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What Is Most Important? Fluency or Accuracy? Is Learning a Second Language a Conscious Process?

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Is a Second Language Acquired or Learned?

Can any one say, “I learned language logically like Mathematics and other Sciences?” Language learning appears to be a fantasy or some such thing. People who speak the English language say that their learning was purely unconscious. Right from their schooling days, they have been listening, speaking, reading and writing English continuously. Only after this lengthy process, they are able to achieve the state of competency. But they are not confident to point out “Is language learned or acquired?” Though they speak language fluently, they are not aware of the major rules of the grammar. They simply accepted the usages that they were exposed to and unquestioningly imitated the same.

The Goal of This Paper

This paper has the objective of finding out the process which Non-native speakers of English adopt to acquire English as their Second Language. It concentrates on two important factors “fluency and proficiency”. It supports the need for fluency rather than for proficiency. Feedback of the people who use the English language as a Second Language is gathered through interview method and used for the analysis.

Is It a Conscious System?

In spite of many theories introduced relating to language learning, it is still puzzling to think how language skills are acquired. Is it a conscious process? Is it related to the behaviour system? Many students still face difficulty in acquiring English as a second language. What exactly inhibits them? How long will it take to achieve fluency?

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Fluency in Second Language

Spoken English training centres assure students that fluency could be installed in them with in a period of six months. They start with basic grammar and end with situational conversations. They devote two hours per day for teaching and training. Probably the trainees would be college students, housewives, and workers who would have crossed the flexible age of acquiring a language but are now interested in improving their career by learning English.

But linguists say that language should be internalized subconsciously so that one can have communicative competence. Ellis (1986:6) says that second language acquisition is the subconscious or conscious process by which a language, except the mother tongue, is learnt in a natural or a mentored set up. It covers the development of phonology, lexis, grammar and pragmatic knowledge.

If it is internalized consciously, only grammatical competence can be achieved. Today's training centres and educational institutions render only conscious learning process which inhibits learners from achieving fluency as acquisition of accuracy becomes a great focus.

Students are introduced to the basic principles, techniques, and methods of learning a second or foreign language using modern linguistic principles and methods of linguistic description (Thirumalai, 2002).

Accuracy or Fluency?

It is an accepted fact that many educational institutions teach English as a subject rather than as a medium of communication. Right from the junior classes till the higher secondary, teaching grammar is a mandatory practice. Moreover, grammar is taught without stressing its role in real conversations and writings. Students are taught only the tactics of converting one statement into another and fill up the blanks by indentifying certain clues. For instance while teaching "Voice" the trainer teaches them only the rules of converting active to passive or passive to active rather than justifying the applications of those structures in real life usage.

The Police killed the culprit. (active voice)

The culprit was killed by the police. (passive voice)

When a student is given samples like the above, he is able to transform one voice to the other category accurately . But he uses the same in wrong constructions when he faces the real life circumstances. The reason is, he knows only the rules, not its applications.

I was studied yesterday night.

I was not slept.

The Police was arrested the thief.

Such usages are common even at the college level. This shows that accuracy acquired through training is short-lived and it does not have permanency. The intention to establish

accuracy restrains the chance of becoming extemporaneous. It affects thinking and creativity and results in stumbling and pausing in fear of committing mistakes.

So, accuracy may be achieved after acquiring fluency. People who use their mother tongue are not aware of the accuracy of the language. They don't know the grammar but they are able to speak with good sentence construction. They would not have browsed the dictionary but they know majority of the functional words. If a person achieves fluency and becomes familiar with the patterns of the second language then he or she will automatically use right constructions.

How is Fluency Achieved?

Brewster classifies acquisition of language into three stages (Thirumalai, 2002).

- i. listening.
- ii. mimicry.
- ii. reproduction

In the case of first language acquisition, all these stages are involved. The child listens initially and mimics after the necessary structures get imprinted in his or her memory and finally the child produces the utterances adequately.

