

Samway, K. D. and McKeon, D. (1999).
Myths and realities: Best practices for
language minority students. Portsmouth, NH:
Chapter 4 Heinemann.

Myths About Acquiring a Second Language (L2)

Second Language Acquisition Myth #1: Learning a second language is an entirely different proposition from learning one's own native language.

Reality: There are many parallels between learning a first and second language.

Background/Overview

It may be comforting for educators to know that learning the linguistic structures and rules of a second language occurs in much the same way as it does for the first (Dulay, Burt & Krashen 1982; Lindfors 1989). In fact, if we think of language as a coin, we can think of first and second language learning as its two sides: essentially the same in composition, but with different designs and different features.

Whether first or second language learning, people learn language because they are in real situations communicating about important and interesting things. Furthermore, this communication is seen and perceived as something that is highly valued (Urzúa 1989). An initial look at the environments in which young children develop their language reveals a great deal of linguistic variety, yet virtually all children effortlessly and naturally learn their native tongues. Children's first language development before they come to school takes place largely through conversations that they hear and have with members of their families.

At one time, it was thought that children learned language by imitating their parents. More recent research suggests, however, that children learn language by actively constructing principles for the regularities that they hear in the speech of others, such as parents, brothers and sisters, and those they interact with on a regular basis (Brown 1973; Chomsky 1969). Evidence of these principles can be seen when children use forms such as *goed*, (as in, "My daddy goed to the store yesterday"), *foots*, and even *feets*. Such errors in children's speech provide us with clues that children are indeed constructing their own hypotheses of how the language functions, since they haven't heard these particular forms in the speech of adults (Wells 1986). As language develops, children become capable of dealing with greater degrees of complexity. They

begin to recognize the inconsistencies of their own speech. They modify their hypotheses about the rules of language and gradually reorganize their language system so that their language approximates more complex adult forms—*goed* becomes *went*.

Learners who are acquiring a second language typically “try out” the language with equal creative fervor, making errors that are similar to the errors made by young monolingual speakers of the language. These errors are an integral part of the second language learning process, helping learners to refine and revise their understanding of how the second language works. Beginning learners of English as a second language (ESL), regardless of age, are as likely to say *goed* and *foots* as first language learners of English, suggesting that learners gradually organize the language they hear according to rules they construct in the new language. Gradually, as the learner’s language system develops, these rules are refined to incorporate more and more of the language system.

Second language learners, like children who are acquiring their first language, often appear to understand language before being able to produce it (Dulay, Burt & Krashen 1982). In fact, many children who are acquiring a second language have been observed to exhibit a “silent period,” saying nothing (or very little) in the new language being learned for periods ranging from several days to several months. For schools and teachers, these features of second language acquisition are often a source of confusion and concern about a child’s learning abilities. It may be reassuring to know, therefore, that these silent periods are considered to be a natural part of second language acquisition, have no long-term detrimental effect on language learning overall, and may, in fact, be beneficial to the second language learning process, providing learners with time to hypothesize about the rules of the new language they are learning.

Although first and second language acquisition are similar processes in many ways, they are by no means identical. Second language learners are more sophisticated learners, in that they already have acquired some, if not most, of the components of one language. Second language learners are more cognitively mature than are first language learners (unless, of course, they are acquiring two languages from birth). See Figure 4–1 for features of L2 Acquisition.

Scenario

It is just before Thanksgiving, and the students in Raúl Castro’s kindergarten class are preparing to make construction paper turkeys, complete with multicolored tails. For the first time, Mr. Castro’s class includes several students whose parents speak a language other than English at home. One of these students, Mee Lon, has Mr. Castro worried. She seems to understand what’s going on in class and is a willing participant in activities such as the one going on today, but Mee Lon rarely, if ever, speaks. Mr. Castro decides to consult with Karen Kelly, Mee Lon’s ESL teacher.

Raúl Castro: Karen, I just don’t understand what’s going on with Mee Lon. She’s really got me wondering if I should refer her for Special Education testing. She never speaks in class, although she seems to be following along with what we’re doing—much better than she did at the beginning of the year—and is fairly outgoing with her peers. But even with the other children, she almost never says anything.

