

# 1 FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

## 1.1 Opening note

Apart from everything else that we acquire in the course of our lives, we learn how to express our thoughts and ideas in a verbal way – we acquire one or more languages. Before talking about acquisition of a language, it has to be made clear what *language* actually is. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000: 721) defines **language** as “the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country”. It is necessary to point out that it does not only concern countries as such. Individual communities or ethnic groups which do not live in their own country can have a language of their own.

According to Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia Deluxe (2004), **language** is “the principal means used by human beings to communicate with one another. Language is primarily spoken, although it can be transferred to other media, such as writing.” This implies that people acquire a language to be able to express their thoughts and needs and to understand what other people's utterances convey. Chomsky (1965) claims that human beings have a capacity to acquire a language. Klein (1986:39) calls this capacity **language processor**, by which he means “those parts of the human brain that are tuned to processing language.”

Children start acquiring their first language shortly after birth. They are surrounded by people speaking the language on an everyday basis and, step by step, start to understand what is being said, use their first words, then combine them to make short sentences, which, later, become more complex and meaningful. Researchers in this field (Piaget, 1969; Chomsky, 1965) went to great lengths trying to explain the processes involved in the acquisition of a first language. Acquisition of another language requires a further and more detailed explanation, as, when reading relevant literature and linguistic research studies, we find out that more than one term is used to refer to similar notions. Thus, several important ideas must be expressed to clarify the terminology in this treatise.

The following subchapters pay attention to differences between the terms most frequently used in the area in question. The conditions under which the particular expressions are appropriate are outlined to avoid any possible ambiguities.

## 1.2 Foreign language

Babies, as soon as they are mature enough to do so, find out that to use words like *bottle* or *pee* is more efficient in getting what they wish for than inarticulate crying. This is a reason why they develop the need and competence to express their thoughts and ideas via their first language. Throughout our lives, we wish to articulate messages to provide and receive more information than just that which concerns our primary needs. We communicate our feelings, ideas, opinions, and also try to receive the same from other speakers of our native language.

People, however, try to acquire more languages than just their first. "Over a billion people in the world speak more than one language fluently" (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982:9). Some of them have to acquire the language of another group of people living in the same country as themselves, some have migrated to a different country and, to succeed in dealing with challenges of everyday life, they must become more or less fluent speakers of the language spoken in that country. Others just wish to be able to use resources only available in a foreign language, make themselves understood when they travel abroad or simply understand the culture of other nation(s) better than is provided by a single language. These are some of the reasons why people acquire a language other than their first. The following terms refer to characteristics and conditions regarding 'language two' acquisition and are explained in more detail below: second and foreign language, acquisition and learning, competence, performance, natural environment and formal setting.

### 1.2.1 SECOND versus FOREIGN LANGUAGE

A **second language** is acquired by people who:

- 1 live in a country where two or more languages are spoken. The language not being their first language but necessary to be acquired in order to enable communication with the rest of the population is considered a 'second language'.
- 2 moved to a country where a language different from their first language is spoken and they need to acquire the language of the target country (Dulay et al., 1982).

A **foreign language** is also acquired after the first language; however, it is one a person voluntarily chooses. It is not a vital means of communication with other people living in their homeland or a country they moved to. The

choice is usually influenced by the interests of the individual and/or their plans for the future in an effort to make use of the language acquired.

The most important difference between the abovementioned terms is that a **second language** is usually acquired in the environment where it is actually spoken on an everyday basis by a certain group of the population while a *foreign language* is most often studied outside of the natural language environment. The example of a Swiss native speaking German and learning French as a second language might be used. A Slovak (living in Slovakia) learning English could serve as an example of someone acquiring a foreign language.

Some authors (Dulay, Burt, Krashen, 1982; Liao, 1996; Skehan, 2002) refer to both – a foreign and a second language – as a **second language** or **language two (L2)**. This is based on the fact that, in spite of the reasons helping an individual decide to study a language and the environment, **language two** (foreign and second language) is studied after the first language has been acquired to some level. The factors differentiating foreign and second languages are important; still, it is indisputable that the ways of second and foreign language acquisition are closer to each other than when comparing the first language to language two. That makes it possible to find relevant such research results which have been achieved in both fields – foreign and second language acquisition.

