

Comparison in the Processes between Children's L1 Acquisition and Adults' L2 Learning

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Abstract: *The paper made a comparison in language processing characteristics between children and adults. Two viewpoints were examined. One is whether children learn first language by imitation. Another is whether children are taught to acquire their first language. The motivation of adults' second language learning differs. It leads the adults to be anxious for quick success and instant benefits from the study. Acquisition vs. learning shows a distinctive picture about language study process, and it helps to understand the nature of knowledge in the process of language development. Regarding affective filter and anxiety, they are common for adults while children rarely meet these two, which also differ the two language processes.*

Keywords: *Language, L1 Acquisition, L2 Learning, Children, Adults*

1. Introduction

Being an English learner and teacher for years, I shall count it as a personal favour while reading Fries' and O'Grady's words. As a student learning English for years, I followed teachers' instruction, practising English without clear understanding the nature of language acquisition. As time went by, I became a Business English teacher, teaching and observing, noticing there were differences among learners' accent, age, background, habit and target. When various learners pursued the rule of Practice Makes Perfect, their language achievements were based upon the countless efforts and pains. They got up and memorized new vocabularies in toilet time which were taught in long-distance internet class last night; they listened to BBC and VOA news report to practice listening; they rushed into classrooms after a whole busy working day without having dinner till 9:00 p.m. and arrived at home in the late evening. Those business English learners had abundant working experiences and professional knowledge in various fields, some of whom were even outstanding and smart in their special field. However, when they came to learning a second language (L2), it was not easy for any of them to master a new language.

In most occasions, we adults take language a matter of course. However, things change quite fast if we have to learn a new one. We cannot catch the right pronunciation and mix continuous sounds all together. We cannot distinguish the difference between similar words. New vocabulary and expressions cannot keep long-time stay in our brain. Most of the time, our mind and mouth cannot cooperate well with each other for the new language expression. We can't say what we want to say, and we can't understand anything either, because everyone speaks too fast.^[1]

In contrast, children learn first language (L1) with fantastic talent, which is very different from the adult painful learning experience. Even a three-year-old child cannot do anything well, his learning language speed is amazing. He cannot wash his face and hands, run fast, do some housework and help, or even eat without making a mess. But while the child was still on the ground floor climbing, he gradually got more familiar with how to pronounce several thousand words, what are their meanings, and how they can be put together to create new expressions and make sentences in various situations.

When we develop a new language, several new special problems would appear during the process to set a series of new language habits, which are against the background of the various first language habits. The primary problem originates not only from the essential features of the new language, the correct order and match during its usage, but primarily arises out of a particular set of native language habits^[2]. It is not rare to notice Fries' viewpoint in reality, especially in adults' second language learning process. The children's first language acquisition is much distinctive because there is only one language during the process.

2. Children's L1 Acquisition

Once children get their births into this world, various kinds of sound and noise will begin to surround them, including music, laughing, crying, crushing, auto engines, window shutting, people conversation, dog bark and so on. They get engaged and take the speech initiatively or passively into its smaller parts (words, prefixes, suffixes, etc.), determine what they mean, and figure out how to reassemble them in new ways^[1].

In O'Grady's view, this process involves utterance of a system of pronunciation, sounds, words meaning and sentence structure, whose intricacy typically make even the most intelligent adult learners surrendered. However, children grasp their language very fluently before they learn how to wash their face or clean up their toys. It seems they are born to learn a language without any formal training or practice. How can they do it?

Plenty of researches have been done to analyse about children's first language acquisition process, although there is still no distinct answer to this mystery. The good news is tips of the iceberg starting emerged time to time, which are helpful for us to distinguish the different ideas and have a better understanding of children's L1 acquisition and adults' L2 learning.

Among those researchers, O'Grady had a systematic analysis about children's first language learning from word hunting, meaning, and sentence making and talking. And he questioned some classical and popular ideas which are still accepted and supported by contemporary minds. Some young upgraded parents follow those misleading ideas in their kids' education. The following questions are meaningful about children's first language acquisition.

