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DESCRIBING LEARNING AND TEACHING

ОПИСАНИЕ ОБУЧЕНИЯ И УЧЕНИЯ

Summary. *This article is about to look at how children acquire language with little effort provided they have exposure to it and opportunities to use it. But the language they are exposed to is rough-tuned by their parents, to discuss the difference between the concepts of acquisition and learning. Despite some claims that learning is only useful for monitoring our own language output, we said that for anyone post-puberty the chance to study language construction should not be in some way 'disallowed'!*

Key words: *Language acquisition, exposure, opportunities and inducements.*

Almost all children acquire a language, apparently without effort. In many parts of the world, children grow up speaking two or more languages. And if young children move to a new country and go to school there, they seem to 'pick up' the new language with incredible ease.

Language acquisition seems to be almost guaranteed for children up to about the age of six. They seem to be able to learn languages with incredible facility. They are also capable of forgetting a language just as easily. It is almost as if they can put on and take off different languages like items of clothing! However, this ease of acquisition becomes gradually less noticeable as children move towards puberty, and after that, language acquisition is much more difficult.

Acquisition here describes the way in which people 'get' language with no real conscious effort in other words, without thinking about grammar or vocabulary, or worrying about which bits of language go where. When children start vocalising their mother tongue at around the age of two, we do not expect them to study it; we expect to just watch it emerge, first at the level of one-word utterances, then two-word utterances, until the phrases and sentences they use become gradually more complex as they grow older. In order for acquisition to take place, certain conditions need to be met. In the first place, the children need to hear a lot of language. Such exposure is absolutely vital. Secondly, it is clear that the nature of the language they hear matters, too. When parents talk to their children, they simplify what they say, both consciously and unconsciously. They don't use complex sentences, or

technical vocabulary; they use language which fits the situation, rough-tuning what they say to match the child's age and situation. Parents' language is marked by other features, too. They often exaggerate the intonation they use so that their voices sound higher and more enthusiastic than they would if they were talking to friend, colleague or partner.

During childhood we get an enormous amount of such language exposure. Furthermore, most of the language we hear especially from our parents is given to us in typical social and emotional interactions so that as we hear language, we also hear the ways in which that language is used. Finally, children have a strong motivational urge to communicate in order to be fed and understood. Together with their parents (and later other adults) they make language together. And then they try it out and use it. This 'trying out' is shown by the way children repeat words and phrases, talk to themselves and generally play with language. But in the end it is their desire to communicate needs, wants and feelings that seems to matter most. And throughout childhood and beyond, most people have a great many opportunities and inducements to use the language they have been acquiring.

It sounds, then, as if three features need to be present in order for children to acquire a language: exposure to it, motivation to communicate with it and opportunities to use it.

If, as we have said, children acquire language subconsciously, what does this tell us about how students should get a second language? Can we (indeed,

should we) attempt to replicate the child's experience in the language classroom?

Some theorists, notably the American applied linguist Stephen Krashen in the 1980s, have suggested that we can make a distinction between acquisition and learning. Whereas the former is subconscious and anxiety free, learning is a conscious process where separate items from the language are studied and practised in turn. Krashen, among others, suggested that teachers should concentrate on acquisition rather than learning and that the role of the language teacher should be to provide the right kind of language exposure, namely comprehensible input (that is, language that the students understand more or less, even if it is a bit above their own level of production). Provided that students experience such language in an anxiety free atmosphere, the argument goes, they will acquire it just as children do, and, more importantly, when they want to say something, they will be able to retrieve the language they need from their acquired language store. Language which has been learnt, on the other hand, is not available for use in the same way, according to this argument, because the learner has to think much more consciously about what they want to say. The principal function of learnt language is to monitor what is coming from our acquired store to check that it is OK. As a result, learnt language tends to 'get in the way' of acquired-language production and may inhibit spontaneous communication.

This apparently convoluted discussion becomes relevant when we consider what we should do with students in class. If we believe that acquisition is superior to learning, we will spend all our time providing comprehensible input. What we will not do is to ask the students to focus on how the language works. Yet there

are problems with this approach. In the first place, the ability to acquire language easily tends to deteriorate with age. Secondly, teenagers and adults have perfectly good reasoning powers and may want to think consciously about how language works. To suggest that they should not think about language if they want to would seem absurd. And we should remember that for many language learners, one of the biggest differences between them and children acquiring their first language is the amount of exposure they get (in terms of hours), and the situation in which this language is used. Learners in foreign language classrooms are in a very different situation from that of children of loving parents.

Perhaps, mere exposure to comprehensible input is not enough, therefore, for older children and adults. Perhaps, as some claim, they should have their attention drawn to aspects of language so that they can notice these aspects; as a result they will recognise them when they come across them again, and this recognition will be the first stage in their 'knowing' of the language which, once known in this way, will be available for them to use.

We can go further and say that a rich classroom environment would not only expose students to language, but also give them opportunities to activate their language knowledge. Furthermore, we should offer them chances to study language and the way it works too, since for some learners this will be the key to their success, and for all others (apart from young children) it will be an added bonus to the other activities which we take into the classroom. In other words, both acquisition and learning have their part to play in language getting for students after childhood.

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