Common Misconceptions about Language Acquisition

Introduction

Language acquisition is a subject about which most people have opinions. After all, everyone has learned a language, many people have watched their own children learn their native language, and many have engaged in second language learning – whether successfully or not. So, language acquisition is unlike, say, law or nuclear physics or computer technology. If those topics come up, non-experts concede to experts, recognizing their lack of knowledge. With language acquisition, it's different. Many people believe that they know more about language acquisition than they actually do, and hence there are many popularly held misconceptions about how people learn languages. Though you may not believe all of these myths, especially now that you have done some reading on language acquisition in this course, it will nevertheless benefit you to become familiar with the myths and the theories and research which debunk them.

Myth #1: Children learn languages more easily and quickly than adults.

The very simplistic nature of this statement regarding language acquisition, an extremely complex endeavor, should alert us to the fact that it cannot be unequivocally true. While it is undeniable that young children often *seem* to "pick up" languages in ways that adults may not, we need to look more closely at where this perception comes from, and what it really means. Children *do* have a distinct advantage where pronunciation is concerned. They can often more easily hear and copy foreign sounds, perhaps with little effort. However, pronunciation is only one, rather small, aspect of language. Archibald (2005) states "it is much more difficult to predict knowledge or ability in any of the other areas of communicative competence (syntax, cohesion, sociolinguistics, etc.) based on age of acquisition" (p. 420). Because pronunciation is one of the first characteristics of language use that we notice, good pronunciation can result in the perception that language skills are higher than they actually are. And poor pronunciation can mask significant knowledge of words and structures.

For example, imagine that a family emigrates to the U.S. from Thailand. The family includes a 34-year-old father who is a businessman with a university degree, and a four-year-old boy. The father enrolls in a full-time program to learn English, while the boy is sent to a typical American preschool. After a year, the father has probably learned at least 3,000 English words and many structures. He can probably communicate well in the supermarket and with neighbors at a community gathering. However, his pronunciation may sometimes be difficult to understand, and his written language may still have many spelling and grammar errors, as he has come from a native language with a totally different writing system. The son, on the other hand, has probably picked up about 1,000 words over the course of the year, not a lot less than his native-English-speaking playmates know, and may have native-like pronunciation. Due to his age, he has no written language to learn. He chats easily with his preschool friends, and everyone says "He has picked up English so quickly!" In reality, the father has learned much more than the son. He has learned three times as many words, not to mention the whole English alphabet and writing system. But when he talks with his peers, native speaking educated Americans, he only has perhaps one tenth the vocabulary that they have, and is sometimes misunderstood due to his

heavy accent. Many people could look at the father and the son and come to the conclusion that "children pick up languages much more easily than adults". But our closer inspection reveals that the adult has learned much more language than the child over the same time period.

Many studies have disproved a simple correlation between young age and facility in language acquisition. For example, Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1982) conducted research with native English speakers of all ages who were learning Dutch as a second language. In their study, children 3 to 5 years old scored the *lowest* on language tests, in all categories. In other words, older children, teens and adults *all* outperformed the youngest group of children. A significant additional discovery was that the 12 to 15 year olds showed the fastest language acquisition in all skill areas. More recent studies have confirmed that the early teen years may be an exceptionally opportune time for additional language acquisition – superior to earlier years (Taylor, 2013).

But the point to remember is that there is *not* a simple correlation between age and language acquisition in any area other than pronunciation. Even where pronunciation is concerned, some adult learners *do* achieve impressive native-like pronunciation. Languages can be learned at all ages. There is no evidence to suggest otherwise.

Myth #2: It takes 1-2 years to acquire the English language.

The misconception that young learners "pick up languages" effortlessly has resulted in their sometimes not receiving needed language acquisition services in public schools. After all, if it is true that young learners just pick up languages, why waste money on providing special language acquisition programs for them? This false assumption led to studies on immigrant children in public school systems. Jim Cummins, a prominent researcher on childhood language acquisition in school, developed the notions of *BICS* (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and *CALP* (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) (See Cummins, 1979, 1994, 2000). According to Cummins, BICS, our "social language", is acquired fairly quickly over the course of 1-2 years. CALP, on the other hand, takes much longer to acquire. Children may require 5-7 years to catch up with native speaking peers, where academic language – the language of textbooks and teacher talk – is concerned.