2.1 Imitation and Evidence against Imitation

Bloomfield's Behaviourism viewed that children learn to make the stimulus-response connection. Bloomfieldian described how language acquisition occurred and divided the process into several steps, one of which was listed in details below in the second step, called "He is beginning to imitate".^[3]

- Babbling generated by a child, repetition of something the child has heard.
- Stimulus pairing with a native speaker's response. It depends on somebody else, for example, the father, saying something that resembles the babbling. For instance, he says *dad*. When the sound excites the child's ears, the child's habit tries into operation and he applies his nearest babbling syllable, *da*. We can judge that he is starting to 'imitate'.
- Bloomfield assumes the relation between stimulus and response.
- The stimulus absence may generate a new stimulus, producing the same response.
- In behaviourist theory, correct performance yields better results.^[4]

Later developed theories began to challenge Bloomfield's behaviourist theory of language acquisition. Language began to be treated as a set of structured rules, not as a series of automatic habits. Learning by imitation was not the route to get those structured rules which may create numerous expressions, but by actively formulating them based on the essential principles and the exposure of language being learned.^[4]

Below are three classical examples of children's first language acquisition, which are quoted to contradict with the imitation characteristic of language acquisition. It may be also an overturn point for most language learners or parents who try to guide their kids to imitate to learn.

Case 1: From Cazden^[5] (no age given)

Child: My teacher holded the baby rabbits and we patted them.

Adult: Did you say your teacher held the baby rabbits?

Child: Yes.

Adult: What did you say she did?

Child: She holded the baby rabbits and we patted them.

Adult: Did you say she held them tightly?

Child: No, she holded them loosely.

Case 2: From McNeill^[6] (no age given)

Child: Nobody don't like me.

Mother: No, say "nobody likes me."

Child: Nobody don't like me.

(Eight repetitions of this dialogue)

Mother: No, now listen carefully; say "nobody likes me."

Child: Oh! Nobody don't like me.

Case 3: From Gass & Selinker^[4] (age 3)

Child: I don't see no trees.

Mother: I don't see any trees. Not no trees, any trees.

Child: No any trees. No any trees.

Mother: I don't see any trees.

From the example of case one, the adult intentionally repeated the word *held*, but the child ignored the correct past tense form and continued the regular adding *-ed*. In case 2 and 3, the mother attempted to revise the incorrect form or even guided the child to express the correct form, though ending with failure. Imitation did not play a key role in the child's conversation with the adult; even the adult was very obvious to show the correct expression.

When we are asked about how a child learns language, average impression lies on "by imitating adults". To some extent, it makes a lot of sense. Imitation is irreplaceable in language acquisition process. Take the words learning for examples. There is only one method for children to learn a word because the word "*dog*" is dog and the word "*cookie*" is cookie. They have to pay attention to adults' expressions and then try to imitate the same thing by themselves. That is to say, they have to imitate what they hear.^[1]

But imitation cannot take us to a further place because the major parts of language cannot be imitated. Sentence is a persuasive example to explain the limit of imitation. We can memorise thousands of words in the brain by imitation, but the production of sentences is different from words storage in brain. Sentences will be created along the demand of language application and usage. Besides, children do not like to imitate expressions and sentences with too many unfamiliar words and structures. If their imitation performance is not good enough, they do not try to continue the behaviour of imitation.

It is not strange to notice that a child may speak out some sentences which are totally new expressions and the adults around never speak them in front of the kid. When a child has mastered some vocabularies, magic may happen for the child to explore various sentence expressions. In sum, although children do some repetition of what they hear, imitation does not take up a significant portion of their first language acquisition, especially in sentence creation. The key for a child to learn a language is not imitation. A better understanding of children's first language acquisition lays some elsewhere.

2.2 Correction and Recast

If children do not learn language by imitation, how do they master it? Could it be their parents explain language details step by step teaching their children, or do they patiently revise and correct the expression errors in daily life till their children reach the perfect speaking level? Both are seemed unlikely, based on our own mother language learning experience in childhood.

