

Language Acquisition

A Course Module
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Module Objectives for the Administrator

1. Explanation of the expected stages and patterns of language development as related to first and second language acquisition.
2. Explanation of how first language development affects development of English.

Pre-Test

1. List two similarities between first and second language acquisition.
2. List two differences between first and second language acquisition.
3. Is it better to learn a second language when one is young or when one is older? Why?
4. How do you know when a person is proficient in a second language?
5. How long does it take to learn a second language?

Importance of First Language Development

1. Does the first language help or hinder the development of a second language? Why?
2. What is the Common Underlying Proficiency Theory? (Hint: Think icebergs.)
3. What is the Threshold Hypothesis?

Second Language Acquisition

When any child is acquiring a first language you will see several stages which remain constant across languages.

Babbling: The baby coos or puts together a string of nonsense sounds that simulate speech, but doesn't mean anything.

Non-verbal Response: The child will begin to respond to language non-verbally. For example, the child might walk over to the refrigerator when the parent says, "Do you want some milk?"

Now, think about an older person trying to learn a second language. What behaviors do you see?

Quiet & listening: When first learning a new language an older person will listen rather than try to speak.

Non-verbal Responses: The older person will respond non-verbally when phrases or words are understood

Will try only words and phrases that have been readily "picked-up."

What are the similarities and differences in the behaviors of an infant acquiring a first language and an older person acquiring a second language?



Key Concepts

Comparison of initial language acquisition to second language acquisition:

1. Both respond non-verbally to understood phrases and/or sentences.
2. There is no "babbling phase" in second language acquisition phase.
3. During second language acquisition there is less risk-taking – only phrases and words that are "readily picked-up" are attempted.

First Language Development

Common Underlying Proficiency/Transferability Theory

Do you know how to drive a car? Do you know how to drive a car in Australia? If you can put your foot on the gas pedal and on the brake, you can drive anywhere, right? It's not quite as easy as it sounds! Think about driving on a different side of the road with different road rules and signs.

This analogy can help us understand the “Common Underlying Proficiency” (CUP) and Transferability Theories. Skills and concepts learned in one language, the first language, do not have to be re-learned in a second language because all of those common skills such as decoding letters into sounds and left to right progression are the same, much like pressing the gas and brake pedal is the same in both Australia and the USA. It is the vocabulary that must be learned plus any surface features that differ – just like the road signs and where the windshield (windscreen for you Aussies!) wipers are located.

For example, in Spanish an upside down question mark “¿” is used at the beginning of a question and is a surface feature that would need to be learned to make reading in Spanish easier. But, the actual process of reading would not need to be re-taught. A person who knows how to read in English can read in Spanish. He knows that the symbols stand for sounds, the sounds are to be read from left to right, and that context clues can be a decoding aid, etc...

Dual Iceberg Representation

Many skills and concepts are common or interdependent across languages. A skill or concept learned in one language, transfers to another language when the requisite vocabulary is acquired. When looking at the “Dual Iceberg Representation” – the underlying skills are the greatest part of the iceberg – what's under the water – and it is only the tiny peaks visible out of the water (the surface features and vocabulary) that we can see that are different. The transferability of skills and concepts forms the basis for L1 instruction. That is, it is more effective to teach students skills and concepts in the language that they know (since they will understand the instruction) while also teaching them vocabulary in the second language.

Once they have acquired sufficient vocabulary, they can then transfer those skills and concepts to the L2. If possible, students should be taught to read in their L1 while they are also helped to acquire English. Once they are able to read in their L1 and once they acquire sufficient English, they can begin reading grade level text in English. This is not to say that reading instruction does not take place in English concurrently. There are many types of strategies that teachers can use to informally expose students to English reading while they are formally learning to read in their first language. We will look at strategies later.

However, L1 instruction isn't always possible. L1 instruction cannot take place if there is no one to provide the instruction (the student's L1 is Russian and there isn't a Russian teacher). In this situation, the teacher should focus first on developing the student's English skills.

What Literacy Skills Transfer?

Research has indicated that the following literacy skills transfer from one language to another.

