Handout 3: Language acquisition

Terminology

- *acquisition*, *learning*: the process of learning a language. Some theories use these terms interchangeably, while others use them for different concepts (see below).
- *target language*: a language that one is learning, or trying to learn.
- *first language* (L1): one’s native language, learned from a very young age. Some people have more than one first language.
- *second language* (L2): a language learned later in life than one’s native language, whether in childhood or in adulthood.

Notes

Children and adults acquire (learn) language differently. Or, to put it another way, we all learned our first language (L1) in a very similar way, while we tend to learn a second language (L2)—if at all—in a variety of ways.

- Everyone learns a first language.
- L1 acquisition is almost completely *subconscious*.
- L1 acquisition involves several regular *stages*, such as babbling, one-word utterances, two-word utterances, and so on.
- L1 acquisition must happen during a *critical period* when we are very young. In addition, different stages of L1 acquisition must happen at particular points in our development. For example, children start to lose the ability to distinguish sounds not in their native language by the age of six months (Kuhl et al. 1992).
- At the end of L1 acquisition, we speak *fluently*, with perfect pronunciation.

Compare L2 acquisition:

- Not everyone learns a second language.
- L2 acquisition is usually *conscious*.
- L2 acquisition does not happen during a critical period, or in regular stages, but can proceed in several different ways (see below).
- Adults who learn a second language rarely speak it completely fluently, or with perfect pronunciation. Rather, they show various effects of their first language.

There are many approaches to the teaching of second languages, and to overcoming the difficulties faced by L2 learners.
The *Natural Approach* (Krashen and Terrell 1983):

- L2 acquisition happens in *stages* similar to L1 acquisition.
- L2 learners must be *comfortable*.
- L2 learners must be presented with L2 input that they can *understand*.
- L2 learners should be challenged with structures *one stage beyond* their current level.

*Total Physical Response* (TPR) (Asher 2000):

- L2 acquisition is made automatic and subconscious by being combined with *actions*.
- L2 learners perform actions, according to commands given in the target language.
- The combination of L2 input and movement aids memory and acquisition.

Dr. Stephen Neyooxet Greymorning’s *Accelerated Second-Language Acquisition* (ASLA):

- Developed for teaching Arapaho, a language of Wyoming, Colorado, and Oklahoma.
- *Less* focus on vocabulary and action-related learning activities.
- *More* focus on quickly developing learners’ ability to understand and produce simple sentences of two or three words.
- When instructors see that learners are on the verge of acquiring particular vocabulary and grammar points, they prompt them to solve them on their own.

**Exercises**

Questions for group discussion:

1. When learning to speak a second language, is it helpful to have a *conscious* understanding of the language’s grammar (sounds, word parts, and sentence structure)? How about when *teaching* a second language?
2. When learning or teaching a second language, is it helpful to have an understanding of how children acquire sounds and grammar?
3. When learning or teaching a second language, is it helpful to compare it to related dialects and languages?
4. When learning a second language, is it helpful to learn to read and write it?

**References**

