L1 vs. L2 Acquisition: Reconciling the Differences between Childhood Language Development and Classroom Learning

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Abstract

This paper reviews a broad spectrum of literature in uncovering the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 language acquisition. Three theories of L1 acquisition in children (Behaviorist, Nativist, and Developmental) are examined. These theories are then applied to the nature of how language is acquired in the L2 classroom, which itself comes under scrutiny for its conduciveness as a language facilitation vessel. Additionally, variables impacting the L2 learner, including motivation and willingness to communicate are examined as further factors that may inhibit L2 language acquisition. The author finds breadth of linguistic interaction as a key factor that brings L2 acquisition closer to its L1 counterpart while acknowledging its replication in the L2 classroom is not so simple. L2 language acquisition challenges in Japan are the primary contextual focus of the paper, though examples from other worldwide contexts are also observed.

Overview

One of the miracles of early childhood is the acquisition of one’s mother tongue. Barring extreme circumstances, a child will seemingly effortlessly pick up one’s native language without books, audio tapes, or formalized instruction. From babbling to development of grammatical morphemes, to fully grown vocabularies and sentence structures, L1 development is an essential yet nearly infallible part of childhood. However, when the language acquisition process shifts from one’s native language to a second language, one need look no further than the countless studies performed on the (in)ability of students, of various ages, to learn a second or foreign language in a classroom, not to mention the practical experience of both educators and language learners. As such, in what capacities are these two learning systems similar or different, and what factors are responsible for these similarities or discrepancies?

Toward shedding light on this discussion, this paper shall first examine theories of L1 acquisition to get a firm grasp at how children learn their first language. Then, the counterparts to these theories in the L2 shall be observed with a consideration and analysis of the practical elements of
the L2 classroom that either aid or inhibit such learning outcomes, including affective factors that are unique to the L2 experience. Although not exclusive to it, many of these issues will be analyzed through the lens of L2 education in Japan.

**L1 Acquisition Process**

Though we have millions of new cases of first language learners every year, we still do not fully understand exactly how children are so adept and successful at learning their first language. However, a few major hypotheses have arisen over the last seventy years that attempt to explain this phenomenon. If we wish to understand the difference between learning in a classroom and a child’s road to language fluency, we must first understand the various prominent theories of first language acquisition.

**How Children Talk**

A child’s L1 acquisition can be broken down into several steps of competence. After babbling, where it is shown that children can already understand the difference between distinct phonemes in the L1, children begin to create two-word sentences, such as “Daddy bye-bye” or “No chair” that, while non-grammatical, relay distinct function and meaning. As time passes, children grow more comfortable with grammatical forms of negation and questions, to where they are able to express more complex thoughts clearly (Lightbrown and Spada 2006). The process is not without bumps in the road, with overextensions (i.e. erroneously attributing a word to a larger group, such as “cow” to all four-legged animals), underextensions (i.e. failure to realize a word may have multiple contexts or usages), or overgeneralizations (i.e. improper verb conjugations based on known grammatical patterns) leading to improper language use (O’Grady and Cho 2001). However, having learned from these mistakes, a normal child will emerge fluent in his or her native language by the age of four. How does this language ascension happen so quickly?

**Behaviorist Theory**

Coming to light in the mid-twentieth century, the behaviorist theory of language acquisition argued that children learn language primarily through the imitation of those around them (Lightbrown and Spada 2006). A child, seeking positive reinforcement, would attempt to reproduce the language he or she hears until such language becomes habitual. Utterances that do not produce the desired response are weeded out, while those that do result in the desired effect are reproduced again. Thus, through constant trial and error, a child is able to put together enough language to develop a communicable pattern that gets the desired results.

