

The Process of Foreign Language Acquisition in Azerbaijani Learners of Different Ages

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Abstract: The research paper is dedicated to the process of foreign/second language acquisition in children and adults. The problem of foreign or second language acquisition is not only the research area of applied linguistics, but also psychology, psycholinguistics, TEFL. The process of acquiring foreign language by children and adults, the stages of this process, some problems while acquiring and learning English as a second language by Azerbaijani learners are studied in the paper.

People can acquire a second or foreign language under many different circumstances. We may have learned a second language when we began elementary school, secondary school or even university. Moving to a new country usually means acquiring a new language which we call a second language. Also people live in different communities, environments or families in which more than one language is spoken and may acquire two or even more languages at the same time. No doubt that, foreign language acquisition has its historical background and aspects. Current theories of foreign or second language acquisition are based on years of research in a wide variety of fields, including linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and psycholinguistics. The article concerns one of the most important issues concerning foreign or second language acquisition in both children and adults.

Key words: Second language acquisition (SLA), bilingualism, critical period hypothesis, age, cognition

We can sometimes wonder how it is possible for a child to acquire two or even more languages at the same time. There are many questions, such as: doesn't the child confuse the two languages; how does he learn the grammatical structure of these languages; does bilingual language development take longer than monolingual development; how does acquiring two languages affect to the child's cognitive development; and also how does it affect to other areas beyond language? What is the role of environment and community in acquiring or learning a foreign language?

There is no doubt that there are some distinctions between children's and adults' acquiring the second language. At least, young children should build their mother language structure first.

Here is the most basic problem in understanding how children learn a language: The input to language acquisition consists of sounds and situations; the output is a grammar specifying, for that language, the order and arrangement of abstract entities like nouns, verbs, subjects, phrase structures. Somehow the child must discover these entities to learn the language.

Language acquisition is the study of the processes through which learners acquire language. By itself, language acquisition refers to first language acquisition, which studies infants' acquisition of their native language, whereas second language acquisition deals with acquisition of additional languages in both children and adults. The important issue is that whether the biological factor includes capacities specific to language acquisition, which is described as universal grammar. About fifty years, linguists Noam Chomsky and after him Eric Lenneberg have argued for the hypothesis that children have innate, language-specific abilities that make language learning possible and easier and also control the process.¹⁹⁹ But other researchers, including Elizabeth Bates, Catherine Snow, Brian MacWhinney, and Michael Tomasello, have hypothesized that language learning results from general cognitive abilities and the interaction between learners and the community and environment surrounding them. Noam Chomsky originally theorized that children were born with a hard-wired language

¹⁹⁹ Chomsky, N. (1975). *Reflections on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books

acquisition device (LAD) in their brains.²⁰⁰ He later expanded this idea into Universal Grammar; a set of innate principles and adjustable parameters that are common to all human languages. According to N. Chomsky, the presence of Universal Grammar in the brains of children allow them to deduce the structure of their native languages from “mere exposure”. But according to nativism, much of the nativist position is based on the early age at which children show competency in their native grammars, as well as the ways in which they do (and do not) make errors. Some research suggests that infants are born able to distinguish between phonemes in minimal pairs, distinguishing between *bit* and *pit*, *shop* and *chop* or *meat* and *meet* for example.²⁰¹ Another source of support for this viewpoint is that young children (under the age of three) do not speak in fully formed sentences, instead saying things like 'want cookie' or 'my coat.' However, they do not say things like 'want my' or 'I cookie,' statements that would break the syntactic structure of the phrase, a component of universal grammar. Children also seem remarkably immune from error correction by adults which nativists say would not be the case if children were learning from their parents.²⁰²

The term second language acquisition, or L2 acquisition, generally refers to the acquisition of a second language by someone (child or adult) who has already acquired a first language. Bilingual language acquisition refers to the simultaneous acquisition of two languages beginning in infancy, especially before the age of three years.

In contrast to the bilinguals, many people are acquainted with a second language after they have achieved native competence in a first language. If we have had the experience of trying to master a second language as an adult, no doubt we found it to be a challenge quite unlike our first language experience. Unlike L1 acquisition, which is uniformly successful across children and languages, adults vary considerably in their ability to acquire an L2 completely. Some people are very talented language learners. Others are hopeless. Most people fall somewhere in the middle. Success may depend on a range of factors, including age, talent, motivation, and whether you are in the country where the language is spoken or sitting in a classroom five evenings a week with no further contact with native speakers. For all these reasons, many people, including many linguists who study L2 acquisition, believe that second language acquisition is something different from first language acquisition. This hypothesis is referred to as the fundamental difference hypothesis of L2 acquisition. Like L1ers, L2ers construct grammars. These grammars reflect their competence in the L2 at each stage and so their language at any particular point, though not native like, is rule-governed and not haphazard. The intermediate grammars that L2ers create on their way to the target have been called interlanguage grammars.²⁰³ Let's see word order in the interlanguage grammars of Turkic (Azerbaijani, Turkish, and Kirghiz) speakers acquiring English as a second language. The word order of the Turkic languages is Subject-Object-Verb. But in these languages word order may change the place and keep the original meaning the same. However, while transforming the elements of the syntactic structure of the Azerbaijani language into English word order significantly changes, and in the Azerbaijani language as well as in other Turkic languages, auxiliary verb does not exist in the sentence.