The early development of language may well have been assisted by some kind of signing..... such as how to use tools..... in an indirect way, tools could have promoted the development of speech. Sounds made at the same time as the gestures might have come to be associated with various activities (Crystal, 1987:291)

Memorization plays a vital role to achieve fluency. When one recites a slogan daily, the script gets imprinted in one's memory and will last long. This is why still you are able to chant your school prayer even at the age of fifty! All because we learned the script without questioning or doing research, but imitated the source person and made the utterance a part of our habit. Pavlov's experiment with the dog prove that a concept becomes indelible when it is made a habit. His experiment was: he would ring a bell before giving food to the dog. Whenever the dog heard the bell, it would salivate, even before the food was presented to it. He called it a **conditional response**.

John Watson and B.F. Skinner supported the application of this animal behaviour for language learning. They proved that animal behaviour was formed by a series of rewards and punishments. From this, they promoted the idea that human behaviour could be described using the same model. In applying these principles to language, Skinner theorized that when parents or caretakers hear a child say something that sounds like a word in their language, they reward the child with praise and attention. If there is a mistake they correct the utterance. The child repeats the words and combinations of words that are praised and thus learns the language.

Chomsky's several publications (especially his 1965 exposition *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, MIT Press, 1965) propose that the acquisition of the structure of language depends upon an innate recognition device. He calls it a language acquisition device (LAD). LAD (language acquisition device) benefits from the exposure, however. Language propensity is innate, according to this position. Exposure to the second or subsequent language and continuous practice to use that language are highly essential.

When we hear another language for the first time, it sounds gibberish. After listening to the utterances several times, we slowly begin to recognize at least some of the sound combinations or structure to some extent. In this process, we match the sounds we hear with those sounds we are familiar with in our first language or in the languages we are comfortable with. Thus, fluency does not mean reasoning ability and a person who looks for reasons can not attain fluency easily.

Method

Area chosen

PSNA College of Engineering and Technology, Dindigul-Tamil Nadu, India, is a reputed institution where students from different countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Singapore, Malaysia, Srilanka, Korea, and different states of India study together. These students mainly use English for all sorts of communication. The college was found to be the right place for carrying out this research as it has people from different cultural backgrounds whose mother tongue is not English. This helped analyse how these people acquired English as Second Language.

Interview method

25 persons of different age groups and different language backgrounds were selected for the initial part of this research. This included the students of Undergraduate and Postgraduate classes, lecturers and professors. They were interviewed about their process of learning English as a second language.

Findings

It was found from the interviews that the maximum number of persons said that they learned the language unconsciously. They familiarized themselves with words, phrases and sentence constructions due to continuous reading, writing, and listening for many years, right from their school days. They said that they achieved fluency first and when they grew up they were able to comprehend the syntactic structures of sentence patterns and through this they acquired accuracy.

S.No	Age groups of Persons	A	B	C

1	18-20 yrs	4	5	16
2	20-25 yrs	8	6	11
3	25-35 yrs	6	5	14
4	35 & above	10	5	10

A- I learned each and every aspect of the language carefully

B- I learned with partial carefulness

C- I do not know

It was found that 16 out of 25 persons including both undergraduate and post graduate students gave their responses with some puzzling tone that their learning process was unconscious. They said “**it came automatically**” as they had many opportunities to listen and speak. It is interesting to know from the teachers (lecturers) that their acquisition of language was also unconscious and that, only after they chose their profession and joined the workforce, their learning became conscious. 14 to 25 lecturers supported described their learning of English as a second language as unconscious learning of the language. At the higher level, however, the professors were not ready to discuss and reveal their process of learning. Their title/designation probably prohibited them from saying that their learning too was unconscious. They assumed that it was a mockery for any person to say that he or she was not aware of their learning process. But 10 to 25 professors were frank to say that their learning of the language was purely unconscious.

Limitations

The study was limited to 25 speakers in each age group chosen particularly at the PSNACollege of Engineering and Technology, Dindigul. This choice has imposed certain limitations on the results of the study:

- Results are bound to the particular parameters of the chosen students, lecturers and professors in that college.
- A wider and larger number would help for further generalization.
- This is only a sort of an informatl study. Stricter and inter-related design will help further.

To Conclude

As a conclusion of this paper, I propose that further research needs to be undertaken, where more number of speakers with diverse backgrounds and skill in English could be interviewed from different regions. The paper also recommends for the behavioural method of language

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teaching and learning up to certain point of time to get the students exposed to the basic contents and structures of the language. Later on, inculcating/achieving accuracy must be attempted.

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