

Unit 4 Language Learning

Unit overview

Language acquisition is one of the key issues for the study of language and it is closely related to the study of almost all aspects of language. How we acquire language seems to be a most straightforward question but actually no one can provide a definite answer to it. Exploring this question can help us better understand other issues about language.

Text A

In Text A, Napoli provides two answers to the question in the title, “How do we acquire language?”. First, children acquire language step by step, gaining a certain skill in each step: recognizing the voices of their mother and other people, distinguishing the sounds of their mother tongue from other language, recognizing words, producing words, producing two-word phrases and producing sentences. However, it does not mean every individual child exactly follows this pattern. Second, language is acquired on the basis of Universal Grammar, which is exemplified by a variety of language acquisition phenomena: Children arrange words according to abstract innate linguistic principles; early utterances produced by small children have an innate structure; immigrants’ children can distinguish grammatical and ungrammatical language us; while parents speak a pidgin language, children may develop a creole language, which has a coherent grammar; and children, especially twins, can develop a secret communication system conforming to UG. In conclusion, language acquisition is a natural process determined by the human biological and physiological make-up.

Text B

Text B is focused on second language acquisition. The authors compare first language acquisition and second language acquisition. According to them, L2 learners tend to have errors in pronunciation and grammar and usually cannot fully acquire the pronunciation and grammar of a second language. Though, they also share some features in common with L1 learners in terms of work order. Then, the authors analyze the impact of L1 on L2 acquisition in terms of pronunciation, grammar and phonology. However, the difficulty in L2 acquisition is caused by more factors than the interference of L1. In the end, the authors discuss the role of age in L2 acquisition and challenges the Critical Period Hypothesis.

The two articles focus on first language acquisition and second language acquisition respectively. After reading Text A, students can compare the differences between L1 and L2 acquisition and discuss the impact of L1 on L2 acquisition.

Teaching objectives

Reading skills

- Summarize the main idea of each paragraph
- Identify topic sentences and key words
- Identify supporting details

Communicative competence

- Illustrate your points with appropriate examples
- Use topic sentences and supporting sentences to organize your presentation/essay
- Use euphemisms for possibly impolite expressions

Critical thinking

- Use different examples to support different aspects of an idea
- Use observation and literature to collect first-hand and second-hand evidence
- Critique a “popular” folk theory with exemplification and reasoning

Intercultural competence

- Be aware of the differences and similarities between English and Chinese euphemisms
- Compare the Chinese language and the English language in terms of L1 and L2 learning
- Understand the effects of cultural differences on communication and language learning

Teaching strategies

You can arouse the students' interest in this topic by showing them the Nature vs. Nurture debate, which is controversial in not only language acquisition but also psychology, education, law and popular culture. There is no definite answer to this debate but every student may have his or her own answer. After learning this unit, they will get new evidence or examples to support their answer or they may simply change their view.

For a detailed description of child language acquisition, you can refer to Chapter 8 in *Towards an Understanding of Language and Linguistics* (《语言学概论》) by Lan Chun. Other resources include:

- A general introduction

<http://www.simplypsychology.org/language.html>

- Emphasis on nature vs. emphasis on experience

http://nsf.gov/news/special_reports/linguistics/learn.jsp

- Language acquisition vs. language learning

http://www.everythingsl.net/in-services/language_acquisiti_vs_language_02033.php

Preparatory work

(1) Language Matters: A Guide to Everyday Questions About Language

This activity aims to arouse students' interest in other everyday questions about language which they often take for granted. They can also learn to search for an academic monograph on the Internet. The twelve questions answered by the author in the book are:

- Question 1: How do we acquire language?
- Question 2: From one language to the next: Why is it hard to learn a second language? Why is translation so difficult?
- Question 3: Does language equal thought?
- Question 4: Are sign languages real languages?
- Question 5: Do animals have language?
- Question 6: Can computers learn language?
- Question 7: Whose speech is better?
- Question 8: Why do dialects and creoles differ from standard language?
- Question 9: Do men and women speak differently? And who cares?
- Question 10: English spelling is hard, and it makes learning to read hard. Should we do anything about it?
- Question 11: Should the United States adopt English as our official language and overhaul our educational system accordingly?
- Question 12: Does exposure to and use of offensive language harm children?