However, the behaviorist theory is not without its critics. Brown (2007) points out that the behaviorist theory does not account for language’s abstract qualities; that is, following this theory, how could one utter a thought or idea that has never been uttered before? Children show an innate knack for creativity in language, yet they show few signs of imitating adults when doing so, instead
demonstrating that they grasp grammatical concepts that allow them to say whatever they want to say. O’Grady and Cho (2001) note that “simple memorization of a fixed inventory of words and sentences would not equip learners to deal with previously unheard utterances – a basic requisite of normal language use.”

Further behavior theorists expanded the theory to include language frames, or patterns of sentence construction, based initially on imitation, but allowing room for expansion of natural creativity (Brown 2007). However, critics still decried the lack of focus on social interaction and failure to account for wider language abstractions within this theory.

Nativist Theory

Chomsky’s nativist theory postulated that humans are born with an innate ability to comprehend language and grammar. Rather than putting the emphasis on the environment, Chomsky argued that the child’s inborn ability to acquire L1 is no different than learning countless other essential skills, and that the learning environment only determines which language a child will learn. Macneill (1996, in Brown 2007) describes children’s minds to contain language acquisition devices, which allow children to understand which sounds and utterances are relevant to speech, organize and store the data for later use, and reject data that is not relevant to the linguistic system. Later theorists advanced the notion of universal grammar, or a blanket language template that is able to be molded to the L1 based on the input a child receives (Brown 2007). Chomsky’s theories helped fill in holes left by the behaviorists. If children possess an innate ability to understand, create, and manipulate language, it will likely quickly lead to the originality and creativity found in young first language learners. Nativist theorists first presented the critical period hypothesis, stating that humans are programmed to acquire L1 during a specific time in their lives, specifically, childhood. Beyond that age, the hypothesis states, a child or adult will never learn a language at the same level as their native language. While generally believed for a child’s L1 acquisition, there is debate as to whether or not this hypothesis holds true toward a timeframe for L2 acquisition.

Developmental Theory

Still other theorists argue that the primary base of language acquisition is interaction within one’s learning environment. While acknowledging there are brain processes at work that cultivate one’s understanding of L1, Lightbown and Spada (2006) content that children can acquire the essential fundamentals of their L1 through freely available everyday receptive and productive interactions with their surroundings.

This concept can be expanded to acquiring one’s native culture. Children are born into the world with no concept of culture. From day one, however, their world view begins to take shape around them, with language being a key factor. The language we speak, be it the words we have (or do not have) to describe objects, feelings, or concepts, or the way language creates paradigms of formality, politeness, and appropriateness, sculpts our sense of what is important and to be
highlighted in our culture. It is through these interactions that we become a functioning member of our society, not only linguistically, but also socially. As an example, Japanese children are exposed to several layers of language formality to be used in different social contexts that communicate similar or even identical ideas. Proper utilization of these layers may differ depending on the individual child, but there is no arguing that children are aware of them and can understand the roots of the reaction (either positive or negative) they receive from adults when utilizing the language themselves, thus socializing themselves toward a cultural medium that would be considered foreign in another culture with a different linguistic formality structure.

L2 Acquisition and Variables

To what extent then is L2 language acquisition similar to the theories of its L1 counterpart, and what additional acquisition variables are present when students learn their second language?

Theories of Second Language Acquisition

Both the behaviorist and nativist theories have their counterparts in L2 acquisition: behaviorists see L2 acquisition as the repetition of patterns of native speakers (leading to the development of the audiolingual method), while nativists continued their push of universal grammar, stating that learners adapt their learning acquisition devices to develop command of new grammar systems beyond the input they receive in classes. These theorists analyze the success of L2 learners in their grammatical resemblance of native speakers. However, Lightbrown and Spada (2006) caution that “linguists have concluded that something [besides universal grammar] is required for second language acquisition since it so often falls short of success.”

Newer theories of second language acquisition focus on interaction as a key factor. While some sociocultural theorists say that external interactions make up the root of all language acquisition, while others suggest these interactions act more as a springboard from which learners can begin to better cultivate their understanding of language, both would agree that negotiation of meaning, especially when in a difficult linguistic situation, encourages learners to formulate more comprehensible output and thus further their level of language acquisition (Lightbrown and Spada 2006).

