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# **An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition**

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**2023 - 2024**

# **An Overview on First and Second Language Acquisition &The Major Frameworks in SLA**

## **1.1 A Historical and Linguistic Overview on L1 &L2 Acquisition**

The 1950s and the 1960s were an exciting time for both linguistics and language acquisition. Until that time, linguistics had been dominated by what was called structural linguistics. Structuralists looked at observable aspects of sentences as they were actually used by people in order to make statements about the rules of language. At the same time, human (and animal) learning was dominated by the psychological theory of behaviorism. It mainly focused on the kind of learning was termed operant conditioning. Under operant conditioning, language was seen as a behavior and not a mental construct. As such, it was learned like any other behavior: through the learning system of stimulus, response, and reward (Patten et al., 2020).

B. F. Skinner applied behavioral psychology to language acquisition in his seminal book *Verbal Behavior* published in 1957. Skinner saw language primarily as a behavior and not as a mental construct. The prevailing notion of the time was that children imitated (response) what they heard (stimulus) and because of continued conversation by parents.

In 1958, Jean Berko Gleason published her famous study in which she tested young children's knowledge of word endings inflections for nouns, verbs, and adjectives in English. Berko found that children did not just imitate the speech around them. Instead, something internal to the child was extracting rule-like knowledge from the examples they were storing in their minds. Children were much more active learners of language than could be claimed under something like behaviorism.

The following year, in 1959, Noam Chomsky published his famous critical review of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*. Chomsky argued two basic points. The first was that unconscious linguistic knowledge was much more abstract and complex than a set of internalized habits . He did not see language as something relatively simple to learn via stimulus and reinforcement, but as a very complex and intricate system that defied description by the psychologists of the time. For him language was not behavior; it was a mental construct. In other words, language was a system that existed inside the mind; something we could study through introspection. Chomsky's second point was that learning anything could not be reduced to operant conditioning. He forcefully critiqued the very basic

constructs of operant conditioning (e. g. , stimulus, response, feedback) and showed how inadequate they were when one considered how quickly children acquire both language and concepts. He argued that children were not blank slates to be written on by their environments, but instead came to the learning task with something internal that guided their active processing of information to convert it into something usable at a given point in time. In the 1960s and 1970s works by Ursula Bellugi on developmental stages showed that in the acquisition of a particular structure, such as negation, one could find stages. That is, children do not magically begin producing negative sentences such as John does not live here but instead go through stages in which bits and pieces of the syntax of negation are added and refined until the child arrives at what looks like an adult-like representation.

During the same era, the most pioneering two publications stand out concerning L2 acquisition. The first was S. Pit Corder's famous essay, "*The Significance of Learners' Errors*" published in 1967. Corder argued that systematic errors in L2 acquisition were not symptomatic of faulty learning, but, as in child language acquisition, were windows into how the mind processed and stored language. According to his views ,errors in language learning provide evidence of the system used by the learner, indicating the strategies employed in the process, although not yet the correct system. The other publication was Larry Selinker's essay, "*Interlanguage.*" In 1972. Selinker argued a number of points. The **first** was that learners create what he called an interlanguage. This language was neither the L1 nor the L2 but was reflective of how the learner moved from one toward the goal of another. He added language transfer or influence as an essential ingredient in L2 acquisition. A **second** idea was that language was a complex and abstract mental representation in the vein of Chomsky's generative perspective. A **third** major idea that Selinker offered was that L2 acquisition, for whatever reasons, was not uniformly successful. Whereas all children growing up in the same environment converge on the same linguistic system (mental representation), L2 learners do not. They are routinely non-nativelike in a variety of domains. Selinker termed this aspect of L2 acquisition *fossilization*.

However , to be more familiar with the field of language acquisition , the next few pages of this paper gives much précised yet detailed account on major notions and issues.

## 1.2 First Language Acquisition

Language acquisition is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language (in other words, gain the ability to be aware of language and to understand it), as well as to produce and use words and sentences to communicate. Structures, rules, and representation are all involved in language acquisition. It takes a variety of skills, including phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and a large vocabulary, to be able to utilize language effectively. Language can be expressed orally through speech or manually through signs ( Pichler,2015).

First language acquisition refers to the process by which children learn and develop their native or first language. It is a natural and instinctive process that occurs during early childhood, typically starting from birth and continuing until about the age of five or six. Without formal training or explicit teaching, children pick up language abilities throughout this period, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and knowledge of social and cultural components of communication(Crowley and Smith , 2010)..

The process of learning a first language is intricate and dynamic, and it is influenced by many variables, including exposure to language input, interaction with caregivers and peers, cognitive development, and intrinsic language learning ability .

Clark (2009) states that children's language development follows a predictable sequence. However, there is a great deal of variation in the age at which children reach a given milestone. Furthermore, each child's development is usually characterized by gradual acquisition of particular abilities: thus "correct" use of English verbal inflection will emerge over a period of a year or more, starting from a stage where verbal inflections are always left out, and ending in a stage where they are nearly always used correctly. However, the following table shows each stage of acquisition.

