

## **Acquisition and learning**

The expression "language learning" includes two clearly distinct, though rarely understood, concepts. One involves receiving information about the language, transforming it into knowledge through intellectual effort and storing it through memorization. The other involves developing the skill of interacting with foreigners to understand them and speak their language. The first concept is called "language learning," while the other is referred to as "language acquisition." These are separate ideas and we will show that neither is the consequence of the other.

The distinction between acquisition and learning is one of the hypotheses (the most important) established by the American [Stephen Krashen](#) in his highly regarded theory of foreign language acquisition known as the Natural Approach.

### **LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

Language acquisition refers to the process of natural assimilation, involving intuition and subconscious learning, which is the product of real interactions between people where the learner is an active participant. It is similar to the way children learn their native tongue, a process that produces functional skill in the spoken language without theoretical knowledge. It develops familiarity with the phonetic characteristics of the language as well as its structure and vocabulary, and is responsible for oral understanding, the capability for creative communication and for the identification of cultural values. Teaching and learning are viewed as activities that happen in a personal psychological plane. The acquisition approach praises the communicative act and develops self-confidence in the learner.

A classic example of language acquisition involves adolescents and young adults who live abroad for a year in an exchange program, attaining near native fluency, while knowing little about the language in the majority of cases. They have a good pronunciation without a notion of phonology, don't know what the perfect tense is, modal or phrasal verbs are, but they intuitively recognize and know how to use all the structures.

### **LANGUAGE LEARNING**

The concept of language learning is linked to the traditional approach to the study of languages and today is still generally practiced in high schools worldwide. Attention is focused on the language in its written form and the objective is for the student to understand the structure and rules of the language through the application of intellect and logical deductive reasoning. The form is of greater importance than communication. Teaching and learning are technical and governed by a formal instructional plan with a predetermined syllabus. One studies the theory in the absence of the practical. One values the correct and represses the incorrect. There is little room for spontaneity. The teacher is an authority figure and the participation of the student is predominantly passive. The student will be taught how to form interrogative and negative sentences, will memorize irregular verbs, study modal verbs, etc. The student later learns to construct sentences in the perfect tense, but hardly ever masters the use of it. It's a progressive and cumulative process, normally tied to a preset syllabus that includes memorization of vocabulary. It seeks to transmit to the student knowledge about the language, its functioning and grammatical structure with its irregularities, its contrasts with the student's native language, knowledge that hopefully will

produce the practical skills of understanding and speaking the language. This effort of accumulating knowledge becomes frustrating because of the lack of familiarity with the language.

Innumerable graduates with arts degrees in English are classic examples of language learning. They often are trained and theoretically able to teach a language that they can communicate in only with extreme difficulty.

## **INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACQUISITION AND LEARNING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**

The clear understanding of the differences between acquisition and learning makes it possible to investigate their interrelationships as well as the implications for the teaching of languages.

First, we ought to consider that languages, in general, are complex, arbitrary, irregular phenomena, full of ambiguities, in constant random and uncontrollable evolution. Therefore, the grammatical structure of a language can be too complex and abstract to be categorized and defined by rules.

Even if some partial knowledge of the functioning of the language is reached, it is not easily transformed into communication skills. What happens in fact is a dependency predominantly opposite: to understand the functioning of a language as a system and to understand its irregularities is a function of familiarity with it. Rules and exceptions as well will make sense if we have already developed solid intuitive control of the language in its oral form, that is, when we have assimilated it.

Krashen admits that the knowledge obtained through formal study (language learning) can serve to monitor speaking. Krashen, however, doesn't specify the language that would be the object of study, but he was probably using the study of Spanish as the basis for his inferences and conclusions because it is the dominant foreign language in the United States, and particularly in the state of California, where Professor Krashen lives and works.

Therefore, it is necessary to explore the degrees of irregularity and difficulty of the target language and how that affects the applicability of Krashen's theory.

**THE DEGREE OF IRREGULARITY OF THE LANGUAGE AND THE EFFICIENCY OF ACQUISITION:** It is obvious that the effectiveness of the monitoring function (made possible by the knowledge of grammar rules) is directly proportional to the degree of regularity encountered in the language under study. If there is regularity, there can be a rule and such a rule will be useful to produce and monitor language. The smaller the regularity, the fewer the rules and more limited the monitoring.

Spanish shows a much higher degree of regularity when compared to English, especially in its almost perfect correlation between the written language and its pronunciation. Therefore, when interpreting Krashen's theory we can logically deduce that his conclusions concerning the superiority of acquisition over learning would be more emphatic if the object of study and analysis had been English as the target language instead of Spanish.

## **AGE AND THE EFFICIENCY OF ACQUISITION VS LEARNING**

The majority of studies as well as the experience of those in the field of SLA indicate that the lower the age the easier, the faster and the more complete the learning will be. In the same way that age is a determining factor in foreign language learning in general, it is also a determining factor in the level of efficiency of acquisition and learning. Disconsidering individual differences like personality, motivation, hearing, and taking the normal learner as a sample, we can say that the lower the age, the more efficient acquisition will be over learning. At the same time, learning demonstrates to be partially efficient only during the age of intellectual maturity, as the graph below represents.

## NATIVE VS. NON-NATIVE INSTRUCTOR

English teaching programs in Brazil are predominantly based on language learning, working with the written language, strictly following a syllabus and having as a first objective transmitting information and knowledge about the language. For this kind of teaching, non-native teachers with the experience of "already having walked down the same path," have an advantage over native speakers.

In language acquisition, however, the primary goal is interaction between people, in which one functions as a facilitator and through which the other (learner) selects his own route building his skill in a direction that interests him personally or professionally. Instead of a syllabus, language acquisition programs offer human interaction. Here, the presence of genuine representatives of the language and culture that one hopes to assimilate is fundamental. Native instructors, therefore, have a clear advantage in a communicative approach, inspired by the concept of language acquisition.

## CONCLUSION

Krashen finally concludes that language acquisition is more efficient than language learning for attaining functional skill in a foreign language not only in childhood, and that the efficient teaching of languages isn't that tied to a packaged course of structured lessons nor is the one that relies on technological resources. Efficient teaching is personalized, takes place in a bicultural environment and is based on the personal skills of the facilitator in building relationships and creating situations of real communication focusing on the student's interests.

The source:

Richardo Schutz: Language acquisition – language learning  
<http://www.sk.com.br/sk-laxll.html> (26.4.2011)