

HOW DO THE STUDENTS LEARN ENGLISH?

---IMPLICATIONS FROM THE STUDY OF SLA---

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英語習得についての考察

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I Introduction

There have been numerous studies on how people acquire second languages. The study of second language acquisition (SLA) relates to how human brain functions, psychological factors, cross-cultural and linguistic differences and sociology. In this relatively new field of study, more and more researches are completed in recent years. They proved some of the common beliefs in traditional language instructions to be wrong. It is difficult to draw a conclusion at this stage about SLA and foreign language acquisition. More studies are necessary to support the validity of the new theories. In this paper, I would like to propose a view on how students learn English in classrooms based on the recent developments in the field of SLA.

II Do Children Learn a Foreign Language Faster and Better?

In Japan there is a common belief that we should teach English to children as early as possible. After school English lessons to primary school students are so popular nowadays. Some children start English even before entering kindergarten. The parents expect their children to be international-minded bilingual adults in the future. They race their children to language schools. However, some children end up disliking English before junior high school when mandatory English classes start. It is the myth that the language acquisition is the earlier, the better. Age is not the only element that decides the success of a language learner. There are additional factors to be considered.

Age is an important component in language acquisition, although it is not the only one. According to the critical period hypothesis (CPH), language learning is successful when it is carried out during the right time. The critical period is believed to be before puberty. After that period language acquisition is believed to be more difficult. There are two examples to support this theory.

Victor was found in 1799 in Aveyron, France as a wild child wandering naked in the woods. He had no contact with human beings before age twelve, when he was discovered. Dr. Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard tried to teach Victor how to speak French. Although Victor developed certain other abilities, he never

learned to speak the language. This is an exceptional case where a child was not exposed to a language before puberty. It is difficult to conclude from this one case that the critical period for language learning exists.

Genie is another case of a child with abnormal language development. She was completely isolated and deprived of social contact because of her abusive father. She was thirteen when she was discovered in 1970 and despite her age, she was unable to speak English. Many teachers and therapists educated her in a rehabilitation center. Afterwards she lived in a foster home while attending special schools. Compared to Victor, Genie's progress was remarkable. She became socialized and learned to speak English. However, her language development was far from normal. It shared features of language development exhibited by adults with brain damage.

CPH is also supported by the fact that the second language (L2) learners who start as adults have more difficulty achieving native-speaker competence in grammar and pronunciation compared to children. Nevertheless, as shown in Victor and Genie's examples, there are personal differences in language learning. Victor and Genie were in peculiar situations not only linguistically, but also psychologically. There are social considerations to be taken into account as well.

Socio-cultural model of SLA describes how adult learners differ from young learners. It is represented in two theories: Howard Gile's accommodation theory and John Schumann's acculturation model. Accommodation theory conditions that the learner's success depends on his/her social identity. When the learner accepts the culture and society of the target language group as a whole, he/she tries to speak in a way similar to the other members of the society. It is a process of convergence. On the other hand, when the learner distances himself/herself from the target-language group, he/she tries to emphasize the distinctiveness. It is the process of divergence. L2 acquisition requires convergence to the culture in the long run and adults are more bound to their own native social identity than children. The learners' attitude to maintain social identity, in turn, interferes with the language acquisition process.

John Schumann's acculturation model also considers the social factors in SLA. He proposes the language development of adult learners terminate when they fail to acculturate to the different society to assimilate as a member of the

group. Acculturation is described by the metaphor of social distance. Many social factors determine the distance of a learner from the target-language group. If the social distance is fairly small, the learner can assimilate the group easily. There's also psychological distance between the target-language group and the L2 group. These social and psychological distances become barriers to especially adult L2 learners. Children are less susceptible to their socio-cultural identities.

Children do not always have advantages over learning an L2. L2 acquisition requires enormous amount of knowledge and information to be processed. It is necessary for the learners to make full use of their cognitive and metacognitive abilities. Cognitive mechanism enables them to notice grammatical rules. Metacognitive awareness enables them to employ efficient tactics for language learning and planning their goals. Moreover, the knowledge of the first language (L1) helps the L2 learners. Adult learners already mastered an L1 and it is easier for them compared to children to use the knowledge of L1 to understand how language works in general. It is effective to use writing at whatever level of language learning to memorize an L2. Very young learners do not have writing abilities yet. They may remember the new vocabulary fairly quickly but forget them quickly as well. Adults, on the other hand, know to resort to writing down the new vocabulary.