The book can be found on <http://en.bookfi.org>, which also provides the second edition of the book with 15 questions about language.

(2) Small children learning language

This activity provides an opportunity for students to reflect on their personal experiences of learning language and collect some real examples of language learning, which can be analyzed during the reading of Text A.

Relevant cases can also be found on the Internet, for example:

http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA5MzUxNTQ3Nw==&mid=206097261&idx=1&sn=ff8cb7a4119c131e3773e9f7d58d2fa6#rd

(3) Universal Grammar

This activity is of great importance for understanding the second part of Text A.

Definition: Universal Grammar proposes that the ability to learn grammar and

language is hard-wired into the brain. It is shared by all human languages. Chomsky argued that the human brain contains a limited set of rules for organizing language.

Key publications of Chomsky:

- Syntactic Structures, London: Mouton, 1957.
- Current Issues in Linguistic Theory, The Hague: Mouton, 1964.
- Aspects of the Theory of Syntax, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1965.
- Language and Mind, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.
- Studies on Semantics in Generative Grammar, The Hague: Mouton, 1972.
- The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory, New York: Plenum Press, 1975.
- Lectures on Government and Binding: The Pisa Lectures, Dordrecht, Holland: Foris Publications, 1982.
- Some Concepts and Consequences of the Theory of Government and Binding, Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1982.
- Language and Thought, Wakefield, RI: Moyer Bell, 1993.
- The Generative Enterprise Revisited: Discussions with Riny Huybregts, Henk van Riemsdijk, Naoki Fukui, and Mihoko Zushi, with a new foreword by Noam Chomsky, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2004.

For more information about Chomsky, please refer to the following website:

<http://www.chomsky.info/index.htm>

(4) Types of language

This activity provides background information necessary for understanding different kinds of language mentioned by Napoli in Text A.

Motherese/baby talk (Paragraph 7): It is a nonstandard form of speech used by adults in talking to toddlers and infants. It features high pitch and special vocabulary, e.g. doggy for dog (Para. 10), daddy for dad (Para. 10), kitty for cat and wawa for water. A feature of baby talk in Chinese is reduplication, e.g. 喝水水 and 吃饭饭。

<http://forum.wordreference.com/threads/baby-talk-vocabulary.1060391/>

Pidgin and creole (Paragraph 16): "Pidgin" describes a blend of several different languages spoken by a multicultural population into one mutually understood language. A creole language is also a mixture of multiple languages, but in this case, the new mixed language becomes the native language for the majority of its speakers. Vocabulary is extensively borrowed from other languages, but the grammar often shares few traits with the languages that contributed vocabulary. Grammar and syntax are as fully developed as any other long-established tongue.

One of the best-known pidgin languages is the pidgin English used in Shanghai in late 19th and early 20th centuries. Creole languages are usually widely used in pre-colonies in the form of the mixture of a European language and the local language of the colonies, e.g.:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English-based_creole_languages

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch-based_creole_languages
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish-based_creole_languages
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese-based_creole_languages
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French-based_creole_languages

Twin language (Paragraph 17): Twin language or twin speech is often referred to as autonomous language, cryptophasia, or idioglossia. They are all types of communication systems, most commonly occurring in twins. Basically, this phenomenon describes the way two or more close siblings use words and/or gestures that are largely unrecognizable or even completely unintelligible to others. This phenomenon shows that children can develop their own communication system based on UG.

(5) Basic terms

This activity aims to familiarize students with basic terms about language acquisition. Student may have the prior knowledge about these terms, so you can try activating their prior knowledge. It is important to distinguish between L2 and FL as well as between language learning and language acquisition.

