

# The Principles of Language Learning

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## Abstract

In this era, becoming bilingual or multilingual is a way of life. Thus, learning a foreign language, which is a complex process, is badly needed. Knowing the principles of language learning will facilitate the language learners to master the second language. There are two pathways to develop competence in a language: language acquisition and language learning. There are several hypotheses about second language acquisition, i.e. the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the input hypothesis, the affective filter hypothesis. In order to be successful in language learning, language learners must have certain characteristics. The personality variables or factors that play great role in the success or failure of language learning are as follows: 1) extroversion and introversion, 2) tolerance of ambiguity, 3) empathy/ego permeability and sensitivity to rejection, 4) cognitive style and field dependence/independence.

**Key words:** *language acquisition, language learning, language competence, the monitor hypothesis, the input hypothesis, the affective filter hypothesis, personality variables*

## A. INTRODUCTION

In this era, the planet becomes smaller and the means for moving around it is easier. This makes people become multicultural and multilingual. Consequently learning a second or a third language is badly needed. Becoming bilingual or multilingual is a way of life.

The learning of a second language is a complex process, involving a lot of variables. Thus, total commitment, total involvement, a total physical, intellectual, and emotional response is necessary to successfully send and receive messages in a second language. It is not sufficient to study only in the classroom. The learners also need to practice outside the classroom if they want to be successful. Knowing the principles of language learning will facilitate the language learners to learn the second language.

This article discusses the principles of language learning. The discussion comprises:

1. The meaning of language learning and language acquisition
2. Hypothesis of Second Language Acquisition
3. Principles of language learning
4. Factors influencing language learning

The four matters above will be discussed one by one in the following section.

## B. LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ACQUISITION

There are two pathways to develop competence in a language: language acquisition and language learning. Concerning language acquisition, Krashen (1981: 6-7) states as follows:

...language acquisition, first or second, occurs when comprehension of real messages occurs, and when the acquirer is not 'on the defensive'... Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. It does not occur overnight, however. Real language acquisition develops slowly, and speaking skills emerge significantly later than listening skills, even when conditions are perfect. The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production.

Thus, language acquisition is a subconscious process. Language acquirers are not consciously aware of the grammatical rules of the language, but rather develop a "feel" for correctness.

Language learning, on the other hand, refers to the "conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them." Thus language learning can be compared to learning about a language. Brown (1993: 7) extracts the components of language learning as follows:

1. Learning is acquisition or getting.
2. Learning is retention of information or skill.
3. Retention implies storage systems, memory, cognitive organization.
4. Learning involves active, conscious focus on and acting upon events outside or inside the organism.
5. Learning is relatively permanent but subject to forgetting.
6. Learning involves some form of practice, perhaps reinforced practice.
7. Learning is a change in behavior.

Johson (2001) similarizes learning and acquisition with declarative and procedural knowledge. Learning refers to declarative knowledge and acquisition refers to procedural knowledge. The learning pathway starts with declarative knowledge and moves to procedural knowledge. Johnson calls this DECPRO (from DECLarative to PROcedural). A main process in this sequence is proceduralization or automatization. The process is important because declarative knowledge without procedural knowledge is insufficient. Some definitions of declarative and procedural knowledge are presented below.

Procedural knowledge is about how to do something. This is in the form of procedure or sequence of steps to reach a certain purpose. It is the knowledge that explains how to perform an action within the framework of clear procedures. Declarative knowledge is the knowledge that we are aware of and one that we can express clearly. This is called open knowledge, real knowledge. Declarative and procedural forms of knowledge are interrelated and one can be derived from the other. Procedural knowledge has significant role in structuring concepts and obtaining declarative knowledge. Knowledge starts with declarative one that paves the way for procedural processes (Yilmaz and Yalcin, 2012)

The difference between declarative and procedural knowledge is between knowing *that* and knowing *how*. Knowing *that* refers to propositional knowledge and knowing *how* refers to skills necessary for operating environment. Procedural memory

is regarded as the system containing knowledge of how to do things. Usually many trials and errors are needed to acquire it, although one trial does occur. It can be said that procedural memory is relatively more autonomous compared with declarative memory in a number of ways. Declarative memory is responsible for what cognitive psychologists traditionally consider as knowledge, i.e. storage of facts and events (Berge & Hezewijk, 1999)

Declarative knowledge has something to do with facts like proposition, while procedural knowledge has something to do with motor skills, cognitive skills and cognitive strategies. Declarative knowledge is knowing that something is the case, i.e. knowledge of facts, theories, events, and objects. And procedural knowledge is knowing how to do something which includes motor skills, cognitive skills and cognitive strategies (Jiamu, 2001).

