

**Batna2 University**

**Department of English language and literature**

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## **Children vs. Adults in Second-Language Learning (Part 1)**

### **Introduction**

Most people believe that children are better than adults in learning a second language. This seems to be backed up by the common observation that young second-language learners seem to pick up another language quickly, just by exposure and without teaching. Factors involved in second-language acquisition can be divided into two categories: (1) psychological, and (2) social.

#### **1. Psychological Factors.**

What shall be considered are the following factors: *intellectual processing*, which is involved in an individual's analytical determination of grammatical structures and rules; *memory*, which is essential if language learning is to occur and remain; and *motor skills*, which concern the pronunciation of the sounds involved in the second language, i.e., the use of the articulators of speech (tongue, lips, mouth, vocal cords, etc.). The role of *motivation* and *attitude* regarding the learning of a second language will also be taken into consideration.

#### **2. Social Factors.**

The types of situations, settings, and interactions which an individual experience can affect the learning of a second language. In particular, the *natural* situation (family, play, workplace) in contrast to the *classroom* situation will be focused on. In addition, light will be shed on whether the second language is learned in a foreign community (the EFL situation), or in the community of the first language (the ESL situation).

### **I. Basic psychological Factors Affecting Second-language Learning**

There are only two processes by which one can learn the syntax of a second language: someone can explain rules to you, *explication*, or you can figure them out for yourself, *induction*.

## **Explication**

Explication is the process whereby the rules and structures of a second language are explained to a learner. This explanation is given in the first language of the learner. The learner is then expected to understand, learn, and apply the rule in the second language. Why a language cannot be learned completely by explication. While parts of a second language can be learned by explication, it is impossible for it to be learned entirely by explication. This is because not all the rules of language have been discovered and written down. Even for a language such as English, the most researched of all languages, one still finds linguistic journals discussing the concepts involved in such features of English as tense and the article.

Explication is rarely applicable to young children. Explaining is rarely done by parents or others when children acquire a native language, yet children by the age of 4 or 5 can understand and speak most of their native language quite well. They have learned language by self-analysis, induction. You do not hear a parent saying: ‘Now, Mary, to make the plural of “dog” you add a “z” sound to the end of the word, while with “duck” you add an “s” sound. You do this, Mary, because the last sound of “dog” has a voiced consonant, and the last sound of “duck” has an unvoiced one.’

## **Teaching Simple and Complex Rules**

However, rules that are simple can be learned by explication without much difficulty. An example of teaching a simple rule would be a case in which a mature Korean speaker studying English would be told that there is a Subject + Verb + Object order of constituents (Korean has S–O–V). Based on such a description, a learner can learn relevant usable rules, though they may need practice before the rules can be applied with any speed or reliability. In such cases, explication may even be a faster means of learning than induction, since induction requires that a learner be repeatedly exposed to words, phrases, and sentences along with relevant situations that give some indication to their meaning.

## **Induction**

Learning rules by self-discovery is the essence of the process of induction. The child who is exposed to second-language speech and remembers what he or she has heard will be able to analyze and discover the generalization or rule that underlies that speech. Not only must the learner devise the rule based on the speech that has been heard, but he or she must also figure out how those rules are to be applied in other cases.

The second-language learner is always trying to figure out language by induction. This is simply the natural thing to do. So long as the structures involved are not far beyond the learner's level of syntactic understanding, there is a good chance that the learner can discover the rules by self-analysis.

## **Memory**

### **Vocabulary Learning and Rote Memory.**

Second-language learners and teachers are forever talking of practice and review. The reason that practice and review is necessary at all is because of some lack in memory ability. So, the greater the number of related occurrences needed for learning, the poorer a person's memory is.

### **Syntax Learning and Episodic Memory**

Memory is crucial for the learning of grammatical structures and rules. For example, in order to determine the type of questions that require 'do' (as in 'Do you want some candy?' but not in 'Is the dog barking?'), how to negate sentences, how to use politeness structures ('Please, close the door', 'Would you please close the door?', 'Would you be so kind as to close the door?'), etc., memory is essential.