Based on the above, whenever expressing my ideas hereinafter, I shall use the term **foreign language**. When referring to research results in second language acquisition exclusively, quoting other researchers, or pointing out the specific characteristics with regard to the respective differences, the term **second language** shall be used.

### 1.2.2 ACQUISITION versus LEARNING

Many researchers (Ellis, 1985; Pinker, 1995; etc.) use both terms interchangeably. Nevertheless, **acquisition** might be considered more general or on a higher level in the lexicological hierarchy, as the meaning incorporates both unconscious and conscious processes, while **learning** is considered to refer to the latter only. Krashen (according to Gomez, 2002) characterises **language acquisition** as the process that occurs when we learn our first language. On the other hand, he claims that **language learning** is learning about a language, that is, learning about grammar rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.

Krashen (ibid) further argues that in order to learn a second language, a learner needs to be provided with the opportunity (environment) to acquire it; learning will occur without any conscious effort from the part of the learner. He, however, has not made clear what is meant by *conscious* and *subconscious*. As a consequence, "it is impossible to know whether learners are operating on the basis of rule or feel in a particular case" (Svoboda and Hrehovčík, 2006:200).

Klein (1986:20) suggests the following categories of second language acquisition:

- 1 **Spontaneous** – when the learner has access to the target language in the course of everyday communication within the environment;
- 2 **Guided** – when these materials are supplied in 'digested' form.

Similarly to other authors, Klein further distinguishes between foreign and second language (he uses 'second' language as a more general term to refer to both of the above).

I dare say that **learning** a foreign language means studying, in a conscious and active way, how it works, what the rules and principles are as well trying to act in the way these predetermine its correct and effective use to be. **Acquiring** a foreign language not only refers to the above-mentioned activities, but also includes subconscious receiving of information, knowledge and experience. As the term '**acquiring**' a foreign language is more complex than 'learning', I consider it more appropriate to use it throughout this treatise.

### 1.2.3 ACQUISITION, COMPETENCE and PERFORMANCE

The use of the term **acquisition** was tackled above; yet, there are further notions known in the area of foreign language research and need to be explained. The Chomskyan notion of the difference between linguistic **competence** and **performance** discriminates between mental representation of linguistic rules (an internalised grammar) and comprehension and production of language. Chomsky separates **competence**, an idealised capacity, from the production of actual utterances, **performance** (Chomsky, 1965). In other words, what a learner has knowledge of and is, in theory, able to use, is considered one's linguistic **competence**; what they actually produce is considered **performance**. This means that competence and performance are closely interconnected. Competence is a vital prerequisite for performance to occur; on the other hand, it is not sufficient as the one and only trigger of

performance. What people use (performance), comes from what they have acquired (acquisition). To clarify how inner and outer language production is linked, linguists make considerable effort to shed some light on how this process (especially in a foreign language, although often through principles in the use of the first language) can be made easier. One of the tasks of foreign language acquisition (FLA) research is to clarify processes occurring when acquiring a foreign language. Acquired knowledge provides a learner with linguistic competence, which can be studied by means of language utterances (spoken or written) in one's performance. However, a "major problem of SLA<sup>1</sup> research has been precisely to what extent competence can be inferred from performance" (Ellis, 1985:6).

As mentioned above, in FLA research it is very difficult to actually observe learners' competence. What is happening in one's head cannot be approached by applying common research methods. That is why learners' performance must be taken into consideration. An underlying linguistic competence can account for the performance which can actually be observed. The use of certain language structures that a researcher wishes to observe can be encouraged and, consequently, the performance in a given stretch of the language can be tested. By means of further examination, learners' competence, and, by implication, acquisition, can be scrutinised (Chomsky, 1965).