Directionality

If the L1 has left to right directionality, then this skill will transfer. Therefore, if a student has learned to read from left to right, s/he does not need to be re-taught to be able to read in English. However, if the student's L1 has right to left or top to bottom directionality then the child will need to learn that English's directionality is left to right.

Sequencing

If the learner in his/her first language has the ability to determine first, next, last, then the learner will be able to do so in L2 as well.

Distinguishing Shapes and Sounds

If the L2 learner already had the ability to recognize letters, to distinguish letters from other shapes and to distinguish sounds in L1, then the basic ability to do that will be present in L2. However, to distinguish between some sounds will take longer than others. For example, a child who has learned Spanish as his L1 will not hear a difference between the short e and short i sound at first.

Knowledge that written symbols correspond to sounds and can be decoded in order and direction

This consists of knowledge that a symbol represents a particular sound transfer. Sounds that are the same will transfer (for example, the "m" sound is the same in Spanish and English. Sounds that differ will need to be learned (for example, vowel sounds). However, a student needs to have acquired some English in order to begin learning sound-symbol relationships in English. A student who is at the pre-production and early speech proficiency levels may not hear the differences.

Activation of semantic and syntactic knowledge

Includes the ability to use the knowledge of grammar and word meanings when reading. Again, grammar rules that differ (for example, the order of nouns and adjectives) will need to be learned. The concepts of noun, adjective and that they appear in a particular order need not be re-taught.

Knowledge of text structure

(narrative, expository, etc.)

Learning to use cues to predict meaning

Strategies learned in the L1 will be used in the L2 and need not be re-taught; for example, the skill of reading the complete sentence to try to discover the meaning of a word may be used in both languages. Also, a strategy to sound out a word to see if it is recognizable may be used similarly in both languages.

Awareness of the variety of purposes for reading and writing

Students who have awareness that there are many different purposes for reading as well as writing will have this same awareness in the new language. Examples of this would include reading for information or reading for entertainment or writing to inform or to persuade, etc. The reader is aware that there are letters, stories, announcements, road signs, etc.... and all have a specific purpose.

Confidence in oneself as a reader and writer

Students who struggle to read in one language, will struggle in a second language, as well.



Key Concepts

Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) and Transferability Theories

Theories that skills and concepts learned in one language do not have to be RELEARNED in another language. These skills and concepts are TRANSFERRED to the new language.

Dual Iceberg Representation

There are many skills and concepts in common across languages. It is only the surface features that are different from Language 1 (L1) to Language 2 (L2).

Post-Test

List two similarities between first and second language acquisition.

- constructs language from prior conceptual knowledge
- is an active learner who tests and revises hypotheses
- requires interaction
- uses cognitive strategies (i.e., overgeneralization)
- understands more when input is modified (caretaker talk, foreigner talk)
- develops language in predictable stages
- experiences a silent period

2. List two differences between first and second language acquisition.

- is usually more cognitively developed
- generally has a greater knowledge of the world
- generally can learn and apply rules more easily
- usually has more control over input
- is familiar with one or more other cultures
- may have a problem with attitude/motivation
- is more likely to be inhibited or anxious

3. Is it better to learn a second language when one is young or when one is older? Why?

The main advantage to learning a language when younger is that the individual is more likely to acquire a native-like accent. Otherwise, there are advantages to both learning a language when younger and when older.

4. How do you know when a person is proficient in a second language?

The person has developed grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic and discourse competence

5. How long does it take to learn a second language?

- 2 to 3 years to develop social language.
- 5 to 7 years to develop academic language.

First Language Role Post-Test

1. Does the first language help or hinder the development of a second language? Why?

Helps what is learned in the first language transfers to the second language.

2. What is the Common Underlying Proficiency Theory? (Hint: Think icebergs.)

Concepts and skills are best learned in the language understood by the student. The student will be able to express these concepts and skills in English once the requisite vocabulary has been learned.

3. What is the Threshold Hypothesis?

The better developed the L1, the better developed the L2 can be High level of proficiency in L1-high level of proficiency in L2 is possible A low level of proficiency in L1-lower level of proficiency in L2