The general knowledge about the world and communication strategies also put adult learners to their advantages. They can understand and effectively use an L2 drawing on these internal abilities.

Accordingly, we face the controversial question, "When is a good time to start English instruction in Japanese schools?" Here, overall cost-effectiveness and the society's needs and expectations should be considered. Japanese language involves heavy memorization load for its complex writing systems. Students learn hiragana, katakana and kanji during elementary school. It is vital for them to master basic kanji before alphabets are taught, supposing that the students will work and live in Japan using Japanese as their main means of communication. Lightbown and Spada conclude that:

When the goal is basic communicative ability for all students in a school setting, and when it is assumed that the child's native language will remain the primary language, it may be more efficient to begin

second language teaching later. In research on school learners receiving a few hours of instruction per week, learners who start later (for example, at age 10, 11 or 12) catch up very quickly with those who began earlier.¹

Therefore, rather than teaching English once or twice a week from the first grade, it is more effective to start English around the fourth grade (age 10). The students will absorb language more quickly and effectively. Moreover, schools may want to devote more time, say four to five times a week, to learn English in junior high school. Language learning should be optimally engaged in every day. If an English class only meets once a week, vocabulary and structures are likely to be forgotten before being acquired.

III Why Do the Students Make Mistakes?

Languages were believed to be learned mainly through imitation. This assumption was drawn from the behaviorist theory of language learning. Behaviorism is based on the psychological theory developed by Skinner. Behaviorists acknowledged that the learners should imitate, repeat and practice the sounds and patterns until they master them. Habit formation is the key in L2 learning process according to the behaviorist theory. This led to the development of audiolingualism that stipulates that the students to drill patterns without reference to the meaning. It was widely used from the 1920s to the 60s and is still taught in English classrooms. Habit formation by monotonous practices doesn't stimulate creativity and therefore, the information can easily be forgotten. Memory works better with the reference to the meaning of the sentence. Pattern practice and substitution drills are characteristics of the audiolingual method. These are effective in teaching grammatical structures, however, not used widely for other purposes these days.

Contrastive analysis (CA) hypothesis was established from the behaviorist theory. CA predicts the errors the learners will make by comparing their L1 and L2. In other words, the learners' L1 is the sole influence on the errors made in their L2. This influence is called L1 transfer or interference. CA says that the greater the similarities between the L1 and L2, the learners will acquire the L2 easier. When there are more differences, however, the learners will face more difficulties. The list of differences between L1 and L2 does not always predict

the students' errors. Therefore, CA is not an answer to the question why the students make mistakes. L1 transfer alone cannot explain errors in L2.

Believers of error analysis proposed that the language of L2 learners have its own system and rules. Larry Selinker called the L2 learners' language by the name of interlanguage. Interlanguages have characteristics of the learner's L1, the target language and universal common features that are shared by all the interlanguages. Interlanguages are systematic and dynamic. They have their own grammatical rules. They are considered as a continuum and the learners continuously move along the continuum depending upon the input they receive and the acquirement of the L2 rules.

Learners' errors can be divided into two different categories: L1 transfer errors and developmental errors. L1 transfer errors are unique to interlanguages and are based on their L1. For example, a speaker translates an L1 sentence directly into the L2 or attempts to use L1's grammatical patterns and expressions in L2. They result in transfer errors. Developmental errors are both made by the L2 learners and children acquiring an L1. Below is a list of different stages L2 learners are likely to go through, when acquiring the past tense of 'eat'. In the chart, 'eated' and 'ated' are the developmental errors the learner can make by overgeneralization of the rule of making past tense.

Stage	Description	Example
1	Learners fail to mark the verb for past time.	'eat'
2	Learners begin to produce irregular past tense forms.	'ate'
3	Learners overgeneralize the regular past tense form.	'eated'
4	Sometimes learners produce hybrid forms.	'ated'
5	Learners produce correct irregular past tense forms.	'ate'

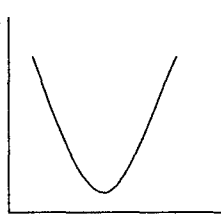
Table 1 Stages in the acquisition of the past tense of 'eat'²

Researches on SLA discovered that these stages in development are similar across learners from different L1 backgrounds. The stages are called developmental sequences. If a learner acquires one grammatical structure earlier than the other, another learner does the same.

