

Interviews about Language Acquisition

—Opinions on important factors in successful language acquisition—

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Abstract

This paper is a report on four interviews conducted to elicit opinions on important factors influencing language acquisition. The subjects, all resident in Japan at the time of the interviews, were a single male Canadian ESL teacher, an Indonesian research student with an Indonesian wife and four children, a Japanese housewife with three children and a British husband, and a British ESL teacher with a Japanese wife and three children. The interviewees were asked to share their language learning experiences and to speak freely in response to the following two questions: 1) What are the most important factors in successful language acquisition? 2) What are the factors in not-so-successful language acquisition? The answers given are listed and discussed.

Introduction

Most people know a lot about the acquisition of language from their own experiences with their native language, and some know even more about it from their experiences with non-native languages or from observations of their children acquiring languages.

It is estimated that there are about 5000 languages in the world and many people have opportunities or obligations to acquire more than one language in various circumstances. Crystal (1997) estimates about two-thirds of the world's children are brought up in a bilingual environment. Edwards (2004) declares that everyone is bilingual, as there is no adult who does not know at least a few words in languages other than her/his mother tongue. Many adults try to learn non-native languages for a variety of reasons: to adapt in a new environment, to study, to get a better job, or to satisfy curiosity.

However, learning a foreign language is not an easy job. For this reason research on language acquisition is of value. There are a number of different types of research method that can be used to study language acquisition: close observation, interviews, surveys and questionnaires, experiments, or examining documentary sources and databases. In this paper, I used an interview method. Interviews are recognized as an effective method for extracting ethnographic data like personal information and ideas, and are used widely as a research method in applied linguistics. I wanted to collect opinions about language acquisition as well as interviewees' own language experiences, and analyze the most important factors in successful language acquisition.

Subjects and Methods

I interviewed four people in a relaxed atmosphere one by one. Each interview took about 30 minutes. The interviewees were a Canadian man, an Indonesian man, a Japanese woman and an English man. I was able to collect a wide range of information as they spoke about their ideas freely. After getting their personal information, I asked each person two main questions: “What are the most important factors in successful language acquisition?” and “What are the important factors in not-so-successful language acquisition?” They answered these questions differently from their own points of view, sharing their experiences. Details of the four people interviewed are as follows.

D (male) is a Canadian ESL (English as a second language) teacher who mainly teaches English at two vocational colleges in Japan where English is taught with completely different attitudes. He says one college has a successful attitude, and the other an unsuccessful one. In the college with a successful attitude, not only teachers and students but also office staff are required to speak English all the time. After a while, students start to chat in English even during break times. Furthermore, as students in this college are in charge of choosing materials, they enjoy the class content. They are very keen on improving their English ability. In the other college, by contrast, students are not so keen on acquiring English. The students often speak Japanese casually during English conversation classes, using boring materials chosen by the college. D has not been so interested in second language acquisition for himself, although he has now lived in Japan for four years. He can manage to communicate with Japanese people, mixing English and Japanese words. He feels people always expect him to speak English but not Japanese. Whenever he has to write or speak about complicated things in Japanese, there is always someone who helps him kindly in English. As he is happy with this situation, he does not think it necessary to study JSL (Japanese as a second language) seriously. He is interested in second language acquisition solely from a teacher’s point of view.

G (male) is an Indonesian research student who studies fisheries at a Japanese university. He came to Japan a year ago with his Indonesian wife and three children (aged 6, 4 and 3) and has had another child in Japan. He is going to start a master’s course soon. His mother tongue is Javanese, but he was educated in Indonesian after junior high school. Now he speaks Javanese with his wife and Indonesian with his children at home. He studied ESL at school and university. After graduating from university, he worked for a government office, but he could hardly speak English then. However, when he was sent to Thailand for a month on business, he realized the importance of speaking English. As soon as he returned to Indonesia from Thailand, he took an intensive

English course, involving a two-hour lesson every weekday for four months, after work in the evening. Thanks to this course he can speak English now. He learned Arabic at high school and university. He can manage to read and write Arabic but cannot speak it nor understand others speaking in Arabic. As for JSL, he started a basic JSL course one month before he came to Japan. At the Japanese university, he takes JSL lessons while doing his major research. He wonders if he should write his master's thesis in English or in Japanese, as he is thinking his ability in ESL and JSL will be equal by the time he comes to write it. He normally reads for his specialty in English but communicates with his professor and colleagues in Japanese. His two elder children can speak Japanese as well as Indonesian, since they go to a Japanese kindergarten. His six-year-old son has had more difficulty in speaking Japanese than his four-year-old daughter.

