**Overview**

One of the miracles of early childhood is the acquisition of one’s mother tongue. Barring extreme circumstances, a child will seemingly effortlessly pick up one’s native language without books, audio tapes, or formalized instruction. From babbling to development of grammatical morphemes, to fully grown vocabularies and sentence structures, L1 development is an essential yet nearly infallible part of childhood. However, when the language acquisition process shifts from one’s native language to a second language, one need look no further than the countless studies performed on the (in)ability of students, of various ages, to learn a second or foreign language in a classroom, not to mention the practical experience of both educators and language learners. As such, in what capacities are these two learning systems similar or different, and what factors are responsible for these similarities or discrepancies?

Toward shedding light on this discussion, this paper shall first examine theories of L1 acquisition to get a firm grasp at how children learn their first language. Then, the counterparts to these theories in the L2 shall be observed with a consideration and analysis of the practical elements of the L2 classroom that either aid or inhibit such learning outcomes, including affective factors that are unique to the L2 experience. Although not exclusive to it, many of these issues will be analyzed through the lens of L2 the education process in Japan.

L1 Acquisition Process

Though we have millions of new cases of first language learners every year, we still do not fully understand exactly how children are so adept and successful at learning their first language.

However, a few major hypotheses have arisen over the last seventy years that attempt to explain this phenomenon. If we wish to understand the difference between learning in a classroom and a child’s road to language fluency, we must first understand the various prominent theories of first language acquisition.

**How Children Talk**

A child’s L1 acquisition can be broken down into several steps of competence. After babbling, where it is shown that children can already understand the difference between distinct phonemes in the L1, children begin to create two-word sentences, such as “Daddy bye-bye” or “No chair” that, while non-grammatical, relay distinct function and meaning. As time passes, children grow more comfortable with grammatical forms of negation and questions, to where they are able to express more complex thoughts clearly (Lightbrown and Spada 2006). The process is not without bumps in the road, with overextensions (i.e. erroneously attributing a word to a larger group, such

as “cow” to all four-legged animals), underextensions (i.e. failure to realize a word may have multiple contexts or usages), or overgeneralizations (i.e. improper verb conjugations based on known grammatical patterns) leading to improper language use (O’Grady and Cho 2001).

However, having learned from these mistakes, a normal child will emerge fluent in his or her native language by the age of four. How does this language ascension happen so quickly?

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demonstrating that they grasp grammatical concepts that allow them to say whatever they want

to say. O’Grady and Cho (2001) note that “simple memorization of a fixed inventory of words and sentences would not equip learners to deal with previously unheard utterances – a basic requisite of normal language use.”

Further behavior theorists expanded the theory to include language frames, or patterns of sentence construction, based initially on imitation, but allowing room for expansion of natural creativity (Brown 2007). However, critics still decried the lack of focus on social interaction and failure to account for wider language abstractions within this theory.

**Theories of language acquisition**

**Behaviorist Theory**

Coming to light in the mid-twentieth century, the behaviorist theory of language acquisition argued that children learn language primarily through the imitation of those around them (Lightbrown and Spada 2006). A child, seeking positive reinforcement, would attempt to reproduce the language he or she hears until such language becomes habitual. Utterances that do not produce the desired response are weeded out, while those that do result in the desired effect are reproduced again. Thus, through constant trial and error, a child is able to put together enough language to develop a communicable pattern that gets the desired results.

However, the behaviorist theory is not without its critics. Brown (2007) points out that the behaviorist theor y does not account for language’s abstract qualities; that is, following this theory, how could one utter a thought or idea that has never been uttered before? Children show an innate knack for creativity in language, yet they show few signs of imitating adults when doing so, instead

**Nativist Theory**

Chomsky’s nativist theory postulated that humans are born with an innate ability to comprehend language and grammar. Rather than putting the emphasis on the environment, Chomsky argued that the child’s inborn ability to acquire L1 is no different than learning countless other essential skills, and that the learning environment only determines which language a child will learn.

Macneill (1996, in Brown 2007) describes children’s minds to contain language acquisition devices, which allow children to understand which sounds and utterances are relevant to speech, organize and store the data for later use, and reject data that is not relevant to the linguistic system. Later theorists advanced the notion of universal grammar, or a blanket language template that is able to be molded to the L1 based on the input a child receives (Brown 2007). Chomsky’s theories helped fill in holes left by the behaviorists. If children possess an innate ability to understand, create, and manipulate language, it will likely quickly lead to the originality and creativity found in young first language learners. Nativist theorists first presented the critical period hypothesis, stating that humans are programmed to acquire L1 during a specific time in their lives, specifically, childhood. Beyond that age, the hypothesis states, a child or adult will never learn a language at the same level as their native language. While generally believed for a child’s L1 acquisition, there is debate as to whether or not this hypothesis holds true toward a timeframe for L2 acquisition.

**Developmental Theory**

Still other theorists argue that the primary base of language acquisition is interaction within one’s learning environment. While acknowledging there are brain processes at work that cultivate one’s understanding of L1, Lightbrown and Spada (2006) content that children can acquire the essential fundamentals of their L1 through freely available everyday receptive and productive interactions with their surroundings.

This concept can be expanded to acquiring one’s native culture. Children are born into the world with no concept of culture. From day one, however, their world view begins to take shape around them, with language being a key factor. The language we speak, be it the words we have (or do not have) to describe objects, feelings, or concepts, or the way language creates paradigms of formality, politeness, and appropriateness, sculpts our sense of what is important and to be highlighted in our culture. It is through these interactions that we become a functioning member of our society, not only linguistically, but also socially. As an example, Japanese children are exposed to several layers of language formality to be used in different social contexts that communicate similar or even identical ideas. Proper utilization of these layers may differ depending on the individual child, but there is no arguing that children are aware of them and can understand the roots of the reaction (either positive or negative) they receive from adults when utilizing the language themselves, thus socializing themselves toward a cultural medium that would be considered foreign in another culture with a different linguistic formality structure.