Figure 4–1
Features of L2 Acquisition

- L1 and L2 acquisition are similar processes, *but*
 - L2 learners are more cognitively mature than L1 learners
 - Language learning involves hypothesis construction and testing:
 - Errors are integral to language learning
 - Understanding language usually precedes language production
 - A “silent period” is normal
 - Younger learners do not necessarily have greater facility with languages:
 - Older learners generally confront more complex linguistic situations
 - Younger learners may pronounce the L2 with minimal accent, *but*
 - Older learners are often more efficient learners
 - Mastering academic language may take L2 learners up to 7 years
 - L2 acquisition and academic success are influenced by sociocultural factors, e.g.,
 - Personality
 - Cultural affiliation
 - Prior schooling
 - Teacher expectations
-

© 1999 by K. Davies Samway & D. McKeon from *Myths and Realities*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. May be reproduced for classroom use.

Karen: I know. She's that way in ESL class, too. And you can imagine how frustrating it is for me when we do oral work—telling stories and playing games. But, you know I recently reread something about a phenomenon called “the silent period.” It occurs sometimes when kids are learning another language. Even though they may be listening to and processing what's going on around them, they just don't speak—at least not in the beginning.

Raúl: But it's almost Thanksgiving! And Mee Lon has been in school since late August.

Karen: I know, but sometimes that's how long it takes. Sometimes, even longer. I asked our family outreach worker to check with Mee Lon's parents to see if she's that way at home. They said that when she's home playing with her brothers, she's a regular motor-mouth in Mandarin. I guess it must be pretty intimidating to be placed in a school where everything is happening in a language you don't understand—and plus, the fact that this is her first school experience must be contributing to her shyness.

Raúl: So what did your book say about dealing with this? Can I ever hope to hear a peep out of her? Won't this delay her development in English?

Karen: Actually, what I read suggested that this “silent period” won’t hurt her development in any way. If you can find activities that she can participate in by drawing or pointing, that will help you know that she’s understanding. Also, if you can get her to join in to games or songs where others are talking or singing at the same time, that might alleviate some of the pressure on her to give a “solo” performance. You know, the book said that some adults have been known to go through this “silent period,” too. I plan to hang on, be patient, and give her a chance to work it out. Although I read that a silent period can last up to 6 months, I bet she’ll be talking by Christmas. If she’s this into the turkeys, imagine when we get to the reindeer!

Second Language Acquisition Myth #2: Younger children are more effective language learners than are older learners.

Reality: While younger language learners may learn to pronounce a new language with little or no accent, older language learners are often more efficient learners.

Background/Overview

Although it has long been thought that young children are more effective language learners, there is some evidence to suggest that this is not the case, except for a greater facility with pronunciation (Dulay, Burt & Krashen 1982). What leads people to imagine that young children are expert linguists is the fact that the types of linguistic tasks young children are expected to perform are generally simple face-to-face communicative activities that fit their developmental level. With increasing age, the language (including the written form of the language) that students must comprehend and use to match their developmental level rapidly outstrips their rudimentary command of the second language, thus creating a mismatch (if not a tremendous chasm) between conceptual and linguistic competence.

The mismatch between conceptual and linguistic competence is often seen most starkly in school settings. Older school-age learners require more sophisticated language skills, which help them maneuver through complex social situations and challenging academic situations. Language researchers and theoreticians have recently begun to explore the ways in which these more complex forms of language vary and, in turn, how that variation affects the ability of students to learn and use language in academic settings (Bialystok 1991; Collier 1987, 1989; Chamot and O’Malley 1985; Crandall 1987; Cummins 1981b; Mohan 1986). The context in which language is used and the conceptual content of communication are two possible sources of variation that have been explored.

Differences in the context in which language is used also help to account for some of the reasons why younger children may be seen as better language learners. The context of language use refers to the degree to which the environment is rich with meaningful clues that help the language learner decipher and interpret the language being used. Face-to-face conversations, for example, provide the opportunity to

observe nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and gestures. Tone of voice conveys meaning far beyond what mere words can express, as any child listening to a frustrated parent demand that toys be picked up *now* can attest.

Children learning to play a game not only have the verbal directions to rely on in helping them figure out the game, but also can actually watch others playing. Language used in environments that contain plentiful clues to meaning is described as context-embedded (Cummins 1981a, 1981b), and these environments are generally thought to be “easier” for learners to navigate. Context-embedded or contextualized language use is evident in some types of school activities, as well. In a science demonstration, for example, as the teacher explains the steps in performing an experiment, students can actually watch the actions, tying the language to something in “the here and now.”