L2 vs. FL:

In pedagogy and sociolinguistics, a distinction is made between second language and foreign language, the latter being learned for use in an area where that language is not generally spoken. Arguably, English in countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines, the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands can be considered a second language for many of its speakers, because they learn it young and use it regularly; indeed in southern Asia it is the official language of the courts, government and business.

In China (with the exception perhaps of Hong Kong), however, English must be considered a foreign language due to the lack of a number of characteristics, such as historical links, media, opportunities for use, and similar vocabulary. Likewise, French would be considered a foreign language in Romania and Moldova. This is despite Romanian and French being Romance languages (unlike Chinese and English, which come from two different language families). This is also despite Romania and Moldova being the only two countries in the world where Romanian is an official language at the national level, Romania's historical links to France, and both Romanian-speaking countries' membership in the Francophonie.

Language acquisition vs. language learning:

There is an important distinction made by linguists between language acquisition and language learning. Children acquire language through a subconscious process during which they are unaware of grammatical rules. This is similar to the way they acquire

their first language. They get a feel for what is and what isn't correct. In order to acquire language, the learner needs a source of natural communication. The emphasis is on the text of the communication and not on the form. Young students who are in the process of acquiring English get plenty of on the job practice. They readily acquire the language to communicate with classmates.

Language learning, on the other hand, is not communicative. It is the result of direct instruction in the rules of language. And it certainly is not an age-appropriate activity for your young learners. In language learning, students have conscious knowledge of the new language and can talk about that knowledge. They can fill in the blanks on a grammar page. Research has shown, however, that knowing grammar rules does not necessarily result in good speaking or writing. A student who has memorized the rules of the language may be able to succeed on a standardized test of English language but may not be able to speak or write correctly.

Critical Reading

I. Understanding the text

1. Outlining

Thesis: Child language acquisition is a natural process determined by human biological and physiological make-up.

Part	Para(s)	Main Ideas
I Introduction	1	How we acquire language is a difficult question but we should know something about it.
II Stages	2-10	Children's language acquisition takes place in stages.
III Patterns versus Individual Development	11-12	There are generalizations in children's language acquisition, but not every individual child's language acquisition follows the same pattern.
IV Universal Grammar	13-17	Many examples show that Children acquire language by using principles of natural language in Universal Grammar.
V Conclusion	18	We are born with the ability to acquire language.

2. Comprehension check

- (1) The author provides two answers. First, children acquire a language step by step (Paragraphs 2-12); second, children acquire a language following the principles of Universal Grammar (Paragraphs 13-17). Based on the two answers, the author

concludes that language learning is a natural process.

- (2) A newborn can recognize the voice of his/her mother because language acquisition starts in the womb, where the fetus can listen to the world outside (Paragraph 3).
- (3) With the example of her four-month-old son, Napoli tries to show that babies can distinguish the sounds of their mother tongue and another language (Paragraphs 4 and 5).
- (4) Readers may object to the analysis of the third scene because Maggie turned off the light as a result of routine or stimulus-conditioning (条件反射). In other words, every time they approached the bedroom, they would turn off the light (Paragraphs 6-9).
- (5) With the examples of Eva and Nick, Napoli tries to show that the language acquisition of individual children may not strictly comply with the general pattern. One stage may happen later or earlier (as Eva didn't say much until she turned three) or some stages may be missing (as Nick skipped the single-word utterances and two-word utterances) (Paragraph 11).
- (6) According to Napoli, the individual cases bear out the pattern, but no individual case covers all the stages in the exact time periods (Paragraph 12).
- (7) Children produce word orders compliant with their native language because they arrange their words according to abstracting linguistic principles, i.e. Universal Grammar.
- (8) Children of immigrants produce grammatical language despite their exposure to ungrammatical language because they can identify and collect the linguistic rules of English from sentences spoken by native speakers.

