

SOME REFLECTIONS ON FACTORS INFLUENCING FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

This article represents an attempt to identify and assess various external and internal factors that play a crucial role in foreign language learning and how formal and informal instruction contributes to the development of learners' communicative competence. The main questions we are trying to answer refer to why students do not always succeed in becoming proficient in English, despite the many hours of study and the teachers' efforts to use extensively authentic materials and up-to-date methods and techniques.

Keywords: communicative competence, language acquisition, linguistic knowledge, formal/informal instruction, internal/external factors.

Rezumat

Acest articol este o reflec ie asupra unor factori care afectează înv area unei limbi str ine i modul în care instruc ia formal cât i cea informal contribuie la dezvoltarea competen elor de comunicare a celor care o studiaz . Întrebarea cheie c reia încerc m s -i g sim un r spus este: de ce studen ii nu reu esc mereu s devin utilizatori eficien i ai unei limbi, în pofida timpului i efortului deus atât de ei în i i, cât i de profesorii lor?

Cuvinte-cheie: *competen de comunicare, asimilare, cuno tin e lingvistice, instruc ie formal / informal , factori interni/ externi.*

There is nothing more rewarding for a learner of a foreign language than to be able to use this language to fulfill its main function-to communicate efficiently. Countless hours of hard work both in class and at home, a demanding but empowering teacher, all these should, at least in theory, lead to satisfactory, if not amazing linguistic proficiency. Unfortunately, despite the time and effort, it is known that not all the learners of a foreign language get to become proficient in it. Individual variation has a loud word to say when we deal with language acquisition. There are learners who display very high motivation and work really hard to achieve the best outcomes in acquiring the language, but in fact, their performance tends to be quite poor even if they manage to get a vast amount of linguistic knowledge.

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The purpose of this article is to elucidate what factors play a significant role in foreign language acquisition and how environment can interfere with the process. We also attempt to identify and review the viewpoints of notorious authors in the field of foreign or second language acquisition. The impetus for this article came from the observation that despite the many efforts of remarkable teachers, a great number of learners never achieve much progress in active, efficient foreign language acquisition. In Moldova, at least, it is a common occurrence to have hardworking students who do amazingly well in written tests but fail to start a simple talk on a commonplace subject, or students who know lots of sophisticated vocabulary and totally at a loss when they are face to face with a native speaker of a foreign language. After long years of learning and classroom practice, far too many students are not either proficient or confident speakers of English. What are the causes that lead to these unpleasant realities? Are the teaching approaches to blame or the teachers themselves? Why do not the students use efficiently the linguistic knowledge they already have? These are some of the questions that motivated this research.

The huge body of literature dealing with theories about first language acquisition, among which behaviorist, maturationist, constructionist, to name just a few, provide different views of the phenomenon, but somehow agree that this is the result of naturalistic, unconscious use and in the greatest amount of cases leads to proficient conversational skills. That is, a child acquires linguistic knowledge without any strain or effort, just by being exposed to it. The child develops his communicative competences by being exposed to a continuous linguistic, and more importantly, flow of socio-cultural information.

It is not the case with a foreign or a second language. Knowing and using a foreign language proficiently usually occurs through formal instruction. It is also true to note that unfortunately, formal instruction of languages does not always result in language proficiency. It should be pointed out that in the vast majority of cases, when we refer to classroom language learning we implicitly mean instructing, not exactly conversing. The classroom discourse is far too often distorted, following some pattern, which is different from the one occurring naturally. It turns out that in a classroom setting there is more learning about the language, than learning the language itself. The assumption that grammatical knowledge is vital still persists and too much of the precious time is dedicated to acquiring grammar rules. Despite the huge amount of theories advanced with the purpose of improving the status of language teaching and language learning, language syllabi still focus too much on grammar knowledge. And final evaluation papers in most cases test mainly

grammar than other skills. Bacalaureate exams in Moldova have long had the reputation of checking how well learners handle grammar exceptions. This could also account for one of the reasons for students failing so often to take this exam. They are not tested in language proficiency, but are expected to display high class grammar knowledge.

In order to achieve better results in developing students' communicative competence, there should be a shift from this type of formal instruction. In fact, many teachers are already changing the situation. Formal instruction in language learning is definitely the basic premise for success. The point is to identify what methods, techniques and contents could lead to the best outcomes.

Another significant moment in the route towards foreign language acquisition is for the teacher to be able to determine what learning activities appeal best with his class. There are studies which state that interactive techniques are best suited for younger learners whereas individual learning is more efficient with adult learners (Krashen and Selinger, 1981). Apart from this, the teacher's direct responsibility lies with the choice of contents that will supplement the textbook or even replace it. In Moldova, for instance high school textbooks are famous for the extra long texts overloaded with difficult vocabulary that the majority of students never finish reading. Evidently, this is highly demotivating for learners, particularly teenagers who are impatient to achieve everything immediately. Under the circumstances, the teacher has the task to decide on what material to provide them with, so that it corresponds more to their interests and keeps up with the curriculum. It is not uncommon for the teacher to become unsure about his choices and the directions to follow and to question the value of what he is doing.