Even we explore and get deeper acquisition about language, it is still hard for an ordinary person to explain how language operates. The reason is because of the subconscious knowledge about language. We know it, but we do not realize that we know it. Thus it is not possible for us to explain language further to anybody else.^[1]

What most parents do is to set an example for their children. Through continuous talking and showing, a child may accept some input and then try to express his own. If the child makes a mistake, the parents will try to correct it, but they do not explain why it is a mistake, which contains two big

problems. The first problem is that the parents do not try correction all very often. For example, a mother of a 2-year-old child may do the corrections more in her talk, but when the child grows up to 4 or 5 years old with self-esteem, the mother may not correct mistakes directly often. The other problem with the correction hypothesis is that children do not respond to correction very well. The example below may show it^[7].

Child: Want other one spoon, daddy.

Father: You mean, you want the other spoon.

Child: Yes, I want other one spoon, please Daddy.

Father: Can you say "the other spoon?"

Child: Other...one...spoon.

Father: Say "other".

Child: Other.

Father: Spoon.

Child: Spoon.

Father: Other spoon.

Child: Other..spoon. Now give me other one spoon?

It is very common to meet the conversation situation when a little girl spoke to his father "The dog runned very fast, daddy." Knowing the incorrect word *runned*, his father did not interrupt this conversation and answered, "Yeah baby, the dog ran really fast, did not he?" This phenomenon is called *recast* in linguistics where parents set a good example for children. Recast is helpful during children's first language learning process, but it is not necessary. Successful children's language acquisition should be based on a series of different conditions. Imitation, recasts or any kind of teaching is not a requirement for their language learning.

3. Adults' L2 Learning

How children acquire first language is very distinctive from adults' second language learning. The former can be considered as an empty room which needs fulfillment through its entrance input and exit output. The later is a room with one entrance and two exits, which has already decorated with some home furnishings inside. It need put extra new style furniture through the room entrance. If some furniture needs to be folded, redesigned and moved out of this room, it must be through the appointed exit in a right order. Otherwise, there will be a mess and no output could be finished.

Second language leaning cannot be seen as just a matter of "linguistic hiccups" from native to target language as Sharwood Smith noted ^[8]. There are other conditions and factors that may affect adults' L2 learning procedures and outcome, such as new language's essential features and principles, other language known, learner's personal reasons including study motivation, intelligence, background, target, and so forth.^[4]

Not like children's first language acquisition, it is not necessary for every adult to learn a second language. Those who want and need to learn usually take a determination to begin a second language, arranging time and money well. Once it really gets a start, an inspirational beginning point usually encourages the adult learners to speed up, forgetting language learning is a complicated way to go.

Learners were various in every aspect, with a diversified background. The constitution of career adult learners in the broad sense is wide and complicated. In general, their study characteristics have something in common, which is essential in adults' second language learning.

-Most of them want to reach a higher language level within short time. Taking shorter time is better in their mind.

-Most of them are busy in work or daily life. They cannot spend a complete day for language study like children or school students.

-Most of them promise five study hours per week in the beginning, but few keep the promise.

-Most of them dare not to practice in public.

-Some of them cannot finish the study plan and give it up.

3.1 Reasons for Adults' L2 Learning

Adults' purposes to L2 learning vary a lot, and they are not pure as those of children's first language acquisition, which may include reasons for a test score, career promotion, study abroad, job hopping, self-improvement, personal interest, etc.

In the language training centre where I used to work, most of the learners had work in different fields and came to study in their free time. Before they registered as formal students, they often asked course consultants the following questions:

- "How long can I finish my course and upgrade to advanced business level?"
- "Can you make sure I speak fluent oral English after two months here?"
- "Whether my IELTS score can reach 6.5 or above within 3 months?"
- "I will have an English interview next week. Can you arrange a speed-up training course of three days for me?"

Few adults want to learn a second language because they really like it. The motivation of adults' second language learning differs. It leads the adults to be anxious to achieve quick success and get instant benefits from the study.

3.2 Adults L2 Learning Courses

If we understand who the adult learners are and why they study a second language, it would be easier and helpful to understand how they process their learning. Here I would like to take the training centre to show how they learn in it, which can be considered as one of the representatives in the market.