II. Evaluation and exploration

1. Evaluating the text

(1) Stages in children's language acquisition

Stage	Para(s).	Language ability acquired		Example(s)
		Time	Ability	
1	2-3	7-month of gestation	Recognize voice	The baby stopped crying after hearing its mother's voice.

2	4-5	4 months	Distinguish language	The baby turned to the food server after hearing her speaking English.
3	6-9	10 months	Pick out words	Maggie turned on the light after hearing light.
4	10	1 year	Produce words	N/A
5	10	2 years	Produce two words	More grape. All gone. Daddy shoe. Doggy good.
6	10	3 years	Produce sentences	What that girl doing? She get hurt....

Classroom tactics: This activity requires the skill to identify topic sentences and key words. It is key to grasping the main idea of Part II (Paragraphs 2 – 10). You can ask students to scan this part to identify the stages, the time of each stage, the ability acquired by children in each stage and the example(s) used by Napoli to illustrate the stage. It might be difficult for students to identify the abilities. The key is to look for “ability verbs”.

(2) Universal grammar

No.	Examples	Connection with UG
1	word order	Children arrange words according to abstract innate linguistic principles.
2	structure	Early utterances produced by small children have an innate structure.
3	immigrants’ children	Immigrants’ children can distinguish grammatical and ungrammatical language us.
4	pidgin and creole	While parents speak a pidgin language, children may develop a creole language, which has a coherent grammar.
5	twin language	Children, especially twins, can develop a secret communication system conforming to UG.

Classroom tactics: This activity encourages students to analyze how Napoli uses different examples to support her view about UG from angles.

(3) Sources of evidence

This activity is designed to help students understand different ways to collect evidence in a systematic and methodological way.

To support her view concerning child language acquisition, Napoli collects evidence from two sources. The examples of her children (Paragraphs 4 and 11) come from her observation, while the generalizations about the one-word phase, the two-word phase and eventual sentences come from the literature (Paragraph 10). The former generates first-hand evidence, while the latter provides second-hand resources.

In Paragraph 9, Napoli encourages readers to conduct an experiment to test the hypothesis. Experimenting is another way to collect evidence.

Other methods include interviewing, questionnaire or reflection.

2. Exploring beyond the text

(1) Other factors.

This activity encourages students to ponder on child language acquisition beyond the central role of Universal Grammar described by Napoli. With this activity, students can analyze the topic in a broader context. For example, physical intactness, especially the auditory and acoustic organs, is the physical basis for acquiring a language. While the innate principles of UG are important, the quality of the natural input plays a significant role. For example, children born to dumb parents cannot learn a language based on the exposure to the input from television programs.

(2) Compare two views

This view is not in line with Napoli's view on language acquisition. Napoli holds that language acquisition is a natural process on the basis of the UG principles that we are born with. In contrast, the traditional view highlights the role of children's exposure to their parents' language. As Napoli points out with the example of immigrants' children, who do not pick up their parents' ungrammatical English but come to learn the language they hear in the world outside the family. Therefore, children do not acquire a language by simply mimicking their parents. Both the natural language faculty and the exposure to real-life language use are indispensable for language acquisition.

(3) This activity provides a special case of child language acquisition: a baby born to Chinese parents but raised by an English-speaking family. It can help students better understand the relationship between nature and nurture in language acquisition.

With rare exceptions, the child is destined to speak a language, no matter in which family the child is brought up. Human beings are born with a language faculty, or Universal Grammar.

However, what language the child acquires depends on the language use to which the child is exposed. Therefore, when the child born to Chinese parents is brought up by an English-speaking family, the child will acquire English.

(4) These examples about child language acquisition show that both Universal Grammar and exposure to natural language use are indispensable to child language acquisition.

The Wild Boy of Aveyron

The Wild Boy of Aveyron, or Victor of Aveyron, was a French feral child

who was found at the age of around 9 living in the woods. When he was found, he could not speak a word. The researchers tried to teach him to speak, but they failed.