Decontextualized or context-reduced language use, on the other hand, occurs in environments that provide few meaningful clues to the learner. There is little in the immediate environment (other than the language itself) that will help learners derive meaning from the language being used, and it is thus seen as “harder” for second language learners. Oral language that is decontextualized can be exemplified by telephone conversations, when a listener no longer can rely on facial expressions or gestures to infer meaning. Reading (especially in books with no pictures) requires that the learner depend strictly on the message conveyed through the words on the page. Lectures (such as those often given in the upper elementary grades, middle school, and high school) that deal with topics such as the American Revolution or the greenhouse effect, provide little in the way of nonlinguistic clues to support meaning.

For children who are learning English as a second language, the implications of such language variation are significant. While children may be able to deduce meaning from context-embedded language, the process of understanding and mastering decontextualized language use is much more difficult. Since much of school language once one moves beyond the earliest grades tends to be decontextualized, children learning English as a second language in school often find themselves lost in a world of meaningless words.

Second Language Acquisition Myth #3: Once second language learners are able to speak reasonably fluently, their problems are likely to be over in school.

Reality: The ability to speak a second language (especially in conversational settings) does not guarantee that a student will be able to use the language effectively in academic settings.

Background/Overview

Do you remember what it was like to take a foreign language? You struggled with pronunciation and vocabulary, the conjugation of verb forms eluded you, the fight to make nouns and verbs (not to mention articles) agree seemed futile, your reading

slowed to a snail's pace of translating word by painful word, and as your frustration level grew, you probably wondered, "Is it *really* worth it?" Now imagine the burden of having to cope with content area instruction in a subject like geometry or earth science at the same time. This is the challenge that LEP students face in school every day.

The content of communication—that is, what the language is about or relates to—is another variation that determines whether language is "easy" or "hard." Variation in content can result in different levels of cognitive demand on learners. Language used to communicate about objects and concrete concepts tends to place less of a cognitive load on learners than does language about complex notions or abstract ideas. Language that expresses what one already knows and understands is less cognitively demanding than that which teaches a new concept or principle.

In addition, researchers are now beginning to suggest that specific content domains (such as math, science, and history) are associated with specific varieties of language (Dale & Cuevas 1987; Kessler & Quinn 1987; King et al. 1987). The use of distinctive words, structures, and communicative functions has been found to vary with the particular content area being taught (e.g., the word *cabinet*, learned in a general context, refers to a cupboard; *cabinet* takes on a very different meaning in a social studies context, when used to refer to a group of presidential advisors).

It has been shown that school language becomes more complex and less contextualized in successively higher grades (Collier 1989; Cummins & Swain 1986). Thus, the ability to learn content area material becomes increasingly dependent on interaction with and mastery of the language connected to such material. The ability to demonstrate what one has learned also increasingly requires extensive use of oral and written forms of language. The academic consequences of such increased language demands on students are readily apparent. Careful planning of instruction is needed in order to help LEP students develop the decontextualized language skills they will need to master the cognitively demanding content in the higher grades.

Second Language Acquisition Myth #4: Learning academic English is equally challenging for all second language learners.

Reality: The challenge of learning English for school varies tremendously from learner to learner and depends on many factors.

Background/Overview

Discussions of language learning in an academic environment must also take into account students' previous exposure to content in their first language. Studies show that children who have had formal academic preparation in a given content area in their first language usually make greater progress initially in academic content in the second language (Collier 1989; Cummins 1981b). Unfortunately, some of the children entering U.S. schools today are students who lack even basic academic skills in

the first language; many come from countries torn by war or civil unrest and have seldom, if ever, seen the inside of a classroom. Some may be illiterate in their first language or come from a language background that does not have a written form. It is clear that for such students, learning English in an academic setting will be a much more challenging task than for their counterparts who have received adequate schooling and who are literate and performing on grade level in their first language.

Second Language Acquisition Myth #5: If we focus on teaching the English language, learning in all areas will occur faster.

Reality: Language learning is a developmental process; while learning a language will not occur in the absence of exposure to the language, increased exposure to the language (particularly in academic settings) does not guarantee quicker learning.

Background/Overview

For schools, the bottom line of all the research on second language acquisition is probably embodied in the question, “How long does it take?” The answer is, “It depends.” This answer is often seen as an unsatisfactory one by policymakers, in particular, who may try to legislate English language acquisition. The passage of California’s Proposition 227 (also known as the Unz amendment), requiring that students be schooled exclusively in English, is an unfortunate case in point.