Performance in a foreign language is triggered and influenced by certain psychological processes. Various cognitive processes are applied in an effort to produce the required utterance in a foreign language. "Competence consists of the knowledge of language which the language user *in principle* has. Performance is the result of the psychological process that employs this knowledge (in producing or in interpreting language utterances)" (Scha, 1990:5).

#### **1.2.4 NATURAL ENVIRONMENT versus FORMAL SETTING**

The environment where second, as opposed to foreign, language is usually acquired, understandably, may vary. Second language is usually acquired in the country where it is also spoken as the first language. Learners can completely immerse themselves into the target language by listening to native speakers, exchanges in public places like shops or restaurants. They talk to their friends, watch television, listen to the radio, or even read street signs and

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<sup>1</sup> SLA – second language acquisition

labels on food and other products. This setting is called **natural environment** and is in contrast to **formal setting** where the learning process takes place in a classroom, where formal instruction on rules and their use in the language in question is given. Depending on the methods and techniques used by the particular teacher, the explained subject matter is practised.

Although the modern world already provides great opportunities for immersion into language by means of satellite television, radio and the internet as well as good access to other resources in the target language, learners of a foreign language mostly have to rely on instruction given in the formal setting of a classroom. The distinction between the above kinds of environment is lessened when formal instruction is provided by a native speaker of the target language. In this way, formal setting of the lessons is shifted towards natural environment. A yet more desirable way of teaching can be pursued when students are provided with an equal share of instruction by a native speaker of their first language and a native speaker of the target language. Here, the first lecturer is able to clearly explain rules in the target language using the students' first language (if necessary), while the latter can give a higher level of authenticity to the formal instruction provided, in particular when focusing on communicative use of grammar.

## 1.3 Factors generally considered influential in foreign language acquisition

### 1.3.1 THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT

Just like any other learning process, a foreign language is also acquired in a setting, providing conditions of various standard. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) identified a set of characteristics the language environment can have:

#### 1 *Naturalness of the environment*

The authors claim that “those students who are exposed to natural language perform better than those in a formal environment, where focus is on the conscious acquisition of linguistic rules or the manipulation of linguistic forms” (Dulay et al., 1982:42).

#### 2 *The learner's role in communication*

When acquiring a second language, learners take an active part in communication. This should also be guaranteed in the formal setting of a classroom where formal instruction on a foreign language is given. Students should be provided with enough opportunity to participate and, in this way, practice the explained rules of the language.

#### 3 *Availability of concrete referents*

A country where the target language is spoken on an everyday basis is the best environment as far as natural input is concerned. Learners can see, hear and feel the events happening around them, for which formal setting must substitute by providing real-like situations (Myles, 2002).

In classes taught by a non-native speaker of the target language, a lack of real-life experience can occur in the area of insufficient discrimination between the language taught and the language actually used on an everyday basis; in other words, between the language which should be used according to the formal rules occurring in books and the language which is used commonly by native speakers. As a language model, a non-native teacher can lack the experience of language structures used by native speakers and, thus, can hardly make the students aware of possible shifts in meaning in any level of the language.

#### 4 *Target language models*

This feature is of vital importance in the formal setting. Apart from original resources that can (or rather should) be brought to the

classroom (newspapers and magazines, print-outs of internet material, audio and video recordings), the teacher is the only living language model able to provide feedback.

### 1.3.2 THE ROLE OF INPUT

For foreign language acquisition to take place, some data in the target language must be available to the learner as *input*. “**Input hypothesis** postulates that humans acquire language in only one way – by understanding messages, or by receiving comprehensible input” (Svoboda and Hrehovčík, 2006: 204).

