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Children Second Language Acquisition Pre-elementary and Elementary Level

Yekhlef Zoulikha
University of Oran1 Ahmed Ben Bella –Algeria
yekhlef72@yahoo.fr

Abstract *This article deals with child's second language acquisition and learning within the scope of the very early stages of school system. Normally, children learn language through their everyday social environment. In other words, from everyday language use with parents at home and outside home. To teach a foreign language to children, however, takes a little more effort. If one is teaching a child between 4 and 10, one will need to collect kid-friendly materials and get in understanding to how children use languages in appropriate methodology which corresponds to children's needs. Thus, our proposal takes into account some basic principles that allow the child and get him ready to learning process. We will also focus on the parents' and teachers' role for acquiring an efficient background in his preparatory stages. So, how soon can one begin before introducing L2 instruction at school and how can this be reached in the teaching / learning process?*

Key words: *Teaching, learning, adequate, second language (L2), acquisition, methodology, efficiency, process, background, structures, meaning, children.*

Résumé : *Cet article traite de l'acquisition et de l'apprentissage d'une langue seconde chez l'enfant dans le cadre des tout premiers stades du système scolaire. Normalement, les enfants apprennent une langue à travers leur environnement social quotidien. Autrement dit, de l'usage quotidien de la langue avec les parents à la maison et à l'extérieur de la maison. Cependant, enseigner une langue étrangère aux enfants demande un peu plus d'efforts. Si l'on enseigne à un enfant entre 4 et 10 ans, il faudra collecter du matériel adapté aux enfants et comprendre comment les enfants utilisent les langues dans une méthodologie appropriée qui correspond aux besoins des enfants. Ainsi, notre proposition prend en compte certains principes de base qui permettent à l'enfant et le préparent au processus d'apprentissage. Nous mettrons également l'accent sur le rôle des parents et des enseignants pour acquérir un bagage efficace dans ses étapes préparatoires. Alors, comment peut-on commencer avant d'introduire l'enseignement de la L2 à l'école et comment y parvenir dans le processus d'enseignement/apprentissage ?*

Mots clés : *Enseignement, apprentissage, adéquat, langue seconde (L2), acquisition ,méthodologie , efficacité , processus ,contexte, structures ,sens ,enfants.*

1. Introduction

A second language acquisition of children is that language which is thoroughly acquired by the child in routine situations and that, gradually, becomes a mean of communication alongside the first language. It is typically acquired in a social environment in which it is actually and usually spoken. Since children learn languages from their surroundings, it will take a lot of efforts to teach a child a language he or she does not normally hear everyday. However, today, enlightened school systems know better. Second languages are introduced in elementary school. Small kids can learn more easily than high school students.

Current researches suggest that from birth through age 10 is the best time to introduce new languages to a child. So, to what extent do parents and teachers make and help children learn a foreign language faster, retain it better and most often speak it with near - native pronunciation?

2. Principles in Child Second Language Acquisition

Every normal child acquires his first language (mother tongue) in the first period of his age i.e., in the first few years of his life. Usually, a child can communicate freely by the time he goes to school. In this respect, Wolf Gang Klein (1986) states: "First language acquisition occurs when the learner –usually a child- has been without a language so far and now acquires one. If it is one language, we speak of monolingual F.L.A. The less frequent case in parallel is known as bilingual F.L.A." P. 4.

A second language acquisition can be acquired in a variety of ways at any age. Thus, each new-born baby is capable of acquiring any human language. The innate structures of a language must be common to all languages.

Researchers are now trying to discover which aspects of the age and personality of the second language learners make a difference in the language learning process and to determine why those features have such an effect on the pedagogy field. These features are individual characteristics of individual learners (children).

- ***Personality***

Refers to an aggregate of traits characteristics of a particular individual (Duday, Burt, Kashen 1982). For instance, if the child is introvert or extrovert, impulsive or reflective, authoritarian or submissive etc… Such personal characteristics are what we consider to make up personality. The personality traits researchers have so far studied in relation to language learning include self-confidence level, capacity of empathize or the capacity for participation in another's feelings or ideas and the degree of tendency to analyze.

- ***Age***

Children appear to be much more successful than adults in language acquisition. Their acquisition of a second language in a natural environment is more likely to eventually sound like native speakers than adults are. On the other hand, adults may appear to make greater progress initially. For this reason, Krashen (1982) puts the focus on the significance of age in child's language acquisition: "Children under ten who experience enough natural communication in target language nearly always succeed in attaining native- like proficiency, while those over fifteen rarely do, although they often come very close." P.78.