Does this hold true for adults as well? Yes. Collier (1989) found that roughly 5-7 years were required for an adult to reach competency that included being able to engage in academic tasks such as taking a college course.

The important thing for us to remember is that it takes a very long time to fully acquire an additional language. It is not a simple or quick task at any age.

Myth #3: The more time people spend in a second or foreign language context, the more quickly they learn the language.

This seems like a tenable statement: the more time you spend in English the faster you will learn English. Again, though, language acquisition is complex! To fully explore the issue, we must ask questions such as these:

1. What about brain fatigue? Is there a time limit on the brain's capacity to absorb new language, rendering language input beyond that time useless?
2. What role does the L1 (first language) play in acquiring an L2 (second language)? Is it possible that the L1 is important, and thus limiting it in favor of the L2 is counterproductive?
3. What about the affective filter – the emotional aspect? If continued L2 input beyond a certain time frame increases stress, does this stress limit the effectiveness of additional time spent in the L2? Is it possible that continued L2 input beyond an ideal time limit may actually decrease motivation and increase frustration, perhaps even causing L2 regression?

These are not easy questions to answer, in part at least because any answers we could find would be highly contextualized – applying to a specific group of learners of a specific language group at a particular language level, etc. etc. But simply asking the question can cause us to re-think the "more is always better" hypothesis.

What do we know? We do know that children learning English make greater gains in English in *dual language* programs than in all English programs. In dual language schooling, typically groups of children with two different native languages are served, and they each acquire the other language through a curriculum that is half in each language. Studies comparing dual language and all English programs have shown that when half of a child's school day is spent in their L1, they learn more of their L2 (Cummins, 1981; Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991). If "more is always better" were true, we would expect children in all English programs to have greater gains in English. Studies in bilingual education also point to the advantage of *using* the L1 to acquire the L2. Much of what we know about language comes from our L1, and it is naïve to think that we don't, or worse that we shouldn't, use that knowledge to help us acquire additional languages. Those of us who have learned languages as adults can attest to the value of notebooks filled with words and translations, comparisons made between the grammars of our L1 and L2, and even connecting idioms and expressions in the new language with those we are familiar with in our native language. We simply *do* use our L1 to acquire additional languages – and that's a good thing.

We also are learning more from recent brain research about things like short-term memory limits. You may recall the "7 item limit" cited in the webinar by Bailey and Pransky (2013). Such research should alert us to the very real potential for brain fatigue in language acquisition. Again, our own experiences no doubt confirm the reality of brain fatigue. We have *felt* the limits; we have experienced the delight of an effortless conversation in our L1 after hours of struggling with an L2; we have probably all said, at some point, "I need a break". And we were right: we *did* need a break.

Finally, recent brain research is proving the affective filter hypothesis, as we also saw in the Bailey and Pransky webinar. Though undoubtedly whether and when increased time in the L2 becomes a negative factor is very individual and contextual, there is no doubt that it *can* indeed have negative ramifications. Talk to language learners who have been thrust into new language contexts with no break, and you will hear from at least some of them stories of exhaustion, demotivation, low self-esteem and frustration.

There is, of course, a *lower* time threshold as well. There can certainly be *too little* input in a language for acquisition to take place – a reality that is unfortunately all too common in foreign language classrooms around the world, where students may only have a couple hours in the L2 per week. If language acquisition, as opposed to learning, is the goal, most would say this is not enough. But this does not mean that more is always better. You *can* have too much of a good thing.

Myth #4: Children learning English will learn faster if parents speak in English at home.

Note: We are talking about a situation in which both parents are, themselves, *not* native English speakers.

This myth is related to #3. If one believes that more English is always better, then it follows that parents should speak English in the home, to speed up the language acquisition process. We have seen above that more is not necessarily better, thus removing one commonly voiced reason why families learning English should speaking English at home. But there are others as well.

First, we have very solid evidence that children do better in every way by retaining and continuing to develop their native language (e.g. Cummins, 2000; Genesee 2007). Continued L1 development is always positive, and never negative, with regard to L2 acquisition and academic development. Second, whether or not parents should speak English at home with their children should depend at least somewhat on the parents' level of English. What if their English is poor? This affects both the language models that children will hear and the scope and types of conversations in which the family can engage. For example, families with limited English may not be able to discuss in English complex topics such as a bullying incident at school or a political situation in their home country.

