Language Learning and Teaching Methods How a child learns his mother tongue

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Résumé : *Cet article tente d'éclairer la manière dont l'enfant apprend sa langue maternelle. Des considérations théoriques ont été données pour expliquer les mécanismes d'acquisition du langage chez l'enfant. Ensuite, les enjeux de l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère ont été abordés.*

L'apprentissage des langues étrangères a soulevé de nombreuses controverses. Aucune méthode n'a réellement montré de résultats satisfaisants. Chaque nouvelle méthode est saluée avec beaucoup d'enthousiasme, elle reste en vogue plus ou moins longtemps, puis elle est finalement abandonnée soit parce que sa faisabilité n'a pas été prouvée, soit parce qu'une nouvelle méthode l'a supplantée. Il est en effet très difficile de proposer une méthode générale applicable tant les situations et les besoins des apprenants présentent de nombreuses variables. L'apprenant est-il un enfant ou un adulte ? Apprend-il avec un enseignant ou seul ? à l'aide d'enregistrements ou de diffusions de leçons ? sur quel système peut-il se concentrer ? a-t-il besoin d'un cursus s'étalant sur plusieurs années ou cherche-t-il à acquérir l'essentiel dans un temps beaucoup plus limité ? Quelles que soient les réponses à ces questions, il faut admettre que dans presque tous les cas, l'enfant apprendra l'anglais de manière artificielle, c'est-à-dire très différemment de la manière naturelle dont il a acquis sa langue maternelle, avec une exposition constante à la langue de sa famille, de son environnement et avec une forte motivation instinctive pour apprendre un moyen de communication verbale efficace. Apprendre une langue, que ce soit sa langue maternelle ou une langue étrangère, c'est apprendre à l'utiliser, à répondre aux situations en y disant les choses qui conviennent, à comprendre ce que les autres y disent et, finalement, à lire et à écrire dans cette langue.

Mots clés : *Parole et expression orale, performance langagière, enfant, compétences linguistiques, méthodes d'apprentissage et d'enseignement.*

Abstract: *This paper attempts to shed light on the way the child learns his mother tongue. Theoretical considerations have been given to explain the mechanisms of child language acquisition. Then, the issues of learning a foreign language have been discussed. In fact, foreign language learning has raised much controversial debates. Reality and various experiences demonstrated that there is no satisfactory method for teaching. Because of the lack of feasibility, a method fails to be used or it is substituted by a new one. It is indeed very difficult to opt for only one single method for both children and adults. Many factors have proved to be influential into the process of acquisition/learning. It is undeniably realized that to learn a language, be it the mother tongue or a foreign language, is to learn how to practice it, how to use it, and to appropriate and assimilate the different ways to respond with it taking into account the*

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circumstances of the situation.
Keywords: *Speech and speaking, language performance, child, language skills, learning and teaching methods.*

1. Introduction

All normal human infants are born with the potentiality of acquiring language. Only subnormal intelligence or defective hearing can prevent the child from realizing this potentiality, but in the normal case a human child acquires the ability to perform the two basic language skills: understanding speech and speaking understandably. Nevertheless, this very language performance depends on a large scale on his experience during the first two or three years of his life.

There are no specific methods for teaching a child to learn his mother tongue(s). Language is a system made of other systems that the child acquires in bulk.

When learning to speak the child is never asked to repeat or to imitate the pronunciation of a sound nor is he explained how to arrange his articulators to produce a particular phone. The child inherits no inborn facility for learning to understand and speak one language rather than other language, he will learn the language that is being used around him, no matter what language it is.

The notion of language is irrelevant to the baby. He is assailed from birth by various sensations, tactile; visual as well as auditory During the babbling stage which lasts almost 08 months, the child is able to produce all sounds the vocal tract can make, then, later this sound production becomes steadily more sophisticated. Instead of somewhat random babbling with a repertoire that is supposed to include all the sounds found in all the languages of the world as well as sounds that exit in no language, the child selects out some of the sounds and sound-sequences that he has noticed in his own vicinity; then gradually through much practice, imitation and repetition he comes out with a semi –deliberate control of speech production that becomes through time more and more automatic.

These habits the child acquires are largely phonetic, but as he grows older he begins to organize his speech into patterns of grammar, to acquire a stock of lexical and grammatical items in order to operate in these patterns and to fit his speech to the appropriate situations. He makes a great number of mistakes, and it takes a long time before he is able to command all the systems of the language and before he becomes linguistically competent, however the process of habit making is similar for all children, in all societies.