The Classroom as Learning Environment

No matter which theory is used to understand first language acquisition, there is an undeniable difference between the learning context of a child learning L1 with his or her family and a student learning L2 in a classroom. In the former, the learning environment is everyday life: whether spending time at home, grocery shopping, or going to the movies, a child is acquiring L1 simply by absorbing the world around him or her.

Compare the above, however, to a classroom. In the traditional sense, a classroom is an intransient environment, complete with desks, a teaching podium, and a blackboard.
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While this may be conducive to schooling, as schools could hardly operate if students were allowed to wander around all day, the static environment is hardly conducive toward the facilitation of L2 acquisition. Students cannot be out in the world, cannot learn through everyday life, and instead are required to sit at desks, often with a teacher lecturing to them.

Upon utilization of more communicative teaching methods, such as Communicative Language Teaching or Task-Based Learning, the latter of which is employed by the Bunkyo English Communication Center at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women’s University, the classroom may become a more dynamic environment. In these teaching methods, teachers attempt to facilitate the negotiation of meaning between students in the target language, a construct similar to the developmental theory of L1 acquisition. These methods encourage interactive communication while demonstrating a genuine need for information transfer, both increasing learners’ language spontaneity and developing communicative competence. Skehan et al. (1996), however, point out that such linguistic negotiation is often reliant upon prefabricated phrases and meanings. Speakers in their L1 can employ such phrases to both save time and build upon shared background knowledge of the task’s context with their partner. Once this operation switches to the L2, as learners conduct the task under the pressures of a limited time frame, students may become too reliant on already learned linguistic chunks rather than incorporating the new language of the task, in addition to paying less attention to new linguistic forms if they are present in the instruction, thus potentially curtailing their long-term progress (Skehan et al. 1996). Furthermore, considering the Japanese scholastic context, these methods are less likely to be adopted due to their relatively recent development and a lack of instructor training and/or instructor confidence in his or her own L2 ability in the case of non-native teachers.

At the other end of the spectrum, more static methods, such as the audiolingual method or grammar translation method, are still widespread in today’s schools. In such classrooms, little transfer of meaning takes place between students, and often, students have very little reason to open their mouths during the lesson but to repeat what the teacher writes on the board. While these methods have their purpose, especially in terms of strengthening syntactic understanding of the L2, they vary greatly from the patterns of L1 acquisition in children. Cook (1969) argues that these methods do not allow learners to mimic their own L1 acquisition, as the process of creating incomplete utterances are rejected in favor of complete, corrected sentences toward a preferred form. As a result, natural patterns of experimentation and creativity, which lead toward linguistic competence and confidence are stifled in order to focus on grammatical accuracy.

L1 Influence and Interference

In contrast to a child acquiring L1, and along with it, a way of expressing feelings, thoughts, and abstractions, an L2 learner already has a base language of communication. Comparisons of the L2 to one’s L1, especially during the early stages of L2 acquisition, are unavoidable. Until one develops a true sense of bilingualism, able to use two or more languages interchangeably, the L1 will retain a semblance of dominance over the L2 in terms of what makes up the core rules of
language. This can be observed in any basic grammar lesson: Japanese students of English have difficulty pluralizing nouns, adding “s” to the end of third person verbs, and putting the verb in its proper place in the sentence (as it comes at the end in Japanese). Though one can be aware of the distinctions between languages and resist quick transfer of the L1 on to the L2, one still retains the L1 as the core guidelines for how languages (and culture) work.

Spada and Lightbrown (1999) found that native French children, even after hours of intensive study, still accepted ungrammatical forms of English as correct due to similar sentence structures being correct in French. They concluded that no matter the stage of the L2 learner, they still filtered their assumptions of L2 grammaticality and productive L2 constructions through the lens of their own L1 interlanguage. Sunderman and Kroll (2006) similarly studied whether specific words in a learner’s L1 would interfere with the understanding of similar meaning words in the L2. While more proficient learners are more apt to distinguish the difference between similar but not exact meaning words in different languages, “the evidence suggests that both lexical form relatives and translation equivalents in the L1 appear to influence performance” (Sunderman and Kroll 2006).