Nim Chimpsky

Nim Chimpsky was a chimpanzee who was the subject of an extended study of animal language acquisition at Columbia University. Chimpsky was given his name as a pun on Noam Chomsky, a leading theorist on human language structure and generative grammar, who holds that humans are “wired” to develop language. Nim was brought up by the researchers together with their child, who was of the same age. The researchers tried to teach Nim human sign language. Nim did seem to learn a number of signs but he never showed something similar to human grammar.

Pharaoh Psammetichus' experiment:

History contains a number of anecdotes about people who attempted to discover the origin of language by experiment. The first such tale was told by Herodotus in 429BC in *The Histories*, who relates that Pharaoh "Psamtik" (probably Psammetichus I) caused two children to be raised in isolation by a shepherd who was ordered not to speak to them; he would see what language they ended up speaking. When the children were brought before him, one of them said something that sounded to the pharaoh like bekos, the Phrygian word for bread. From this, Psamtik concluded that the capacity for speech is innate and that the natural language of people was Phrygian.

Language Enhancement

I. Word and phrase

1. Word in context

Note: This activity encourages students to use contexts to guess the meaning of a possible new word without looking up the word in a dictionary. Therefore, it is important to call their attention to this activity before their preview.

2. Preposition and adverb

- (1) to
- (2) out
- (3) to
- (4) to
- (5) to
- (6) to
- (7) to
- (8) to

3. Word formation

- (1) conform
- (2) deform
- (3) inform
- (4) multiform
- (5) reform
- (6) transform
- (7) uniform

4. Proofreading

<p><u>Common</u> misconception about language acquisition is that children <u>need be</u> taught language. In fact, though, acquiring language happens naturally—just like metabolizing sugar. No one has to teach us; our brain does it <u>on own</u>.</p> <p>There are language communities in which no conscious language teaching goes on, <u>so</u> language acquisition proceeds normally. In Samoa, for example, adults do not view infants and small children as conversational partners, <u>or</u> do they feel a responsibility to model their speech so that children can more easily <u>learn</u>. Instead, the children simply overhear speech between adults. <u>Like</u>, the adults do not listen to the speech of the children. It's as though the children's talk is not part of the larger language community. Yet the children acquire the</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">1) A common2) need to be3) on its own4) but5) nor6) learnt it7) Likewise8)
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language of the larger community just fine and <u>in</u> the same rate that children acquire language all around the world. Conscious language teaching, then, <u>is necessary</u> for first language acquisition.	9) at 10) is not necessary
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Note: This short paragraph provides another piece of evidence supporting Napoli's view. Therefore, this activity can be done before reading and analyzing Text A. You can ask students to do this activity, summarize the view and compare the view with that of Napoli.

II. Sentence and discourse

1. Paraphrasing

- (1) They are in the process of acquiring the sound system of their language.
- (2) Sometime around the child's third birthday, six months earlier or later, there is great progress in children's language learning and children start producing long sentences with varying degrees of morphological and syntactic complexity.
- (3) They collect and learn the linguistic rules of English from sentences spoken by native speakers, who have a coherent grammar, not those sentences spoken by their parents, who might well have an incoherent grammar in English.
- (4) Sometimes, however, the secret language between children develops very well.
- (5) We are born with the natural ability to process and produce natural human language.
- (6) We acquire our specific native language in a natural way, by examining carefully what we are exposed to or what we create with the UG principles that we are born with.

2. Translation

- (1) 在这些研究中，儿童可以识别英语的证据是眼睛活动增多、心跳加快，而不是罗伯特做出的那种笑脸和咿呀声，但是这些研究是在实验室环境中做的，而罗伯特所在的是社会自然场景。
- (2) 我缓慢而大声地说：“milk（牛奶），要说 milk。”尼克也缓慢而大声地说：“Awamih。”这时我才发现，原来他是在说“I want milk（我要牛奶）”，是一整个句子，而不仅仅是一个词。
- (3) 比如，如果在一个儿童所说的语言中，操纵者出现在被操纵的物体后面

(例如有的语言把动词放在宾语后面，会说“书-读”，而不是“读-书”)，那么这个儿童就会使用与说英语的儿童相反的词序。

- (4) One of the great benefits of technology today is the ability to expose ourselves to real foreign language.
- (5) Non-native speakers of English introduced some new elements into the language.
- (6) He came to America with only some rudimentary knowledge of English but soon became a pretty fluent speaker.