Observation of very small children has revealed that the names of objects, actions are learnt by close association of name and object, etc. What we wear on the feet are shoes, the color of his shirt is red, putting the hand on the lock of the door is 'opening or closing". There is no other word for the child to think of with precisely the same meaning. There is no translation process, even if in the early

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stages he calls "shoes " all that is worn on the feet. He thinks from object to name. Similarly, the bilingual child does not translate; he simply learns another name for the same object; for him " shoes is not the equivalent to / sobaT / or to soulier but in his mind one object is either soulier or / sobaT/ depending on the language he is using.

The child learns by the ear; he associates an object or anything with a combination of sounds not with a picture of a written word in his brain. It is true that at the beginning of the learning process, the child utters only words but he rarely hears them separately; he learns to use them as he hears them: put your shoes on, take your shoes off, etc.; later he learns new sound combinations which fit appropriately into other collocations: take your coat off, put your cap on, where have you put your cap and the like.

Different environments may bring about differences in vocabulary. A child from a coastern village may not know or recognize many words used by a child from an inland area and vice versa yet each of them can speak English without hesitation as he knows and uses spontaneously the various forms of the language into which all the forms must go.

Language is learnt in action, a child looks at a thing, points to it, eats it, touches it, plays with it, etc. The child makes hundreds of mistakes, but he is constantly being corrected by the persons around and therefore he corrects himself through perception of his faulty imitation.

When a child first learns to speak he benefits from a large number of teachers. Everyone with whom he comes into contact assists in teaching; there is no time-limit, the child is learning all the time he is awake. The learning process is continued until there is no conscious effort of memory, and association of objects and ideas with the appropriate sounds becomes automatic.

The family's social and cultural background is highly determinant in the child' linguistic development; there are specific registers the child hears and uses from which he can generate millions of new expressions.

2. Learning a foreign language

Learning a foreign language is a different task. Language is a system made of different other systems. First we have the system of sounds; these combine into a system of forms, which in turn combine into a system of structures. These three systems operate another system, the system of meaning. Such an analysis would give tell us the following:

- The sounds of the language.
- The significant sounds.
- Which significant sounds appear together and the changes they undergo when combined.
- The significant forms (stems and affixes).

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- Which forms appear together and how they combine.
- The types of order in which these forms appear.
- How the system of form and order pattern our experience through units of meaning?

While all these systems are naturally acquired during the learning of the mother tongue, they have to be placed in the child's mind for learning the foreign language. The question is then to find an appropriate method that would firstly help the child graft the new structures over the structures of the language he uses and speaks in all situations, secondly that would not result in interference or inhibition.

Being aware of the delicate and hard mission they are assigned to, linguists and pedagogues have been trying to find out the best method to initiate a foreign language learning process.

Foreign language learning is first and foremost a community-oriented task which is difficult to achieve if not impossible in areas where there are no native speakers, no English films, no TV programmes or other resources of the sort indispensable to achieve the learner's linguistic development. The task and the responsibility of the school programme-makers is then to provide the learner with a material that would facilitate and guarantee the success of the learning process.

The material should take into account:

- The cognitive and sociocultural needs of the learners.
- The geographical situation.
- The teacher's training personality and ability to use language.
- The needs of the society in which the learners are living.

Once these prior underlying objectives have been defined and set up we can turn to the teachers and determine the part of their task, it is indeed their responsibility to:

- know the learner' needs, interest and aspirations.
- learn about the people and the places of the learning community to use language in real communication activities.
- include in the learning process the authentic materials: hesitation words, exclamations, unarticulated sounds to give a more authentic ring.
- modify the order of the learner's textbook with respect to the necessity and urgency of the situation.
- reintroduce previously taught linguistic and cultural material; it is an excellent feedback to understand new linguistic forms introduced in completely differing sociocultural situations.
- move from tightly controlled mechanical exercises (useful for habit formation) to more creative activities.

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- Leave the learners free to express themselves allowing mistakes and not interfere unless there is complete breakdown of the meaning.
- try not to avoid the issue when facing an unexpected situation.

3. Conclusion

Foreign language learning has raised much controversy. No method has actually shown any satisfactory results. Each new method is hailed with much enthusiasm, it remains on vogue a more or less long span of time, then it is ultimately abandoned either because its feasibility has not been proved or because a new method has superseded it.

It is indeed very difficult to suggest a general applicable method as the learners' situations and requirements present so many variables. Is the learner a child or an adult? Is he learning with a teacher or by himself with the help of recording or broadcast lessons? which system does he want to focus on? does he need a course extending over several years or is he attempting to acquire the essential in a much more limited time? Whatever the answers to these questions are it must be accepted that in nearly all cases the child will be learning English in an artificial fashion i.e. very differently from the natural way in which he acquired his mother tongue, with constant exposure to the language of his family environment and with strong instinctive motivation to learn an efficient verbal means of communication.

To learn a language whether it be the mother tongue or a foreign language, is to learn how to use it, to respond to situations by saying appropriate things in it, to understand what others say in it and, ultimately, to read and write in it.

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