In referring to Table 1, the learners' use of the correct form 'ate' at stage 2 does not mean that they acquired it. Regarding the developmental sequences 'eated' and 'ated' are more advanced forms compared to 'ate' in stage 2. It is very difficult to judge students' language levels by focusing on errors. Learners

may display a high level of accuracy initially, regress later and again show high level of performance following the grammatical rules of the target language. It is called a U-shaped course of development. Table 2 shows a typical learning path of natural L2 acquisition of a certain structure. Learners pass through a U-shaped curve for every grammatical pattern that they acquire. Language acquisition is not a straight line. Rather, learners experience cyclical downward and upward movement as shown on Table 3.

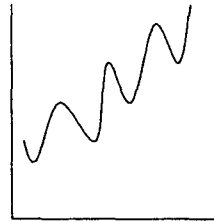
level of acquisition
of a grammatical
structure



time

Table 2

level of
L2 acquisition



time

Table 3

IV What Are the Characteristics of a Good Language Learner?

Some students believe that they have no talent for learning English. Every time they say “I don’t like English”, they seem to reinforce their self-fulfilling prophecy. In this section, affective filter, motivation, aptitude and learning styles are discussed in order to see if any talent is necessary to learn a foreign language.

What are the characteristics of a good language learner? Age is one factor that influences SLA as we discussed in section II of this paper. Anxiety, motivation, learning styles and aptitude are other determining elements. These affective dimensions of L2 learners will be analyzed.

One factor that prevents people from language acquisition is anxiety. Stephen Krashen developed the affective filter hypothesis along with his other theories of SLA. According to the hypothesis, a learner’s motivations, needs, attitudes and emotional states affect the learning process. Affective filter is an emotional barrier to learn L2. It will be up and working when the learner is under stress. It will be down when the learner is relaxed and motivated. English learners who previously had low scores in English classes and who believe that their achievement in English is low for their lack of talents have their

affective filters up. In turn, the affective filters prevent the learners to absorb new information in class. Affective filter is strengthened by anxiety, exhaustion, low motivation, negative attitude toward the culture and bad experience. I think it is crucial for all the students to lower the affective filter, forget about their feelings of English inability and start accepting the fact that English can be learned.

Motivation or positive attitude influences the degree of success of and language learner. There are two basic categories of motivation: extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is determined by the L2 learners' attitudes toward the target language group. Some of the extrinsically motivated students are interested in language and culture of the target language community. Others want to interact closely with the group. Intrinsic motivation is the natural desire to do well. It is inside the learners. When the students have intrinsic motivation, they study for themselves and for their own internal reasons and satisfaction.

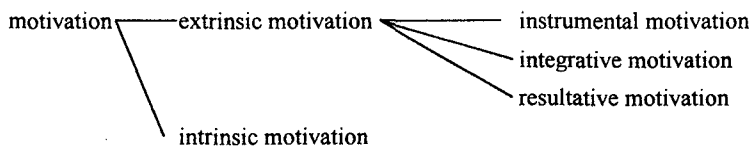


Table 4 Types of Motivation

In regard to the Table 4 on this page, extrinsic motivation is divided into three sub-categories: *instrumental*, *integrative* and *resultative* motivation. Instrumental motivation is based on educational and economic reasons of the learners --- to get a good grade, to pass an examination, to enter a good school, to get a good job and to receive a better salary. Integratively motivated people are interested in becoming part of the target language community. They are not threatened to lose their socio-cultural identities by learning the language and understanding the culture.

Resultative motivation is based on the complex structure of motivation. The researchers on motivation have difficulty analyzing how motivation affects learning, because motivation produces successful learning and successful learning enhances motivation. Is strong motivation the result or the cause of successful learning? Is the lack of motivation the result or the cause of failure in learning?

The answer is that both are true. Motivation is both the result and cause of successful or failed learning. When motivation is the result of successful or failed learning, it is called resultative motivation.

