaking, are taught the language in a formal, structured way. There are of course those exceptions who manage to learn a language by living in a country where it is spoken and picking it up by listening and speaking. However, the vast majority of us learn a second (or third and fourth) language through formal instruction. In a child's case, as we noted above with our concerned parent, overt teaching seems to have little or no effect on either the acquisition rate or the order. In contrast, our L2 learners will probably benefit to varying degrees from the teaching of the language forms and also from the repetition of language structures.

6. There is one final suggested reason for not equating language acquisition with language learning. By the time we come to learn a language at school, language acquisition is complete and so we already possess extensive competence in our mother tongue. We know what language is for and how to get things done in that language. From this point of view, the language teacher is merely demonstrating a new way of doing things that we already know. The L2 learner has already gone through many physiological and psychological changes during his/her life. So, although there are learning strategies that were available in childhood that have long since disappeared, the mature L2 learner will have learned a whole new range of strategies that can be used when learning a new language.

As we are all painfully aware, even with these adult strategies, learning a second language always seems to fall short of our expectations. With time, we appear to lose the facility that we once had for acquiring a language and in many cases we find ourselves battling with strange grammatical rules and facing an inability to 'get our mouths around' the sounds of L2. The best we can achieve is often a rough approximation of the native speaker target. Why does this happen? As we noted above, there is a widely accepted view that all children are born with a Universal Grammar (UG) which is ready to be switched over to learning the language of their immediate environment, but does this asset fade away?

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