The fact is that the rate of second language acquisition (particularly in academic settings) is really a function of several variables. The age of students at the time of initial exposure to the second language, previous schooling in the first language, and the type of instruction provided in the second language—all influence the rate of L2 acquisition. Collier’s (1989) synthesis of research on academic achievement in a second language offers the following generalizations drawn from an exhaustive review of the literature:

1. When students are schooled in two languages, with solid cognitive academic instruction provided in both the first and second language, they usually take from 4 to 7 years to reach national norms on standardized tests in reading, social studies and science, whereas their performance may reach national norms in as little as two years in mathematics and language arts (when the skills being tested include spelling, punctuation, and simple grammar points).
2. Immigrants arriving at ages 8 to 12, with at least 2 years of schooling in their first language, take 5 to 7 years to reach the level of average performance by native speakers of English on standardized tests in reading, social studies and science when they are schooled exclusively in English after arrival. Their performance may reach national norms in as little as 2 years in mathematics and language arts.

3. Young arrivals with no schooling in their first language may take as long as 7 to 10 years to reach the average level of performance of native English speakers on standardized tests in reading, social studies and science.
4. Adolescent arrivals with no previous exposure to the second language who are not provided with an opportunity to continue academic work in their first language do not have enough time left in high school to make up the lost years of academic instruction. This is true both for adolescents with a good academic background and for those whose schooling has been limited or interrupted.
5. Consistent, uninterrupted cognitive academic development in all subjects throughout students' schooling is more important than the number of hours of instruction in the second language for successful academic achievement in the second language.

The generalizations drawn by Collier (1989) point out the complex nature of second language acquisition in an academic environment. They also help to explain why some LEP students seem to perform better than others. The variety of factors that influence a student's ability to master challenging subject matter while acquiring another language (proficiency in the first language, ability to read and write in the first language, and previous schooling in the first language) also help to point out one inescapable fact that seems to have eluded many school districts: Just learning English will not guarantee a student's academic success.

The length of time that LEP students appear to need in order to master language for academic purposes accounts for some of the confusion experienced by teachers working with such learners. Many LEP children puzzle their teachers with displays of relatively proficient English in social settings such as the playground and the cafeteria, where contextualized language skills are sufficient. When these students move back into the classroom, however, their teachers are sometimes heard to say, "I think he knows more than he's letting on. I hear him using English on the playground, and yet when it's time to do social studies, his English suddenly disappears. Is he trying to fool me into thinking that he doesn't understand so that he can get out of work?" Probably not. In other words, in many cases, children who have achieved modest levels of contextualized English proficiency find themselves "mainstreamed" or exited from support programs that are needed to help them continue the process of acquiring the decontextualized language skills they need to cope with higher order concepts that are language dependent. The disparity between children's linguistic capabilities in social settings compared with their capabilities in academic settings often results in children being asked to handle a larger linguistic load than they are ready to carry, thus falling behind in the "regular" classes in which they've been placed.

Second Language Acquisition Myth #6: Students from Asian countries are better English language learners and more academically successful than students from Spanish-speaking backgrounds.

Reality: Students from all language and cultural backgrounds are equally capable of learning English as a second language; academic success cannot be attributed to language or cultural background, but rather to a variety of social, emotional, intellectual, and academic factors.

Background/Overview

No discussion of language minority and LEP children would be complete without some mention of the relationship of academic performance to cultural affiliation. Scholars have long documented cultural differences that exist between students' homes and the school (Guthrie 1985; Heath 1983, 1986; Ogbu 1992; Scarcella 1989), suggesting that there are discontinuities that exist for many groups who are not part of the "mainstream middle class." While such discontinuities may create hardships for all groups, some groups clearly seem to experience more difficulty in making the transition from home to school than do others. This is particularly true for language minority students. Many educators have observed that some language minority students seem to perform better in U.S. schools than do others, and they point to Asian "whiz-kids" who top out on the SATs and win science fairs.

Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi (1986) have examined variability in the school performance of different linguistic minority groups around the world. While the specific linguistic minority groups that do well in school vary from country to country, each country appears to achieve success in schooling some groups, while other groups languish. In addition, there appears to be evidence that variability in performance is affected by the country in which a particular group finds itself. Such a group may do well in one country, but poorly in another. One example of such variable performance is the case of Korean students, who have been shown to perform quite poorly in schools in Japan, while doing quite well in schools in the United States (DeVos & Lee 1981).