The training school divided its routine courses into eight levels^[9], including IB (Icebreaker), T (Threshold), B (Beginner), LI, I (Intermediate), BI (Business Intermediate), BA (Business Advanced) and A (Advanced). Within the frame of the 8 level courses, each potential learner need take part in an online test system called DYNED, which was authorized by a US company. If necessary, an oral test with a tutor was also carried out, to determine the appropriate level he or she should begin. There were three types main classes. All classes were supplementary to each other, and the rate of progress would be arranged based on the degree of difficulty and learner's acceptability.

-Private course: no more than four attendants; each class needs about 30-45 min online preparation including listening and shadow repeat.

-Salon course: no more than ten attendants; each class needs topic preparation in advance.

-Selective course: no less than two classes per week.

The above introduction gets a glimpse of adults' L2 learning, how they prepare and what they learn in a professional language training centre. The tuition of such course is expensive because they can enjoy native foreign teachers and personal tutoring service. Even in such a well-equipped environment, the learning experience was full of pressure and pain, and its average outcome was barely satisfactory, compared with children natural and joyful first language learning experience.

4. Deeper Analysis

In most part of the paper, I deliberately use the word acquisition for children's L1 and the learning for adults' L2, because of the Monitor Model founded by Krashen in the 1970s. But I need to make it clear that acquisition not only belongs to children's L1 and learning not only belongs to adults' L2 because it is not easy to divide them absolutely in the complicated and confused language process.

4.1 Acquisition V.S. Learning

There are five basic hypotheses in the monitor model: the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis and the Affective Filter Hypothesis.

In Krashen's^[10] theory system, he held the idea there were two absolute methods during the process of developing a second language. For L2 learners, one measure was called acquisition. The other measure was through learning^[4]. Krashen's Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis explained the two concepts distinctively, and their processes are very different from each other.

The concept of acquisition is a similar process to the way children develop their first language ability. In the process of language acquisition, it happens subconsciously. For example, it is usual to notice the application of the language in interactive communication. The fact is not only that we are using the language for interaction but that we are also acquiring language during its usage. The result, language acquired ability, is also subconscious. As the language proficiency growing, we gradually get to ignore the essential and innate language rules we have acquired. Sometimes we judge by so-called "feel". Grammatically we "feel" right or "sound" wrong. The sentence has a "feel" missing a word. And the errors "feel" needing correction. Step by step, we are not aware of what rule was violated, and we acquire the language ability undesignedly and unconsciously. In simple words, acquisition is "picking up" a language.

The concept of learning is another method to develop a second language ability. Learning refers to the conscious knowledge of a second language. In other words, learning is about knowing a language. To most of the second language learners, the "knowing" include grammar rules study, getting clear about them, being able to explain them or discuss with others. We can also consider language learning is the formal knowledge of a language. People learn a second language explicitly and consciously.

In Krashen's comparison between acquisition and learning, it digs some differences in the language study process. Related to children's L1 and adults' L2, the former main characteristic is similar to acquisition and the latter is to learning.

Children are surrounded by a world full of sorts of sound and noise. Their receive is subconscious and without an explicit target. He or she can acquire from everything around, for example, parents conversation, TV show, private call in a restaurant, playing partners in pleasure ground, dog and cat fighting, delivery man's talk to neighborhoods, etc. No matter useful or non-sense, children never pick and choose based on a special target or limit themselves to finish the language acquisition within a period of time. That is why children L1 often give us an impression of acquisition in joy.

In contrast, adults' L2 experience is much more painful. First, they learn for something, and most of them want to finish it in a high efficiency. In other words, adults prefer to finish their L2 within a shorter time. Thus they can reach their special targets much sooner. They learn Business English for company negotiation, learn TOEFL or IELTS for test score which is demanded for an oversea university application, learn daily conversation for foreign travelling, and learn interview answer skills for career promotion. That is what Krashen mentioned, "knowing" something about the language, including vocabulary memorization and forgetting, incorrect pronunciation of a whole sentence, poor listening in real conversation context, and thousand times of giving up in mind.

