Second language acquisition/ learning

Chapter 15
Children acquire their 1st language really fast and without any effort.

All children develop language at roughly the same age.

The question is: if 1st language acquisition is so straightforward, why is learning a 2nd language so difficult?

Think about a baby acquiring his first language.

Think about a person acquiring a second language.

What similarities and differences are there in the two processes?
The distinction between

- ‘*Foreign language learning*’: “language is not generally spoken in the surrounding community.”
  - e.g. a Japanese student learning English in Japan. *(EFL)*
- ‘*Second language learning*’: “learning a language that is spoken in the surrounding community.”
  - e.g. a Japanese student leaning English in USA. *(ESL)*
Acquisition & learning

- **Acquisition**: gradual development of ability in a language by using it naturally in communicative situations with others who know the language.

- **Learning**: a more conscious process of accumulating knowledge of the features of a language (e.g. vocabulary & grammar) in institutional setting.

- Results of acquisition & learning (p. 163)
Acquisition barriers

- Why learning L2 is fundamentally different from L1?
  - **Age** – encounter the 2l during their teenage or adult years.
  - **Interaction is not constant** – few hours each week of school time rather than via constant interaction experience as a child.
  - **Another language** – with an already known language available for most of their daily communications.

- Many adults manage to overcome the difficulties to use the L2 effectively- though not usually sounding like native speakers.
  - Joseph Conrad
  - This provides evidence for the Critical Period Hypothesis
There are other types of acquisition barriers that might inhibit the learning process

- Teenagers are much more self-conscious than younger children.
  - Unwillingness
  - Embarrassment
  - Lack of empathy with the other culture.
  - Dull textbooks, unpleasant classrooms, an exhausting schedule of study or work, etc.

- Basically, if we are stressed, uncomfortable, self-conscious or unmotivated, we are unlikely to learn anything,

- Children may overcome such factors quickly.
Focus on method

- Educational approaches to L2 learning - how L2 might best be learned
  - The grammar-translation method
  - The audio-lingual method
  - Communicative approaches
The grammar-translation method

- Treating L2 as any other academic subject.
- Vocabulary lists and sets of grammar rules
- Memorization is encouraged.
- Written language rather than spoken language is emphasized.
- Translation to the mother tongue

- Produced many successful L2 users

Criticism:
- does not focus on how the language is used in everyday conversations.
  - Saudi students can leave school, having achieved high grades in English, yet find themselves at loss when confronted by the way English native speakers actually use their language.
The audio-lingual method

- Emphasizes spoken language
- Systematic presentation of the L2 structure, moving from the simple to the more complex, in the form of drills – repetition.
- The use of language is a ‘habit’ that needs a lot of practice.
- Dialogue form, mimicry, set phrases, drills, memorization, tapes, language labs.
- **Criticism**: boring + not like the interactional nature of actual spoken language use.
Communicative approaches

- Based on the belief that the functions of a language (what is it used for) should be emphasized rather than the forms of the language (correct grammatical or phonological structures).
- More concerned with the learner and nature of the acquisition process.
Focus on the learner

- A shift from concern with the teacher, the textbook, and the method to an interest in the learner and the acquisition process.
- One of the radical features of the communicative approach is the toleration of ‘errors’ produced by students.
Transfer

- Crosslinguistic influence
- Using L1 sounds, expressions, or structure when speaking L2.
  - e.g. an Arabic speaker may say: “open the lights?”

2 types:
- **Positive transfer**: If the L1 & L2 have similar features, then the learner may benefit from positive transfer.
- **Negative transfer** (interference): transferring an L1 feature that is really different from the L2 (e.g. putting adj before n.) results in negative transfer.
Interlanguage

- Errors that do not relate to L1 or L2
- Interlanguage = an in-between system of L2 learners, which has some features of the L1 and L2 plus some independent of the L1 and L2.
- If some learners develop fixed repertoire of L2 expressions, containing many forms that do not match the target language and seem not to be progressing any further, their interlanguage is said to have ‘fossilized’.
- ‘fossilization’ in L2 pronunciation = foreign accent.
Motivation

- Very important in language learning.
- **Instrumental motivation** = to achieve some goal
  - Graduation requirement
  - Read scientific publications
  - Find a better job
- **Integrative motivation** = social purposes
  - Become an accepted member in a community
Input & output

- Input = the language the learner is exposed to
- To be beneficial for L2 learning, input has to be comprehensible.
- Simpler in vocabulary & structure = foreign talk
  - How are getting on in your studies?
  - English class, you like it?
- This type of foreigner talk may be beneficial at early stages.
  - Not only for immediate communicative success, but also for providing the basic structure of L2.
- As the learner develops, there is a need for more interaction – ‘negotiated input’.
- Negotiated input = L2 materials that the learner can acquire in interaction through requests for clarification while attention is given to what is said. (e.g. pp. 168-169)
Output = the language the learner produces

The opportunity to produce comprehensible output in meaningful interaction is another important element the learner's development of L2 ability.

Task-based learning – communicative competence.
Communicative competence

- Communicative competence = the general ability to use language accurately, flexibly, and appropriately.

  - Grammatical competence
  - Sociolinguistic competence
  - Strategic competence
Grammatical competence

- how to use the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language.
- What words do I use?
- How do I put them into phrases and sentences?
- Is it enough?
Sociolinguistic competence

- how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating.

- Which words and phrases fit this setting and this topic?

- How can I express a specific attitude (courtesy, authority, friendliness, respect) when I need to?

- How do I know what attitude another person is expressing?
Strategic competence

- how to recognize and repair communication breakdowns
- how to work around gaps in one’s knowledge of the language
- How do I know when I’ve misunderstood or when someone has misunderstood me?
- What do I say then? How can I express my ideas if I don’t know the name of something or the right verb form to use?
Applied Linguistics

- Investigating L2 learning- other fields communication studies, psychology, education and sociology.
- Deals with all other practical issues.
Hope you enjoyed the course 😊