This brings us to the final, and possibly most important, reason why the language of the home should be the parents' native language(s): parents need to be parents. Parenting is the greatest task parents engage in at home – not language teaching. They need to use the language or languages in which they can best fulfill their duties as parents, helping children to develop and grow into healthy and self-reliant adults. A language is just a language. People can acquire additional languages at any age. Parenting has a time limit, and the precious years afforded to parents to teach and nurture their children should not be sidelined by inflated notions of the importance of learning English.

Of course, context is everything in the field of SLA. Perhaps the picture changes if children are acquiring English within a non-English speaking country, and the parents have a very good command of English. Perhaps in such a situation there is no threat of losing the L1, as it is the language widely used outside the home. Perhaps, as well, the parents speak English very well, and can thus both provide good language models and engage in their parenting tasks using English. In such a context there may be no harm, and may even be good, in using English in the home.

Still, all parents would do well to think seriously about any decision *not* to use their native language(s) with their children, in the home. There need to be compelling reasons for this *not* to be the best choice.

Myth #5: The more children are immersed in English in school, the faster they will learn English.

This myth, as well, relates to myth #3. Again, if one believes that more L2 is always better, it follows that school all in the L2 would be best. As we saw above, more is not always better. And where children are acquiring an L2 in school, we have very strong evidence pointing to the value of instruction in the L1. Collier and Thomas (2004) conducted research on second language acquisition in school, investigating the effectiveness of many different models. In their research, *dual language* models outperformed English-only models. The Collier and Thomas study showed that:

> Enrichment dual language schooling closes the academic achievement gap in L2 and in first language (L1) students initially below grade level, and for all categories of students participating in this program. This is the only program for English learners that fully closes the gap; in contrast, remedial models only partially close the gap" (Collier & Thomas, 2004).

In this study, "remedial models" are full-English models. That is, children are "remediated" by being sent to ESL classes, when they are not immersed in English-medium classrooms. In the Collier and Thomas study, and in others, the full English model does *not* result in learning English more quickly.

Myth #6: All people acquire languages in the same way.

You may read this myth and immediately think "Ah… here's one that I *didn't* believe." If so, good for you! We have made great strides in education, in understanding learner differences. However, if we could glimpse inside language learning classrooms around the world, we would quickly come to the conclusion that many teachers teach as if everyone *did* learn in the same way. Most of the time students are doing the same things, and more often than not, what they are doing involves a talking teacher, silent students, and a textbook.

How *do* language learners differ? Some investigations into this question have led researchers to propose ideal language learner qualities, such as the following:

- Tolerance of ambiguity: the ability not to fixate on unknown language, but attempt to get the gist of something that is read or heard.
- Willingness to communicate: the effort to engage in communication even when lacking some of the words and structures that are needed.
- Search for patterns: looking at language as a puzzle, and seeing patterns and connections.

However, language learners do not necessarily exhibit all these qualities, and others similar to them, all the time. So, the first way in which language learners may differ is in the degree to which they possess these "ideal" language learner characteristics, and the degree to which they can develop in these ways if provided teaching towards these goals.

Learners also differ, of course, in personality. It is often thought that personality characteristics such as extroversion enhance language learning potential. In reality, this is unproven. Extroverts certainly have

some qualities which may aid their language learning, but they may also listen less than would be ideal for optimal language acquisition, and they may be inclined to develop fluency at the expense of accuracy. Still, introversion and extroversion, and other personality differences, undoubtedly do play a role in the types of classroom activities which are likely to be motivating and stimulating for learners.

Another line of thinking about learner differences has to do with *multiple intelligences (MI).* Popularized by Howard Gardner (1993), this is the idea that learners vary in eight different types of intelligence: linguistic, mathematic, visual/spatial, body/kinesthetic, naturalistic, musical, interpersonal and intrapersonal. MI theory has been applied to language acquisition in various ways, from the emphasis on kinesthetic activities, to the inclusion of music, to support for relationship-building within the classroom.