Language Taught vs. Language Learned
Complicating the language classroom is the notion that what students are taught in the classroom is not necessarily what they walk away with after the lesson. Although a teacher may have a perfect lesson planned out, confident the students will have mastered a specific grammar or conversational point by the end, the point may not have sunk down into students’ spontaneous ability to use the language. Willis (2003) states that spontaneous mastery is the pinnacle of any L2 acquisition, representing an ability to manipulate and use the language in a way that conveys real meaning in a non-fixed setting. The gap that exists between a language learner’s spontaneous communication and their understanding of grammatical rules allows for ambiguity as to what exactly learners will gain from the lesson. Understanding this, teachers can attempt to apply methods that focus less on specific grammar and more on communicative competence in order to reduce the gap. Willis (2003) argues that learners who have a certain level of language ability yet lack spontaneous command of the language should be given time to both “get meanings across (improvisation) and work to refine those meanings (consolidation).” However, as shall be described, various factors even beyond those inherent to more static language classrooms stand in the way of promoting such spontaneous language use.

Type of Language Learned
In order to simplify grammatical constructs into neat patterns of usage, L2 textbooks often teach language patterns that rarely are used in real conversation. Arguments have been made for more authentic texts to be incorporated into L2 classrooms. Authentic language has a real-world draw, making the language (and prevailing culture behind the language) come alive to the learner. Although authentic text is by and large a much more difficult learning medium than contrived
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text, the danger of text that is too contrived is the inability to glean much real linguistic value from it. Especially when taught through grammar translation, it is much more difficult for one to add grammar taught through contrived sentence patterns (sometimes hardly resembling a sentence a normal human would say!) into one’s spontaneous language use. Furthermore, textbooks (and teachers) may overemphasize some grammatical patterns and underemphasize others as part of a larger syllabus, even though the language taught does not quite match native L2 usage (Lightbrown and Spada 2006).

Time and Setting

Another factor that complicates L2 acquisition is that students are busy with a variety of subjects that may limit the time dedicated toward L2 learning. In Japan, for example, an average student in junior high school studies English only three hours a week. Couple this with Japan being a highly EFL environment (little opportunity is available to speak English outside of the classroom), and teachers are faced with pressure to pack in as much as they can into those three hours, often leading to learning situations that are highly abnormal when viewed through the lens of L1 acquisition. LaVan (2001) notes that adolescent learners are much more likely to use L1 with each other even in an immersion setting, as being able to communicate freely and easily is essential in establishing social identity. Lacking the necessary linguistic competence to build these relationships in L2, students will see the L2 as an “official” or “classroom” language, while the L1 remains the dominant language of social networks and spontaneous interaction. As an L2 teacher, it is important to recognize that L1 language use will nearly undoubtedly persist, and that promotion and encouragement of L2 usage is more likely to lead to fruition than attempting to stamp out any usage of L1 in the classroom (LaVan 2001).

L2 Affective Factors

Beyond the aforementioned differences in L1 and L2 language acquisition, several affective factors play a key role in determining learners’ ability to acquire a second language.

Learner Motivation

In contrast to L1 acquisition, which is largely irrespective of motivation (a child need not be motivated to acquire his or her first language), motivational factors play a significant role in the L2 classroom. Dornyei and Otto (1998) define motivation as “the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes.” These factors have a direct influence on the amount to which L2 learning and communication becomes feasible (MacIntyre et al 2002). In helping us break down this definition and understand the implications of motivation, a wealth of terminology and theories has been proposed during recent years.
Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

One of the original motivation dichotomies, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation explore the factors that prompt a learner to work hard at learning a second language. Deci (1975, in Brown), defines intrinsic motivation as motivation for inner sense of accomplishment, competence, and self-determination, while extrinsic motivation focuses on the reward one will attain from outside factors, such as financial reward or good grades.

