



Review Article

A review of theoretical perspectives on language learning and acquisition

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews three main theoretical perspectives on language learning and acquisition in an attempt to elucidate how people acquire their first language (L1) and learn their second language (L2). Behaviorist, Innatist and Interactionist offer different perspectives on language learning and acquisition which influence the acceptance of how an L2 should be taught and learned. This paper also explicates the relationship between L1 and L2, and elaborates on the similarities and differences between the two. This paper concludes that there is no one solid linguistic theory which can provide the ultimate explanation of L1 acquisition and L2 learning as there are many interrelated factors that influence the success of language acquisition or language learning. The implication is that teachers should base their classroom management practices and pedagogical techniques on several theories rather than a single theory as learners learn and acquire language differently. It is hoped that this paper provides useful insights into the complex process involved in language acquisition and learning, and contributes to the increased awareness of the process among the stakeholders in the field of language education.

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Introduction

It has become a continuous interest of psycholinguists to explain the similarities and differences in the way people acquire their first language (L1) naturally and learn their second language (L2). Saville-Toike (2012) made a distinction between L1 and L2 to clarify what these two terms mean. L1 is also referred to as native language, primary language, and mother tongue. The important feature of L1 is that it is a language which is acquired during early childhood, commonly before the age of three. L1 is usually acquired in the process of growing up with the people who speak the same language. L2 refers to two things; first, the study of individuals or groups who are learning a language

ensuing their L1 which they have learned as children and second, the process of learning that particular language. This additional language is called L2 albeit it might be the third, fourth, or the eighth language to be acquired. Researchers have debated this issue for years by using theoretical models such as Behaviorist, Innatist and Interactionist to further comprehend the phenomena of L1 acquisition and L2 learning.

In this paper, we review all the theoretical models mentioned above to get a better understanding of how people acquire L1 and learn L2. There is scattered research on the theoretical foundations of acquiring L1 and learning L2 (for example, Bhaskaran, 2012; Mendoza, 2011) that needs to be brought together for a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena. We also explicate the relationship between L1 and L2, and then elaborate on the similarities and differences between L1 and L2. Towards the end of this paper, implications for teachers are discussed.

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How Do We Acquire Our First Language (L1)?

L1 is one of the unexplainable mysteries surrounding us in our daily lives (Gallaso, 2003). A child learns language naturally, almost miraculously, as their language acquisition is rapidly developed with an apparent speed and accuracy that baffles parents. Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator who was responsible for the Montessori education which fundamentally believes in human development using an educational approach even said that “*The only language [people] ever speak perfectly is the one they learn in babyhood, when no one can teach them anything!*” (as cited in O’Grady & Cho, 2011, p. 326). Many parents believe that nothing is more pivotal in their children’s lives than the ability to acquire language. Most children acquire language effortlessly, giving the impression that the process of L1 acquisition is simple and direct. However, this is not the case as children go through several stages in acquiring L1.

The ability to produce speech sounds emerges around six months of age, with the onset of babbling. Babbling gives children the chance to experiment and to practice their vocal apparatus, which is important for later speech development. Babbling will continue until the age of about twelve months, when during this age, children will produce intelligible words. When they have acquired fifty words or so, usually around the age of eighteen months, they will begin to adopt fairly regular patterns of pronunciation. According to O’Grady, Archibald, Aronoff, and Rees-Miller (2004), children adopt three strategies in learning the meanings of new words; firstly, the whole object assumption: where a new word refers to a whole object, secondly, the type assumption: where a new word refers to a type of thing, not just a particular thing, and thirdly, basic level assumption: where a new word refers to types of objects that are alike in basic ways. In relation to these strategies, children acquiring L1 generally make errors in meaning, for instance, over-extensions and under-extensions. Children also normally display some general patterns in L1 development, such as the frequent occurrence in utterance in the final position, syllabicity, for example *-ing* and *'s*, absence of homophony, few or no exceptions in the way grammar rules are applied, allomorphic invariance, and clearly discernible semantic function.

Children’s L1 acquisition continues to flourish with the holophrastic stage where they utter single words. When they are around 18 months–24 months, they are able to combine words in two-word stages. By the age of around 24 months–30 months, they develop to the telegraphic stage where they are capable of uttering a clear phrase structure with head-complement and subject-VP patterns.

Children use babbling and cooing as well as crying to send and receive an astonishing number of messages from the people around them, especially their parents and family members who in return sometimes use ‘Baby Talk’ to regulate their speech to suit the children’s still-developing-L1 competence. As the children grow up physically, so does their linguistic ability as they internalize more complex structures through an expansion of their vocabulary bank and also from their immediate social surroundings.

L1 Acquisition: Behaviorist, Innatist and Interactionist Theory

Lightbown and Spada (2006) explain L1 acquisition rather humorously by stating that based on Behaviorist Theory, L1 acquisition is “*Say what I say*” (p. 10), for Innatist Theory, “*It’s all in your mind*” (p. 15)” and for Interactionist Theory, “*A little help from my friends*” (p. 19) help L1 acquisition. From these phrases, we can conclude that each theory has different explanation as to how we acquire our L1.

According to the Behaviorist Theory, Skinner (1985) equated learning a language to verbal behavior. Therefore, he believes that language acquisition like any other behavior can be observed, rather than trying to explain the mental systems underlying these types of behaviors. To him, children are born with a blank state of mind or *tabula rasa*. Children acquire L1 through stimuli given to them and the responses of children are conditioned through reinforcement. A positive response will be conditioned through positive reinforcement like reward or praise and vice versa for a negative response which is conditioned with punishment. However, this simplistic view of L1 acquisition received criticisms, mainly from the advocates of Innatist Theory, among whom Chomsky (1959) believed that children are equipped with an innate template or blueprint for language, which is called the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which accounts for the swift mastery of language among children despite the extremely abstract nature of language. It is believed that children do not start from scratch when it comes to language learning as they can acquire complex grammar quickly and without any particular help beyond the exposure to L1.

The concept of Universal Grammar (UG) explains the commonality of how children acquire language by learning rules in L1 which are presumed to be universal. Again, this theory also receives criticism, specifically from Interactionists like Piaget (as cited in Pascual-Leone, 1996) who insist that language is not a separate module of the mind as language represents the knowledge acquired through physical interaction between the children and the environment. Vygotsky (1978) also supports this view by stating that the conversations that children have with adults and other children are important as these conversations constitute the origins of both language and thought, where thought is essentially internalized speech and speech emerges in social interaction. Bloom (as cited in Ekehammer, 1974) also criticizes the Innatists’ pivot grammar, as the relationship between a pivot word and an open word are not of the same nature. Bloom further concludes that children learn underlying structures and not superficial word order.

How Do We Learn a Second Language (L2)?

An L2 learner is different from a child acquiring the L1 in terms of the learners’ characteristics and the environments in which L1 and L2 typically occur (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). First, learners’ characteristics, especially learners’ age, for L2 is usually older than children acquiring the L1. Moreover, L2 learners have already acquired at least one language and the prior knowledge in the L1 may prove to

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