Procedural knowledge without declarative is insufficient. Procedural knowledge alone is inadequate. For example, it is a common fate for immigrants to develop the ability to speak a foreign language. They speak with apparent fluency, but without real understanding of the rules behind what they are saying.

Thus, both procedural and declarative knowledge are important to the learner. Not only must both be developed, but also maintained. Johnson argued that both pathways acquisition and learning are needed by the learners: combining formal and informal instruction, adding some acquisition to learning, adding some learning to acquisition.

The acquisition-learning hypothesis claims that adults do not lose the ability to acquire languages the way that children do.

### **C. KEY HYPOTHESES OF SLA**

There are several hypotheses about second language acquisition, i.e. the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the input hypothesis, the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1981).

#### *1. The natural order hypothesis*

The natural order hypothesis states that "the acquisition of grammatical structures proceeds in a predictable order." For a given language, some grammatical structures tend to be acquired early, others late, regardless of the first language of a speaker. Ellis (1989: 42) claims that there are strong similarities in the developmental route followed by different L2 learners. SLA follows a universal route that's uninfluenced by such factors as the age of the learner, the context in which learning takes place, or the learner's L1 background.

#### *2. The monitor hypothesis*

The language that we have consciously learned acts as an editor in situations where the learner has enough time to edit. This conscious editor is called the Monitor. The language that one has subconsciously acquired is responsible for fluency. Error correction by others has little influence on them, they can often correct themselves based on a "feel" for correctness.

#### *3. The Input hypothesis*

The input hypothesis answers the question of how a language acquirer develops competency over time. It states that a language acquirer who is at "level i" must receive comprehensible input that is at "level i+1." "We acquire, in other words, only when we understand language that contains structure that is 'a little beyond' where we are now." If we get enough of that kind of input, then we will in effect be receiving and thus

acquiring out  $i+1$ . "Production ability emerges. It is not taught directly." Ellis (1994) calls this kind of input as comprehensible input. Input can be made comprehensible in various ways: through simplification, with the help of context, etc.

#### 4. *The affective filter hypothesis*

Motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety all affect language acquisition, raising or lowering of any comprehensible input that is received. The more comprehensible input one receives in low-stress situations, the more language competence that one will have. A low or weak affective filter allows the input 'in'. Students should have their affective filter kept low, meaning that classroom stress should be minimized and students should not be put on the defensive. (<http://www.languageimpact.com/articles/rw/krashenbk> , accessed in October 7th, 2014)

### **D. PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING**

Language learning is a process which takes time under the best of circumstances, when the learner is motivated and has everything available to help him to reach his goals. It is important to note that language learning is never a linguistic phenomenon only. It is affected by several sociolinguistic and psychological factors which are all intertwined in unique ways in the case of each learner. The learner's prior experience as a student in general and self-image specifically as a language learner will determine how the learning task is viewed, whether it, for example, will seem impossible or doable. The person's prior knowledge, attitudes, personality, learning styles and skills and motivation, to mention a few, are all factors related to the eventual outcome of the language study (Mitsutomi, <http://www.aeservices.net/English/Language-Learning-Mitsutom>, accessed in January 27<sup>th</sup> 2014)

Brown (2004) classifies language learning principles into three sub-groupings: Cognitive Principles, Affective Principles and Linguistic Principles. Principles are seen as theory derived from research, to which teachers need to match classroom practices. Here are some brief summaries of the principles that fall into each grouping: (<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/Principles-of-Language>, accessed in January 27<sup>th</sup> 2014)

Cognitive principles comprise *automaticity* which means there is subconscious processing of language with peripheral attention to language forms; *meaningful learning* which can be contrasted to rote learning, and is thought to lead to better long term retention; *anticipation of rewards* in which learners are driven to act by the anticipation of rewards, tangible or intangible; *intrinsic motivation*: motivation coming from the learners themselves; *strategic investment* : the time and learning strategies learners invest into the language learning process.

Affective principles consist of *language ego* which means that learning a new language involves developing a new mode of thinking - a new language "ego"; *self-confidence* meaning that success in learning something can be equated to the belief in learners that they can learn it; *risk-taking*: taking risks and experimenting create better long-term retention; *language-culture connection*: meaning that learning a language also involves learning about cultural values and thinking.

Linguistic principles involve *native language effect*: a learner's native language creates both facilitating and interfering effects on learning; *interlanguage*: at least some of the learner's development in a new language can be seen as systematic; *communicative competence*: fluency and use are just as important as accuracy and usage

- instruction needs to be aimed at organizational, pragmatic and strategic competence as well as psychomotor skills.

Language learning does not happen because someone requires it. It happens with personal effort. It is always an individual challenge and journey and only good learners will arrive in the destination, language mastery. In the following section, factors of good learners will be clarified.

