

The Impact of Experience on the Development of Language

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Introduction :

Although the ability to acquire language is innate among the human species, experience also plays a very important role in the development of human language. This role that experience plays in child language acquisition can not be taken lightly.

Children are not passive absorbers of experience, nor are they passive acquirers of language. Instead, they are very actively eliciting responses from those around them in an effort to make sense out of their world. Because their objectives in acquiring a language are to communicate and to understand the world around them, language acquisition is meaning based. Since the mother usually structures her input to the linguistic level of the child, the child receives comprehensible input. This input and the influence that it has on language development are also very important.

Once the child receives language experience, he must process it. Thus, some of the ways in which children process semantic information and acquire new vocabulary and language structure will also be discussed. There is a natural order in the acquisition of grammatical forms, based on children's needs to find the best way to express what they mean.

Finally, how the study of first language acquisition can be applied to the ESL classroom will be discussed. In order to make this shift from first to second language acquisition, the

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view will be taken that second language acquisition, like first language acquisition, takes place as a result of strategies learners use to express their meaning and as a result of comprehensible or meaningful input from mothers, peers, or teachers.

Semantic Processing :

Input is processed according to its meaning. According to Slobin, the sequence of the development of linguistic forms depends on the forms' semantic complexity. In other words, the child will only express forms that he comprehends. Furthermore, Gleitman found that young children will accept sentence constructions that are not syntactically correct, as long as they make sense to them, yet they will not accept sentences that they do not understand. (Hakes, 1980).

Language acquisition either coincides with experience or follows it. Nelson has said that cognitive development is the scaffolding for speech. Some researchers, such as Slobin (1973) say that cognitive development must be in place before speech. Slobin uses the example of the acquisition of the past perfect tense in children. He reports that children use the words *now* and *yet* shortly before they use the past perfect tense:

I didn't make the bed yet. (simple past tense)

I haven't made the bed. (past perfect)

Other researchers, such as Meltzoff claim that speech and cognitive growth occur simultaneously. Slobin, Nelson, Bruner and Meltzoff agree, however, that comprehensible experience assists language development.

Furthermore, the semantic processing of vocabulary coincides with comprehensible experience. Children will request input from anyone who happens to be around. Vocabulary acquisition follows a period of intense questioning by children. For instance, young children ask the names of objects by pointing to them or by the use of a question, such as "What's dis?".

In addition, overgeneralization occurs during the acquisition of vocabulary, affixes, and grammatical forms. For example a child may use the word *dog* as a label for all four-legged creatures until experience teaches him otherwise. Similarly affixes and syntactical forms are overgeneralized, because young children have formed hypotheses in their minds that "one message takes only one form."

The Natural Order Hypothesis :

Some linguists propose that there is a natural order of acquisition in the development of

grammatical forms. This acquisition of grammatical forms is based on the child's desire to express what he means in the best possible way. The acquisition of grammatical forms depends on comprehensible input. The following is a summary of the order of child language acquisition, based on Brown's observations:

Stage 1: (age 2–2.5) Telegraphic speech. One or two word speech is made up of contentives, that is, words with high content value.

Stage 2: (Age 2.5) This stage begins when the mean length of utterance (MLU) reaches 2.25 words. The changes which occur in children's speech include:

- 1) Function words appear in children's vocabulary.
- 2) Tense markings are beginning to be used on verbs and possessive endings are beginning to be used on nouns. Overgeneralization generally takes place on these affixes, as in the following sentence: *I goed.*
- 3) The auxiliary verb *be* and *be* as a main verb begin to be used.
- 4) The prepositions *in* and *on* begin to be used in children's vocabulary.

Stage 3: (Age 2.75)

- 1) Negatives appear in sentences: No more juice.
- 2) Interrogatives appear, beginning as two or three word questions: I ride train?
- 3) The modals *can't* and *don't* appear: Can't it be a bigger train?
- 4) Sentence combining begins: I watch everybody fall off and if they do,

I go and get the teacher.

Children at this stage overgeneralize syntactic word order. For example, children make a hypothesis that the order in which events occur is from left to right in a sentence. Eve Clark (1977) provided sentences such as the following for children to act out using toy objects:

The boy patted the dog before he kicked the rock.