3. Language in use

- **Skill:** Be aware of the differences and similarities between English and Chinese euphemisms
- **Skill:** Use euphemisms for possibly impolite expressions

“Blunt”Expressions	English Euphemisms	Chinese Euphemisms
backward 1	2 be visually-impaired	<u>视力不太好，有视力障碍，视力受损</u>
be blind 2	4 between jobs	待业中
be deaf 3	10 have a disability	腿脚不便
unemployed 4	3 have a hearing problem	听力不太好，失聪
dead body 5	6 lay off	下岗
fire (verb) 6	11 low-income group	低收入人群
die 7	7 pass away	走了、过世
kill 8	5 remains	遗体
old people 9	9 senior citizens	长者
be handicapped/crippled 10	8 terminate	处决
poor people 11	1 underdeveloped	发展中的、欠发达的

4. Paragraph structure

Answer: (6), (3), (5), (4), (1), (2)

Note: This activity can also be done as a warm-up before reading and analyzing Text

A. After putting the sentences into order, students can be invited to think about the implication of this case for language acquisition.

Intercultural reflection

1. Chinese and English learning

- Skill: Compare the Chinese language and the English language in terms of L1 and L2 learning
- Skill: Understand the effects of cultural differences on communication and language learning

To do this activity, students can refer to the analysis of language transfer in Paragraphs 10-15 of Text B. By pondering on this topic, students may become more aware of the negative transfer from Chinese into English. The transfer may take place in terms of pronunciation, semantics, grammar and pragmatics. More importantly, there are both positive transfer and negative transfer.

You may refer to the following two articles:

戴炜栋、王栋（2002），语言迁移研究:问题与思考，《外国语》6：24-27。

郭铭华（2002），论母语在外语课上的作用，《外语与外语教学》4：1-9。

2. L1 acquisition of Chinese

- Skill: Use observation and literature to collect first-hand and second-hand evidence

This activity encourages students to use what they have learned in Text A to analyze the acquisition of Chinese as a first language. To do this activity, students can collect first-hand examples or search for second-hand literature. Students can also compare their findings of the L1 acquisition of Chinese with the findings of Napoli.

3. Why learn English

This activity aims to help students better understand motivation for learning a foreign language and get more motivated to learn English. This activity is a good opportunity for students to practice conducting a survey and analyzing the results of the survey. The results collected from the survey may seem a chaos and their job to classify the results and work out a pattern.

If they have access to international students learning Chinese, they may interview both domestic students learning English and international students learning Chinese and compare their motivation for learning a foreign language.

You may refer to the following resources:

An online course on language learning theories:

<https://coerll.utexas.edu/methods/modules/learners/02/>

A survey on language learning motivations

https://www.llas.ac.uk/resourcedownloads/6063/700_reasons.pdf

“中国大学本科生英语学习动机类型”:

<http://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFDTOTAL-XDWY200301004.htm>

A report by the Guardian about British students' motivation for learning a foreign language:

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/nov/07/-sp-do-young-people-care-about-learning-foreign-languages-data#rd?sukey=cbbc36a2500a2e6cb8c189cb0ea9028d8cfa9539ff25d950459ccc499acdac6373af47347461955bacae9bc9733d8525>

4. The younger the better

- Skill: Critique a “popular” folk theory with exemplification and reasoning

To do this activity, students can refer to the Critical Period Hypothesis (关键期假说) described in Paragraphs 20-25 of Text B. This issue is still controversial, so students do not have to work out a definite answer. However, it is important for them to support their view with specific examples and/or reasons rather than simply following their intuitive response.