



The Logical Problem of Second Language Acquisition

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1. Introduction

Since the mid to late 1980s, numerous teachers and educationalists have argued that an "intercultural approach" to foreign language teaching (FLT) prompts a re-examination of the most basic assumptions about language functions and the goals a language course should seek to achieve. "Communicative" methods of FLT generally emphasise the acquisition of native-speaker competence, underrating the competent of "culture".

In this article we consider what it means to know a language. Individuals grow grammars, which are biological entities represented in people's brains and which characterize their linguistic knowledge. Cutting some corners, we can say that grammars grow in accordance with genetic or developmental principles, and we can discover what those principles are.

Grammars vary from one person to another, and they may change in groups of people from one generation to the next. This happens if the initial conditions change somewhat, if people are exposed to different childhood experiences. If we observe a language undergoing some significant shift over the course of time, what really is occurring is that grammars are changing in certain individuals and that grammatical change then spreads through a population of speakers. In this way we study individual behaviour as the basic building block of aggregate social phenomena, explaining the complex by the simple.

2. We know more than we learn

A striking property of language acquisition is that children attain infinitely more than they experience-literally. They attain a productive system, a grammar, on the basis of very little experience. To understand some fundamental aspects of language acquisition, we should analyse the actual research about the specific phenomena.

To foreign language teachers, justifying for students why they should study a foreign language may seem unnecessary. The reasons are so obvious. Yet how many times are foreign language teachers confronted with justifying their subject to students? Why should this lack of interest prevail?

If the benefits of learning a foreign language were obvious to students, we would not constantly be faced with that question or with dropping enrolments and retrenchment. This brings to mind an incident I observed in the class of an otherwise excellent teacher who first aroused and then frustrated the student's desire for personal interaction. He had planned a five-minute warm-up at the start of the lesson, in which he asked personalized questions of the students. Since there had been a school prom over the weekend, he asked the students several questions about the affair. They were enjoying talking about it, and when he told them to take out their books, their response was, "oh, couldn't we talk about the dance some more now?"

He replied that they had a lot to cover and there wasn't enough time. The class begged him- to no avail- and then groaned as he began the content for the day. And we wonder why we have to defend learning a foreign language!

When students talk about what they want to and are interested and attentive, teachers often feel they are off the subject and must get back to the content. Yet when students do talk about what relates to them, there is increased attention.

3. Anxiety in the foreign language class

English is the foreign language of choice amongst Albanian secondary school students. The average Albanian learners of foreign languages do not just want to understand how a language functions, or simply note how it compares stylistically with other languages already learned; this remains the domain of language specialists. They are interested in it because it is a sure stepping stone to some aspect of social acceptance, professional and social promotion or self-actualisation. They want to experience the language in its functions.

The point of concern, therefore, is why after investing material and other resources, such as time and money, into learning a language do the learners of foreign language still have inhibitions as far as expressing themselves verbally is concerned.

For centuries, there were few if any theoretical foundations of language learning upon which to base teaching methodology. In the Western world, "foreign" language learning in schools was synonymous with the learning of Latin or Greek. Latin, thought to promote intellectuality through "mental gymnastics," was only until relatively recently held to be indispensable to an adequate higher education. Latin was taught by means of what has been called the Classical Method: focus on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary and of various declensions and conjugations, translation of texts, doing written exercises. As other languages began to be taught in educational institutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Classical Method was adopted as the chief means for

teaching foreign languages. Little thought was given at the time to teaching oral use of languages; After all, languages were not being taught primarily to learn oral/aural communication, but to learn for the sake of being 'scholarly' or, in some instances, for gaining a reading proficiency in a foreign language. Since there was little if any theoretical research on second language acquisition in general, or on the acquisition of reading proficiency, foreign languages were taught as any other skill was taught.

In the nineteenth century the Classical Method came to be known as the Grammar Translation Method. There was little to distinguish Grammar Translation from what had gone on in foreign language classrooms for centuries, beyond a focus on grammatical rules as the basis for translating from the second to the native language. But the Grammar Translation Method remarkably withstood attempts at the turn of the twentieth century to 'reform' language teaching methodology, and to this day it remains a standard methodology for language teaching methodology in educational institutions.

Prator and Celce-Murcia list the major characteristics of Grammar Translation:

1. Classes are taught in the mother tongue, with little active use of the target language.
2. Much vocabulary is taught in the form of lists of isolated words.
3. Long elaborate explanations of the intricacies of grammar are given.
4. Grammar provides the rules for putting words together, and instructions often focuses on the form and inflection of words.
5. Reading of difficult classical texts is begun early.
6. Little attention is paid to the content of texts, which are treated as exercises in grammatical analysis.
7. Often the only drills are exercises in translating disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue.
8. Little or no attention is given to pronunciation.