**L2 Acquisition and Variables**

To what extent then is L2 language acquisition similar to the theories of its L1 counterpart, and what additional acquisition variables are present when students learn their second language?

Theories of Second Language Acquisition

Both the behaviorist and nativist theories have their counterparts in L2 acquisition: behaviorists

see L2 acquisition as the repetition of patterns of native speakers (leading to the development of

the audiolingual method), while nativists continued their push of universal grammar, stating that learners adapt their learning acquisition devices to develop command of new grammar systems

beyond the input they receive in classes. These theorists analyze the success of L2 learners in their grammatical resemblance of native speakers. However, Lightbrown and Spada (2006) caution that “linguists have concluded that something [besides universal grammar] is required for second language acquisition since it so often falls short of success.”

Newer theories of second language acquisition focus on interaction as a key factor. While some

sociocultural theorists say that external interactions make up the root of all language acquisition, while others suggest these interactions act more as a springboard from which learners can begin to better cultivate their understanding of language, both would agree that negotiation of meaning, especially when in a difficult linguistic situation, encourages learners to formulate more comprehensible output and thus further their level of language acquisition (Lightbrown and Spada

2006).

**The Classroom as Learning Environment**

No matter which theory is used to understand first language acquisition, there is an undeniable difference between the learning context of a child learning L1 with his or her family and a student learning L2 in a classroom. In the former, the learning environment is everyday life: whether spending time at home, grocery shopping, or going to the movies, a child is acquiring L1 simply by absorbing the world around him or her.

Compare the above, however, to a classroom. In the traditional sense, a classroom is an intransient environment, complete with desks, a teaching podium, and a blackboard.

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While this may be conducive to schooling, as schools could hardly operate if students were allowed to wander around all day, the static environment is hardly conducive toward the facilitation

of L2 acquisition. Students cannot be out in the world, cannot learn through everyday life, and

instead are required to sit at desks, often with a teacher lecturing to them.

Upon utilization of more communicative teaching methods, such as Communicative Language

Teaching or Task-Based Learning, the latter of which is employed by the Bunkyo English

Communication Center at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women’s University, the classroom may become a more dynamic environment. In these teaching methods, teachers attempt to facilitate the negotiation of meaning between students in the target language, a construct similar to the developmental theory of L1 acquisition. These methods encourage interactive communication while demonstrating a genuine need for information transfer, both increasing learners’ language spontaneity and developing communicative competence. Skehan et al (1996), however, point out that such linguistic negotiation is often reliant upon prefabricated phrases and meanings. Speakers in their L1 can employ such phrases to both save time and build upon shared background knowledge of the task’s context with their partner. Once this operation switches to the L2, as learners conduct the task under the pressures of a limited time frame, students may become too reliant on already learned linguistic chunks rather than incorporating the new language of the task, in addition to paying less attention to new linguistic forms if they are present in the instruction, thus potentially curtailing their long-term progress (Skehan et al 1996). Furthermore, considering the Japanese scholastic context, these methods are less likely to be adopted due to their relatively recent development and a lack of instructor training and/or instructor confidence in his or her own L2 ability in the case of non-native teachers.

At the other end of the spectrum, more static methods, such as the audiolingual method or grammar translation method, are still widespread in today’s schools. In such classrooms, little transfer of meaning takes place between students, and often, students have very little reason to

open their mouths during the lesson but to repeat what the teacher writes on the board. While

these methods have their purpose, especially in terms of strengthening syntactic understanding

of the L2, they vary greatly from the patterns of L1 acquisition in children. Cook (1969) argues

that these methods do not allow learners to mimic their own L1 acquisition, as the process of

creating incomplete utterances are rejected in favor of complete, corrected sentences toward a

preferred form. As a result, natural patterns of experimentation and creativity, which lead toward linguistic competence and confidence are stifled in order to focus on grammatical accuracy.

**L1 vs. L2 Acquisition** text, the danger of text that is too contrived is the inability to glean much real linguistic value from it. Especially when taught through grammar translation, it is much more difficult for one to add grammar taught through contrived sentence patterns (sometimes hardly resembling a sentence a normal human would say!) into one’s spontaneous language use. Furthermore, textbooks (and teachers) may overemphasize some grammatical patterns and underemphasize others as part of a larger syllabus, even though the language taught does not quite match native L2 usage

(Lightbrown and Spada 2006).

**Time and Setting**

Another factor that complicates L2 acquisition is that students are busy with a variety of subjects that may limit the time dedicated toward L2 learning. In Japan, for example, an average student in junior high school studies English only three hours a week. Couple this with Japan being a highly EFL environment (little opportunity is available to speak English outside of the classroom), and teachers are faced with pressure to pack in as much as they can into those three hours, often leading to learning situations that are highly abnormal when viewed through the lens of L1 acquisition. LaVan (2001) notes that adolescent learners are much more likely to use L1 with each

other even in an immersion setting, as being able to communicate freely and easily is essential in establishing social identity. Lacking the necessary linguistic competence to build these relationships in L2, students will see the L2 as an “official” or “classroom” language, while the L1 remains the dominant language of social networks and spontaneous interaction. As an L2 teacher, it is important to recognize that L1 language use will nearly undoubtedly persist, and that promotion and encouragement of L2 usage is more likely to lead to fruition than attempting to stamp out any usage of L1 in the classroom (LaVan 2001).