Stage	Age	Main feature/s
<b>Babbling</b>	6-8 months	Repetitive CV patterns
<b>One-word stage (better <i>one-morpheme</i> or <i>one-unit</i>) or holophrastic stage</b>	9-18 months	Single open-class words or word stems
<b>Two-word stage</b>	18-24 months	"mini-sentences" with simple semantic relations
<b>Telegraphic stage or early multiword stage (better <i>multi-</i> <i>morpheme</i>)</b>	24-30 months	"Telegraphic" sentence structures of <i>lexical</i> rather than <i>functional</i> or <i>grammatical</i> morphemes
<b>Later multiword stage</b>	30+ months	<i>Grammatical</i> or <i>functional</i> structures emerge

Table (1) illustrates the main stages of first language acquisition according to Clark (2009)

### 1.3 Second Language Acquisition

The first chapter of Ellis' Second Language Acquisition Research provides a definition of the term "second language acquisition", describing it as a "way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue"(Ellis 2008:5-6), thus providing an umbrella term in the context of the book for both second and foreign language learning.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to the process of learning another language after the native language has been learned. Sometimes the term refers to the learning of a third or fourth language. The important aspect is that SLA refers to the learning of a nonnative language after the learning of the native language. The second language is commonly referred to as the L2. As with the phrase "second language," L2 can refer to any language learned after learning the L1, regardless of whether it is the second, third, fourth, or fifth language (Gass and Selinker,2008).

Ellis (2008) discusses the two goals of SLA which are :  
 (a)description and (b) explanation of L2 acquisition and internal and external factors such as social environment, input and cognitive processes that influence language learning. Several case studies are presented in order to further emphasize the importance of some methodological issues and difficulties in description and explanation of language learning. One such difficulty is, for instance, that learners, in the process of learning, engages in

“item learning” and “system learning” and an explanation of L2 acquisition must account for both of these and the relationship among them .

As mentioned previously ,the term 'second' is generally used to refer to any language than the first language. Foreign language is the one that is learnt in classroom setting and it plays no major roles in community. Implicit learning is typically defined as learning that takes place without either intentionally or awareness. Explicit learning however, is necessarily a conscious process. Acquisition is implicit and learning is explicit. Studies of SLA fell out of fashion because theory are time-consuming and they don't permit generalization. Early literature on SLA shows that inability to take part in communications and social-psychological distance from native speakers are two of the early discovered reasons for unsuccessful language acquisition. In addition, literature also reveals the grammatical competence develops independently from other competencies.

### **1.3.1 The Role of Age in L2 Acquisition**

The following points give a clear account on the role of age in the process of second language acquisition:

- 1- Adults proceed through the early stages of syntactic and morphological development faster than children.
- 2- Older children acquire faster than younger children
- 3- Acquirers who begin natural exposure to a second language during childhood achieve higher proficiency in L2 than beginning adults.
- 4- Adults outperform children only when rate of learning is concerned. They will be overtaken by children who receive enough exposure to the L2. Sufficient exposure leads to the activation of implicit learning and this takes considerable time.
- 5- Children are more likely to acquire a native accent and grammar than adults.
- 6- There is no agreement as to whether there is a critical period for learning and L2.

What is mention above shows that the advantage for older learners was strong and durable on measures of grammar and least evident in the case of

measures of speech perception, listening comprehension and oral fluency. Adults outperform children in the short term. The greater cognitive development of older learner is advantageous where explicit learning is concerned. Adults do not necessarily outperform early-starters in the long-term where the implicit learning is involved. This kind of learning will not show up until after many hours of exposure to the L2. Naturalistic learners who start as children achieve a more native-like accent than those who start as adolescents. Ultimate attainment in pronunciation decline linearly as a product of learners' starting age.

## **1.4 Theoretical Frameworks Regarding L2 Acquisition**

### **1.4.1 Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH).**

Critical period hypothesis is a notion which means that language is best learned during the early years of childhood, and that after about the first dozen years of life, everyone faces certain constraints in the ability to pick up a new language. Sometimes the adjectives “optimal” and “sensitive” are used as well as “critical” . Explanations for the existence of a critical period in SLA have focused on roughly four theoretical perspectives: (1) neurolinguistic explanation; (2) cognitive explanation; (3) social-psychological explanation; and (4) linguistic explanation (Nikolov, 2002).

Critical period hypothesis claims that there is a fixed span of years during which language learning can take place naturally and effortlessly, and after which it is not possible to be completely successful. Singleton indicates that if there is a critical period, this varies depending on the aspect of language under examination. The end of critical period constitutes the point at which the decline in performance as a result of age ceases. *Discontinuity in Learning* occurs, instead of CPH. It refers to the fact that after a certain age, the pattern of learning changes (Ellis,2008).

### **1.4.2 Fossilization.**

This term was introduced by Selinker. He defines it *as a permanent cessation in learning before the learner has attained target language norms at all levels of linguistic structure and in all discourse domains in spite of learner's positive ability, opportunity, and motivation to learn and acculturate into target society* (p24).