

## **Language Learning and Language Acquisition: A Study of Formal and Informal Communication Situations in the English Language**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Language is a natural Human phenomenon which every normal child acquires when he or she reaches the age of language acquisition. With children's adequate exposure to the language of their immediate environment or first language or mother tongue (L1), they gradually develop ability in the language effortlessly and they use them naturally in communicative situations. But second or foreign language (L2) learning is quite different and challenging scenario because it is learned in a totally artificial environment. This results in all the attendant problems experienced in second language learning. The essence of this exploration is to reveal the difference between first language acquisition and second language learning. This inquiry is anchored on the theory of language acquisition and Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which explain how our world views affect the manner we use language. This study reveals that language acquisition is informal while language learning is formal.

**KEY WORDS:** Language, Language Acquisition, Language Learning, First Language and Second Language

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Language is a human instrument of expression both in the first language and in the second language situations. Human language is a signalling system which uses vocal sounds as its materials. Language by and large is a system through which human beings use literary signs and symbols to express their feelings, thoughts and ideas. Right from early stage, a native speaker of a language acquires his or her language from the time he is able to produce some sounds of his language. The child begins with a strong motivation to learn his mother tongue out of the desire to communicate with the people within his immediate environment. As a result of his innate ability he makes a steady progress in his bid to master his mother tongue. This indicates that children do not need explicit instruction to learn their first language but they seem to just pick the language up in the same manner they learn to roll over, crawl and walk. So, first language in children happens unconsciously because they have innate ability to acquire language. (LAD) Therefore, first language acquisition occurs unconsciously through implicit learning. Moreover, the learner is highly motivated and surrounded by a conducive linguistic environment. He hears the language all day long at home, at school, at play, in the classroom when rebuked and praised. As a result, the native speaker has intuitions about his dialectal grammar, about the features of the standard language grammar. He has a unique capacity to write creatively in literature, jokes and so on. All these come easy because he belongs to the sociolinguistic group that has unavoidably transmitted it into him. Conversely, the learning of a second language (L2) is a different and challenging scenario. The second language learner learns his language in an artificial environment and manner, which is quite different from the natural way and environment, a mother tongue is acquired. He thereby faces a lot of obstacles as he tries to achieve

some competence in the language. Prominent among these obstacles is the conflict between his native language and the new language- target language. This is the greatest bane of his linguistic life. This happens because by the time he begins to learn the second language; the habits of his first language have already been entrenched in his mind as part of his behaviour. Consequently, the interference of the system of the first language becomes inevitable, so, the second language learner meets with a lot of learning problems in the phonological, semantic and grammatical structural systems of the languages, especially in the learning of English language. This inquiry therefore is focused on the distinction between language learning and language acquisition; thus, the informality of first language and formality of second language communicative social situations. However, the main purpose of this work is to show the differences in language learning and language acquisition. Specifically, this study will:

1. Show the process of language acquisition,
2. Examine the process of adult language learning,
3. Explain the relationship between language and thought.

## **II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION**

### **Language**

It was Angela Carter who defines language as power, life and instrument of culture, domination and liberation. This explication gives impetus to the acquisition or learning of language as a result of usefulness of language. Consequently, Althchison (1983) defines language as a patterned system of arbitrary sound signals, characterized by structure, dependence, creativity, displacement, duality and cultural transmission. In his view, Pyles (1972) says language is a systematized combination of sounds which have meaning for all persons in a given speech community. Udofot (2011) describes language as the means by which people from the same and related communities interact and express their thoughts and feelings to one another. Sapir in Udofot (2011, p.2) gives a classical explanation of language as:

a purely human and non instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.

Hall in Udofot (2011, p.5) gives a famous definition of language as “the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols. Language is also seen as a social phenomenon. Thus, language is described as a system of signals, including voice, sounds, gestures or written symbols which encodes and decode information. However, languages are not just sets of symbols. They also often conform to a rough grammar or system of rules, used to manipulate the symbols. What is more important here is that language is constructed by humans who live in communities to express their way of live and needs. So, whatever system of rules and symbols a language possesses are given to it by its speakers. No matter how language is defined, the chief end of language is to communicate ideas within a social context. Thus, the essence of language is communication. Udofot (2011) therefore reveals that language is normally organised into patterns-phonetic and graphic and has specific characteristics. The whole explications given above imply that information expressed by language has to be meaningful to the hearer otherwise communication or interaction does not take place. This is the reason Gimson in Udofot (2011, p.3) describes language as:

a system of conventional signals used for communicational signals for communication by a whole community. This pattern of conventions covers a system of significant sound units, the inflection and arrangement of words and the association of meaning with words.