Nevertheless, the belief that children are better at language acquisition than adults is expected and built up on different factors such as cognitive abilities to receive, learn, pronounce, discover and store new information (language), new words which gradually, lead to learning and attaining new knowledge. Thus, it has been

said that "almost every one learns the sound patterns of a language perfectly as an adult." Stated by Scovel (1969) - cited in Krashen (1982) p. 79.

Yet, some adults can achieve very high levels of proficiency in pronouncing a second language and they seem to be the exception rather than the rule. However, children appear to be much more successful than adults in acquiring the phonological system of the new language. They may, eventually, attain the native-like accents. Moreover, most children are ultimately more successful than adults in learning a second language, but they are not always faster. Adults appear to progress faster than children in the areas of syntax and morphology, at least in the early stages of learning. (see Krashen 1982, PP. 94- 95).

- **Spontaneous Learning**

The term Spontaneous Learning is used to denote the acquisition of L2 in everyday communication (Wolf Gang Klein, 1986, p. 16). Some knowledge of the language is acquired through unsystematic social intercourse. Thus, the child second language acquisition starts, at first, at home with the help of parents if they are bilingual. In other words, if parents use two different languages (the mother tongue and another foreign language) very seldom at home, the child, then, tries to discover and learn the new words he hears through the parents' every day conversation.

Yes – oui - نعم

No - non – لا

That's good – c'est bon – هذا جيّد

Thank's – merci – شكرا

Henceforth, when the child tries to pronounce and repeat such a word in another language which is not the native mother tongue language, it does not mean that he tries to show to the other that he is using a new language, but this phenomenon happens spontaneously. Thus, to enter a communication with the others is of a great importance. This type of a communication allows the child to start acquiring and learning the language for which he tries to make progress in communicating with the others by using and injecting from time to time new words.

In fact, this helps him to reinforce his communicative competence, mainly when he finds himself using his actual repertoire in an optimal way in expressing himself and understanding the others. Consequently, these aspects encourage the child to respond spontaneously with the new concepts acquired in the new language as well as to develop an optimal language variety in the interests of efficient communication so that he can approximate gradually to the environment he is leaving (participating – asking – answering – talking).

- ***Guided Learning***

Several researches have been made in recent years, particularly, on the distinction between the notion of acquiring a language (acquisition process) and for learning a language (learning process). Accordingly, there is a considerable variation in usage. According to Wolf Gang Klein (1986) who makes it, a little bit, different in his attempts in distinguishing between the foreign language and second language acquisition:

> The term foreign language is used to denote a language acquired in a milieu where it is normally not in use and which, when acquired, is not used by learners in routine situation. A second language, on the other hand, is one that becomes another tool of communication alongside the first language. P. 19.

Yet, the distinction between learning and acquisition is that the former referring to guided, whereas the latter to spontaneous learning. Any language acquisition is guided by some factors such as the scope and kind of linguistic data available to the learner (child). This type of learning occurs under systematic and intentional influence. It takes, typically, the form of regular language instruction in school. Thus, his (learner) task is to extract some rules for an adequate use.

- ***The Role of Parents***

Today parents recognize the importance of being bilingual. Now, they just need to know where to turn for assistance in funding fun and productive bilingual products that will bring the target into their child's life. Hence, focussing on activity and interaction rather than memorization on and rules, we intend to give a great importance to the role of parents in chills second language acquisition in which several tasks can be exercised by parents at home and outside home

- ***Foreign Language Interaction***

Using the foreign language for everyday activities brings it alive and teaches children basic vocabulary in context. Parents may do this during all the present learning opportunities such as meal time, drive time, bath time, etc…

- ***The Audio-Visual Aids***

Parents can find a conductive area for their children to watch an interactive TV program that uses both native and foreign language. They can choose a show TV program that is short, interesting and educational, and which can subsequently spark the children's interest in learning the language. Parents can also let their children listen to children's songs, such as nursery rhymes, alphabet songs or birthday songs, which are sung in different languages. Subsequently, the children can be familiar with the songs which will make them listen to it attentively and eventually sing along with it using the foreign words or phrases.

- ***Playing Games***

Playing games incorporating the use of the foreign language helps the child to learn new words. If the child likes to play board games, he tries to use the foreign language to identify colours, shapes and numbers. Counting is also involved when playing board games. For instance, instead of counting using the native tongue, parents, then, try counting using a foreign language. The child can easily memorize words and numbers when such words are often used.

