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LANGUAGE LEARNING in MINISTRY

Preparing for Cross-Cultural Language Acquisition

Jan Edwards Dormer

Language Learning in Ministry: Preparing for Cross-Cultural Language Acquisition

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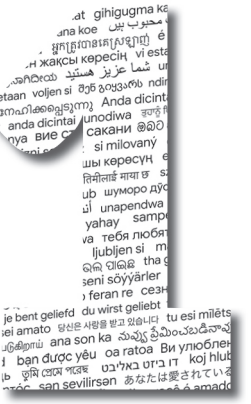
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Misconceptions about Language Acquisition

PHIL

I really tried to learn the language for the first two years after we got here. But I just couldn't get it. I don't know why I thought I would. I've never been a good language learner. Now my kids, on the other hand—they're the lucky ones. Kids pick up languages easily, right? You should have heard our little Kaitlin when she was only four, jabbering away with the lady who came to clean our house. I wish it could be like that for me!

Like Phil, many people have preconceived ideas about language learning, and these notions usually have some basis in reality. Phil may have taken Spanish in high school, yet not emerged from those classes speaking Spanish. And now Phil sees his four-year-old responding very differently to a new language environment than he is, and he quickly surmises that the difference has something to do with age. To complicate matters further, he assumes that he isn't a good language learner, because if he were, he would have learned Spanish in high school, right?

Upon closer inspection of Phil's beliefs, we see many unexamined assumptions. Among them are:

- that Phil's high school classes provided him with good language learning opportunities
- that some people can learn new languages and others can't

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- that Phil could not have learned the same language that Kaitlin learned had he been exposed to the same interaction with the housekeeper
- that Kaitlin was using extensive and diverse language when she was "jabbering away"
- that Kaitlin did not experience stress from the new language environment like he did

Are these assumptions correct? What if they aren't, or what if they are just partial truths? Would that change Phil's perspective about language learning?

In this chapter we will examine commonly held beliefs and assumptions about language learning with the intent of determining if they are grounded in fact or if they stem from unexamined assumptions and experiences.

To begin, let's discover your current perspectives. Read the following statements, and then put an X somewhere on the line between "True" and "False" to indicate your level of agreement with the statement. Don't overthink your answers, but mark each line according to your initial reaction.

What Do You Think?

1. Children are better language learners than adults.
   True . . . . . False
2. Children have fewer inhibitions than adults about using new language.
   True . . . . . False
3. Children can hear and reproduce new sounds better than adults.
   True . . . . . False
4. There is a "critical age" above which it is more difficult to learn a language.
   True . . . . . False
5. Language aptitude tests are good at predicting language learning success.
   True . . . . . False
6. Success in language learning is measured by the ability to communicate.
   True . . . . . False
7. Some people can't learn new languages.
   True . . . . . False
8. Language learning is quick and easy for some people.
   True . . . . . False
9. The more you are immersed in a new language, the faster you will learn.
   True . . . . . False

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10. We learn a new language in a predictable sequence.
    True . . . . . False

11. It's not important to understand how the language works; we just need to *use* it.
    True . . . . . False

12. It usually takes no more than two years to learn a new language in an immersion setting.
    True . . . . . False

Hang on to your answers! In the last chapter of the book we will revisit these statements to see what you have learned. Here, in this first chapter, I will address five commonly held misconceptions about language acquisition. I will present the basis for these beliefs and how a closer look at the complexity of language learning reveals that these statements can't simply be taken as fact.

Misconception #1: Children Are Better Language Learners than Adults

I teach a graduate course on second language acquisition, and one of the first tasks I assign my students is to ask their family and friends this question: Who learns language more easily—children or adults? Inevitably the response comes back that *everyone* they asked believes that children learn languages more easily. Can something that nearly everyone believes actually be wrong? Yes! There is no shortage of examples of how something everyone believed was eventually proven false. For example, take the belief that the earth is flat, or that getting caught in the rain causes the flu.

As a society, we continue to build our knowledge, and commonly believed ideas continue to be challenged. To provide a more recent example, it wasn't long ago that coffee was seen as bad for you. Now, thankfully, through more research we know that coffee has some good properties as well. As a regular coffee drinker, I am grateful for that change in perspective!