### **Language Acquisition**

Language acquisition is the manner of learning a language by immersion. Language acquisition is a product of subconscious process which is informal or natural way of gaining the knowledge of the language. Here, language is not taught to children. A child just picks up his native or first language or mother tongue just being around his parents, siblings and other people in his environment. The child acquires the language without any conscious thought, effort or study. The child acquires his mother tongue through imitation and interaction with his parents and the environment that surrounds him. His need to communicate paves the way for language acquisition to take place. This happens because there is an innate capacity in every human being to acquire language or languages if adequately exposed to these numbers of languages. Consequently, at five years, a child can express ideas clearly and almost perfectly from the point of view of language and grammar. It is surprising that although parents or teachers never explain to the children the workings of their language the child's utterances show a perfect or almost perfect command of the rules and patterns of the language. This means that a first language is acquired through exposure to the language and meaningful communication and not through a systematic study of any kind. Thus, the child needs a source of natural communication (Julio Foppoh) online. Baldeh (1990) adds that the child learning his mother tongue is surrounded by his parents, brothers, sisters, his peers and the immediate community such that within an incredible short time he has developed a large

vocabulary which puts him in good stead to master his environment and language. He hears his mother tongue every waking moment of his life. Subsequently, acquiring his mother tongue is an inevitable process. More so for all his numerous needs he communicates in this all important language. He is consequently forced to learn his mother tongue. This he does fast, spontaneously and effortlessly. As a result, at the age of five he has acquired the grammar of his native languages. Baldeh (1990, p.50) therefore commands to teachers, especially English to make it possible for the child to bring to the fore his innate language capacity. This he should do thorough concentrating on the teaching of creative expression. English grammar teaching therefore should be minimal just to sensitize the U learner to the complexities of his own language- to make explicit what he knows implicitly.

### **Language Learning**

Language learning is associated with second language acquisition. It is a more difficult experience than the first language acquisition. It is the opposite of language acquisition. It is a structural learning of a language. It is a process of learning languages in addition to the native languages. The term, language learning is used to describe any language whose acquisition starts after early childhood, including the third or subsequent language learned. Therefore, Baldeh (1990) agrees that second language learning is more complex, more time-consuming, and more demanding. He cited a Nigerian learner of English who already has a language, in some cases he knows two or more of the national languages and he grabbles with a foreign one known as English Language. This is why [Order task in Baldeh (1990, p.50)] puts in this herculean succinctly thus: learning a second language after we have acquired verbal behaviour (in the mother tongue manifestation) is a matter of adaptation or extension of existing skills and knowledge rather than the relearning of a completely new sets of skills from scratch.

In order to communicate his feelings, thought or attitudes, he falls back on the system of his mother tongue, thus, the conflict between the linguistic system of the first language and the second or foreign languages. This leads to mother tongue interference and all the problems experienced in the learning of the second language especially in the English language in the phonological, semantic and grammatic levels. These entire problems emanate because second language learning and teaching are characterized by artificiality and hostility. Baldeh therefore recommends that second language especially English language teaching be rooted and grounded in grammar but the aim should be for our students to be able to express their thoughts, facts or feelings accurately. This is in tandem with the words of Mackey in Baldeh (1990, p.51). the purpose of composition in a second language is to drill the learner in the use of the language, not in the use of his imagination ".It is no exaggeration to say that the teaching of a second language is, in varying degrees, the teaching of the difficulties encountered by the learners of the language. Therefore, the examination in a second language context must in part address itself to those structures that give perennial problems to the learners.

### **Difference between Language Acquisition and Language Learning**

Language acquisition is the manner of learning a language by immersion. It provides the students with the practical knowledge of the language whereas, language learning focuses on providing theoretical knowledge of a language. Language is the primary form of communication that humans use. However, language is not something that is taught to children. Children will pick up their native language just by being around other people, mainly their families. This is called language acquisition. The child acquires the language without any conscious thought or study. In fact, by the time a child is four years old, he/she can express ideas clearly and almost perfectly from the point of view of language and grammar. This is despite any formal studying of the language. Language learning, on the other hand, is a structured learning of a language. This is the process that most people follow when trying to learn another language. Here, the student is made to study lists of vocabularies, as well as sentences, structures and grammars. This is the most common method used in schools and language learning centres. Language learning is generally considered to be a slower process than language acquisition. There are people who study a language for years without mastering it. The main difference between language acquisition and language learning is that language acquisition is the manner of learning a language by immersion. It provides the student with the practical knowledge of the language, for example, the student might not know the grammar rule but is still able to immaculately converse with a native; whereas, language learning focuses on providing theoretical knowledge of a language. In this case, the student might know all the proper grammar rules and the correct ways of sentence structuring, but might still lack the confidence to have a conversation with a native. Language learning is seen as formal (what is done in the classroom or other formal situations), while language acquisition is seen as natural" (which is not necessarily taught but naturally acquired).

