ASSESSMENT OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION BY PRESCHOOLERS

GLORY L. ISAIAH, *PhD*
Department of English
Faculty of Art
University of Sheffield
Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England
United Kingdom,

Arit Okonobong ATAKPA, *Ph.D*
Department of Early Childhood Education,
Akwa Ibom State College of Education,
Afaha Nsit

AND

Immaculata UMOH
Department of Pre-Primary and Primary Education Studies
University of Uyo

ABSTRACT

Language is seen as a way of communicating meaning. The paper introduced the concept of language, noting that it covers a wide range of implications, such as body language, sign language, and animal language. It also gave an explanation of the concept of second language acquisition, characteristics of second language acquisition by preschoolers, cultural diversity, and learning and behavioral disabilities, which were used as the concept of second language to produce repetition. It was on this basis that the paper concluded that language is a system for communication using sounds or gestures that are put together in meaningful ways according to set rules. Through language, people can express their feelings, write poetry and novels, and even think. Language is essentially human, although possibly not limited to humans. One of the recommendations was that enhanced knowledge of research and critical reflection on one's teaching should be made to provide learners, including preschoolers, with the necessary learning techniques and skills to help build in them good learning culture of languages.

KEYWORDS: Language, Second Language, Characteristics and Acquisition

Introduction

How much time do you spend thinking about the language you speak? If you're like most people, you probably don't consider it much at all. For many of us, speaking is as natural as waking up each day; it's an unconscious action that we rarely notice we're even doing. As a result, we usually don't imagine our language as something that might wield power, fuel debate, or even cause conflict (Clark & Henneberg, 2017). In truth, however, language can operate in all of these ways. As these stories illustrate, language affects many facets of human culture: religious, political, social, and economic. Many of these situations described are provocative. The banning of certain languages or mandating the use of one over another has produced tension and anxiety, charges of isolationism, and even allegations of racism and discrimination. According to Kamusella (2016), language is a rule-based system of signs. Saying that language is rule-based usually makes people think of other kinds of situations where rules are enforced by a particular authority. For example, think about classroom behavior. Pupils are expected to sit still, be quiet, pay attention, and so on; typically, there are consequences if they don't follow these rules. Language rules, however, are not enforced by any authority figure; language police do not exist. Instead, language rules are conventions. This means that they come into existence through common practice by users of the language rather than through the imposition of an authority figure. As a result, members who use the language conventions of their particular community may not even be conscious of following them. We talk about language as a system of rules or conventions because a single language convention, for example, a single word, a pause, or an alphabet letter, does not tell us much beyond its immediate meaning. Thus, we usually combine these conventions together to convey larger meanings.

Concept of Language

According to Agha (2006), the most important fact about language is that it is a way of communicating meaning. If it did not do that, it would be as irrelevant to most of what human beings do as bird song or the sound of the waves. The latter forms of sound are often pleasing to the human ears, but they do not help us to conduct our everyday business. Language does exactly that, and more. But from the fact that language communicates meaning, it does not follow that it is easy to say what meaning is. There was a famous book by Ogden and Richards entitled "The Meaning of Meaning," which listed over twenty definitions of the

word, but in the end, it did not succeed in resolving the problem of how to deal with the question of meaning. Language is a means of communication. It is a means of conveying our thoughts, ideas, feelings, and emotions to other people. Jack Richards and Richard Schmidt define language as "the system of human communication which consists of the structured arrangement of sounds (or their written representation) into larger units, e.g., morphemes, words, sentences, utterances." In common usage, it can also refer to non-human systems of communication, such as the "language" of bees or the "language" of dolphins.