Y (female) is a Japanese housewife who has an English husband and three children (aged 8, 6 and 3). She received grammar-translation English education during her school days, which she thinks was no use for her, but got interested in oral English at the age of 25 when she met her future husband. To improve her English she went to England to study ESL for 9 months. Now she is fluent in English and always speaks English with her husband, who is an ESL teacher at a high school in Japan. Her husband has lived in Japan more than ten years, but hardly speaks nor understands Japanese. When the eldest boy was a baby, she herself tried to speak English to him, as she really wanted him to master English. But after she realized that their children need to master proper Japanese as well, she mainly speaks Japanese to her children. Thanks to their father's lack of Japanese, her three children speak English to their father and understand oral English as well as Japanese.

S (male) is an English ESL teacher at a university in Japan, who has lived in Japan more than ten years. He is very interested in learning foreign languages. He can speak French almost like a native, as he was in France for a year at the age of ten, going to a local French school, and continued to study it at school and university in England. He used to be quite good at Russian, which he studied at school and university, but now he has forgotten a lot of it since he has not had opportunities to use it at all for a long time. Unlike lots of foreign ESL teachers living in Japan, he has studied JSL very hard and is fluent in Japanese. He has a Japanese wife and three children (aged 10, 8 and 5). He tries not to speak Japanese but English to his children at home so that they can speak and understand English as well as Japanese. The children understand what S says in English perfectly, but they often answer in Japanese, expecting him to understand their Japanese. He is not satisfied with the ESL teaching environment in his university. The class size tends to be much too big (with 40 to 50 students in an oral English class). Some students are not interested in

learning ESL at all, but attend the classes merely because ESL classes are compulsory for them.

I chose these four people, because they are all very interested in language acquisition from their own points of view.

Results

<What are the most important factors in successful language acquisition? >

All of the four said that no conscious effort is necessary for first language acquisition. All that is needed in this case is interaction with other people. On the subject of second or bilingual language acquisition, however, they all talked a lot and shared with me some factors which they think lead learners to successful acquisition. They mentioned factors from the various points of view of a foreign student living abroad, an ESL teacher, a language learner, or a parent whose children are learning languages. Here is a list of the factors mentioned during the interviews.

1. Motivation:

- The need to communicate with someone who cannot understand one's home language.
- Having a goal to achieve (e.g. a proficiency test, thesis writing).

2. Environment:

- Plunging into an environment where one has to use the target language (e.g. homestay, traveling or living in a country where the target language is dominant).

3. Desire to learn: It is important for learners to desire to learn.

4. Age: The younger one starts, the more quickly and easily one can learn a language.

5. Good educational environment:

- A good language teacher:
 - Is proficient in the target language (both oral and literary proficiency).
 - Uses only the target language and encourages learners to speak the target language exclusively.
 - Can teach the target language systematically knowing an adequate teaching method.
 - Has a good relationship with learners.

- Importance of interesting materials (e.g. interesting topics for learners, use of real information, practical not artificial exercises).
- Class size for language learning: Smaller classes are better.
- Advantage of using the learners' home language occasionally in class (e. g. for instructions or explaining grammar).

6. Gender: Women tend to be better in language acquisition than men.

<What are the factors in not-so-successful language acquisition? >

Here is a list of the factors mentioned by respondents in answer to the second main question.

1. Lack of opportunity to communicate using the target language.

The main reason for studying a language is to communicate with people using the language.

2. Unhelpful educational environment:

- Highly academic classes using artificial exercises.
- Untrained teachers. (Some people think, wrongly, that any native speakers of a language can teach the language without special training. On the other hand, some Japanese English teachers are highly academic but do not speak English.)

3. Personality unsuitable for language acquisition: (e.g. being too afraid of making a mistake to speak, trying to understand the target language by translating into one's home language).

4. Lack of ability/intelligence: If people are not clever enough to learn grammar, language acquisition can be difficult.

Discussion

It was clear from the interviews that each person interpreted "language acquisition" differently. For D, who is not interested in learning a second language himself but in teaching ESL to Japanese (whose oral ability is generally said to be lower than their reading ability), "language acquisition" is almost synonymous with learning oral English. G, who has had opportunities to learn several languages, thinks oral proficiency in a language very important, but realizes that, for him, language acquisition for academic purposes (reading and writing included) is also necessary from his experience of studying in a foreign university. For Y, who thinks the grammar-translation method of English education that she experienced during her school days was no use, oral

language acquisition is the top priority. She does not seem to think that learning a language involves much more than learning how to speak it. S seems to see language acquisition from a greater variety of angles, influenced, perhaps, by his own experiences as a child in France, his academic study of languages, his experience as an ESL teacher, and as a father whose three children are learning both Japanese and English.