It is only through memory that a learner can accumulate the vast amount of speech and *relevant situational data* that serves as the basis for analyzing structures and formulating rules. It is not enough to remember whole phrases and sentences; the learner must also remember the situations in which these sentences were uttered to derive the meaning of those phrases and sentences and their syntax. The type of memory that involves situations is what Tulving (1983) and others refer to as 'episodic memory'. Thus, for example, outside the classroom, the degree of politeness of an utterance must be determined from the situation in which it occurs.

The learner must note who is talking to whom and what is their status. This information must be remembered and associated with the different expressions, e.g. 'Please close the door', 'Would you please close the door?', 'Would you please be so kind as to close the door?' Children's memory ability Children under 7 years display a phenomenal ability at rote memorization. Older children, however, do not, with some decline beginning around 8 years of age and with more of a decline from about 12 years of age.

## **Motor skills**

### **Articulators of Speech**

Good pronunciation is clearly an important part of learning a foreign language. The better our pronunciation, the better we can communicate with others. The creation of speech sounds is related to the ability to control the muscles that manipulate the organs of speech. Motor Skills is a term that psychologists use to describe the use of muscles in performing certain skills, from general ones like walking to fine ones like writing and speech. The Motor Skills that are involved in speech utilize what linguists call the articulators of speech. These include the mouth, lips, tongue, vocal cords, etc., all of which are controlled by muscles that are under the general control of the brain. The articulators of speech must do the right thing at the right time if one is to utter sounds accurately.

### **Decline in General Motor Skills**

To be able to attain a high level of proficiency in a motor skill, e.g., gymnastics, skating or piano playing, one should start young. The reason is that somewhere around the age of 12 years, the ability to acquire new motor skills begins to decline. This decline is due to the fact that the fine control of the muscles of the body is as yet unknown, although, since the decline is of such a general nature, involving many muscle groups, it seems likely to be due to some change in central functioning in the brain.

### **Decline in Ability for New Articulations**

As people age and as their ability to acquire new motor skills declines, their ability to command their articulators of speech is negatively affected. Consequently, children are expected to do much better in the pronunciation of a second language than adults because children have the flexibility in motor skills that adults generally have lost. Several studies have demonstrated that the earlier the age at which acquisition of the second language begins, the more native-like the accent will be. The Oyama study of Italian immigrants, for example, showed that the younger the children, the more native-like would be their pronunciation. The subjects were 60 Italian-born male immigrants who lived in the greater New York metropolitan area. The subjects were categorized according to 'age at arrival in the United States' (6 to 20 years) and 'number of years in the United States' (5 to 20 years). It was found that the younger arrivals performed with near-native English pronunciation while those who arrived after about the age of 12 years had substantial accents. Length of stay had little effect.

## **Motivation and Attitude**

### **Motivation**

A number of factors that affect second-language learning operate only in certain types of situations. The question of motivation for learning a second language, for instance, is not likely to arise in a natural type of setting such as with a young child. A 1- or 2-year-old needs no motivation to learn a second language; given language input, the young child will automatically learn – with learning even occurring in negative circumstances. An older child of 4 or 5 years, however, may need motivation to learn a second language since by that age the child may be aware of whether a language is positively or negatively regarded by others, or the child may prefer other activities.

The planned learning situation such as the classroom, however, presents a very different problem. There is an element of choice involved in attending class, listening to the teacher, participating in activities, and in doing assignments. The amount of exposure that one receives and the amount of attention and effort that one devotes to learning may be affected by one's motivation. Dislike of a teacher, for example, could seriously affect language learning unless it is balanced by a high degree of motivation that enables one to persist. Teachers are generally aware of this possibility and often devise ways to increase positive motivation and attitudes.

### **Attitude**

A negative attitude towards the target language or its speakers, or the other members of the class, may also affect one's determination and persistence to be involved in the classroom and its activities. This same negative attitude could impair memory functioning and detract from focusing on the target language. Many variables, such as status and cultural background, become more potent with the age of the learner and are important considerations in the classroom learning situation. This is not to say that attitude may not play a role in the natural situation as well. By 4 years of age children have developed attitudes towards language. They know how people react to different languages. For example, children may not wish to use their native, but foreign for this country, language outside of the home. They may prefer to conform to their peers and other members of the dominant language community.