Defining a language is not an easy task. Various linguists have attempted to define language in various ways. However, if we analyze the definitions closely, we will find that each of these definitions is incomplete in some respect or another. These definitions will raise a large number of questions. Some of the most commonly accepted definitions of language given by experts in the field of linguistics are given below: Edward Sapir says: "Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols." This definition is rather incomplete because "ideas, emotions, and desires" are not the only things communicated by language. The term "language" covers a wide range of implications, such as body language, sign language, and animal language. According to Hall (1997), "language" is "the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols." Hall's definition is narrow because it regards language purely as a human institution. We know that animals do communicate. Animals have their own language. In the words of Noam Chomsky, language is "a set of (finite or infinite) sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements." Chomsky focuses on the structural features of language. He showed how language can be investigated by analyzing it into its constituent elements. Each of these linguists focuses on certain aspects of language and ignores some others. However, what they have said about language is true, though not comprehensive.

Concept of Second Language

A second language, or L2, is a language that is not the native language (first language, or L1) of the speaker but is learned later (usually as a foreign language, but it can be another language used in the speaker's home country). A speaker's dominant language, which is the language a

speaker uses most or is most comfortable with, is not necessarily the speaker's first language (Noack & Gamio, 2015). The second language can also be the dominant one. For example, the Canadian census defines "first language" for its purposes as "the first language learned in childhood and still spoken," recognizing that for some, the earliest language may be lost, a process known as "language attrition." This can happen when young children move to a new language environment. The concept of L2 ("non-native language," "second language," or "foreign language") implies the individual's prior availability of an L1, or some form of bilingualism. Again, the use of the L2 set of terms has a dual function: it indicates something about the acquisition of the language and something about the nature of the command. So, in order to sum up, the term "second language" has two meanings. First, it refers to the chronology of language learning. A second language is any language acquired (or to be acquired) later than the native language (Nicholas & Stephen, 2009). Second, the term "second language" is used to refer to the level of language command in comparison with a primary or dominant language. In this second sense, "second language" indicates a lower level of actual or believed proficiency. As a result, "second" also means "weaker" or "secondary."

Over the past several decades, applied linguistics and second-language (L2) acquisition/teaching have been areas of prolific research and have undergone continual development (Canagarajah, 2005). Language learning professionals and researchers have access to a wide variety of studies by researchers in fields such as linguistics, education, psychology, and sociology. Following years of wide-ranging, meticulous, qualitative and quantitative, short- and long-term studies searching for the most reliable method for teaching additional languages, the field has accumulated a respectable repertoire of teaching approaches. Notwithstanding, teachers and researchers might avoid pointing to one single most successful method that advances learners to a fully functioning level in the target language. As such, this article does not attempt to formulate an explicit, clear-cut answer to the pressing question: how should additional languages be taught? Rather, it identifies essential themes in the field of applied linguistics, focusing explicitly on teaching and learning second languages in a classroom setting (Opitz & Degner, 2012).

Characteristics of Second Language Acquisition, Cultural Diversity and Learning/Behavior Disabilities

The complexity of deciphering between the inherent characteristics associated with cultural and linguistic needs and a learning or behavioral disability can be quite challenging when the question of whether a diverse learner has a disability arises. We begin by providing an overview of second language acquisition, with specific emphasis placed on the behaviors typically expected as a learner is progressing through various stages of language acquisition. This is followed by a discussion of cultural diversity and various behaviors reflecting different values and norms. Specific behaviors, often associated with learning disabilities and behavior disorders, are then presented.

An overview of Second Language Acquisition

Second language acquisition is a process that is influence by several cognitive and environmental factors (Cummins, 2000; Hamayan & Damico, 1991). These include:

- Age: Children who begin the process of learning English as a second language during their early childhood years generally achieve higher levels of proficiency (Krashen, Long, & Scarcella, 1979).
- Acculturation: Patterns of second language use will take learners longer to internalize over the more outward aspects of a new culture (e.g., clothing styles, music) (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003).
- Attitude and Motivation: A postive attitude along with high levels of motivation are important aspects necessary to achieve proficiency in a second language (Hamayan & Damico, 1991).
- Learning Style: A learner's culturally influenced preferred styles of learning may differ from the teacher's preferred styles of teaching, resulting in inadequate learning progress (Grossman, 1995), including progress toward learning a second language.
- Native Language Proficiency: Proficiency in the preschoolers/pupils first language provides the foundation for successfully acquiring a second language (Coyne, Kame'enui, & Carnine, 2007; Cummins, 1989).

