

Challenging Popular Opinions on Language Learning and Teaching

David Shaffer
Chosun University, Gwangju, Korea

Abstract

Over the years, numerous beliefs about how languages are learned and how they should be taught have coalesced among laymen and foreign language teachers alike, often without very much theoretical foundation or research as a basis. The aim of this presentation is to challenge about fifteen such popular opinions and show how they are not supported or poorly supported by present second language acquisition research and theory. These opinions deal with first and second language acquisition beliefs, error correction, first language interference with language learning, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar rules, structures, and interaction. The end goal is to produce a clearer perception of how second languages are learned and of current thinking on best practices for teaching them, making it possible for the teacher to make informed classroom instructional adjustments.

I. Introduction

Everyone considers themselves to be an expert on language learning – after all, they have all managed to master at least one language and quite possibly more. As such, popular views on first and second language learning arise and many are accepted but the general public without question, and in many cases, without foundation. This presentation will take a look at over a dozen popular views on the language-learning process first discussed by Lightbown and Spada (1993). Some of these popular views are slightly deviant from what research reveals, others have no research support.

The popular opinions to be challenged include: Languages are learned mainly through imitation. Parents usually correct young children's grammatical errors. Highly intelligent people are good language learners. The best predictor of success in second language acquisition is motivation. The earlier a second language is introduced in school programs, the greater the likelihood of success in learning. Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language. It is essential for learners to be able to pronounce all the individual sounds in the second language. Once learners know roughly 1,000 words and the basic structure of the second language, they can easily participate in conversations with native speakers. Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practice examples of each one before going on to another. Teachers should teach simple language structures before complex ones. Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits. Teachers should use materials that expose students only to language structures that they have already been taught. Teachers should respond to students' errors by correctly rephrasing what they have said rather than by explicitly pointing out the error. Students learn what they are taught.

II. Popular Views

A. Languages are learned mainly through imitation

It is difficult to find support that suggests that imitation of others' speech plays the major role in language acquisition. Language learners are not parrots. They often produced sentences that they have never heard before, that they could never have heard before, and that no one has ever said before. Learners have been heard saying "I am hiccing up" and "It was upside down, but I turned it upside right." Such production provides evidence that learners do not merely memorize or imitate what they hear others say (Saxton, 2010). However, language imitation can play a role in language learning (Ellis, 1985), some learners, especially young learners, use word, phrase, or sentence imitation as a language learning strategy, but others may learn a language quite well without using imitation as a strategy.

B. Parents usually correct young children's grammatical errors

The amount of caretaker correction of a child's language is sure to vary considerable depending on the caretaker's social, education, and linguistic background as well as the child's age (Clark, 2009). When children are young, parents and other caretakers actually correct children's linguistic errors very rarely. It is when children near elementary school age that adults become more concerned and begin to correct children's mistakes. However, the mistakes that are most often corrected at this time are meaning-related mistakes rather than purely grammatical mistakes. Semantic errors rather than syntactic errors are considered to be of more importance.

C. Highly intelligent people are good language learners.

People with high IQs are good at learning *about* things, and they are good at taking tests. Therefore, they will be good at taking tests *about* language. Learning a language, however, is much different and involves much different skills than those measured on an aptitude test (De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2005; Saville-Troike, 2006). There is not a close relationship between intelligence and language learning ability. Some students who are good at school subjects struggle with learning a language and vice-versa. Students with high IQs often have good study habits and this may transfer to learning a language also. But students with a wide variety of abilities may be good at language learning, especially conversational skills.

D. The best predictor of success in second language acquisition is motivation.

Motivation is an ingredient that leads to successful second language acquisition, but there are many reasons why it may not be the best predictor of second language acquisition. Highly motivated learners may meet with great obstacles to learning (Ortega, 2009). For adults, fluency, accuracy, and easily comprehensible pronunciation may be high hurdles. Learners' aptitude, their learning styles, and their satisfaction with the classroom environment can all greatly affect success in learning (Gass & Selinker, 2001). In addition, teachers do not have an influence on a learner's intrinsic motivation. They can however influence learner motivation by making the classroom environment supportive.