- **The Use of Pictures in Books to Improve Vocabulary**

Parents may point to the items in the book and say the name of the item in the foreign language. Books that focus on a child's first word are great for these tasks. They help the child to gain a large amount of new words and encourage him to speak and use only the foreign language.

- ***Use of Internet***

The internet has simplified and made the child foreign language program much easier than years ago. Parents can help their children by looking for bilingual programs that allow them to sample their visual and audio products on line so that they can get interested in the content and style of the language learning within that particular program that corresponds to the pre-elementary and elementary level.

3. The Role of the Teacher

Learning a language is not a matter of acquiring a set of rules and building up a large vocabulary. The teacher's efforts should not be directed at informing his learners about a language, but at enabling them to use it. Yet, learners' mastery of a language is ultimately measured by how well they can use it, not how much they know about it.

Although specific theories of the nature of a language may provide the basis for a specific teaching method, other methods derive initially form a theory of language learning. Concerning the theory of language learning, Richards and Rodgers (1986) point out two basic points on the basis of learning approach or method. They clearly state:

> A learning theory underlying an approach or method responds to two questions: (a)- What are the psycholinguistic and cognitive processes involved in language learning? (b)- What are the conditions that need to be met in order for these learning processes to be activate? P. 18.

Yet, current studies agree on the idea that early second language acquisition offers surprising benefits to children. Research has demonstrated an improved ability to communicate, better cognitive development, a richer cultural awareness and ultimately. It may offer better job opportunities in the future. However, this can be reached on the basis of an adequate and successful teaching methodology fulfilled by the teacher. Therefore, our proposal includes some significant stages in the teaching methodology adapted to the pre-elementary and elementary level. It helps

both teachers and learners (children) to accomplish the aims to be reached if well applied and taken into consideration in the classroom.

- ***Presenting Vocabulary***

Research suggests that form birth through the age of ten (10) is the best time to introduce new languages to a child. The latter will learn the language faster, retain better and most often speak it with near-native pronunciation. In order to become a skilled performer, the learner (child) must become proficient at using the units of a language; words and sentences appropriately.

However, learning words irrespective of their function can be a waste of time, for not all words are equal. The teacher must draw a distinction between structural words and lexical items. Words like I, you, he/she (je, tu, il/elle) (**أنا –أنتَ – أنتِ – هو – هي**) are structural. Their use can be closely defined; they are part of a grammatical system in those languages mentioned above (English- French- Arabic). On the other hand, words like tree, flower, book (arbre, fleur, livre) (**شجرة – زهرة – كتاب**) are purely lexical items and in no way part of a grammatical system.

Therefore, skills in handling structural words are the key to mastering a language for the meaning that is conveyed in sentence-pattern. All depends largely on the function of the structural words that hold them together.

Consequently, during the course, the teacher should help the learners to understand the new items through pictures, paraverbal procedures (mimicry and gestures), definitions or working out from the context. At the beginning, the most efficient way is to resort paraverbal procedures, as the course proceeds and their lexical stock increases. Also, it is good to use definitions in English and French, and also their translation into the mother tongue, it should still be considered as a last resort. In addition, this point is considered with basic techniques for presenting new words to realize at least the following objectives:

- To establish the importance of teaching the meaning of new vocabulary as well as the form, and as showing how words are used in context.
- To give the teachers techniques for showing the meaning of new words in a simple and adequate way.
- To show the teachers the way how to make learners grasp and reinforce their use of new vocabulary by asking questions and using new items.

- ***Giving Examples***

Another way to show what words mean is by giving examples. For instance, if we take the word “lazy” (paresseux) (**كسول**), the teacher can explain the meaning of this word by giving the appropriate meaning by saying for instance: “some people work hard, the others do not. They are lazy.” “I have a brother who is lazy. He gets up late and, then does nothing all the day.”

It is not so necessary to give complicated explanation. The meaning can be shown by a simple sentence. A good example should clearly show the meaning of such a word to someone who does not know it.