4.2 Affective Filter

The Affective Filter hypothesis, also presented by Krashen, is to describe and explain the relationship between the affective variables and the L2 acquisition. The different strength level of affective filter will lead to the acquirers vary one to another. For example, some people with lower study motivation for L2 acquisition will tend to perform less active to absorb input information. Their affective filter will also be strong or high. Even the language information has been received and understood, the input may not be able to reach brain's responsible part of language acquisition or the part so-called the Language Acquisition Device. Those people who have more conductive attitudes to L2 acquisition will have higher possibility to seek and gain larger input information. They will also provide a weaker and easier-passing affective filter and will be open and effective to catch more input information and deliver it into a deeper layer of their mind.^[10]

Based on Krashen's viewpoints, Affective Filter Hypothesis can explain comprehensible input and weak affective filter are two simple conditions which are necessary for language acquisition. Comprehensible input is the effective information which is received, absorbed and operated in the language process. During the adults' language learning, it is very common to notice memorization of new words or expressions is a problem for most of the adult learners. One reason may be the normal forgetting curve, but the most part may count for their indistinct understanding or even no understanding about the new input.

The affective filter plays an important role in individual variation in second language developing process. It also distinguishes children's first language acquisition from adults' second language learning. The true reason is that children do not have the affective filter at all in their first language processing, so Affective Filter Hypothesis is invalid in children's first language acquisition^[4].

The Filter is not present (or, at least not operative) in children but is present in adults, though there is no crystal explanation till now about the process how is the input information filtered out by an under-determined learner. It is obvious that the present of filter in adults' L2 learning is one more obstruction than the absence of it in children's L1 acquisition.

4.3 Anxiety

The reason for anxiety analysis between children and adults is similar as the above filter because most of children do not have the mental situation so-called anxiety in their L1 acquisition while adults get worried very often in the daily situation.

Anxiety does not always play a negative role in language learning. Mizruchi^[11] described anxiety has a curvilinear effect on the performance like many other elements in general. When the factor of anxiety keeps in a low level, it would be helpful. When it reaches a high level, anxiety will harm.

Most adults understand this principle very well but they cannot apply it as well as they comprehend. One case was in the training centre mentioned above, where online preparation was a necessity before private class. It would take about 30-50 min for students to finish preparation before each class. Some freshmen followed the preparation rule very well in the beginning, which benefited their performance during classes. Even in some first classes, they could open mouth and talk with native English teachers for a whole hour. But, human nature includes greed and laziness. As they became more proficient and experienced, their mental status changed which led to impatience and anxiety in the online preparation. Some doubted their study record system got collapse and did not record their study, and some required tutor to provide a special allowance to give up the preparation part and enter classes directly. Anybody could imagine a class performance without any preparation vs. a class with mature practice before it starts.

Hoffman noted that anxiety can direct attention toward pure form and away from meaning. In a previous review, intense anxiety was found to direct language learner's attention to the physical features of language such as pronunciation properties, presentation order, and sound similarities. The direction to physical layers would cause the ignorance of semantic aspects. This suggests that affect can determine the extent to which semantic and nonsemantic modes of processing are brought into play.^[12] Hoffman's description of attention direction happens very often in adults' second language learning, where children cannot feel it in their joyful first language acquisition.

In children's L1 acquisition, there may be also some anxiety appearances which are usually caused by other purposes, not for language nature itself. Further more, based on the different competence of children acquisition and adult learning, even both are confronted with the same language problem, children L1's absorption often plays its amazing advantage beyond the adults L2's, which are shown as children happy and adults painful in their processes.

5. Conclusion

Two viewpoints about Children's language development were discussed. One point is children learn first language by imitation, and the other is children are taught to acquire their first language. Both are misleading in children's first language acquisition. After getting clearer about children and adults language processing characteristics, analysis was made between children's L1 acquisition and adults' L2 learning from Acquisition vs. Learning, Affective Filter and Anxiety. Acquisition vs. Learning show a deeper distinctive picture about language study process, and it is helpful to understand the nature of knowledge in the process of language development. Regarding filter and anxiety, they are common for adults while children rarely meet these two, which also differ the two language processes.

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