Before the boy kicked the rock, he patted the dog.

After hearing the first sentence, the child will make the boy pat the dog before he kicks the rock. But in the second sentence, the child will make the boy kick the rock, before he pats the dog.

Clark and Clark (1973) asked young children to repeat complex sentences that were modeled by the experimenters. Children remembered the underlying meaning of the sentences, but did not repeat them exactly as said:

Modeled: Owl who eats candy runs fast.

Child: Owl eat a candy and he run fast.

The child's acquisition of clauses also follows a natural order. Children favor keeping a

clause intact over embedding them in the main clause.

Lindfors reports that later language development follows an expansion and refinement process:

1. Expansion and refinement of structure.
2. Expansion and refinement of expression to convey meaning.
3. The ability to talk about language as a code appears.
4. Language can be used as an abstract symbol system without contextual support.

Likewise, the development of the phonological system also follows a natural sequence. Sounds that are more difficult to pronounce, such as the final "h" in fish, appear after easier sounds, such as the dentals (eg, d, s).

The Role of Motherese:

Mothers' speech to children has a significant effect on their language development. Vygotsky was one of the first psychologists to speak about the important role that the mother plays in her child's linguistic development. According to Vygotsky, the dialog between mother and child helps the child to handle a situation which he could not handle alone. The adult provides the needed conditions and directions based on her estimate of her child's potential for success. (King, 1984).

Early nativist theories practically discounted the mother's role in child language acquisition. These theories claimed that child language acquisition was almost totally innate. Attention was drawn to the numerous false starts, hesitations, and sentence fragments present in adult speech and the assumption was that this type of speech was modeled for young children. However, research by Brown and Bellugi (1964) and others showed that mothers' speech, when directed to their children, is not only grammatical, it is simplified. The intonation of mothers' speech or motherese is higher, and the speech is slower. Corroborating Vygotsky, Brown found that mother's speech was just slightly beyond the child's linguistic development. In fact, she modeled the speech the child would produce roughly one year later.

Child	Mother
See truck, Mommy.	
See truck.	Did you see the truck?

(Brown, 1964)

Pellegrini, Brody and Sigel (1984) examined parents' teaching strategies with sixty communicatively handicapped and sixty noncommunicatively handicapped children. They wanted to study the difference in parent communication styles with these two different types of children, based on Vygotsky's hypothesis that mothers tailor the linguistic level of their

speech to their children's verbal level. The parent's conversation was studied, while they were directing their children in cognitively demanding play tasks, such as puzzles. The experimenters found that parents of communicatively handicapped children were less cognitively demanding of their children. They asked their children more questions, and they used more verbal and nonverbal strategies to motivate their children. They spent more interactional time with them. Parents of non-communicatively handicapped children challenged their children more, while parents of communicatively handicapped children used more motivating strategies.

Although both mothers and fathers tailor their utterances roughly to their children's linguistic level, Hladik and Edwards (1984) found that mothers' speech to their children was more grammatical than fathers' speech to their children. The sentence lengths of both mothers' and fathers' speech were simple and roughly about the same lengths, but when parents spoke to each other, sentence lengths increased and the fathers' speech was more grammatical. Fathers tended to speak much like their children in form. They used content words and left out the function words. In contrast, mothers' speech, while simple in sentence length and word choice also included function words. This research suggests that mothers may be more natural first language teachers of children.

In addition, mothers seem to perform the role of initiator of communication. They seem to employ behaviors directed at keeping their children talking. They asked more questions. In contrast, the father's role seems to be more subtle as a reactor. Yet, all parents concentrated on the meaning of the children's message, rather than form, and neither parent tried to correct their children's speech. Furthermore, parent speech to children is less complex, than parent speech to one another. Moreover, the speech of all parents was highly referential. It related to the context of the situation.

The amount of motherese speech also seems to have an impact on how linguistically advanced children are. Della Corte, Benedict, and Klein (1983) counted the number of mothers' utterances to children in caretaking situations and analyzed them based on the children's communication styles. Nelson hypothesized that children have two different styles of language acquisition:

- 1) Nominal/referential style—The child understands and uses nouns to name objects.
- 2) Pronominal/expressive style—the child's speech is largely imitative, filling in gaps in speech with prosodic babbling. The child uses pronouns and function words (perhaps imitatively).

