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An Overview of Second Language Acquisition

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Summary

What are the traits of successful second language acquisition, and what causes difficulty in acquiring a second language? These are questions that students at Cedarville University explore in LING 3080 (Linguistics for Language Learning). In LING 3080, students determine how much of a language can be acquired within a semester through trial and error. During this process, students track their progress and determine the factors that lead to the success or failure of acquiring a second language. Working in groups of two or more, students are given a high degree of freedom regarding the methods they use and are free to choose the language they wish to study. Additionally, they aim to become as fluent as possible in that language during the semester (approximately four months).

There are several stated reasons for desiring to acquire a second language. The writer of essay 15 mentions studying Arabic out of an interest in Middle Eastern countries with a highlighted need for missions work. Some drew their enthusiasm from a previous experience with second language acquisition. The author of essay 9 writes, “From seventh to twelfth grade I had learned Spanish and thought it fairly easy to learn (Essay 9, pg. 2).” Most writers, however, base a majority of their decisions on a keen interest in the culture associated with their chosen language. The writer of essay 10 tells of having an interest in Russia’s history and architecture, while the author of essay 14 wishes to use American Sign Language to effectively communicate with people afflicted by hearing impairments.

Some common threads exist among the writers of these essays. First, all the writers have previous experiences with learning new

languages. Many of the authors state that they took some Spanish in high school, and all report some knowledge of another language. This being the case, most of the second languages known to the authors are based off the Latin alphabet. Another common thread is the mood of the authors. The authors report that they held a high level of enthusiasm at the outset of the project and were pleased with their attempts to pick up the second language at the end.

However, the authors frequently write of the many struggles they encounter in their attempts. These struggles can be grouped into three categories: motivation, time, and learning environment. Each essay discusses the deficiencies within these categories that plagued the writers. Several of them state that, should these deficiencies be rectified, there would be substantial improvement in the acquisition of the second language. Therefore, a critical analysis of these essays shows that proper motivation, adequate time, and a structured learning environment are necessary and effective tools for second-language acquisition.

Of Motivation

A lack of proper motivation, as the authors uniformly admit, is an obvious and prevalent issue. Two types of motivation are regularly mentioned in the essays—integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation stems from the desire to gain knowledge and become involved with a culture (Essay 13). Conversely, instrumental motivation results from the projected benefits of an action (Essay 13). Both types of motivation are present in the essays.

Despite the typically strong zeal among the writers at the outset of the course, various complications arose throughout the process of learning that negatively affected the authors' motivation. One basic complication was a lack of effort on the part of the authors. The writer of essay 10 admits that a pure lack of effort caused failure on his or her part, and the author of essay 13 reports a failure to be "proactive (Essay 13, pg. 5)." Several of the authors report that, after the first month or two, their original motivation was either dead or fading fast. Understandably, the author of essay 14 discloses that additional school and work loads began to abate the desire to study the second language.

The use of accountability partners yielded mixed results. The author of essay 15 reports that, occasionally, neither partner was

able to assist the other due to a lack of motivation. For others, the accountability partners were a major asset. For instance, the author of essay 9 writes that most of his or her group meetings proved to be successful. These meetings resulted in successful vocabulary and pronunciation review. Ultimately, most of the writers benefitted from having a partner or two but found it difficult to establish meeting times.

One recurring issue that appears in the essays regards those who worked with a language not based off the Latin alphabet. Alphabetical problems complicated the issues of those who were already struggling with poor motivation. For example, the author of essay 15 writes that he or she found the Arabic alphabet to be painfully different from the Latin alphabet. The writers of essays 10, 13, 14, and 15 all report struggles with learning a new alphabet. In a nice summary of the general attitude towards the new alphabets, the author of essay 10 writes, “If anything, this experience has given me a desire to learn every language that DOES share a Latin alphabet with English (Essay 10, pg. 2).” Overall, the motivation of the students contributed heavily to the success or failure of their second language acquisition.

Of Time

As the writers attempted to overcome falling levels of motivation, a lack of time to study further strained the authors. From this lack of time, a plethora of problems arose. A consistent, pronounced issue was the authors’ failure to set effective and realistic goals. The authors of essays 13 and 15 mention a lack of planning, which led to inconsistent, fruitless meetings.

Several authors write that they had trouble meeting with their partners and/or getting any fruitful results from the meetings. Specifically, the author of essay 13 writes that he or she failed to meet with his or her partner as many times as originally planned because no set number of meetings was required. The author of essay 15 states that he or she met with his or her partner infrequently, which became a factor that contributed to poor meeting results. Similarly, a serious problem arose in the inability of some authors to find time to meet with their partners. Such was the case with the author of essay 10. At times, even the best meeting plans came to ruin. The author of essay 12 states that, despite having prepared opportunities

to meet, he or she was unable to meet with his or her partner as many times as planned.

Other time-related problems existed as well. The writers of essays 13, 14, and 15 state that they did not have enough time to absorb the language and found themselves misusing what little time they had. The author of essay 15 states that he or she would become frustrated with the Arabic alphabet and fail to work on it for weeks at a time. The lack and mismanagement of time bedeviled the authors and stifled their efforts to effectively acquire their second languages.

Of a Structured Learning Environment

The final hindrance to second language acquisition results from a loosely structured learning environment. This seems surprising at first, but it's shown in the essays to be a frustrating impediment. The author of essay 10 identifies closely with this problem and determines that he or she lacked the self-discipline needed to make satisfactory progress. Likewise, the author of essay 9 states, "Not having a structured classroom and teacher hindered my learning and caused frustration (Essay 9, pg. 3)." Even the use of online programs failed to provide any sort of structured learning environment.

Another side effect of lacking a structured learning environment was the absence of a teacher to instruct the students in their respective languages. Already facing a lack of resources, the author of essay 15 desired the help of a teacher. Without a proficient teacher, he or she was uncertain of the correct usage for different aspects of Arabic.

Conversely, some were able to supplement this lack of a structured learning environment to a degree. The author of essay 12 had female roommates who spoke Portuguese. Through them, she was able to fill some of the gaps of not having a classroom setting, but she still struggled to develop the non-oral parts of the language. In general, the lack of a structured learning environment negatively affected motivation and frustrated the efforts of the writers.

Conclusion

The essays provide solutions to the complications found in the language learning project. Pertaining to motivation, success results from attaining both integrative and instrumental motivation and having helpful accountability partners. Pertaining to time, it is necessary to utilize it properly and to have an ample supply of it.

Regarding the learning environment, it is uniformly expressed that structure is needed. Where structure exists, results are markedly better. This analysis communicates that proper motivation, adequate time, and a structured learning environment are necessary and effective tools for second-language acquisition. The elements of successful second-language acquisition are evident in the essays, and all three should be followed to maximize efficiency while acquiring a second language.