Probably the most well-known theory of "learning styles" is the categorization of learners as *visual, auditory* or *kinesthetic.* Sometimes called "modalities", these ways of learning have filtered into popular thinking in many places, with people labeling themselves as one of these three learner types. Differentiation according to such "learning styles" may not be very applicable to language acquisition. *All* language learners seem to benefit from visuals and physical movement. Also, all language learners usually need to develop all four language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening), so visual vs. auditory distinctions may not be relevant.

Finally, this discussion would not be complete without mentioning cultural influences on language learning. Do Japanese learners acquire language just as well even though they may speak less? Do Americans learning foreign languages benefit more from learner choice than other nationalities might? Do Brazilian English learners do best with highly collaborative and relational classroom activities? Researchers are engaged in many studies about the effect of cultural differences on language acquisition, and any English teacher working with a specific cultural group would be well-served by investigating what cultural influences have been found.

Though we know that all learners do not acquire languages in exactly the same ways, actual research on the effect of learning styles, culture and other differences is sparse. What is our take-away, then? First, certainly learners are different in all sorts of ways, and if a class is small, it behooves the teacher to know her learners well and teach in ways that will be most motivating and effective for them. Second, learner differences should not be a noose around the neck of teachers of large classes. If a teacher has many students, the point to remember is that *variety* is needed. Regardless of learning style, all learners need to read (visual) and write (kinesthetic) and engage in oral communication (auditory). All learners benefit from diverse activities.

Myth #7: You have to speak the language of the learners in order to teach them English.

This is a persistent myth that sometimes prevents people from entering the TESOL profession, or even volunteering to help English learners in some way. The fact is that we teach languages primarily in the *target language…* the language students are learning. Thus, English classes should be taught in English, using words and structures that are appropriate for the students' level. We do not rely on translation when teaching a language, and in fact, too much translation often hinders language acquisition.

In many English-teaching contexts, there are students from several different native languages in the classroom. So, this is an additional reason why we need to keep the language of the classroom in the target language: English.

This is not to say that English teachers should not learn the language of their students, if all their students speak the same native language! If an English teacher is living and working in Korea, for example, teaching classrooms of students who all share Korean as their native language, the teacher should, of course, be taking classes to learn the Korean language. This will be very beneficial in her teaching of English, as she will have a greater understanding of the commonalities and differences in the two languages, will be able to establish rapport with learners in their mother tongue, and will develop more empathy for her learners as she attempts to learn a foreign language.

However, it is important to understand that good language teaching relies on an understanding of language acquisition and skill in using methodologies which foster language acquisition. It does *not* rely on knowledge of the learners' native language.

Myth #8: Language students learn and remember what they are taught.

Our final myth is sobering, given the fact that we are language teachers. We presume that students will learn and remember what we teach them. In reality, again, language acquisition is much more complex than that. Let's recall Krashen's (1981) monitor model – specifically the natural order hypothesis. This says that students acquire language in a predetermined order, regardless of teaching. To illustrate, let's say I decide to teach a group of beginners the past perfect verb tense. Though my methods and teaching skills may be superb, my students will not acquire this tense. They might be able to memorize rules for forming it, but they will not be able to use it. If in this hypothetical lesson I am speaking to the learners in English using the "be" verb in sentences such as "This is the rule" and "These are the rules", my students *may* acquire "is" and "are", even though that is not what I taught. Why did students *not learn* what I taught, but *did learn* what I did not actively teach? Because they learned the language that they were *ready* to learn. They learned what came next in the *natural order,* or, as it has sometimes been called, the *internal syllabus.*

The second half of this myth speaks of how well students remember what they have learned. It is sometimes said that students need at least six contacts with a word, in meaningful communication, before they remember it. In my language learning efforts sometimes the number seems to be much higher than this! The point is, we simply do not remember words that we hear or read once, or even two or three times. We need repeated contacts with a word, within a meaningful context, before it "sticks". The obvious lesson for teachers is that review and practice are probably even more important than initial teaching in the long journey towards language proficiency.

Conclusion

Hopefully, this focus on some particular areas in which public opinion may not be correct has given you some food for thought, and some reliable information to use in public discourse. It is as we who have a

deeper view of language acquisition can share and dialogue with those around us that public opinion will change, promoting better language acquisition opportunities for all.

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