**Comparison between Language Acquisition and Language Learning**

	<b>Language Acquisition</b>	<b>Language Learning</b>
Meaning	Picking up a language	Studying a language
Focus	Practical knowledge	Theoretical knowledge
Method	Unconscious, inexplicit	Conscious, explicit
Situation	Informal situations	Formal situations
Grammar	Does not use grammatical rules	Use grammatical rule
Dependency	Depends on attitude	Depends aptitude
Order of learning	stable order of learning	Simple comprehensive order of learning

**THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL WORKS ON LANGUAGE LEARNING AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

**Competence and Performance**

Chomsky (1965) coined the term competence to account for the unconscious knowledge speakers have of their language. This unconscious knowledge refers to what someone knows about the language, the mental representation of the language (Franken and Rodman, 1981). To clarify this, we look at Saussure's distinction between "langue" and "parole" in (Awa, 2014). He describes "Langue" as a system of rules, which are common to speakers of a language, such as English while "parole" relates to the exact use of these rules, which speakers and writers make on different occasions. Chomsky (1965) also differentiates between "competence" and "performance". While 'competence' is the innate knowledge, which a native speaker possesses about his or her language 'Performance' therefore, refers to the actual use of the language in real-life situations. Competence, however, has been subdivided into two broad areas, namely linguistic competence and communicative competence. O Grady, Dobrovolsky and Aronoff (1993) define linguistic competence as the ability speakers have to produce and understand an unlimited number of sentences including many that are novel or unfamiliar. Normally, language users speak a language without consciously knowing about the rules governing it that is the grammar behind it. For this reason, some authors refer to **linguistic competence as grammatical competence**. This knowledge has five main components: phonological, syntactic, semantic, lexical and morphological. Phonological competence refers to the knowledge speakers have of the sounds and possible sound combination of a language. Syntactic competence refers to the knowledge the speakers have about the possible syntactic combination of their language. Semantic competence refers to the knowledge speakers have of the meanings of words in their language. Lexical competence refers to the knowledge speakers have of an extensive amount of words in their language. It also refers to the ability that speakers have to use these words according to the appropriate context. Morphological competence refers to the knowledge speakers have of the formation of words in their language or better said word structure. Communicative competence is a broad term that involves not only the structural features of language, but also its social, pragmatic and contextual features or characteristics. Therefore, it is necessary to understand communicative competence as the sum of a series of competencies. Performance can be seen as the physical representation, usually in utterances of any type of the human competence (Chomsky, 1965). It refers to "how" someone uses language. Chomsky considered performance as a faulty representation of competence because of psychological restricting such as memory lapses and limitations, distractions, changes of directions, halfway through sentence hesitation and so on. Performance, in a way, accounts for the failure language users have when they transpose their competence into actual linguistic production.

**Language and Thought**

Linguists have been doing research on the relationship between the language we speak and our thought. Some of the questions they ask are " which one comes first: Language or thought? Do we think before we talk or our language shapes our thought? How does thought translate into language? And so forth. However, the general feeling is that we think in the language we speak. For instance, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis stipulates that the structure of our mother tongue influences the way our minds perceive the world we live in. Speakers of different languages notice different things and so make different distinctions. Bloom points out that there exists a universal core of meaningful distinctions that all humans share, but other distinctions that people make are shaped by the forces of language. On the other hand, language learning might really be the act of learning to express ideas that already exist. The classical theories of the relation between language and thought in development psychology are those of Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget (2007 ) claims that language depends on thought for its development, and it is based on four sources of accident: the period of infancy, in which fundamental principles of thought are exhibited well before language; the simultaneous emergence of language, deferred imitation, symbolic play, evocative memory, and mental imagery. They suggest that language is but one outcome of more foundational changes in cognitive abilities. The lack of effect of language upon reasoning

abilities in middle childhood and the nature of speech in early childhood, the claim being that the communicative function of speech results from cognitive developments. By contrast Vygotsky (1962) while seeing thought and language as initially separate systems, considers the two merge at around two years of age, producing verbal thought. Mental operations are regarded as embodied in the structure of language and hence cognitive development results from an internalization of language.

### **Second Language Acquisition/Learning**

Second language learning is the process by which people learn languages in addition to their native language(s). The term second language is used to describe any language whose acquisition starts after early childhood (including what may be the third or subsequent languages learned) scholars (for example Krashen (1981) often differentiate language learning from language acquisition. The former being seen as formal (what is done in the classroom or other formal situations), while the latter is seen as “natural” (which is not necessarily taught but naturally acquired). However, today, most scholars use the terms interchangeably. Applied linguists focus more on the experience of the learner in the classroom. While most psycholinguists focus on the processes a child goes through to acquire a language. Krashen (1981), opines that language acquisition is a subconscious process unlike the way a child learns language. Children are not consciously aware of the grammatical rules of the language, but rather develop a “feel” for correctness. Language acquisition is picking up a language instinctively. 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. The acquisition / learning distinction hypothesis claims that adults do not lose the ability to acquire languages the way children do. Research shows that error correction has little effect on children learning a first language and on those learning second language. Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition consists of five main hypotheses:

### **The Acquisition/Learning**

Really, distinction is the most fundamental of all the hypotheses in Krashen’s theory and the most widely known among linguists and language practitioners. For Krashen, there are two independent system of second language performance the acquired system” and “the learned system”. The acquired system or acquisition is the product of a subconscious process, very similar to the process children undergo when they acquire their first language. It acquires meaningful interaction in the target language natural communication – in which speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances but in the communicative act. Learning is the product of formal instruction and it comprised a conscious process which results in conscious knowledge “about” the language, for example knowledge of grammar rules. According to Krashen, learning is less important than acquisition.”

### **The Monitor Hypothesis**

The monitor hypothesis explains the relationship between acquisition and learning and defines the influences of the latter on the former. The monitoring function is the practical result of the learned grammar. According to Krashen, the acquisition system is the utterance initiator, while the learning system performs the role of the “monitor” or the “editor”. The “monitor” acts in a planning, editing and correcting function when three specific conditions are met that is, the second language learner has sufficient time at his/her disposal, he/she focuses on form or thinks about correctness, and he/she knows the rules.

### **The Natural Order Hypotheses**

The natural order hypothesis is based on research findings (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Fathman, 1975; Makino, 1980 cited in Krashen 1987), which suggested that the acquisition of grammatical structures follows a “natural order” which is predictable. For a given language, some grammatical structures tend to be acquired early, others late. This order seemed to be independent of the learners’ age, L1 background; conditions of exposure, and although the agreement between individual acquires was not always 100% in the studies, there were statistically significant similarities that reinforced the existence of a natural order of language acquisition. Krashen however points out that the implication of the natural order hypothesis is not that a language programme syllabus should be based on the order found in the studies. In fact, he rejects grammatical sequencing when the goal is language acquisition.

### **The Input Hypothesis**

The input hypothesis is Krashen’s attempt to explain how the learner acquires a second language. In other words, this hypothesis is Krashen’s explanation of how second language acquisition takes place. So, the input hypothesis is only concerned with “acquisition”, not “learning”. According to this hypothesis, the learner improves and progresses along the “natural order” when he/she receives second language “input” that

is one step beyond his/her current stage of linguistic competence. For example, if a learner is at a stage “ 1” , then acquisition takes place when he/she is exposed to “ comprehensible input” that belongs to level “ 1 + 1” since not all of the learners can be at the same level of linguist competence at the same time, Krashen suggests that natural communicative input is the key to designing a syllabus, ensuring in this way that each learner will receive some “ 1 + 1” input that is appropriate for his/her current stage o linguistic competence.

### **Affective Filter Hypothesis**

Finally, the fifth hypothesis, the affective filter hypothesis, embodies Krashen’s view that a number of affective variables’ play a facilitative, but non-casual, role in second language acquisition. These variables include: motivation, self confidence and anxiety. Krashen claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. Low motivation, low self-esteem, and initiating anxiety can combine to raise” the effective filter and form a “ mental block” that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. In other words, when the filter is “ up” it impedes language acquisition. On the other hand, positive affect is necessary, but not sufficient on its own, for acquisition to take place.

### **Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**

The Sapir-Whorf theory, named after the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, is a mould theory of language. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf brought attention to the relationship between language, thought, and culture. Neither of them formally wrote the hypothesis nor supported it with empirical evidence, but through a thorough study of their writings about linguistics, researchers have found two main ideas. Writing in 1929, Sapir argued in a classic passage that: Human beings do not live in the objective world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the real world is to a large extent unconscious built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached...we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation (Sapir, 1929, P.69). This position was extended in the 1930s by his student Whorf (Whorf, 1940, P213-214) who in another widely cited passage declared that:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face: On the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impression which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, and implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.

It was on the basis of these statements by the two scholars that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was formulated. Whorf distanced himself from the behaviourist stance that thinking is entirely linguistic (Whorf, P.1956:66). In its most extreme version the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” can be described as consisting of two associated principles. According to the first, linguistic determinism, our thinking is determined by language. According to the second, linguistic relativity, people who speak different language perceive and think about the word quite differently.

## **III. CONCLUSION**

Language is power. Language is freedom. This necessitates the acquisition or learning of languages as first or second. The first language acquisition is a natural and unconscious experience because of its conducive learning environment- a child hears it all day long- at home, school, when rebuked and when praised. He cannot help but acquire it. Learning of a second or a foreign language is a more herculean experience because it is learned in a most artificial environment when the learner must have had a first language and his mind is more or not fully developed.

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