All four emphasized that motivation and a good educational environment are important factors in successful language acquisition. The more strongly one has the motivation, the more earnestly one can devote oneself to language acquisition. I agree with this opinion. Y and S indicated, "Desire to learn," which I put in a separate category in the results section because the interviewees emphasized it separately, but it can be included under the "motivation" factor. G mentioned the "spirit" to learn a language is the most important factor, later on in the interview agreeing that he used "spirit" with the meaning of "motivation". D emphasized the importance of motivation, thinking about his students in the two vocational colleges. His lack of interest in JSL acquisition for himself in spite of living in Japan can be attributed to a lack of motivation, as he finds he can live comfortably, relying mainly on English.

Although all four interviewees mentioned good educational environment, there was some disagreement as to what actually made for such an environment. The two Western ESL teachers took opposite positions on one important point. D believed the second language teacher should speak the target language consistently without using the home language and encourage learners to speak the target language exclusively. S, by contrast, mentioned that using the students' home language occasionally for instructions or explaining grammar, for example, helps learners understand the target language better and more quickly.

To consider the ESL educational situation in Japan, in which many Japanese English teachers still concentrate on the grammar-translation method without speaking English a lot, I can understand why D indicated the importance of exclusive use of the target language. Nevertheless, some may consider his approach a little old-fashioned. Using the home language occasionally for explaining instructions or grammar may not only help learners understand the target language better and more quickly, but may also help them feel less tense. Research evidence indicates that children in bilingual classes, where there is exposure to the home language and to English, have been found to acquire English language skills equivalent to those acquired by children who have been in English-only programs. (McLaughlin 1992; Cummins, 1981; Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991.) D emphasized the importance of choosing interesting materials for learners. Use of real information and practical, not artificial, exercises were indicated by S. To improve English

education in Japan, class size, materials, and teacher quality are to be considered seriously. G mentioned learning grammar systematically would be helpful in language acquisition, especially for adults. Grammar acquisition also improves communicative skill effectively if teachers give enough practical exercises at the same time as introducing a grammar point.

S and Y, both of whom have children learning Japanese and English bilingually, mentioned environment. G, who came to Japan from Indonesia with his wife and children, also emphasized the importance of environment. Disappointed at English education in Japan, Y went to England to learn communicative English and mastered it there. S, who experienced extremely boring Japanese classes as a student in a Japanese university, said only the homestay helped improve his Japanese then. G disclosed that his two children had learned Japanese much more quickly than he and his wife, as they attend a Japanese kindergarten where all children and teachers speak only Japanese.

S, who was in France for a year at the age of ten, going to a local French school and eventually mastering French almost to native-speaker level, mentioned age. He said that the younger one starts, the more quickly and easily one can learn a language. He remembers that although in the beginning it was hard to study in French, eventually he could study all subjects in French as well as his ten-year-old classmates. According to him, his parents, who were also in France then, cannot speak French as well as he can.

This view seems to demonstrate what McLaughlin (1992) calls two commonly held *misconceptions*, namely: 1. children learn a second language quickly and easily; 2. the younger the child, the more skilled in acquiring a second language. S certainly developed a more native-like accent than his parents. However, as mentioned by McLaughlin (1992), this may have happened because he was placed in more situations where he was forced to speak the second language than his parents. S continued to study French in high school on returning to England, which improved his French further. Thus, his case cannot be said to prove the younger-is-better-hypothesis.

G referred to gender. He said that his 6-year-old son has had a much more difficult time in learning Japanese than his 4-year-old daughter and that girls tend to have more natural talent for language acquisition. I asked if the two children have different personalities, which might account for the differences. He admitted that they have completely different personalities, but insisted that these differences in personality are related to the difference in gender. He seemed to have a firm idea that women are better in language acquisition than men.