Teacher effectiveness is believed to be of huge importance and in the last decade, at least, in Moldova there have been made significant efforts to boost teachers' quality, commitment and fluency as well through a notable variety of events ranging from seminars, workshops, conferences and schools. The main objective of these is to make a change in the classical way of perceiving the process of teaching languages and focus more on student-centered learning. It is worth noting that Moldova, unlike other high performing states, has not developed and implemented yet, a national system to ensure that all teachers that enter the profession are well prepared and ready to teach and will benefit of continuous support in their professional development. There are excessive demands from the teachers, without too much being offered back, hence the massive migration of teachers from the field lately. Pessimistically enough,

but our educational system is rotting and failing to attract, prepare and support expert teachers who will teach in powerful ways, teachers who really can make a change. Undoubtedly, highly qualified teachers are the most important asset a government should never hesitate to invest in. They, in return will invest their time, knowledge and energy to produce best quality results in their teaching career. So, formal instruction in foreign language learning has definitely a significant role, particularly in the context where there is not extensive exposure to it outside the classroom.

It is interesting to note that there is another side of the same coin: there are people who develop incredible communicative skills in a foreign language just by watching soap operas on TV or using other technology.

Studies show that those few who manage to learn a foreign language from soap operas on TV, for instance, develop stronger communicative competences due to the fact that they are not just exposed to natural, authentic conversational situations, but also elements of culture, which is essential for efficient communication. It goes without saying that these passive exposures must be followed by some *interaction* in order to reinforce language acquisition. Otherwise, it will result in just latent, passive knowledge. Children nowadays do spend far too much time in front of a media device and as researchers have shown (Christakis, Zimmerman, Grela, Lin, Roseberry, and others) they manage to effectively learn new vocabulary, particularly if the programs they follow are associated with some social interaction. Interaction in day-to-day situations is the key to efficient language acquisition and it is the answer to the question why do not all people learn languages from technology, despite much exposure.

Definitely, psychological factors have a significant part in the process. Outside the classroom, without being teacher-guided and constrained by some pre-formulated objectives, the learner feels more confident and it is easier for them to get knowledge in informal settings. Here both internal and external factors are of particular importance. Incidental learning occurs mainly if a person is driven by special enthusiasm and motivation to discover and learn new things and not last, has ***linguistic intelligence***, which includes the ability to perceive language facts, to speak, articulate and express one's feelings in one or more languages both orally and in writing.

In fact, there are two contradictory conceptions about foreign/second language acquisition: one favoring formal instruction of languages (Krashen and Seliger, 1975, 1976; Krashen, 1976; Briers, 1978; Long, 1983; Pica, 1983). The other (Mason, 1971; Martin, 1980; Upshur, 1968) emphasizes the idea that formal

instruction of languages does not account for much, particularly if there are enough opportunities for practice outside the class.

An ideal combination would consist of a well-balanced mixture of formal and informal language learning and both the teachers and the students should be completely aware that a foreign language cannot be acquired exclusively during a certain number of classroom encounters. Formal language teaching and learning should proceed from the assumption that outside the formal learning framework, the students feel free to express their creativity and learn much better those things that correspond to their personal needs. The real life situations they face do nothing than facilitate their language acquisition as compared to the simulated situations from the formal learning context. As foreign language learning and its competent usage depend on many variables and factors, the researchers in the field state that there is no complete solution to the problem. Lightbown and Spada underline the role of the learner's characteristics in language learning. Among the most important features they identify: intelligence, personality traits, age, preferences and motivation. According to them, personal characteristics and variables interact in complex ways, making it impossible to anticipate the progress the learner is going to achieve in language learning. (Lightbown and Spada, 1999)

When we envisage the concept of communicative competence in a foreign language, it is worthwhile to bear in mind that a multitude of internal factors like anxiety, frustration, fear, low self-esteem, etc. play a considerable part in its development. Sometimes, when learners face deficiencies in their communicative and social competence, this translates into internalized or externalized behavior patterns that are not always well tolerated by peers or even teachers. There is not a single teacher who has not confronted at least once in their teaching experience with learners displaying impulsive, disruptive or even aggressive behavior when feeling incapable of putting into words what they have in their minds and blaming it all on their teacher or some sibling. A case comes to mind which dates back to the first 5 years of my teaching career. One of my students, who on a regular basis had relational problems with her classmates without my ever suspecting it, began reproaching me my not "loving her" because of my being quite demanding about her performance in class. She was naturally a bright student, but because of these behavioral problems, she did not achieve great results in improving her communicative competence in English and never finished her studies.

Highly sensitive students are prone to turn into less efficient foreign language users and the teacher's difficult task is not just to teach, but to look for

efficient ways of convincing her students that what they are taught is worth being learned and to encourage them on a daily basis to overcome all those barriers that might prevent them from becoming proficient in the language they study. Boosting their motivation is a great challenge, alongside with the skill of turning to the best account their linguistic aptitudes.

As a wrapping up note, it is important to state that the multitude of factors affecting language acquisition and using it for communicative purposes, make the teachers and material designers' job even more demanding. The multidisciplinary character of foreign language teaching and learning is still an area with many unknowns challenging researchers from various fields to dedicate time and effort to decipher them, thus trying to facilitate both the teachers and learners' task. Foreign language learning is not easy and all the factors involved influence the process. Best results can be expected when both formal and informal instruction, which are its inherent components, are intertwined judiciously without ignoring the amount of personal effort that a learner is ready to make.

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