- Community/Family: Cultural and linguistic values and abilities are essential to successful second language acquisition (Baca & Cervantes, 2004).

Cultural Diversity

Interrelated with second language acquisition needs, behaviors, and characteristics are the values, norms, customs, and behaviors associated with cultural diversity. Challenges face learners as they attempt to adjust to a new culture, creating situations in which misinterpretation of culturally valued behaviors is seen by educators as learning or behavior disorders. In addition to language, many factors reflect diverse cultural experiences of learners, such as learning styles, previous educational experiences, or family/community views toward education, respect, time, belongings, and individual achievement (Grossman, 1995). Differentiating behavioral differences from disorders requires educators to understand the learners' cultures and how those cultures teach and view different behaviors. It is not possible, nor productive, to identify all the diverse behaviors that are frequently misdiagnosed as disorders; rather, some typical examples are presented in Baca and Cervantes (2004), Hoover and Collier (2004), and Winzer and Mazurek (1998). These examples are not all-inclusive and are presented to emphasize the critical importance of knowing the culture within which you teach prior to making judgments concerning a possible disability.

Cooperative versus Competitive Learning: According to Grossman (1995), cultures differ in the degree to which they stress cooperation, competition, and individualism. In some cultures, cooperatively sharing information is encouraged and supported. In schools, this may be misinterpreted as copying or cheating. Conversely, some cultures teach children to be self-reliant when completing work and solving problems. This should not be misinterpreted as an inability to work with others or as conflict-generating behavior. Within many cultures, however, cooperative learning is preferred over competitive learning, which, for many pupils, presents significant problems should the classroom instruction be independent and competitively based. Knowing a diverse learner's cultural views toward cooperative versus competitive learning is essential to avoid misinterpreting such behaviors as indifferent, avoidance, or lazy (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998).

Active and passive learning: In addition to issues of cooperative and competitive learning, cultures vary in how they prefer to emphasize

active and passive learning (Grossman, 1995). Children in nursery who prefer passive learning are taught to sit quietly, be attentive, and respond verbally only when asked or called upon in the classroom. Educators who prefer a more active posture in learning may misinterpret these behaviors as shyness, laziness, or emotionally based insecurity to an extreme. Although "active participatory learning has proven to be more effective than passive learning for most learners" (Grossman, 1995), not every child come to school ready for active learning and must be taught this way of education. These preferences for learning also include cultural values pertaining to the extent that learning should be teacher or learners-directed. A learner's inability to engage in active learning in school should not be automatically considered a problem, and must be considered relative to the cultural values of that learner, ranging from preschoolers to students.

Motivation: The extent to which a preschooler is motivated to learn also has underpinnings in cultural values and norms. For example, how the home supports learning is one of the key elements of motivation (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998). If a culture teaches us that certain fields of study or careers are more male or female specific, then motivation to succeed in different subjects may be culturally based. The cultural backgrounds of preschooler provide a foundation for shaping how he/she views various aspects of education, and the importance of these must be known prior to considering lack of motivation as a characteristic of a disability rather than a cultural preference.

Aggression: Behaviors typically associated with aggression (e.g., defending oneself, strong verbal expression of views) may be encouraged and taught in different cultures. Tolerance of aggressive behaviors may vary across cultures, and educators must be familiar with cultural expectations concerning aggression prior to labeling it as a behavior disorder. Furthermore, learners who are new to school in the United States may be unfamiliar with acceptable behaviors, which may be more restrictive to the learner than in previous settings or cultural preferences (Hoover & Collier, 2004). It is important to note that aggressive behavior that is hurtful or harmful to others is not to be tolerated; rather, culturally based aggression often becomes an issue for educators, not when it is hurtful, but when it becomes more assertive than typically preferred by the teacher. However, this more assertive behavior is not to be misinterpreted as a disorder if the student/pupil is behaving in a culturally taught manner.