It is remarkable that this method has been so stalwart among many competing models. It does virtually nothing to enhance a student's communicative ability in the language. It is 'remembered with distaste by thousands of school learners, for whom foreign language learning meant a tedious experience of memorizing endless lists of unusable grammar rules and vocabulary and attempting to produce perfect translations of stilted or literary prose'. However in another sense, one can understand why Grammar Translation is so popular. It requires few specialized skills on the part of teachers.

There are aspects of language learning that may call upon a conditioning process, a meaningful cognitive process. Others depend upon the security of supportive learners; others are related to one's total intellectual structure. Each aspect is important, but there is no consistent combination of theories that works for every context of second language learning. Each teacher has to adopt a somewhat intuitive process of discerning the best synthesis of theory for the most enlightening analysis of the context. That intuition will be nurtured by an integrated understanding of the appropriateness and of the strengths and weaknesses of each theory of learning.

Teachers generally want to 'know' that a method is 'right', that it will work successfully. We want finely tuned programs that map the pathways to successful teaching. In other words, we tend to be born doubters. But the believing game provides us with a contrasting principle, intuition.

It is noted that analytical or systematic thinkers generally excel in problems that call for planning and organization, as when one set of numbers must be worked out before another can be analyzed. On the other hand it is even said that intuitive thinkers are likely to excel if the problem is elusive and difficult to define. They keep coming up with different possibilities, follow their hunches, and don't commit themselves too soon. It is clear, however, that both styles are essential for efficient cognitive functioning. While people tend to favour one style or the other, it is the complementation of intuition and analysis that enables us to make good decisions, to solve problems, and to categorize the world around us.

Sternberg and Davidson found that insight – making inductive leaps beyond the given data- is an indispensable factor of what we call intelligence, much of which is traditionally defined in terms of analysis.

All this suggests that intuition forms an essential component of our total intellectual endeavour. One of the characteristics of good language learners is that they are willing and accurate guessers. We can turn that around and say that a teacher, too, must be a willing and accurate guesser-a user of intuition.

There is ample evidence that good language teachers have developed good intuition. In an informal study of cognitive styles among ESL learners a few years ago, I asked the teachers of the ESL learners to predict the TOEFL score that each of their students would attain when they sat for the TOEFL the following week. The teachers had been with their students for only one semester, yet their predicted scores and the actual TOEFL results yielded the highest + 90 correlation in the whole study. Many good teachers cannot verbalize why they do what they do, in a specific and analytical way, yet they remain good teachers.

4. The acquisition problem; the Poverty of the Stimulus

The child acquires a finite, generative system- a grammar- which generates structures which correspond more or less to utterances of various kinds. Children acquire these grammars despite a poverty of stimulus on three levels.

First, the child hears speech from adults, peers, and older children. This stimulus does not consist uniformly of complete, well-formed utterances; It also includes sentence fragments, slips of the tongue, incomplete thoughts, ill-formed utterances from people who do not know the child's language well, and even sentences artificially simplified,

supposedly for the benefit of children. Even if only 5 percent of the expressions the child hears are of this latter type, there will be a significant problem in generalizing to the set of grammatical sentences of the language, because the pseudo-sentences do not come labelled as defective.

Second, a child encounters only a finite range of expressions, but she comes to be able to produce and understand an infinite range of novel sentences, going far beyond the sentences heard in childhood. We know this at the intuitive level when we recognize that we constantly encounter novel sentences that we have not heard or used before. Consider the sentences on this page; it is unlikely that the reader has encountered any of them before in the precise form in which they occur here.

More formally, to understand that there is an infinite number of English sentences, one has only to realize that, in principle, any given sentence may be of indefinite length. Three iterative devices permit this and they may occur in various combinations; relativization, complementation and also co-ordination. If a sentence may be of indefinite length, then it follows that people have a capacity to use and express an indefinite number of sentences.

Third, people come to know things subconsciously about their language, things for which no direct evidence is available in the data to which they are exposed as children learning to speak. People eventually utter complex, ambiguous sentences, identify paraphrases, and distinguish sentences that may occur in their language from ones that may not.

As a conclusion I have to say that I have just illustrated this kind of problem, and the subconscious, mature capacity that ordinary people have involves language properties made explicit by linguists. However, the crucial properties lie outside the primary linguistic data available to young children. The distinction between the range of data known to the linguist and the much more limited data available to the beginning speaker is of vital importance for the biological view of language development.

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