Though I sometimes hear this “girls-are-more-talented” hypothesis, I have my doubts about it, wondering if the idea about the superiority of women in language acquisition derives from factors not related to innate ability, such as from different personalities, experiences, or different tendencies in speech attitude and interaction between women and men. Actually, the degree to which gender and culture influence how speakers act and interact is of keen interest to applied linguists. Sherzer (1987), for example, proposed a number of different categories of potential “gendered” differences in language to help describe how language and gender differences may manifest in different languages and cultures. The categories include whole language differences, differences in styles, variable or frequency differences, or differences in patterns of speaking. Among white, middle-class American men and women, for example, women typically build on the previous speaker’s topic so that topics develop progressively, while conversations by men often show abrupt topic shifts as men are less likely to be discussing topics such as personal problems which would elicit long discussions.

Y alone emphasized personality. She said some personalities are not suitable for language learning. Some tend to be too afraid of making a mistake to speak the target language; others, through caution, try to understand the target language by translating word by word into their home language. I certainly agree from my own ESL and JSL teaching experiences that these personality types mentioned by Y can make language learning difficult, while an outgoing personality could be advantageous. However, with proper educational guidance and awareness of the issue, it should be possible to overcome any problems posed by personality.

G brought up IQ. He said that people need to have a minimum level of intelligence in order to acquire a non-native language. According to him, mastering grammar is important for language acquisition and if people are not clever enough to master grammar, language acquisition can be difficult. I cannot but agree with him to some extent. As a language teacher, I have noticed mastering grammar can help adult learners in particular to acquire a non-native language. Certainly, some students find it very difficult to master grammar systematically and continue to use the target language sloppily. However, it is difficult to estimate learners’ IQ. Though some learners cannot understand grammar systematically, they have a special ability to acquire a language through practical communications. They may have better abilities in hearing and observing others and in mimicry than those who can master grammar systematically.

We language teachers have to think about conquering the difficulties in teaching a non-native language to learners who cannot master grammar systematically, as opportunities or obligations for all sorts of people to learn non-native languages are increasing. People who could not go to

school at all to receive proper education in their country because of political oppression, for example, have to acquire a non-native language if they emigrate. Some simply do not like studying grammar systematically. Conventional teaching methods, emphasizing mastering grammar systematically, do not appeal to all learners. In response to the diversity of learners, a succession of teaching methods, many of which do not necessarily emphasize mastering grammar, have been developed since the 1970s, such as the Communicative Approach, Total Physical Response, Suggestopedia, the Functional Notional Approach and the Natural Approach. If language teachers grasp learners' purposes and goals for the language acquisition clearly, finding out their strong points, if possible, and use these methods effectively, they may conquer the difficulties.

Conclusions

It was interesting to hear different opinions on the factors considered by interviewees to be important in successful - and not-so-successful - language acquisition. I agreed with many ideas, but had doubts about others. As for the acquisition of JSL, which was not that common in the past for geographic and political reasons, it has been getting popular both in and outside Japan in the last 40 years or so. Many non-native Japanese speakers from various backgrounds, such as students, business people, returnees, technical trainees, family members of the above, spouses of Japanese and so on, learn JSL in Japan, having individual purposes and goals. Even among international students coming to Japanese universities, their purposes and goals for JSL acquisition are different, depending on their fields of research, ability in English, which is acknowledged widely as an academic global language, or the way their professors guide their speciality. Some students read for their speciality and write their thesis all in Japanese, others read and write for the speciality and even communicate with their professors in English but learn JSL to live comfortably in Japan. G is thinking of learning academic JSL to write his thesis, which will demand completely different skills from those that he is leaning now. It is generally recognized that there are four basic language skills, namely, writing, reading, speaking, and listening, but Hernandez-Chavez et al. (1978) suggest that language ability should be divided into sixty-four skills. Writing a personal letter and an academic thesis, for example, require completely different skills.

The grammar-translation method of ESL teaching, which has long been dominant in Japan, is now criticized and communicative oral methods are in demand. Two interviewees took language acquisition as exclusively oral ESL acquisition, but I believe it should involve more than that. Even if a person sounds fluent in a language, he/she has not necessarily mastered other language skills. People may have different opinions about language acquisition, depending on which skills they think are important.

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人がどうやって言語を習得していくかというトピックは、研究分野が広く、大変興味深い。特に、大人が母国語以外の言語を習得していく段階においては、様々な困難があり、その成功の要因を見つけだすことは意義深い。本稿では、言語習得に興味を持つ、カナダ人の男性英語教師、インドネシア人の男性留学生、日本人の女性主婦、イギリス人の男性英語教師の4名に、個別にインタビューを行ない、彼らの言語習得にまつわる経験をもとに、Language acquisitionの成功の要因と、あまりうまくいかない場合の要因を探り出したいと考えた。

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