Studies such as Maslow (1970, in Brown 2007) have shown that encouraging intrinsic motivation leads to higher classroom success rates; the flourishing of such self-oriented goals leads to "self-actualization," or the desire to do the best one can do. Bruner (1966, in Brown 2007) adds that an ideal classroom extricates itself from the "control of reward and punishment," adding that "the principal weaknesses of extrinsically driven behavior is its additive nature." In such classrooms, the students would not need nor should be presented with extrinsically motivating factors, as the class would take it upon themselves to learn the new language out of their desire to learn and grow.

However, the fact remains that at schools, L2 education does not happen in a vacuum. External pressures, such as tests, grades, and the desire to get into top colleges around the world are constantly in the back of students' minds, which impact their extrinsic motivation. Kimura et al (1999) found that for a host of different student types in Japan, including most high school students and some junior high school students, classes are often extrinsically motivated, often negatively. Students in these classrooms are studying English to pass exams or to further their future careers, not to develop personally. Thus, while students understand the importance of their studies long-term, their motivation does not parlay into a desire for internal growth, which can inhibit the amount of learning that takes place in the classroom.

Motivation in the Learning Context

Gardner (2007) discusses classroom learning motivation, where the learning situation influences student motivation to learn. Focusing on how learners view their own learning context, this type of motivation can and often is influenced by several language class factors, including the teacher, the class atmosphere, the course content and materials, the state of the classroom itself, as well as the individual personalities of the students (Gardner 2007). These classroom context factors play an important role in developing what Gardner (2007) terms "attitudes toward the learning situations." Be they positive or negative for the individual student, these attitudes play an important role in classroom language learning.

Gardner (2007) also discusses the cultural context of learning a foreign language. Unlike other subjects, learning a language also means cultural exchange, either phonologically, lexically, or socially, and the cultural attitudes one carries about the value of language learning will influence the learning process. Cultural attitudes may influence beliefs regarding the value and
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meaningfulness placed upon the learning of an L2, along with ideas about what is and isn’t possible regarding acquisition of the target language (Gardner 2007). In Japan, this can be seen as a sharply demotivating factor, where people (erroneously) believe that Japanese and English are simply too different, that Japanese people will never be able to learn English well, and that understanding English is a luxury but not an essential skill for most Japanese professionals. Students may begin their studies excited about learning English, as Kimura et al (1999) find, but their motivation wanes upon being presented with the intricacies of English. Likely, it is this difficult stage compounded with negative cultural beliefs that act as a motivational barrier for many students.

Demotivation

Direct demotivation of students is another factor that affects the L2 classroom. In a study done in Vietnamese schools by Trang and Baldauf (2007), a majority of students experience demotivation on some occasion, and many multiple times. Furthermore, only about half of students surveyed reported having overcome their demotivation. Demotivating factors included frustration toward lack of progress in English, poor self-esteem, frustration toward the teaching method, teacher behavior, stress related to grading and assessment, or inadequacy of the learning environment. In Trang and Baldauf’s (2007) words, these factors “destroyed” or “decreased” student interest in learning English. Trang and Baldauf (2007) found that demotivation had a negative impact on students in all cases, precluding them from achieving their expected learning outcomes.

Teaching methods ranked at the top of the demotivational factors scale. It appears that regardless of method used, the method will only lend itself to a portion of learners due to variances in learning styles. Even more, students may prefer a more static teaching method similar to the ones discussed earlier. Kimura et al (1999) found that Japanese high school students seemed to prefer teacher centered lectures where students were free to be disengaged. Perhaps through demotivation and having built up tolerance to less-engaging methods, students were more satisfied for the status quo to continue than to suddenly begin engaging in a more communicative classroom.

