

## **Second Language Acquisition: A Case Study**

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**Abstract:** *The case study presented here, deals with the subject of second language acquisition making at the same time an effort to show as much as possible how L<sub>1</sub> was acquired and the ways L<sub>1</sub> affected L<sub>2</sub>, through the process of examining a Greek girl who has been exposed to the English language from the age of eight. Furthermore, I had the chance to analyze the method used by the frontistirio teachers and in what ways this method helps or negatively influences children regarding their performance in the four basic skills. We will evaluate the evidence acquired by the girl by studying briefly the basic theories provided by important figures in the field of L<sub>2</sub>. Finally, I will also include my personal suggestions and the improvement of the child's abilities and I will state my opinion clearly.*

**Keywords:** *case study, children, Greece, second language acquisition, skills.*

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### **I. Introduction**

According to the findings of the case study examined here, concerning issues such as age, social and family background, personal characteristics, age, sex, motivation, environment, parental education, and financial situation, we will have the chance to understand how the above factors played either a negative or a positive role in acquiring L<sub>2</sub>.

### **II. Difference Between L1 And L2**

The basic difference between L<sub>1</sub> and L<sub>2</sub> is that the former is remarkable for the speed with which it takes place (usually during infancy). The important element is that by the age of five the child has acquired a great part of the basics of the language while acquiring L<sub>2</sub> requires a set of paragon and methods to develop the proficiency of the language. L<sub>2</sub> refers to the gradual development of ability in a language by using it naturally in communicative situations<sup>(1)</sup>.

### **III. Acquisition And Learning**

Some researchers distinguish between acquisition and learning. Acquisition refers to the subconscious process of "picking up" a language through exposure; on the other hand, learning is related to the conscious process of studying it<sup>(2)</sup>.

### **What Is A Case Study?**

A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; one not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used<sup>(3)</sup>. The most common type of CS [case study] involves the detailed description and analysis of an individual subject, from whom observations, interviews, and (family) histories provide the database<sup>(4)</sup>.

### **Historical Review**

In applied linguistics, the case study has been employed principally as a tool to trace the language development of the first and second language learners<sup>(5)</sup>. Thus, we should take a look to previous important case studies concerning language acquisition. A notable case is that of Genie, a 13-year-old who had spent most of her life tied to a chair locked in a small room. Her father was intolerant of any kind of noise and had beaten Genie whenever she made a noise. Moreover, there had been no radio or television and the child's only human contact was forbidden to spend more than a few minutes with her, only long enough to feed her. Genie had spent her whole life in a state of physical, sensory and psychological deprivation. As a conclusion, Genie was unable to use language, but when she was brought into care she began to respond, trying to imitate sounds and

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<sup>(1)</sup> Yule, *The Study of Language*, pp. 175-191

<sup>(2)</sup> Ellis, *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, pp. 14-15

<sup>(3)</sup> Nunan, *Research Methods in Language Learning* pp.76-78

<sup>(4)</sup> Nunan, *Research Methods in Language Learning*, pp. 76-78

<sup>(5)</sup> Nunan, *Research Methods in Language Learning*, pp. 76-78

communicate. Her syntax remained simple. This case provides some evidence against the notion that language cannot be acquired after the critical period (up until puberty); it can be acquired but not fully and not in a proficient level<sup>(6)</sup>.

#### **IV. Research Method Used**

The oral interview has been widely used as a research tool especially in psychology and applied linguistics. It has been used by second language acquisition researchers seeking data on stages and processes of acquisition<sup>(7)</sup>. Obviously, the research method I used is the one of interview, both of the child and his parents. The main purpose of interviewing both sides is that of having more accurate findings, being more objective and also becoming more familiar with the general idea about language that exists in the family (see Appendix p.1).N Another method I used is tape recording because the child examined is not affected negatively by the fact that everything we talk about is recorded. She is not a shy child. The interview lasted almost 2 hours and naturally took place at the girl's house. I would like to mention here that the discussion with the parents was held in Greek, since neither of them speaks English. The conversation with the girl was held in both languages.

#### **V. Family And Social Background**

Firstly, I should introduce the girl. Her name is "Ioanna L.", she is fourteen years old and she lives in an area that is close to Athens. Her family is a typical middle class Greek family. She has two sisters and an older brother who lives abroad. From what I have experienced, being a long time acquaintance of the family due to the fact that we were neighbors, I could say that there are exceptionally strong love bonds between the mother and the children. The father is more distant towards his children, which by no means indicates he doesn't care about them. However, he expresses his love in his own unique way. Both parents have an adequate educational background; they have finished high school and more specifically the father is a graduate of an Institution of Electronics and Engineers. Furthermore, they both work. Their financial situation is good enough to pay for four to six hours of private lessons per week.

#### **VI. Personal Characteristics**

"Ioanna L." is a young teenage girl; she is a very good student, a hyperactive child, adorable and sweet. She has a very communicative personality and generally I can say that she is very extrovert. She likes to attend conversations between older people in order to learn more things. She is mature enough to understand basic issues and discuss about them. Issues like her future studies, since her dream is to become a primary school teacher. She is not cooperative in learning foreign languages, specifically English, even though she understands that it is required to have knowledge in English because it is an international language used everywhere. She didn't start English because she wanted to, but in order to please her parents, who had this desire. She isn't really motivated to learn English, so here I could say that her English teacher will face a difficulty.