Della Corte, et al. found that mothers of nominal/referential children communicated more with them than the mothers of pronominal/expressive children did. Mothers of nominal/referential children directed an average of 20.8 utterances to their children, whereas mothers of

pronominal/expressive children only directed an average of 6.2 utterances to their children. Three mothers of pronominal/expressive children did not speak to their children at all. Mothers of nominal/expressive children commented on behavior and the environment, while mothers of pronominal/expressive children merely directed their children's actions. It appears that based on the results of this study, these two styles may in fact, be two different levels of language acquisition.

Ervin-Tripp(1973) discovered that mothers present the same vocabulary over and over in a variety of contexts. Moreover, mother's speech refers to events happening in the present. In addition, mothers repeat the same message several times in different ways over a variety of sentence structures.

Based on these studies of first language acquisition, it appears that the environment plays a significant role in the development of children's ability to express themselves. Children are initiators of their language acquisition in part, but they also depend on their parents to communicate with them. Furthermore, parents communicate with their children in ways that are highly contextual and referential. This type of communication is what Krashen calls comprehensible input.

Second Language Acquisition

Although the order of acquisition of grammatical forms may differ with respect to first language (see Hakuta, 1978), according to Ervin-Tripp (1972), the first expressions second language learners acquire are those which have meaning for them.

The lesson that ESL(English as a Second Language) teachers can glean from the studies mentioned above is the need to structure learning in such a way that students receive comprehensible input. They can simplify their speech in order to make it easier to understand. They can speak more slowly and pause more between words. They can present material in a way that relates to the interests and experiences so that the lessons are meaningful to them. When teachers arrange environments and guide interactions in a way that relates to the interests and experiences of the students, then students will be more motivated to learn a second language.

ESL teachers can learn to be more patient with learners' errors. If language acquisition follows a more or less developmental process and the assumption is that it does, then it will take time before proper forms are acquired. Hence, if a learner is having difficulty with a form, the teacher should address the meaning of his message, while modeling the correct form. She should then assume that given enough comprehensible input, the student will gradually acquire the correct form over time.

It is difficult as an ESL teacher to stop providing so much structure that the learner is not

creating his own language. For instance, I presented a lesson to Navajo students on using the telephone in an emergency. The children's conversations became so much more creative when I stopped overcorrecting their conversations. The conversation instead became related to their experiences. In their phone calls to the police they reported "drunk mens" hanging around. The communicative content was established, whether or not all the forms were correct. In addition, Korean university students also seem to prefer practice situations involving real communication.

Conclusion :

Experience has a significant impact on the development of language acquisition. Children process language semantically by relating the input to their own experience. Although some researchers claim that there is a natural order of language acquisition based on children's experiences of finding better and better ways of expressing meaning, in the case of second language acquisition, other research proposes that a learner's first language may also have an impact on which grammatical forms are learned first. Mothers are excellent providers of experience in the form of comprehensible input. Finally ESL teachers can benefit from learning how to provide comprehensible input for their students.

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국문초록

경험이 언어발달에 미치는 영향

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본고에서 필자는 모국어 습득과정에서 검토된 사항을 제2외국어 습득과정에 적용시켜 보고, 제2외국어 교육의 방향을 제시하고자 했다.

어린이들은 직접적으로 의미있는 표현들을 우선 습득하게 되고, 문법적 범주는 2차적인 것으로 시일을 두고 서서히 습득하게 되는 것 같다. 더군다나 이러한 표현들은 어린이들의 언어능력에 비해 약간은 높은 것으로 되어 있다. 모국어와 제2외국어일 경우 순서상의 차이는 있으나, 대체로 보아서, 제2외국어 학습자 역시 직접적으로 관련있는 표현들을 먼저 습득하는 것으로 나타났다.

결론적으로, 제2외국어 교육은 문법적 형태보다 실질적으로 의사소통(communication)에 둘째 외국어 습득이란 견지에서 보다 효과적이라 할 수 있다.