

# ***Enhancing Pedagogical Approaches: Comparing First Language Acquisition in Childhood with Second Language Learning in Adulthood***

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the pedagogical implications of language learning by examining two distinct phases: first language acquisition in childhood and second language learning in adulthood. While cognitive development in adulthood supports advanced comprehension and analysis, the effort required to attain proficiency in a second language far exceeds that of first language acquisition. Both processes involve the formation of a language system, but differ significantly in terms of age, learning environment, and instructional methods. Despite these differences, the two language systems influence each other, often resulting in the formation of an interlanguage during second language acquisition. By integrating linguistic theories with personal experience, this paper provides insights into how educational practices can be enhanced to better support language learners at different stages.

## **1. Introduction**

Language learning is a multifaceted process that can be better understood by examining its two distinct phases: first language acquisition during childhood and second language learning in adulthood. From an educational perspective, these two phases offer critical insights into how language instruction can be tailored to different age groups. While cognitive development in adulthood allows for greater comprehension and analytical skills, achieving proficiency in a second language often requires more effort compared to first language acquisition in childhood. Theoretical frameworks suggest that both phases involve the development of a linguistic system, but they differ significantly in terms of age, learning environment, and pedagogical methods.

In childhood, language acquisition is largely a natural, immersive process driven by environmental exposure and social interactions. In contrast, adult second language learning relies more heavily on structured, intentional teaching methods, often making the process more challenging. However, these two language systems are not completely independent of one another; they can influence each other, leading to phenomena like interlanguage, a transitional system that reflects features of both the first and second languages.

This paper seeks to explore the pedagogical implications of these two phases of language learning by integrating linguistic theory with personal experiences. Through this exploration, the aim is to offer insights into how educational strategies and practices can be refined to better support learners across different stages of language development.

## **2. Distinctions between children's first language acquisition and adult second language learning**

Before discussing the distinctions between my childhood first language acquisition and adulthood second language learning, it is necessary to distinguish the definitions of acquisition and learning. In my language learning trajectory, the memory of first language acquisition is very vague; I cannot remember when I could understand other people's words and what was the first sentence I said, but I could express myself clearly and competently when I was very young, even at that time I did not know what grammar means. As Anderson (2007) [8] deemed that Language acquisition refers to the unconscious and effortless process of learning the language. Lightbown and Spada (2001) [13] considered that children's language acquisition usually begins in their early childhood before the age of three, and mastering a fluent language is also a fundamental part of a child's growth and learning. Therefore, language acquisition is a process of a child being able to master the mother tongue fluently (Varshney, 1995) [20].

Language learning, by contrast, is defined as the process of consciously and orderly amassing knowledge of linguistic features such as vocabulary, sentence structure, and grammar in an institutional setting (Brown and Yule, 1985) [1]. Meanwhile, my language learning experience also confirms this definition. Compared with the natural acquisition of the first language, my second language learning is more active and systematic, and it is mainly obtained in class with resorted teacher's teaching. Thus it can be seen that language learning is a conscious and systematic learning process that requires teachers' training and guidance (Anderson, 2007) [8].

To sum up, as Fromkin (1983) [12] explained that acquisition is like walking; for any normal child without the teacher's teaching, he is still able to walk; it is a human innate skill. While learning is like reading; if a person has not received an education, they will not have the ability to read; it is the result of active learning. Language acquisition refers to the unconscious accumulation of language skills process, mostly assigns to the gain of the first language. Moreover, language learning refers to the conscious and systematic process of language learning, chiefly attributed to the learning of foreign languages.

## **3. The influence of age on language acquisition and learning**

Age is an important factor affecting language acquisition and learning outcomes and is generally considered that children's first language acquisition is easier and more fruitful than adults' second language learning, even though adults have higher intelligence and learning abilities than children. According to the theory of Chomsky (1976) [4], human language acquisition is independent of intelligence and logic, and that is also one of the different areas of innate knowledge that the human brain contains. He called this linguistic talent LAD: the language acquisition device. Furthermore, there is an internal set of rules called universal grammar (UG) in it, which governs the initial state of human linguistic competence and determines the ability to understand and produce language (Palmer, 2000) [14]. Once the child is exposed to the surrounding language, the UG is activated and then matches what is heard with this pre-existing knowledge of grammatical structures (White, 2003) [21]. So this is why children can acquire a complex language in a short time. There is an interesting experience about my first language acquisition, which is also evidence of the concept of LAD and UG. When I was young, I lived in a remote town where Mandarin had not yet been popularized, both my parents and teachers could not speak standard Mandarin, in life and study they were in dialect to

communicate with me. Although without anyone to teach me, I naturally acquired the standard Mandarin in my childhood; this language ability seems to be innate. After studying linguistics courses, I reflected upon this experience and found that my Mandarin ability is not innate because although at that time the language environment around me was dialect, the communication media I was exposed to were all in standard Mandarin. Such as TV programs, cartoons, children's songs, etc. So I naturally acquired Mandarin after a long period of cultivation.

