Acquiring a first language

The process of first language acquisition can be summarized very simply: children first produce single words, then they learn to combine words into phrases, and in due course they learn to combine phrases into sentences.

This developmental process is driven by the urge to communicate, which is part of each child's biological inheritance. From birth babies seek reciprocity – interaction with the people in their immediate environment – first through gaze and eye contact, then through gesture and posture.

Reciprocity provides the frame within which babies gradually pass through the successive stages of first language acquisition:
- cooing (vowel sounds: *oo-oo-oo*, *aa-aa-aa*) →
- babbling (alternating consonant and vowel sounds: *ma-ma-ma*, *da-da-da*) →
- first words (e.g., *car* used to name the family car) →
- one-word utterances (e.g., *car* used to mean "there's the car" or "I want to ride in the car") →
- morpheme inclusion (e.g., adding *–s* to *cat* to form the plural *cats* or *–ing* to *go* to form the present participle *going* →
- transformations (e.g., *I want the toy* becomes *Susie wants the toy*) →
- complex constructions (e.g., sentences with subordinate clauses)

Developmental orders in first language acquisition

The acquisition of a first language is marked by regular developmental orders. In the case of English, for example, the acquisition of *wh*-question forms entails the following stages:
- *wh*-WORD + NOUN (PHRASE) + MAIN VERB
  What Mama singing?
- *wh*-WORD + NOUN (PHRASE) + AUXILIARY + MAIN VERB
  What Mama is singing?
- *wh*-WORD + AUXILIARY + NOUN (PHRASE) + MAIN VERB
  What is Mama singing?

Language and thought

The acquisition of a first language is inseparable from the acquisition of certain modes of thinking. According to the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986), our higher cognitive functions do not develop spontaneously but are internalized from social interaction. Language is the engine that drives this process of internalization: *social speech* (communication between two or more people) becomes *egocentric speech* (talking to oneself, e.g., in order to understand and solve a

problem), which in turn becomes *inner speech* (thought articulated in – often fragmentary – language).

Inner speech is the basis for all forms of discursive thinking, including those on which education depends. Note that the child's capacity for *inner speech* is developed and refined as the capacity for literate behaviour is developed and refined.

Success and failure in first language acquisition

All normally endowed children learn to speak the language of their environment. This process is inseparable from their general cognitive development and their gradual socialization. Depending on the environment in which they live, children will differ from one another in their early experience, and this will be reflected in their language, especially in the words they know. But there are no failures in first language acquisition understood as the acquisition of speech: all normally endowed children become native speakers of their first language. (Note that children who are born profoundly deaf spontaneously become native speakers of sign language if their primary care givers use sign language to interact with them.)

Unlike the acquisition of speech, learning to read and write is a conscious and intentional process. For most children it is part of schooling, and as such it is subject to all the factors that determine success or failure in education generally.

Acquiring a second language

There are many differences between second and first language acquisition, including the following:
- Unless it begins in early childhood, second language acquisition is not part of the learner's primary cognitive development.
- In most cases learners have much less time for second language acquisition than they had for first language acquisition.
- The later second language acquisition begins, the more it is a necessarily conscious and intentional process.
- The later second language acquisition begins, the more it is influenced by conscious motivational factors.

Five facts about L2 acquisition

1. All learners of second languages subconsciously transfer grammatical properties of their first language to the second language.

2. Like first language acquisition, second language acquisition proceeds by stages and is characterized by developmental orders.

3. The learner's knowledge of the second language develops systematically, which means that errors are not random.

4. Learners have variable intuitions about the second language and their production of it is variable at different stages of development.

5. Compared with native speakers, second language learners' internalized grammatical knowledge is incomplete.

Three facts about second language teaching

1. A focus on linguistic form (grammar and orthography) is a necessary part of education for literacy in any language.

2. At the same time, there is a wealth of research to show that when language teaching is driven by formal grammatical instruction it has only limited success.

3. Second language teaching succeeds to the extent that it engages learners in spontaneous use of their target language.

Inner speech in second languages

Second language learners need to develop a capacity for inner speech in the second language: gradually developing the capacity to think in the language is a precondition for progress towards the higher proficiency levels.

We can leave the development of this capacity to chance, with the result that some learners will swim but many will sink. Alternatively we can seek to create a "dynamic of internalization" in the second language classroom. This is a matter of organizing classroom activities so that *social speech* can stimulate the development of *egocentric speech*, which will gradually become *inner speech*. If we choose the latter option, we shall attach great importance to exploratory learning that is organized in pairs and small groups.

The challenge facing language support teachers

On its own, language support can never be enough. For one thing, teachers have very limited time with their language support pupils; for another, the social-interactive dynamic of the classroom inevitably favours the acquisition of some forms of communication but necessarily excludes others. Language support must focus principally on the curriculum, but its success will always depend on factors beyond the teacher's control.

We maximize the effectiveness of language support by giving priority to language that will allow pupils to participate as much as possible in mainstream classes (that is the purpose behind the Benchmarks and European Language Portfolio); by working with subject teachers to devise activities that allow language learning to continue in mainstream classes; and by developing a whole-school policy that gives priority to the social integration of non-English-speaking pupils

Language support should encourage a cyclical process in which what happens in the language support class facilitates the acquisition of more language in mainstream classes, which in turn helps non-native pupils to become fully integrated members of the school community, which in turn helps them to become fully integrated members of the larger community outside school.

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References

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