When studying the area of importance of the information that learners are provided with, different approaches can be found:

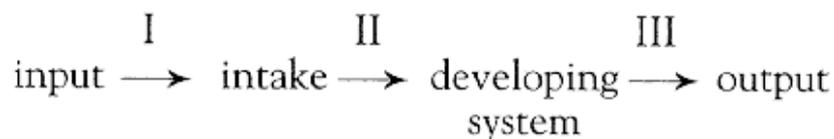
- A **behaviourist viewpoint** considers the linguistic environment as the crucial determining factor. In this model of learning, language input is made available in the form of *stimuli* and *feedback*. This theory emphasises the importance of stimuli regulation, so that the input information available to learners is divided into steps which mirror the immediate level of learners' target language.
- A **nativist viewpoint** claims that exposure to language itself is not sufficient for acquisition to take place. Input is only seen as a trigger for internal mechanisms. This theory highlights the importance of internal processes in learners.
- An **interactionist viewpoint**, as could be expected, connects both above theories. It considers the result of interaction between learners' mental abilities and the linguistic environment. It underlines the importance of both input factors and innate mechanisms, an interplay between external and internal factors.

Many theorists and teachers (Schütz, 1995; Fantini and Reagan, 1992) stress that varied and frequent comprehensible input is key to acquisition. It would make sense that the higher the number of opportunities for the brain to store and reinforce patterns, accents, concepts, and meanings of a language, the better this information would be stored and processed (McCain, 2000).

Myles (2002:5) also emphasises the importance of input in language acquisition: “the cognitive and information processing models generally claim that language learning is no different from other types of learning, and is the result of the human brain building up networks of associations on the basis of

input.” This means that an important part in the process of FLA is played by the quality of the information that enters the learner’s brain and that he/she can use for further processing. In order to get a positive effect, this information must fulfil certain criteria. Students must be provided with “input that has two basic characteristics. First, it must be *comprehensible*, so that learners can understand the sentences they see or hear. Second, input must encode some *referential meaning* to which learners can respond” VanPatten (1992: 26). Good quality input can then trigger *intake*<sup>2</sup> and further processing that is responsible for developing a language system in a learner and is used in the performance in the form of *output*<sup>3</sup>.

**Figure 1: Processes in second-language acquisition**



(Adapted from VanPatten, 1992.)

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### 1.3.3 THE ROLE OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE

Another possible influence in the process of foreign language acquisition is knowledge of the learner’s first language. There are contradictory opinions on whether acquisition of a first language and a foreign language involve the same or distinct processes. It seems to be obvious that, whether or not we believe that a foreign language is acquired in the same way as our first language, its existing knowledge must be admitted and any further experience with another language is based on and refers to it. According to Klein (1986: 39), acquisition of a foreign language involves “the capacity to reorganise the language processor”, (which we used and developed while acquiring our first language), “to cope with another language”. Various opinions on whether this influence is positive or negative and several views on whether acquisition of a first and second language are identical or quite different processes can be found.

In this field, two controversial viewpoints appear:

<sup>2</sup> **Intake** is the input information available for further mental processing of a language.

<sup>3</sup> **Output** is the language the learner produces (the outcome of the processed language that has been taken in).

- **Identity Hypothesis**, in its extreme form, declares that it does not matter whether or not a learner acquired another language before the new target language. The acquisition of first, second or any following language(s) is an identical process controlled by the same rules.
- **Contrastive Hypothesis** claims that acquisition of a foreign language is to a great extent influenced by the acquired first language. Those structures that are similar (or identical) in both languages are easily acquired “as a result of ‘positive transfer’”. Those forms that contrast with the newly-acquired in a foreign language cause difficulties, produce errors “as a result of ‘negative transfer’, or ‘interference’ between the two contrasting languages” (Klein, 1986: 25).

Dulay et al. (1982: 92) partly takes the side of identity hypothesis supporters claiming: “The first language has long been considered the *villain* in second language learning, the major cause of a learner’s problems with the new language. The first language is no longer considered an annoying ‘*interference*’ in a learner’s efforts to acquire a second language.” Of course, this theory is not taken to the extreme and the above author does not suggest identity in the process of L1 and L2 acquisition. Still, in her opinion, the first language already acquired can have a (positive) influence on the process of foreign language acquisition. Clahsen (1990: 136) had gathered some opinions of researchers supporting the latter view and divided them into two subcategories, which he presents in his paper on first and second language development: “Some researchers (e.g. Clahsen and Muysken, 1989; Schachter, 1988) claim that the differences between L1 and L2 acquisition are real and fundamental: that is, involving different learning mechanisms. Others, for example White (1988) and Flynn (1988), argue that the observed differences are attributable to the use of L1-specific settings in the L2; that is, to the fact that L2 learners already know a language.”

