

Batna2 University

Department of English language and literature

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Children vs. Adults in Second-Language Learning (Part 2)

II. Social Situations Affecting Second-Language Learning

There are many social situations in which a second language is learned. Basically, we can cover the most important of them according to three categories, the natural, the classroom and community context. The natural situation in which a second language is learned is one that is similar to that in which the first language is learned. It can involve social situations such as those involving family, play, or the workplace. The classroom situation involves the social situation of the school classroom. Each of these types of social situations has its own advantages and disadvantages. The community context allows students to have access to a natural situation outside of the class and thereby supplement their classroom learning.

The Natural Situation

Characteristics of the Natural Situation

A natural situation for second-language learning is one where the second language is experienced in a situation that is similar to that in which the native language is learned. That is, language is experienced in conjunction with the objects, situations, and events of everyday life. The paradigm case would be that of a young child going to live in another country and learning that country's language, not by any explicit teaching, but by interacting with playmates. For example, an English-speaking 5-year-old girl from New York goes to Tokyo with her parents. Through playing with Japanese children, she soon learns Japanese. In fact, she learns the language in less than a year, which is not uncommon for children this age, and her speech is indistinguishable from that of native speakers. *A child can learn a second language faster than the first language!*

With age, language is more essential for social interaction. It is important to note that for adults, social interaction mainly occurs through the medium of language. Few native-speaker adults are willing to devote time to interacting with someone who does not speak the language, with the result that the adult foreigner will have little opportunity to engage in meaningful and extended language exchanges.

Adult second-language learners will typically have significantly fewer good language-learning opportunities in a new language community than will children. If the adults mainly stay at home, they will not be able to meet and talk much to native speakers. Going shopping, going to the bank, and other such chores, while beneficial, are very limited in time and scope. Second-language interactions in the workplace could also be very limiting, for, because of their lack of second-language ability, adult learners would not be hired to do work that required native speakers to linguistically interact with them in any depth.

In contrast, the young child is often readily accepted by other children, and even adults. For young children, language is not as essential to social interaction. Older children can have problems. Sometimes older children may not want to identify with a new community and will consequently resist learning the new language. Thus, while younger children will be more likely to accept learning a new language and the culture it involves, older children may strive to maintain their own identity and cultural beliefs by avoiding situations that would expose them to using a language and culture that might challenge their view of themselves.

Conscious willingness to communicate is also considered critical for acquiring and improving a foreign language. In a series of studies conducted with Japanese high school students who came to the United States to study English and experience a different culture, participants pointed out that ‘taking initiative to communicate with American classmates or host families’ helped them gain confidence and improve their language skills.

The Classroom Situation

The classroom is isolated from other social life. The classroom for second-language learning is a planned situation. It is commonly known that physically, there is a room that is isolated from the rest of social life. In the room there is a teacher and a number of students. The teacher is the one who knows the second language and the students are there to learn the language.

In the enclosed space of the classroom, nothing happens (linguistically) unless the teacher makes it happen. Students do not act on their own but follow the directions of the teacher. All other aspects of life are suspended or subordinated to language learning. This, of course, is very different from the home or community where a lucky second-language learner would eat at a table with others, walk around doing things, work in the garden, go for a drive, etc., all the while hearing and using the second language in conjunction with these activities.

Learning language as part of a group and not as an individual. There are other characteristics of the planned classroom situation that distinguish it from the natural situation. These include social adjustment to group process (individuals must subordinate their behavior and follow classroom procedures for the benefit of all), the need to attend class in order to learn, the need for long periods of concentration, and, when required, having to do home study.

As far as language is concerned, the explicit teaching of grammatical structures and rules may be involved, depending on the method used. Using books and taking notes are often expected of the student. Students must get used to learning language as an academic subject. Thus, when considering overall the demands of the classroom situation, the older one is, the better one is able to adjust and function within that situation. Young children often will not do as well as older children and adults.

English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

Whether the classroom is in a school that is in a community where the second language is spoken is a matter of some importance, for this will allow students to benefit from both a natural situation outside the class and their classroom learning. Thus, for example, Pakistanis learning English in a classroom in London will have beneficial language experiences outside the classroom that Pakistanis learning English in a classroom in Karachi will not. The former (learning English in London) is an English as a Second Language (ESL) context while the latter (learning English in Karachi) is an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Because the ESL context provides more language-learning opportunities for the second-language learner through exposure to natural situations outside the classroom, such learners, unsurprisingly, will generally progress more rapidly than learners living in an EFL context.

Furthermore, in comparing children and adults, we may say that, given that the natural situation benefits children more than adults, the ESL context will benefit children more than it will adults. Of course, the ESL context will benefit adults too, but to a lesser degree. Conversely, adults

can do better in the EFL context where they can apply their superior cognitive skills for learning in the classroom situation.