SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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According to Dulay and Burt (1973), second language acquisition is only a recapitulation of the first language acquisition, that is, of the vernacular. Because vernacular acquisition happens at a very early age and in a very naturalistic environment (thus the term Mother Tongue Approach), Dulay and Burt (1973) argued that the acquisition of conversational language is much different from the acquisition of a second language which usually takes place in a controlled environment like formal schooling.

Interestingly, second language acquisition in the formal school setting involves the learner in developing an understanding of the fundamental aspects of the English language such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and syntactic. These fundamental domains of the English language are not learned in the acquisition of that language in the vernacular setting. Because the environment is highly naturalistic, details as such would not only be irrelevant but absurd as well. This is understood when one recognizes the process by which conversational language is acquired.

There are a relatively huge number of studies that deal with second language acquisition consisting of case studies of pupils who are in the process of acquiring proficiency on another language. For example, it is interesting to note that much of the studies dealing with the same topic focus on second language learners that are of privileged economic status (Hakuta, 1976). In a report commissioned by the United States Department of Education, van Lier (2004) summarized the findings of related studies which in return provided an impetus for a much in-depth evaluation of the course second language acquisition. After careful analyses of the existing studies, van Lier found that many of the early case studies of young children emphasized the successes of the L2 acquisition process. The researchers often marveled at the rapidity with which these
young children learned to converse in the second language, sometimes in a matter of months.

These findings concur with the opinions of the general population that learning languages is an easy and natural task for young children (Crawford, 2004). They just ‘pick them up,’ as it were. However, when we look a little more closely at the details of language use as reported in these case studies, we can see a few general patterns emerge. In none of the case studies, whether of young children, adolescents or adults, are any significant developments of complex grammar reported within the first year, or even in the second year. Rather, all studies speak of formulaic utterances, conversational strategies, and a highly simple code. This simple code is sufficient for everyday social contact, and often gives the impression of amazing conversational fluency in these contexts, but it is not the elaborate, syntactically and lexically complex code of the proficient language user.

Second language acquisition, as it has been agreed upon by many scholars, is a difficult process of acquiring proficiency in the English language foreign to them. In consideration of this difficulty, it was noted how policy makers have been engaged in a longstanding debate about the extent of services to be offered to second language learners. Although the setting discussed above as well as the case studies tackled are foreign to our own educational system, it would be important to learn from them. While it is true that the differences are great, it is also true that our programs, particularly for second language learners – every learner is - can be improved by evaluating and perhaps by doing an extensive critical analyses on the case studies mentioned above.
References