- ***Asking Questions***

Learners (children) should be trained to learn by making a few mistakes as possible. They should never be required to do anything which is beyond their capacities. Therefore, the teacher must be aware of basic questions types and to show how they can be used for different purposes. As well, he must elicit short and long answers from the learners in a natural way. The teacher must also be aware of different possible strategies in asking questions for three possible reasons:

- When the teacher presents new vocabulary or structure, he can check that learners have understood it by using the new word in a question.
- To give learners practice: If we want the learners to use certain structure, one way to do this is by asking questions that require particular answers.
- To find out how learners really think or know: The teacher should use questions to encourage the learners to acquire the language by making them talking about themselves or their experience in short paragraphs or through conversation between the teacher and the learners. If they (children) are to make the most of their abilities, they must be trained to adopt correct learning habits.

- **Question Types**

In the classroom, it is possible to ask many different kinds of questions to see how learners might reply to each type. Each type of questions is appropriate to different purposes.

- **Yes / No Questions**

Teachers should understand how to form "Yes/ No questions" to which they (learners) can give true answers. The pre-elementary or elementary level is the most delicate level among the other levels in the teaching / learning process. For this reason, learners should be trained adequately in all types of questions.

The reply to Yes / No questions can be only yes or no, or with the short form Yes, I do. No, I cannot, etc… The teacher should give a full explanation of the structure on "Yes / No questions". For instance, the teacher explains that the auxiliary verbs come first, in simple present we use do / does, in the past simple we use did.

Examples:

1- Do you like living in…?
Aimeriez vous vivre en…?
هل تحبون العيش في...؟

2- Do you know this?
Connaissez vous ça?
هل تعرفون هذا؟

3- Can you speak French, English?
Pouvez vous parler le français, l'anglais ?
هل تستطيعون التحدث بالفرنسية، الإنجليزية؟

Or Questions

This type of questions is sometimes called 'Alternative questions'. The reply is usually a word or a phrase from the question itself. These questions are formed exactly in the same way as Yes / No questions, but contain two final elements.

Examples:

1. Is it clear or not?
2. Est ce que c'est clair ou non ?
3. **هل هذا واضح أم لا؟**
4. Do you drink coffee or milk at home?
5. Prenez vous du café ou du lait a la maison ?

هل تتناولون القهوة أم الحليب في المنزل؟

- ***WH- Questions***

They are also called 'information questions'. With most WH- questions, it is natural to give a short answer. So, the natural answer to "where do you live?" is "In Algeria", not "I live in Algeria". A few WH- questions require long answers. This type of questions is formed in the same way as Yes / No questions but begins with WH word like: When, Where, Why, How, How long, or How much.

Example:

When do you come at school in the morning?

A quelle heure arrivez-vous à l'école le matin ?

في أي ساعة تصلون إلى المدرسة صباحا؟

The teacher should point out that some WH questions with "who" or "what" have the same structure as a normal sentence. These are called "subject questions" because they ask about the subject of the sentence.

Examples:

- Something happened. → What happened? (not What did happen?)

  Qu'est qui c'est passé?

  ما ذا حدث؟

- Someone talked to him. → Who talked to him?

  Qui lui a parlé?

  من تحدث إليه؟

- Someone knows the answer. → Who knows the answer?

  Qui connaît la réponse?

  من يعرف الجواب؟

The main aim of these types of questions is to check that learners understand a new word or phrase through the way the question is used. Also, from the answers given by the learners, the teacher may detect that the learners (children) start to be

familiar with short and long answers. This task gives a great part of chance to let the learners listen to each other's answers that are used in different way by each one. In fact, this can help to stimulate their motivation and awareness in the classroom. There are many ways of asking questions: teachers can ask each learner in turn round the class; they can let any pupil (child) calls out the answer, as they can choose a pupil to answer; they can get the class to answer in chorus, etc…

- **Presenting Structures**

In many classroom courses, the emphasis is wholly on the written language. The teacher must begin with the simple form of a statement. He has, again, to establish what is meant by a 'structure' and by 'example of structure'. As a matter of fact, the learner should know that we can use one structure to make different sentences; so if learners learn the main structures of the new language, it will help them to speak and write it in the appropriate way.

Hence, when the teacher presents a structure, it is important to show what does it mean and how it is used by illustrating with examples to clarify its form to the learners so that they can make other sentences of their own. The simple way to present a structure is often to show it directly using things the learners can see such as objects, pictures, classroom, etc…, or to think of a situation (real or imaginary) from or outside the classroom. Subsequently, by using several different examples, the teacher helps the class to build up a clear idea of what such structures mean and how they are formed and used.