#### **First Language Acquisition**

"Ioanna L.", based on her mother's words, started to understand and react to language at the age of one. She confused baby-talk words (caretaker speech) with the correct ones. For example, in the village a lot of mothers use the phoneme "ai" for the word "water", so the child muddles up "ai" and "water". When the baby says "ai" it means that he/she wants to drink water. Furthermore, she speaks according to the existing dialect and she has the accent used in this particular geographical area.

#### **Second Language Acquisition**

"Ioanna L.", just like the majority of Greek children, went to a frontistirio to learn English. The process of learning the second language began at the age of eight. It is true that it wasn't difficult for her to adapt to the system of the frontistirio. As expected in the L<sub>2</sub> she produced overgeneralizations as a result of the L<sub>1</sub>. She transferred Greek expressions into English and she still does that; obviously, this way isn't effective for L<sub>2</sub> communication (negative transfer). I should mention that "Ioanna L." didn't have any previous experience with English and that because her parents wanted her first to learn Greek (mother language) perfectly or at least in a very good level. "Ioanna L." spends three hours every week to the frontistirio doing mainly exercises related to grammar (grammar – translation method) and writing.

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<sup>(6)</sup> Yule, *The Study of Language*, p. 171

<sup>(7)</sup> Nunan, *Research Methods in Language Learning*, p. 149

### Speaking

The ability to speak presupposes not only a firm knowledge of language features (grammar) but also the ability to process information and language “on the spot”<sup>(8)</sup>. The whole purpose of referring to the above statement is because “Ioanna L.” cannot speak English spontaneously and generally she cannot communicate easily with a native speaker of English due to the fact that the process she follows is to think in Greek and translate in English. From that I can conclude that the speaking section is not included in the program or method of the frontistirio.

### Listening

Another important skill for the learner, especially the non-native speaker of the language, is the listening skill. It is especially important since it provides the perfect opportunity to listen to voices other than the teacher’s, enables students to acquire good habits as a result of the spoken English they absorb, and helps to improve their own vocabulary and pronunciation<sup>(9)</sup>. From what I saw, “Ioanna L.” understands the conversations she hears; she catches the general meaning even if she doesn’t know many words or expressions from the discussion.

### Reading

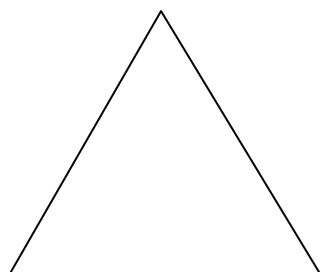
“Ioanna L.” couldn’t read extensive passages at the beginning, but now she is able to read whole texts and I believe she can read books easily, since she loves reading. Sometimes she gets stuck on words or phrases without having a basic meaning for the text. To get maximum benefit from their reading students need to be involved in both extensive and intensive reading. One of the fundamental conditions of a successful extensive reading program is that students should be reading material they can understand. The intensive reading makes learners realize that they shouldn’t feel desperate if they don’t understand every single word in a text. It seems contradictory to insist that students “read for meaning” while simultaneously discouraging them from trying to understand the text at a deeper level than merely gist<sup>(10)</sup>.

### Writing

Another skill of great importance is writing which is strongly related to speaking. They both belong to communication and combining these two skills we can say that a learner is capable of interacting with other speakers or generally people through discussions or personal letters and written assignments.

#### Oral Communication

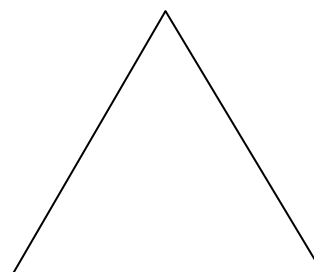
Utterance



Speaker ↔ Listener

#### Written Communication

text



Writer ↔ Reader

Written text has a number of conventions which separate it from speaking. Apart from differences in grammar and vocabulary, there are issues of letter, word and text formation, manifested by handwriting, spelling, layout and punctuation<sup>(11)</sup>. In this specific case, “Ioanna L.” doesn’t have a serious handwriting problem (the reader can easily understand her writing) and her spelling is absolutely correct; there is a slight problem with punctuation. She knows how to organize a text and she is able to write letters with fluency.

## VII. Recommendations-Personal Opinion

After the above findings about “Ioanna L.”’s skills, I will try to make recommendations concerning her progress; it’s not difficult to realize that the only serious problem she faces is in the speaking section but she can be improved through discussions in the classroom (communicative approach) and by the method of drilling (audio lingual method). I believe that with a lot of practice she will manage to improve herself, especially in this

<sup>(8)</sup> Harmer, The Practice of ELT, p. 270

<sup>(9)</sup> Harmer, The Practice of ELT, p. 228

<sup>(10)</sup> Harmer, The Practice of ELT, p. 214

<sup>(11)</sup> Harmer, The Study of ELT, pp. 255-258

skill since it is the problematic one. As far as the other three basic skills, I honestly think that she is improving daily but it would be helpful for her to watch movies without subtitles or subtitles in the English language, so she can see words, phrases and their spelling. Another activity is to start reading books in English and as a result she will practice English and learn new words, so she can use them in either speaking or writing.

### VIII. Conclusion

As a conclusion, I would like to express my feeling of satisfaction and personal fulfillment due to the great experience I had doing this research concerning second language acquisition. I could have written more about the child examined but this requires a lot of analysis which, unfortunately, there is no opportunity to conduct. It was very useful for me to observe an individual in an issue of great concern in the field of language. I hope the above issues presented in this case study have been adequately explained.

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Some of her Publications: **Koutsompou Violetta-Irene**, "Young Learners: How advantageous is the early start?" *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* Vol. 15, Issue 5 (Sep. - Oct. 2013), pp 27-37

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