1. Arif qapını döydü. “Arif door knocked” (Arif knocked the door).
2. Arif indi məktub yazır. “Arif now letter is writing” (Arif is writing a letter now).

The research shows that Azerbaijani speakers acquire English word order in pieces. During the first stage they use English words but the S-O-V word order of their native language, as follows:

Stage 1: My mum a new dress has bought. (My mum has bought a new dress)
“Anam təzə paltar alıb.”

At the second stage, they acquired S-

Stage 2: Otaq yoldaşım kredit kartla ödəməkdə mənə kömək etdi
(My) roommate by a credit card to pay me helped.
“My roommate helped me (to) pay by a credit card.”

At the third stage they acquire the negative forms in the sentence.

Stage 3: Mən bu barədə heç kimə heç nə söyləməyəcəm
I about this issue nobody nothing will tell

“I won't tell anything to anyone about this issue.”

At the fourth stage while acquiring possessive pronoun and subject pronoun they encounter with some problems in confusing them as in the following examples:

Stage 4: Onun evi şəhərin kənarındadır. Onun şəhərin kənarında evi vardır.
His house is in the suburbs. He has a house in the suburbs.

²⁰⁰ Chomsky, N. (1975). *Reflections on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books

²⁰¹ Yang, Charles (2006). *The Infinite Gift: How Children Learn and Unlearn All the Languages of the World*. New York: Scribner

²⁰² Pinker, Steven (1994). *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*. New York: Harper Collins.

²⁰³ Fromkin V, Rodman R, Hyams N. 2003. *An Introduction to Language*, 379-390

These stages differ from those of children acquiring English as a first language. For example, English children know from the start that language has S-V-O word order. However, like first language learners, second language learners attempt to uncover the grammar of the target language.

Although English is included to the group of inflected languages, it has the elements of agglutinative languages quite much. In the English language adjective-noun agreement does not formed as in other inflected languages like Russian, which means from this point of view English does not differ from Azerbaijani and other Turkic languages:

a ниже цоусе – ниже цоусес - зяиянэ ев – зяиянэ евляр; an expensive car- expensive cars – bahalı maşın – bahalı maşınlar; an interesting book – interesting books – maraqlı kitab – maraqlı kitablar

However in Russian which is also belonged to inflected languages the adjective declines with the noun: *красивый дом – красивые дома; дорогая машина – дорогие машины; интересная книга – интересные книги.*

These similar characteristics help the Azerbaijani learners to acquire English as a foreign language faster.

Many L2 acquisition researchers reject the idea that L2 acquisition is fundamentally different from L1 acquisition. They point to different studies to show that interlanguage grammars do not generally violate principles of UG, which makes the process seem more similar to L1 acquisition.

Second language acquisition (SLA), like first language acquisition, also proceeds in broadly systematic stages.

The first stage is called Pre-production (Silent/Receptive) stage. The learners of the target language may have up to 500 words in their receptive vocabulary but they are not yet speaking. Some students will, however, repeat every thing you say. They are not really producing language but are parroting. They can understand and duplicate gestures and movements to show comprehension. Total Physical Response methods will work well with them.

The second stage is Early Production. The student understands the main idea of what is communicated, but may not understand every word. He or she will begin to respond in small word groupings and answer yes/no and cognitively undemanding questions that require the repetition of no more than one word (i.e. would you like to drink coffee or tea? “tea”). This stage may last up to six months and students will develop a receptive and active vocabulary of about 1000 words. During this stage, students can usually speak in one- or two-word phrases.

The third stage is Speech Emergence. Students have developed a vocabulary of about 3,000 words and can communicate with simple phrases and sentences. During this stage there is a shift of emphasis from reception to production. The student begins using simple sentences, improving pronunciation and intonation, and demonstrating and expanding vocabulary. He or she engages in relatively familiar language and tasks (developing initial reading skills, decoding and literal comprehension, writing for personal purposes - reading and writing for operational purposes - writing answers to lower level questions). Those around the learner should encourage any attempt to speak in the second language (L2), and be careful not to discourage or make fun of attempts made. Again, if the speaker is understandable there is no need to correct them on pronunciation.

The fourth stage is Intermediate Fluency. At this level the student is developing academic vocabulary, and little information other than teacher and textbook is provided. English language learners at the intermediate fluency stage have a vocabulary of about 6000 active words. He or she is beginning to think in the new language instead of translating from the native language. They begin to use longer sentences and more elaborate speech patterns though they may continue to make errors in the use of new vocabulary and complex grammatical structures. At this stage the student understands academic presentations accompanied by visuals and demonstrations, participates in hands-on science activities, makes models, maps charts, graphs, solves computational and word math problems assisted by manipulatives and illustrations, participates in academic discussions, can make brief oral presentations, can use higher order comprehension skills, understands written texts through discussions, illustrations and visuals, writes simple science reports and answers higher level questions.