Locus of control: Learners' locus of control refers to the extent to which learners perceive whether they are controlled by internal or external forces (Hallahan et al., 2005). Learners perceptions of the locus of control vary significantly across cultures. In some cultures, learners believe that certain events (e.g., success, control over one's own future, responsibility for certain things) are beyond their control. This external locus of control perception drives how and to what extent various life tasks are undertaken. In other cultures, a more internal locus of control (i.e., being in charge of one's own efforts and future) prevails, which in turn drives task completion and views toward the achievement of goals (Hoover & Collier, 2004). Although many educators strive to assist learners to achieve an internal locus of control, for many diverse learners, the external locus of control is a cultural value and/or a temporary expected result as learner adjust to new cultural environments (i.e., acculturation) and should not be viewed as a disorder.

Acculturation: In addition to acculturation affecting the process of second language acquisition, it has specific implications when considering a diverse learner for a suspected behavioral disorder. Diverse learners who are acclimating to a new educational environment may find this experience highly stressful and difficult to manage (Hoover & Collier, 2004). The stress and confusion often associated with acculturation may be evident in several behaviors considered disruptive in school, including withdrawal, aggressive acting out, distractibility, or confusion with locus of control. Educators must consider potential behavior problems in relation to the acculturation levels diverse learners are experiencing. As learners become more acculturated to the school and learning environment, the side-effect behaviors of acculturation will diminish, clearly indicating the lack of a behavior disorder.

Disabilities

As suggested, for some educators, the cultural and linguistic behaviors and characteristics previously discussed are often misinterpreted as one and the same as learning or behavior disorders, due to a lack of understanding of diverse cultural values and norms. To assist in determining the difference between a disorder and a difference, characteristics of learning and behavioral disabilities are discussed, followed by a comparison of all three behaviors (i.e., second language, cultural, and disability) to best differentiate difference from disability.

Learning Disabilities (LD): Historically, a number of inherent factors have contributed to classifying learning disabilities, including the concept that LD involves intrinsic, biologically based, learning difficulties (i.e., as opposed to learning failures associated with culture, language, and socioeconomic variables), as well as specific cognitive deficits or sets of deficits (i.e., as opposed to generalized learning difficulties due to differences across cultures and languages). There are several definitions of learning disability, each with advantages and disadvantages. An accepted operational definition of learning disabilities best serves our interests related to the discussions in this book and is as follows: As applicable to other categories of preschoolers with learning disabilities exhibit learning and cognitive disorders that are intrinsic to the learner (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002) and are reflected in academic achievement deficits. Characteristics often associated with learning disabilities include one or more of the following along with an academic deficit (Hallahan, et al., 2005):

Attention deficits: Problems maintaining attention to and remaining on tasks.

Impulsivity: Tendency to respond quickly, leading to frequent errors.

Hyperactivity: Persistent pattern of and inappropriate degrees of excessive movement (Cohen, Spenciner, & Twitchell, 2003)

Information-Processing Deficits (e.g., memory, perception, thinking). Problems with long- or short-term memory, perceiving and processing in- formation, using problem-solving abilities, and regulating and adjusting one's performance as needed While not all characteristics are found in all pupils with learning disabilities, these are presented so that problem-solving teams can understand potential similarities in behaviors often associated with learning disabilities and those reflective of educational needs of learners resulting from cultural and linguistic diversity.

Behavior Disorders: As discussed in the previous section, many learners' behaviors that are consistent with diverse cultural norms, teachings, and expectations are misunderstood or misinterpreted by educators, resulting in a misdiagnosis of a behavior problem or disorder. Similar to learning disabilities, various definitions of behavior disorders exist and each has its critics. Also, similar to the LD definition, professional organizations have generated operational definitions of behavior

disorders to best serve educators and their preschoolers, pupils and students. An operational definition of this type best serves our discussions. The Mental Health Special Education Coalition, formed in 1987, generated the following: It is quite true that those with behavior disorders exhibit "behavioral and emotional responses in school programs so different from appropriate age, cultural or ethnic norms that the responses adversely affect educational performance, including academic, social, vocational, or personal skills" (Fiedler, 2003). This operational definition further emphasizes that if the exhibited problems are temporary or expected responses to stressful events in the environment, they are manageable with routine interventions and are not considered behavior disorders.