## **E. FACTORS INFLUENCING LANGUAGE LEARNING**

There are factors that can contribute to individual success or failure in language learning. Perhaps the key to success relates to the personality variables. According to Johnson (2001), the personality variables or factors that play great role in the success or failure of language learning are as follows: 1) extroversion and introversion, 2) tolerance of ambiguity, 3) empathy/ego permeability and sensitivity to rejection, 4) cognitive style and field dependence/independence.

### *1. Extroversion and introversion*

The typical extrovert is sociable, likes parties, has many friends, needs to have people to talk to, and does not like studying by himself. He craves excitement, takes chances, often sticks his neck out, acts on the spur of the moment, and is generally an impulsive individual. He always has ready answer, and generally likes change.

The typical introvert, on the other hand, is a quiet, retiring sort of person, introspective, fond of books rather than people, he is reserved and distant, except with intimate friends. He tends to plan ahead and distrusts the impulse of the moment. He does not like excitement, takes matters of everyday life with proper seriousness, and likes a well ordered mode of life (Eysenck: 1965 in Johnson 2001: 140).

Skehan (1998) points out that there is a conflict of expectations for learning in general, and for language learning in particular. It is said that extroverts are easily distracted from study and find difficulty concentrating, and they are not good learners overall. But when it comes to language learning, many people feel that extroverts should have the advantage. This is because they have character of sociability. There is correlation between the sociability, the extrovert's personality and the oral performance.

### *2. Tolerance of ambiguity*

Budner (1962) describes intolerance of ambiguity as the tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as sources of threat. Thus, people who are intolerant of ambiguity are worried about the future. On the other hand, people who are tolerant of ambiguity seem quite happy living in a state of uncertainty. The research results reveal that those who are tolerant of ambiguity are better language learners than those who are not.

### *3. Empathy/ego permeability and sensitivity to rejection*

Empathy or ego permeability is "act of constructing for oneself another person's mental state." (Naiman et al. 1978). Some individuals may be said to be "open" to the personalities of others; their egos are permeable. They are empathetic individuals. They will be good language learners. Other individuals have "sensitivity to rejection" character. They feel hurt by the rejection of other, by the criticism to their performance.

### *4. Cognitive style and field dependence/independence*

Some individuals seem more able than others to extract things from the context in which they are met, and to see them as separate entities. People who can do this easily are said to be field independent, while those who do not are said to be field dependent

(Johnson, 2001: 143). The research results show the positive correlations between field independence and language- learning success, particularly at later learning stage.

Good language learners of course not only have the four variables above, there are some other characteristics. Ellis (1989: 122) mentions a list of characteristics of good learners as the following:

1. Be able to respond to the group dynamics of the learning situation so as not to develop negative anxiety and inhibitions
2. Seek out all opportunities to use the target language
3. Make maximum use of the opportunities afforded to practice listening to and responding to speech to meaning rather than to form
4. Supplement the learning that derives from direct contact with speakers of the L2 with learning derived from the use of study technique (such as making vocabulary lists)- this is likely to involve attention to form
5. Be an adolescent or an adult rather than a young child at least as far as the early stages of grammatical development are concerned
6. Possess sufficient analytic skills to perceive, categorize, and store the linguistic feature of the L2, and also to monitor errors.
7. Posses a strong reason for learning the L2 which may reflect an integrative or an instrumental motivation) and also develop a strong 'task motivation' (i.e. respond positively to the learning tasks chosen of provided)
8. Be prepared to experiment by taking risks, even if this makes the learner appear foolish
9. Be capable of adapting to different learning conditions.

Rubin (1975) proposes seven hypotheses about good learners as in the following:

1. The good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser.
2. The good language learner has a strong drive to communicate, or to learn from communication. He is willing to do many things to get his message across.
3. The good language learner is often not inhibited. He is willing to appear foolish if reasonable communication results. He is willing to make mistakes in order to learn and to communicate. He is willing to live with a certain amount of vagueness.
4. In addition to focusing on communication, the good language learner is prepared to attend to form. The good language learner is constantly looking for patterns in the language.
5. The good language learner practices.
6. The good language learner monitors his own and the speech of others. That is, he is constantly attending to how well his speech is being received and whether his performance meets the standards he has learned.
7. The good language learner attends to meaning. He knows that in order to understand the message it is not sufficient to pay attention to the language or to the surface form of speech.

## **F. CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the previous discussion, some conclusions can be drawn as follows: There are two pathways to develop competence in a language: language acquisition and language learning. Language acquisition is a subconscious process. Language acquirers are not consciously aware of the grammatical rules of the language. Language learning,

on the other hand, refers to the "conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them."

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