However, in the same external language environment, my parents did not acquire Mandarin as easily as I did (they were not exposed to TV, computers, and other media devices when they were young). Even now, their Mandarin still has a strong dialect accent. The concept that age is an essential factor in second language learning is based on the belief that there is a critical period for second language learning (Syafiyah, 2011) [19]. The critical period hypothesis (CPH) was published by Lenneberg in 1967 and is still the framework of many studies on age-related language learning (Saville-Troike, 2006) [16]. It means that in this period, language learning can be acquired and learned effortlessly and naturally for human beings. It is about the first decade of life, while it is hard to be entirely successful once missing the critical period, which is roughly the time it takes to lateralize language on the left side of the brain. According to the studies of brain damage in children and adults have shown that damage to the left hemisphere rarely leads to language impairment and can be quickly repaired in children, but not in adults (Ellis, 1994) [10]. Therefore, although my parents and I were in the same language environment, they did not acquire Mandarin as naturally as I did because they were exposed to Mandarin as adults and had already missed the critical period of language acquisition. Looking back at my language learning experience, I learned Mandarin naturally from an early age, while my formal second language learning began at the age of 12. According to the critical period hypothesis, the optimal age for second language learning is before the age of 10; my second language learning age is not too late, but compared to the standard pronunciation of the first language, my second language pronunciation still has a native accent, just as my parents' Mandarin has a dialect accent.

#### **4. The effects of language environment and learning methods on first and second language**

Based on Chomsky's theory, human language acquisition ability is innate and independent of intelligence and logic. However, mastering a language still requires the corresponding language environment and lots of practice (Steinberg and Danny, 2003) [18]. Therefore, the target language environment and efficient language learning methods are prerequisites for mastering a language, while they are quite different in first language acquisition and second language learning. In general, the former has a more rich language environment and more natural learning methods than the latter, which is why first language acquisition is more relaxed and flexible than second language learning. Varshney [20] defined that Language Acquisition is a process whereby children achieve a fluent control of their native language; however, this mastery cannot be accomplished overnight; children do not naturally form a complete language system after waking up one morning (Fromkin, 1983) [12]. In the process of acquiring the first language, children almost hear 5000 to 7000 utterances every day so that they can gain the first language grammatical code successfully before puberty (Chenu and Jisa, 2009) [3]. Thinking of my personal experience, I was immersed in a first language environment for a long time before speaking the first word. However, at that time, I could not fully understand the meaning of each sentence, my parents had been communicating with me, and I unconsciously and passively absorbed the various words and sentences around me. According to Fauziati (2011) [11], this form of unconscious language receiving in young children is called caretaker speech. The characteristic of this language is that it is direct and straightforward without thinking, which is an excellent way to reduce the complexity of language in order to communicate effectively with young

children. So when I was learning my first language, I did not treat it as a difficult task or a heavy burden because I was in an abundant language environment, and I would be in a curious and game-oriented way to follow my parents and repeat what they said, unknowingly mastering the complex language system.

On the contrary, my second language learning was different. In China, English learning was still focused on the traditional cramming teaching model. I spent a lot of time memorizing grammar and words but lacked communication exercises. When I was in primary school, my second language learning process was not pleasant. Learning English was just about taking exams and earning high marks. Due to the excessive focus on standardized test scores, English teaching in China is test-oriented, with little emphasis on the practical application of language. The most time-consuming part of my English learning was memorizing vocabulary lists and doing grammar exercises. In my memory, my vocabulary was very narrow at that time. Even though I could recite hundreds of words, I could only use a few simple words, such as hello and goodbye, to greet others. Even more challenging was the grammar exercise; I did not understand the basic principles of grammar. I had to memorize many formulas and phrases by rote. Compared with first language acquisition, second language learning is more complex and needs effective learning methods. Language learning strategies (LLS) refer to the actions and behaviors consciously taken by learners to improve their learning outcomes. Cohen (1990) [6] also explained that learning strategies might influence the frequency, amount, and quality of second language learning. To improve my English, I have tried various English learning methods: memorizing words, listening, reading, translation, and reciting texts. I have spent much time learning English, but the results have not been significant. I have gradually come to realize that my learning methods are the main reason for my poor English progress. For example, when I was reciting words, I just kept repeating the spelling and meaning of words to keep them in my mind, but I did not know how to use them flexibly, so after the exam, these words quickly slipped from my memory. To sum up, the lack of an ideal language environment and efficient learning methods are the main obstacles to my second language learning.