Specific characteristics often associated with behavior disorders are:

1. Problems are exhibited over an extended period of time
2. Behavior is consistently seen in at least two different settings, one of which is in school
3. Learner is unresponsive to direct interventions

Conclusion

Language is a system for communication using sounds or gestures that are put together in meaningful ways according to set rules. Through language, people can express their feelings, write poetry and novels, and even think. Language is essentially human, although possibly not limited to humans. Language proficiency, in turn, should be seen through the critical lens offered by trans-languaging approaches to additional language pedagogy. Linguistics, on the other hand, is the scientific way of studying language.

Recommendations

1. Enhanced knowledge of research and critical reflection on one's teaching should be made to provide learners, including preschoolers, with the necessary learning techniques and skills to help build in them good learning culture of languages.
2. Teachers should work closely with the checklist to avoid impressionistic and subjective, and possibly misleading, self-assessment.
3. Readers should be encouraged to experiment with the frequency that is suitable for their goals.

REFERENCES

Agha, A. (2006). *Language and Social Relations*. Cambridge University Press.

Baca, L. M., & Cervantes, H. M. (2004). *The bilingual special education interface*. (4th ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Bradley, R., Danielson, L., & Hallahan, D. P. (Eds.). (2002). *Identification of learning disabilities*: Research to practice. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Canagarajah, A. S. (2005). Reconstructing local knowledge, reconfiguring language studies. In A. S. Canagarajah (ed.), *Reclaiming the local in language policy and practice* (pp. 3–24). London, England: Routledge.

Clark, G. & Henneberg, M. (2017). Ardipithecus ramidus and the evolution of language and singing: An early origin for hominin vocal capability. *HOMO*, 68(2), 101–21.

Coyne, D.M.; Kame'enui, E. J. & Carnine, D. W. (2007). *Effective Teaching Strategies that Accommodate Diverse Learners.*

Cummins, J. (1989). *Empowering minority students*. Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education.

Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, Power, and Pedagogy*. Bilingual Children in the Crossfire. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Fiedler, M. (2003). A Note on Companion Matrices. *Linear Algebra and Its Applications*, 372, 325-331.

Grossman, P., & Stodolsky, S. S. (1995). Content as context: The role of school subjects in secondary school teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 24 (8), 5-11.

Hall, S. (1997). *Introduction, in Representation*: cultural representations and signifying practices, S. Hall, Ed. London: SAGE in association with The Open University, 1997, pp. 1-11

Hoover, J. J. and Collier, C. (2004). Meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional learners: Preferral to

mainstreaming. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 14, 30-34.

Kamusella, T. (2016). The History of the Normative Opposition of 'Language versus Dialect: From Its Graeco-Latin Origin to Central Europe's Ethnolinguistic Nation-States. *Colloquia Humanistica*, 5(5), 189–198.

Krashen, S. M., Long, M., & Scarcella, R. (1979). Age, Rate, and Eventual Attainment in Second Language Acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 13, 573-582.

Nicholas, E. & Stephen, L. (2009). The Myth of Language Universals: Language Diversity and Its Importance for Cognitive Science. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 32, 429–492.

Noack, R. & Gamio, L. (2015). *The world's languages, in 7 maps and charts.* The Washington Post, 23 April 2015.

Opitz, B. & Degner, J. (2012). Emotionality in a second language: It's a matter of time. *Neuropsychologia*, 50 (8): 1961–1967.

OVANDO, C., COLLIER, V., & COMBS, M. (2003). *Bilingual and ESL Classrooms*: Teaching Multicultural Contexts. (3rd ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Winzer, M. A. and Mazurek, K. (1998). *Special Education in Multicultural Contexts*. Guides - Non-Classroom. Prentice-Hall, Inc., pp. 460.