Researchers speculate that variability in the performance of linguistic minority students may be partly explained by examining the connection between education and other societal institutions and events affecting minorities (Cummins 1989; Matute-Bianchi 1986; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi 1986; Ogbu 1992). In addition, they suggest that the social perceptions and experiences of particular minority groups can affect the outcome of their children's schooling. Immigrant minorities and "caste-like" or indigenous minorities are two of the categories of minority groups that have been described (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi 1986; Ogbu 1992; Ovando & Collier 1985). Let us say at the outset that it is important not to stereotype the behavior of any individual according to the categories, since within each category there is a wide range of adaptations to life in a given culture, and the designation of a particular group may change over time or in a particular context. The categories do help, however, to build a framework in which minority achievement can be better understood.

Immigrant minorities include groups that have moved more or less voluntarily to their new country for political, social, or economic reasons. Examples of such minorities in the United States are the Koreans (mentioned earlier), Japanese Americans,

Cuban Americans, and Chinese Americans. Immigrants in the immigrant minority category tend not to evaluate their success in the new country by comparing themselves with elite members of the host society; their frame of reference is still in the country from which they emigrated. They compare themselves either with their peers in the “old country” or with peers in the immigrant community.

Education is an important investment for such immigrant groups because it is perceived as the key to advancement, particularly for their children. Immigrant children are taught to accept schools’ rules for behavior and achievement; they learn to switch back and forth between two cultural frames of reference—that of the home and that of the school. Their ability to make these adjustments without feeling that they are losing their own culture enhances their ability to perform effectively in school.

Caste-like or indigenous minorities are minorities that have become incorporated into a society more or less permanently and involuntarily (through such processes as conquest, colonization, and slavery), then relegated to a menial status within the larger group (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi 1986). For example, Koreans (mentioned earlier) who were originally sent to Japan as colonial subjects in forced labor, perform poorly in school there and function as a caste-like minority in that setting. Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Puerto Ricans may be examples of such minority groups in the United States.

Caste-like minorities tend to believe that they cannot advance into the mainstream of society through individual efforts in school or by adopting the cultural beliefs and practices of the dominant group. As Ovando and Collier (1985, 270) point out, “There is a tendency in the United States for mainstream whites to perceive indigenous minorities as being non-American, even if they have been here for generations.” The belief that they cannot make it leads these minorities to adopt survival strategies to cope with the conditions in which they find themselves and to make them distinct from the dominant group. Such strategies may eventually become cultural practices and beliefs in their own right, requiring their own norms, attitudes, and skills. These strategies might be incompatible with what is required for school success, and, thus, caste-like minorities may tend to experience the conflict of two opposing cultural frames of reference—one appropriate for the dominant group and one appropriate for minorities.

Caste-like minorities are reluctant to shift between the two frames because they perceive the frame of the dominant group as clearly inappropriate for them. Since schooling tends to be bound up with the ideals and practices of the majority group, it also tends to be seen as something that is less than appropriate for members of the minority group. Members of the minority community who try to behave like members of the majority community (i.e., learning English, striving for academic success and school credentials) may be ostracized by their peers. The dilemma for such minority students is that they must choose between two competing cultural frames: one that promotes school success and one that does not, but is considered appropriate for a good member of the minority group (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi 1986; Ogbu 1992; Trueba 1984).

Schweers & Velez (1992) vividly illustrate these points as they describe the conflict that Puerto Ricans face when learning English on the island. In 1902, following

the Spanish-American War, when Puerto Rico became an unincorporated territory of the United States, English was declared an official language of equal status to Spanish. Shortly thereafter, English was imposed on the public school system, not only as a required subject, but also as the preferred language of instruction. Although the policy has changed dramatically since then (in 1992, Spanish was declared the sole official language of government on the island), English still enjoys great prestige among Puerto Ricans, who have held U.S. citizenship since 1917. English represents real political power, the language of the most powerful and influential country in the world, and to most Puerto Ricans is the *sine qua non* for professional advancement and economic security. Schweers and Velez (1992) point out, however, that there has been persistent resistance to the spread and use of English on the island of Puerto Rico throughout the course of this century, citing a 1992 poll that showed that although 83% of respondents favored official status for both English and Spanish on the island, only 20% of the population was reported to be functionally bilingual. As Schweers and Velez (1992, 14) explain, "Many Puerto Ricans resist learning English precisely because of the beliefs and advantages that support its presence on the island."

While the relationship between culture and schooling is one that is extremely complex, one fact again becomes starkly apparent: Although learning English is essential for success in school for all linguistic minority students, the acquisition of English alone in no way guarantees that every linguistic minority student will succeed academically. The question of school achievement is not solely a linguistic one; the cultural messages received by children from both the school and the larger society may influence their feelings about school as well as their feelings about themselves in relation to school. The way in which children view themselves is connected to the way schools (and the larger community) view them.