## **5. The connections between the first language and the second language: positive and negative transfer and the generation of interlanguage**

In general, adult second language learning is established on the formation of the first language, so the two language systems are bound to influence and transfer each other. The word "transfer" refers to the direct or indirect influence of existing experience on new knowledge; people are habituated to connect new things with their original experience unconsciously, and people from different cultural backgrounds may be all affected by this psychology. "Language transfer" is a unique phenomenon in foreign language learning, which is reflected in the influence of learners' mother tongue on target language learning (Crystal, 2003) [5]. Ellis (1985) [10] believed that according to the theory of language transfer, language learners are inevitable to be influenced by their first language in the course of learning a second language, and this influence may be positive transfer or negative transfer. Then our mother tongue is like the original language, which provides the first building materials, and then gradually mixes with the materials of the target language to form a new language form absent in the first language and target language: interlanguage (Richard, 2019) [15].

### **5.1. Positive transfer**

Any two languages are different in some respects, but at the same time, they merge in others. When language fusion makes the first language help target language acquisition quickly, this is a positive transfer (Bardovi-Harlig and Sprouse, 2018) [2]. There is an example about language positive transfer: I have never formally studied Japanese, but I was able to understand some Japanese words during my

first trip to Japan, because although Chinese and Japanese are two different languages, they have a lot of similar words, so for most Chinese native speakers, it is not a difficult thing to understand some simple Japanese words. Similarly, it is generally believed that native speakers of the Indo-European language system have the edge over the counterparts of the Sinitic system in learning English (Cui, 2018) [7].

## 5.2. Negative transfer

On the contrary, when the influence of the first language leads to the obstruction or error of target language learning, it will lead to a negative transfer on language learning. Applied linguists tend to focus on negative transfer rather than positive transfer because they generally believe that only negative transfer brings challenges to language teaching and learning (Bardovi-Harlig and Sprouse, 2018) [2]. Due to Chinese and English belonging to two completely different language families, so many linguists hold a view that the effects of negative transfer outweigh the positive transfer for Chinese in learning English. Negative transfer is reflected in various aspects of language learning: 1. Foreign accent: if foreign language learners have a strong accent, it is mainly because of the negative transfer of the native language accent (but not the whole reason), and if there is a pronunciation only in the target language not mentioned in the native language, it will also cause some learning difficulties. 2. Grammar: for instance, there are 16 tenses and morphs in English but not in Chinese, so many Chinese students and even myself often ignore the changes in tenses in oral and written English, resulting in grammatical errors. 3. If a word has a similar meaning in both the mother tongue and the target language, it will help language learners to understand the word; it is a positive transfer. Nevertheless, if a word has a similar pronunciation in two languages but completely different meanings, it will interfere with language learners; it is a negative transfer. For example, English "parent" and French "parent" (relative); English "became" and German "bekommen" (to receive) (Bardovi-Harlig and Sprouse, 2018) [2].

## 5.3. Interlanguage

Interlanguage, originated from American applied linguist Larry Selinker, refers to a transitional language used by language learners in the process of target language learning, which is between the first language and the target language (Bardovi-Harlig and Sprouse, 2018) [2]. The production of "interlanguage" is because the process of learning a second language is non-linear and fragmented, which typically develops rapidly in some fields while relatively slowly or even permanently stagnates in others (Selinker, 1972) [17]. Therefore, the use of interlanguage is an inevitable stage in our foreign language learning and also a reflection of language transfer, which will constantly change with the improvement of target language ability. Exactly as Efron (1941) [9] deemed that interlanguage reflects the rule development system of language learners, which is the result of multiple language learning processes, including the positive and negative transfer of first language, contrastive interference of target language, and newly encountered grammar rules. For instance, Chinglish, known to Chinese English learners, is a typical interlanguage. When I first came to the UK, I tried to translate every word I said into Chinese in English, so it caused a lot of confusion for native English speakers. For example, when I was shopping, I used to ask: "Can I use my bank card?" Because in China, both credit cards and debit cards are called bank cards, I literally translated it from Chinese to English. But then I found that native speakers rarely use the word "bank card".

Although interlanguage sometimes confuses, it can also help language learners understand and use the target language easier. As mentioned before, interlanguage did help me express my ideas in many cases when I first came to the UK (even until now). Maybe words are inappropriate sometimes; interlanguage is indeed a useful communication tool for language learners in the process of second language learning. On the other hand, we should also timely correct the inauthentic expressions and

accumulate language materials to make interlanguage gradually approach our target language.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper is a review of my language acquisition and learning experience from childhood to adulthood, including my first language acquisition and second language learning. Firstly, both language acquisition and language learning refer to the process of language knowledge accumulation. While language acquisition emphasizes the unconscious and effortless process (Anderson, 2007) [8]. Language learning is defined as the consciously and orderly accumulating knowledge of language features such as vocabulary, sentence structure, and grammar in an institutional environment. It is precisely because of the differences in acquisition and learning that my first language and second language development processes are also significantly different, it is mainly reflected in: (1) different ages of language learners. (2) different language environments and learning methods. However, at the same time, the two language learning systems are not independent of each other. Because of "Language transfer", my second language learning affected by the first language. This includes the positive transfers that have a positive impact and the negative transfers that have a negative impact on target language learning, as well as the "interlanguage" that occurs during the language learning. For language learners, learning the target language is the process of constantly improving their interlanguage.

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