The fifth stage is Advanced Fluency which takes students from 4-10 years to achieve cognitive academic language proficiency in a second language. Student at this stage will be near-native in their ability to perform in content area learning. Most ELLs at this stage have been exited from ESL and other support programs. At the beginning of this stage, however, they will need continued support from classroom teachers especially in content areas such as history/social studies and in writing. the student understands most (but not all) academic presentations without visuals or demonstrations, makes formal oral presentations, uses higher level reading comprehension skills including inferential and critical reading, reads for information, writes compositions, essays and research projects, solves math word problems without illustrations, and writes answers to higher level questions - can take standardized achievement tests successfully. This is the time to provide some grammar instruction and to present new information and language, including extensive vocabulary development.

A great deal of the research on non simultaneous second language acquisition, in both children and adults, has focused on the interfering effects of the first and second languages. For the most part, research confirms that the linguistic and cognitive processes of second language learning in young children are in general similar to first language processes. Dulay and Burt found, for example, that 86 percent of more than 500 errors made by Spanish-speaking children learning English reflected normal developmental characteristics – that is, expected intralingual strategies, not interference errors from the first language.²⁰⁴ Hansen-Bede examined such linguistic structures as possession, gender, word order, verb forms, questions, and negation in an English-speaking three-year-old child who learned Urdu upon moving Pakistan. In spite of some marked linguistic contrasts between English and Urdu, the child's acquisition did not appear to show first language interference and, except for negation, showed similar strategies and rules for both the first and the second language.²⁰⁵

Some researches (Hudson, G. 2000; Douglas Brown, H. 2000) show that children acquire the second language quicker than adults do. On the other hand it is quite contrary, it is about cognitive differences: Language learning adults are obviously different from children by already having knowledge of a language: ability to talk about the language and how it works. Adults use this knowledge to try to figure things out. Finally, adults have expectations about learning. They also have metalinguistic knowledge: conscious, analytic, knowledge of their use of language, and also formal knowledge of the terminology of grammar. This gives them the means to learn in conscious and analytic ways seemingly quite different from those of children. Adults are also able to monitor their speech – comparing their utterances with their conscious knowledge, and correcting accordingly. But the learning style of children is more intuitive and we can say, it is more natural. The different learning styles of adults and children have been distinguished as 'learning' and 'acquisition'. The conscious and analytic approach of adults has been termed language learning, and the unconscious and spontaneous approach of children language acquisition. There are some reasons for the superiority of child language acquisition. Almost all children fully succeed in learning their first language, whereas many adults fail to learn well the second languages which they study. Children acquire their first language completely fluently and without accent, whereas most adult learners continue to make errors. Adults typically have to work hard at second language learning, whereas children seem to acquire their first language almost effortlessly. It is necessary to note that there is also a biological difference acquiring language between children and adults. It concerns with critical period for language learning. It is a period during which something must be acquired or learned, for after that time the neurophysiological basis for that learning might be lost or weakened.

The critical period hypothesis of brain plasticity and learning capacity has been called into question. Other factors may account for differences in adult and child language learning. Children's apparently effortless and rapid language acquisition may be explained by the fact that the environment is set up to engage them in frequent and optimal learning opportunities. By contrast, adults seem to have an initial advantage in their learning of vocabulary and syntax, but may never achieve native-like pronunciation. A more modern view of the Critical Period Hypothesis is represented by the University of Maryland, instructor Robert DeKeyser. He argues that although it is true that there is a critical period, this does not mean that adults cannot learn a second language perfectly, at least on the syntactic level.

At the present time, the evidence from second language acquisition research has not provided unequivocal evidence for the critical period hypothesis. There is not a simple answer to the question of age and second language – it depends on how we measure second language proficiency. The best researchers can say is that young children generally learn L2 better than older children and adults, at least in the long run. Knowledge of children's learning of their first language provides essential insights to an understanding of the second language acquisition.

Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language.

In conclusion, I would like to say that children are luckier than adults in acquiring the second language (curiosity, ambition etc). Moreover, the advantage that younger learners display in some studies may be due to biological changes (or critical period hypothesis), environmental factors, motivation, cognitive changes, or some combination of factors. Clearly, we have much more to learn about how the capacity for language acquisition changes over the life span.

While Azerbaijani language is in the group of Turkic languages and is an agglutinative language, and English is inflected and in Germanic language group, due to some similarities in both language structures, the learners of these languages acquire some features of both languages easier.

²⁰⁴ Dulay, Heidi C. and Burt, Marina K. 1974a. Errors and strategies in child second language acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly* 8: 129-136

²⁰⁵ Hansen-Bede, Lynn. 1975. A child's creation of a second language. *Working Papers on Bilingualism* 6: 103-126

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