- **Using the Blackboard**

The blackboard is one of the most useful of all visual aids. It is always available and can be used for various purposes without special preparation. The aim in using a blackboard should be to make things clear to the class and help to focus their attention. So in order to use the blackboard effectively, it is important to develop good basic techniques of writing on the blackboard and organizing what we may write. Therefore, the teacher may present new words and structures, writing tables for presentation and practice, and simple drawing of people, places and objects for particular purposes.

The writing, however, should be large enough to be read from the back of the classroom, and should be written in straight line. In addition, the teacher should talk or say about what he is writing word- by- word or phrase- by- phrase with the use of simple explanation at the same time as to make the learners recognize what he is saying clearly, and guess the meaning of what is written on the board.

Furthermore, the use of the blackboard helps the learners to make difference between structures. The teacher has to use different coloured chalks or underlining the important features in the sentence as well as using tables. For instance, the teacher uses tables to show the opposite of the words, to show the adjective or the verb form of such words, and to show the plural and singular form of the pronouns and nouns used in the new language that the children are learning and acquiring at the same time.

- **Using Text Reading**

Another way of presenting new words and structures is through reading texts. How to use a text reading depends primarily on the purpose for which we want to use it? It is to develop reading comprehension skill. It is taken as a way of presenting new words and structures. This can be done through basic procedures in the classroom before and after reading. However, learners in the pre-elementary or elementary level enjoy speaking and explaining things they do not know about their meaning. Thus, there are various things that the teacher can do before reading a text which will make it easier for learners to understand and help them to focus their attention on it. For example:

- He gives a brief introduction to the text.
- Gives one or two guiding questions (orally or on the board) to the learners to think about as they read.

It is important to introduce the theme of the text before the learners are asked to read in order to help them by giving some ideas on what to expect and to increase their interest about reading. As a matter of fact, a well-designed course is one which takes into account what is called 'the learners' state of readiness', the point where they can proceed from easy to difficult. Thus, learners should be prepared to silent reading after the teacher has made read his first reading. Finally, the teacher can carry on the following procedures that led to a successful comprehension and which help both the teacher and the learner(child) to go beyond presentation to practice. When for instance, the learner has understood the general meaning of the text, the teacher may go through the text again, checking detailed comprehension and also focusing on important new vocabulary and on the main ideas of the text, explaining any difficult words or expressions. This can be done through series of comprehension questions requiring short and sometimes long answers.

Accordingly, the teacher should encourage the learners (children) to comment on the text from their point of view and emphasize that the main purpose of asking comprehension questions is to lead them (children) to look closely at the main ideas of the text. To achieve this, Adrian Doff (1988) focuses on the following points as to checking learners' comprehension:

- It is best to ask a series of short, simple questions which help to 'break down' the meaning of the text and make it easier to understand
- Learners should only be required to give short answers (the aim is to check comprehension, not to get learners to reproduce the text).
- Learners should keep their books open, so that they can refer to the text to answer the questions. P. 63.

Yet, in considering the reading process, it is important to distinguish between two different activities; reading for meaning (silent reading) and reading aloud. Reading for meaning, therefore, is the activity we normally engage in when reading

anything. When we read for meaning, we need to read attentively everything. On the other hand, reading aloud is a completely different activity whose purpose is not only to understand a text, but also to convey the information to someone (the other learners in the classroom). Hence, this task plays an important role in developing the learners' reading comprehension abilities and enables them to guess the meaning of unknown words. In this respect, Michael McCarthy (1990) focuses on the importance of meaning in vocabulary learning and points out:

> Meaning will be the organizing principle of most vocabulary learning, and the teacher will proceed to explain meanings of words in a way that: (1) solves the immediate problems of comprehension for the learners. (2) enables them to relate the new words already known. P. 25.

4. Conclusion

If we consider the mentioned aspects and ideas, it is easy, therefore, to conclude that beginning foreign language education during the early stage of childhood is of a prime significance and not only possible, but also recommended. The introduction of second language acquisition at the level of pre-elementary and elementary schools implies a whole process going through an exhaustive work being shared between the parents' role and the teachers' role. The former can be reached through particular tasks fulfilled by parents with their children in creating a good atmosphere and conditions so that they (children) can acquire the new language appropriately. The latter, on the other hand, can let them (children) apply their stock of vocabulary and express themselves in classroom since:

- They have the ability for direct learning.
- They have a lively imagination.
- They are able to grasp the gist of a message.
- They are creative (by nature) in different communication situations.

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