Another demotivating factor present in EFL contexts is the inability of students to rationalize the need for the L2 in their environment. When a learning situation lacks both an out of class facility to use the L2 in context and a direct need for fluency in the language to become successful, many students are turned off by L2 study. Returning to Japan, there has been little historical need for English fluency in order to operate smoothly within Japanese society, nor have there been ample opportunities for students to engage in cultural exchange or language practice outside of class. Failure to understand an underlying need for the L2 contributes to demotivation.

Willingness to Communicate

MacIntyre et al (2002) discuss factors that increase or decrease students’ willingness to
communicate in L2. They found that a combination of high language anxiety and low perceived linguistic competence can lower one’s willingness to be an active part of one’s L2 classroom. Anxious feelings about upcoming performance or interactions in the L2 may lead to an increase in self-attentive thoughts, or worse, self-deprecating thoughts. Even without engaging in communication, anxiety about future language use can curtail one’s language acquisition process, including the quality of L2 output (MacIntyre et al 2002).

More so than one’s actual lack of ability to communicate in the L2, perceived communicative competence (or incompetence) can affect one’s willingness to communicate in a foreign language. MacIntyre et al (2002) note that while one may not have a firm grasp of one’s actual ability, detrimental thoughts regarding one’s perceived ability can work to supersede one’s actual communicative competence. MacIntyre et al (2002) also find that initiation of communication is especially susceptible to be stunted by negative self-perceived ability. This poor perceived competence, coupled with frustrations toward teaching methods may lead to the demotivation discussed prior.

Furthermore, there is often a correlation between perceived competence and language anxiety. MacIntyre et al (2002) found that while younger students have low levels of language anxiety due to lack of experience studying L2, older students are more susceptible to underrate their actual communicative ability due to the buildup of anxiety levels over years of study. Through repeated language experiences, often negative, L2 students are often less likely to be willing to communicate due to these affective variables.

While children show little reticence to make and learn from mistakes, adolescents and adults are often more defensive in character, feeling averse to sounding like a child or being “wrong” in the L2, especially in a class of their peers. Learners with more fragile self-esteem likely will have a harder time taking the necessary risks that learning a second language requires (Brown 2007). The constant fail before success of L2 causes some learners to be both critical of themselves for not speaking perfectly and afraid of judgmental peers. This in turn causes some learners to lose interest in class participation, speaking only when called upon and nothing more, especially in a culture where such negative peer perceptions are actually realized.

Conclusion

Though theories of L1 and L2 acquisition may be similar, L2 acquisition in the language classroom has many factors that do not come into play when a child is learning L1. We have seen the importance of interaction in developing both language systems, especially in terms as a stepping stone toward L2 communicative competence and eventually linguistic spontaneity. Children learn through play, heedless of mistakes and constantly acquiring new pieces of information about how L1 works. However, the transition to L2 classrooms is not so simple. Be it through the teaching method used, the language syllabus that omits or heavily edits authentic language, time or setting constraints, or simply the influence the L1 has on student learning, a variety of key factors
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complicate the L2 acquisition process. Furthermore, adolescent and adult learners must deal with affective variables of motivation, demotivation, anxiety, and inhibitions that affect their ability or even desire to become fluent in the second language and/or engage in the acquisition process.

Although teachers can take steps to construct an L2 classroom that mirrors elements of L1 acquisition, it is important to have an understanding of the limitations that go along with it. As Cook (2002) states, “both teachers and students become frustrated by setting themselves an impossible target” when expecting students to achieve L1 like fluency by the end of the lesson syllabus. By viewing our own classrooms in this light, both in the scope of doing more to promote an L1 acquisition modeled interactive atmosphere while lowering affective variables, yet not trying to do the impossible and expecting the perfect classroom, we can continue to grow as educators and better support our students. As we come to learn more about the unique elements of L2 acquisition, we will surely make even further advances in our own classrooms in the years to come.

References