As was the case so many times in the past, the opinion interconnecting all views will probably be closest to reality. It seems to be natural that knowledge of a language and its structures helps learners to realise that any other language must also use *some* structures to express one’s ideas and that these structures more or less resemble those in our first language. On the other hand, it must be admitted that the level of difference between the first and second language has an influence on the process of acquisition. The application of L1 rules to the foreign language can be seen in its every level (see below). If two languages use different *surface structures* to express the

same *deep structure*<sup>4</sup>, learners must “search” in their existing knowledge of the first language.

### 1.3.4 INTERNAL PROCESSING

In the previous chapters, the factors influencing foreign language acquisition viewed from ‘outside’ were discussed. All this, however, is not sufficient. Even if the best possible conditions in every way are provided, without some further processing within the learner, no acquisition can take place. On what actually happens in the brain, a considerable number of works have been written (Stenberg, 2002; Hansen, 2004; Kafka, 1991; Cummins, 1995; Itkonen, 2006, etc.).

According to Dulay et al. (1982), three major internal processes are in action in foreign language acquisition:

**1) Filter** screens all incoming language and allows it (or not) to undergo further processing. All this depends on learners’ “motives, attitudes, and emotional states” (Dulay et al., 1982: 71). This is a part of the internal processing that subconsciously decides:

- a which target language models the learner will select;
- b which parts of the language will be attended to first;
- c when language acquisition efforts should cease;
- d how fast a learner can acquire the language.

This depends on students’ motivation and emotional states.

In my teaching practice, I have come across several students who (in their own words) voluntarily “chose not to acquire” all the English verb forms because they found it too confusing and, in their own words, “native speakers only practically use three or four of them anyway”. One of the teacher’s tasks is to show the learners that the use of language becomes considerably easier if they master the rules of a foreign language’s grammar, as sufficient competence in it provides them with certain freedom to concentrate on the contents of their utterances rather than their form.

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<sup>4</sup> My understanding of Chomskyan notion of deep and surface structure lies in the difference between *what* is expressed and *how*. E.g. *John kissed Mary* and *Mary was kissed by John* are two different surface structures expressing the same idea (deep structure). *He is eager to please* and *He is easy to please* use the same grammatical structure of an adjective followed by *to infinitive*; hence, have analogical surface structure. However, they express completely different deep structures, as in the first example, the subject is the agent of the action while in the latter he is the receiver. In the sentence *I wonder what we are going to have to eat* (the same surface structure) the speaker might be complaining in advance about being forced to eat something they do not like or merely wondering what the hosts are preparing (different deep structures).

**2) Organiser** is responsible for the learner's gradual organisation of newly presented language. "Its functioning is subconscious and is based on what psychologists call 'cognitive' principles: analytical and logical criteria for the organization of knowledge and behaviour" (Dulay et al., 1982: 54). This mainly concerns the transitional stages that will occur before the final correct form is acquired, the errors that regularly occur in a learner's speech and the order in which the new language structures are acquired. A considerable amount of research has been carried out on *interlanguage*<sup>5</sup> (needless to mention Chomskyan *universal grammar*<sup>6</sup> (*UG*)) and the order of acquisition (Dulay and Burt, 1973; Lightbown, 1987, etc.), as well as the most frequently occurring grammatical errors.

The following examples of the use of learners' interlanguage are directly related to the research carried out in this treatise:

**a) Omission of grammatical morphemes;**

E.g.: I work last night.

**b) Regularisation of irregular rules;**

E.g.: I buyed a new book.