There are learning style preferences, personality and aptitude that are also believed to influence L2 acquisition. Learning style preferences suggest that learners approach a task with different skills, tactics and strategies. In general, learners can be divided into three groups --- visual, auditory and kinesthetic. Visual learners need visual aid to learn a language. Auditory learners learn mainly through listening. Kinesthetic learners need to touch with their hands, move their bodies and feel in order to learn a language. An English class is usually a mixture of all three types of students. The students should receive instructions using all three sensory channels, visual, auditory and kinesthetic, so that everyone can understand in his/her own style. However, teachers are likely to stick to their own leaning style preferences. If a class is conducted mainly in one sensory channel that the teacher is familiar to, say auditory, visual and kinesthetic students in the class suffer.

Apart from the sensory channel preferences, there are other individual leaning styles. Some memorize vocabulary by writing them down. Some repeat the vocabulary aloud. Some approach language by way of grammatical rules. Some listen to the native speakers and learn new phrases. It is important to give the students freedom to choose their preferred way of language leaning. In addition, students need to be aware of their learning styles, so that they can learn more efficiently and effectively.

Personality may affect L2 acquisition, although researches have not proved direct link between personality and language learning yet. One reason is that personality is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to define. Extrovert people are not always better in languages than introvert people. There are studies on extroversion, inhibition, self-esteem, empathy, dominance, talkativeness and responsiveness in this field.

Language aptitude in part overlaps general intelligence and personality, however, has distinctive components as well. Language aptitude has been measured by the success in formal language test as used in academic courses and L2 proficiency in communicative situations. According to John Carroll,

language aptitude consists of:

- 1 Phonemic coding ability, i.e. the ability to identify the sounds of a foreign language so that they can be remembered later. This ability is also seen as related to the ability to handle sound-symbol relationships (for example, to identify the sound which 'th' stands for).
- 2 Grammatical sensitivity, i.e. the ability to recognize the grammatical functions of words in sentences (for example, the subject and object of a sentence).
- 3 Inductive language learning ability, i.e. the ability to identify patterns of correspondence and relations between form and meaning (for example, to recognize that in English 'to' can denote direction and 'at' location).
- 4 Rote learning ability, i.e. the ability to form and remember associations between stimuli. This is believed to be important in vocabulary learning.³

These abilities are language processing capabilities. However, the list above is not necessarily conclusive.

Recent studies focus on learning strategies that can be taught to help students. According to Chamot, "learning strategies are the steps, plans, insights, and reflections that learners employ to learn more effectively."⁴ They are defined as observable behaviors and mental functions that are used to facilitate learning. According to the researches, successful learners use more learning strategies than less effective learners. The good news is that learning strategies can be taught to weaker students. The point I would like to stress is that learning strategies can help less successful students despite their weakness in language learning aptitude. Age and aptitude should not be the excuse for unsuccessful language learning. With due diligence and effort English can be acquired to the level of communicative competence.

IV Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen how the students in language classes learn through the perspective of SLA. Children do not acquire language easier and faster. Children have advantage over pronunciation and grammar, but adults

have developed L1 to help learn an L2. Social identity and acculturation are the reasons that adult learners have more difficulties adjusting to the new language, culture and society.

Student errors are divided into L1 transfer errors and developmental errors. Language develops in a U-shaped curve. Developmental errors are universal phenomenon, while L1 transfer depends on the native language the L2 learner speaks.

In the last section I discussed characteristics of good language learners. Although motivation, learning styles, personality and aptitude are important, students can learn strategies to compensate their lack of certain abilities and characteristics. English can be accessible to every learner.

I would like to thank Professor Elite Olshtain of Hebrew University for inspiring me to write this paper.

(こうやまみき 本学非常勤講師)

¹ Lightbown, Patsy M. and Spada, Nina, *How Languages Are Learned*, Oxford University Press, 1993, P.50.

² Ellis, Rod, *Second language Acquisition*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p.23.

³ *Ibid.*, p.74.

⁴ Chamot, Anna Uhl, "Learning Strategies and Listening Comprehension", in Mendelsohn, David J. and Rubin, Joan ed. *A Guide for the Teaching of Second Language Listening*, Dominic Press, Inc., 1995, p.13.