"Second language acquisition," the term given to the learning of a new language after the native language has been acquired, is a relatively new field of study. Only in the past fifty years or so have we started to see scientific studies contributing to our understanding of how new languages are learned. We have learned a great deal about how the environment, the type of language being learned, and specific learning activities impact language acquisition. For example, we now have more understanding about how a child's interactions differ from those of an adult, and how this difference may explain why a child seemingly "picks up a language effortlessly."

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Returning to our opening story, Phil's daughter Kaitlin likely heard simple and repeated phrases from the housekeeper every time they were together. Had Phil's housekeeper interacted with him in the same way, he might have been "jabbering" right along with Kaitlin!

Before we dive into some new understandings about child and adult language learners, let me define what I mean by a child language learner. Up to age three or four, one of a child's main tasks is the acquisition of his native language. When I refer to second language acquisition, I'm not talking about a child learning his native language. That is *first* language acquisition. And a child can have two first languages.

Children raised in bilingual homes truly do experience "effortless" language learning, in the sense that learning our native language(s) is unconscious and natural. (See more in chapter 5 about raising children bilingually—i.e., with two native languages.) In this chapter we are considering the scenario in which a child is learning a new language *after* the first language has been fully acquired. A four-year-old usually has good command of all the basic word sets (body parts, colors, frequent nouns and verbs, common adjectives, etc.) and the simple sentence structures of his native language. If he is exposed to a new language after this foundation in his native language has been acquired, we would call it a *second* language.

So what do we now know about the *second* language acquisition of children and adults? Let's consider the advantages that language learners might have at different ages.

Advantages of younger learners

For years, many have thought that there is a "critical period" in childhood beyond which language cannot be easily learned. This idea came from research on first language acquisition. It was theorized that a child who did not receive adequate linguistic input by a certain age (sometimes thought to be puberty) would not be able to acquire a native language. The idea of the "Critical Period Hypothesis" (CPH) was quickly adopted into common thinking about language acquisition. And unfortunately it has often been understood as applying to *second* language acquisition, even though this has not proven to be the case. In fact, Hakuta, Bialystok, and Wiley (2003) conducted a study designed to test if there is a decline in language acquisition after puberty, but found no such decline. They concluded that the CPH was *not* supported for second language acquisition.

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There is one area of language, however, in which the notion of a "critical period" actually does apply: pronunciation. Children *do* appear to have superior ability to hear and reproduce new sounds. Some say that this ability also extends to the use of native-like speech in other areas as well, such as reductions (for example, shortening "going to" to "gonna"). The problem is that this advantage in pronunciation, or "native-like speech," is treated as more significant than it actually is. English, for example, has many dialects. What constitutes "native-like pronunciation"? And how important is that? An adult language learner might lament that she will probably never sound like a native speaker. But in the bigger picture of what constitutes communicating through a new language, it's just not that important.

Advantages of older learners

So … Do adults have any advantages over children? Yes! In practically every other way, older learners—teens and adults—have the upper hand. 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 three to five years old scored the lowest, in all categories, on language tests. Older children, teens, and adults all outperformed the youngest group of children.

One key area of superiority is in learning skill. Adults have been learning new things for many years. They have honed some learning strategies, understand the role of their own motivation and discipline, and have the ability to comprehend structure and organization. Children typically require far more repetition in order to remember a new language than do adults, because adults can consciously rehearse, practice, and memorize in a way that younger children normally cannot.

All this means that over the same period of time, given similar opportunity, adults are likely to learn far more words and language structures than a child.

Some cite emotional factors in claiming that children are superior in second language acquisition. For example, children are frequently said to have "fewer inhibitions." This does not jive with my experience of teaching children English in several different countries. Children are often shy and reluctant to use a new language. In fact, experts on English language learning in American schools affirm the "silent period"—a period of up to about six months during which a beginner in the language should not be required to speak. Contrast that with some very lively adult language classes in which students are willingly speaking out from the beginning, such is their investment in their learning.

The fact is, all personality types are found in all age groups. But older learners can consciously step out of their comfort zone to engage in an activity that will facilitate language acquisition.

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