**c) Choosing the wrong alternative from a number of forms;**

E.g.: too much people, too many breads

**3) Monitor** is that part of learners' internal processing, which "is responsible for conscious linguistic processing" (Dulay et al., 1982: 58). Dulay et al. (1982: 61), furthermore, claim; "Tasks which focus on linguistic manipulation seem to encourage monitoring, while those which focus on communication do not". This means that correct use of grammar (applying rules to morpheme and word manipulation), to a large extent, depends on the function of the learner's monitor. Knowledge of foreign language grammar is mainly based on the formal instruction a learner is provided with. This, from the grammar acquisition viewpoint, makes monitor the most important part of internal processing.

There are differences in the extent to which learners actually use the monitor in the production of a foreign language.

<sup>5</sup> **Interlanguage** – an emerging linguistic system developed by a learner of a foreign (second) language who has not become fully proficient and is approximating the target language. The learner preserves some features of his/her first language in speaking or writing in the target language.

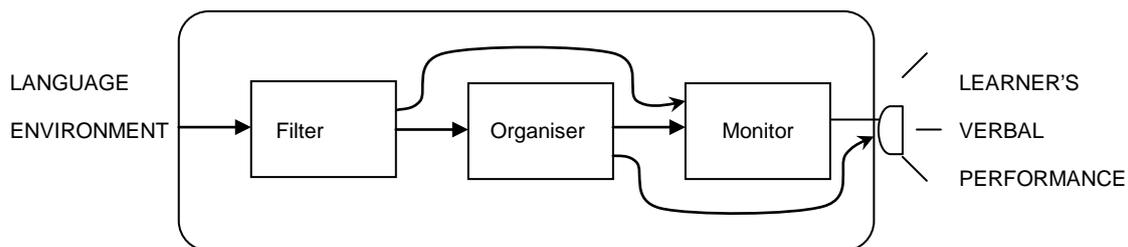
<sup>6</sup> **UG** – a linguistic theory postulating principles of grammar shared by all languages. It attempts to explain language acquisition in general, not describe specific languages. It proposes a set of rules that would explain how children acquire their language(s), or how they construct valid sentences of their language.

Krashen distinguishes:

- **Over-users** – those learners who use the monitor all the time (those more concerned with accuracy than fluency);
- **Under-users** – those learners who have not learned or who prefer not to use their conscious knowledge (those more concerned with fluency rather than accuracy);
- **Optimal users** – those learners who use the monitor appropriately (those who tend to be equally accurate and fluent) (Schütz, 2005).

To sum up, all three parts can (but need not) be involved in internal processing of a language. It depends on factors like learner motivation whether the presented language will undergo all of them. **Figure 2** reflects the process.

**Figure 2: Internal processors**



(Adapted from Dulay et al., 1982)

### 1.3.5 INDIVIDUAL LEARNER DIFFERENCES

Apart from those factors influencing learners of a foreign language in general, there is a set of such influences that vary from one learner to another and differ according to a learner's inner characteristics. Sundry authors distinguish various factors which, as they believe, influence second or foreign language acquisition. Among these, individual learner characteristics play a central role. Liao (1996:1) distinguishes the following cognitive factors of second language acquisition: intelligence, language aptitude and language learning strategies. Lujan-Ortega (2000) proposes age, aptitude/intelligence, motivation, learning/cognitive style and personality. Bond (2002), in her research on successful language learners, is more accurate in stating the factors that may aid one's language learning and draws more detailed perspective. Her list comprises age, exposure to the foreign language in infancy, immersion, intelligence, personality, attitude and motivation, relationship between first and

target language, sensory style, learning strategies and other factors (such as mimicry or musical ability). The author of the article 'Learner characteristics: factors affecting the success of L2 acquisition' (online document) summarises opinions of several authors and concludes that the following factors affect the success of foreign language acquisition: intelligence, language learning aptitude, personality, motivation and attitude and the age of acquisition. It is also stated in the aforementioned article that due to a lack of detailed research in the area, there is no solid evidence for the effect of aptitude, personality and learner beliefs and preferences. A similar approach can be found in Ellis (1985:10) who states that "there are five general factors that contribute to individual learner differences in some depth: age, aptitude, cognitive style, motivation and personality".



The above theoretical analysis brought about some interesting questions about factors that influence acquisition of a foreign language. To answer some of these questions became an ambition of this treatise.