E. The earlier a second language is introduced in school programs, the greater the likelihood of success in learning.

Early English education does have its benefits for acquisition. Research shows that it benefits native-like proficiency. However, this comes at a cost. To begin with, it is usually least cost-effective. The younger the learner, the more expensive the language gains. For very young learners, second language acquisition may lead to first language losses. For learners learning in EFL environments and not expected to be living, working, and speaking in second language environments and not needing native-like proficiency, it is more efficient to begin second language learning later (Pinter, 2011). Also important is the intensity of the language-learning program. A couple hours a week of second language instruction will not produce much language acquisition.

F. Most of the mistakes that second language learners make are due to interference from their first language.

First language interference does account for a certain amount of language learners' mistakes, but the first language may have many positive effects also. For closely related languages, language transfer is often positive. Many of the mistakes a language learner makes are due purely to the language learning process. That is, second language learners make many of the same mistakes that first language learners make, such as overgeneralizations in irregular verbs (*go – goed – goed*). Other mistakes may be due to undergeneralizations inherent in the language learning process. The majority of interlanguage mistakes are not first-language influenced.

G. It is essential for learners to be able to pronounce all the individual sounds in the second language.

There is great variety in the pronunciation of English sounds by native speakers, so it is not “essential” that an English learner be able to pronounce all of them in a certain native dialect. What is important is that their English pronunciation is intelligible. For example, pronunciation of rhotic “r” is common in American English, but is absent in British English. With the international interaction of English speakers, it is necessary for them to understand each other’s variety of English pronunciation, not necessarily be able to pronounce it. (See Cook, 2008.)

H. Once learners know roughly 1,000 words and the basic structure of the second language, they can easily participate in conversations with native speakers.

Conversational English requires a smaller vocabulary than written language, but one-thousand words and only basic structures is very limiting for a speaker. It may not allow for the use of different registers and polite requests, thus leading to misunderstanding and communication breakdowns. (See Cook, 2008.)

I. Teachers should present grammatical rules one at a time, and learners should practice examples of each one before going on to another.

The learning of individual grammatical rules is not a linear process. A language learner (first or second language) may produce the correct verb form *went*, later produce *goed* through overgeneralization, and then go back to *went* after their refinement of the rule. Acquisition of a grammar rule does not occur in isolation but through association of that grammar rule with the rest of the language being learned. (See Cook, 2008.)

J. Teachers should teach simple language structures before complex ones.

Research has found that there is a particular order in which language structures are learned regardless of how, when, or if they are presented in class. Also, a structure that appears to be simple may be cognitively complex, and conversely, an apparently difficult structure may be cognitively simple. (See Cook, 2008.)

K. Learners' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits.

If asked, the majority of language learners will say that they want to be corrected immediately and explicitly when they make an error, but experience shows that a considerably smaller number of students are comfortable with the teacher doing so (Long, 2003). Excessive error correction can have a negative effect on motivation. It is true that if an error goes uncorrected over a long period of time, "fossilization" may occur. But the conscientious learner self-monitors and self-corrects even without having their errors corrected by others.

L. Teachers should use materials that expose students only to language structures that they have already been taught.

Comprehensible input is important in materials selection and development, but comprehensible input does not mean only materials that the learner has been exposed to. If a large percentage of the material is already known by the learner, new vocabulary, grammar, and expressions may be easily understood. Paul (2003) suggests that "we should expose the children in our classes to English they can understand at present or that is just beyond their present level (p. 4). Also if materials contain only structures that have already been introduced, motivation may be lowered.

M. When learners are allowed to interact freely in class activities, they copy each other's mistakes.

It is true that students may pick up other students' mistakes from interacting with them, but this is more than offset by the amount of student practice and interaction that group work and pair work afford. Students rarely pick up speaking errors from other students from hearing one error from one student once. Students consider what they hear from another student along with the other input that they get, especially considering native speaker input, and thus make decisions on the appropriateness of what another learner may have said (Kasper & Wagner, 2011).

N. Teachers should respond to students' errors by correctly rephrasing what they have said rather than by explicitly pointing out the error.

Research has found that the majority of language teachers' use recasts a majority of the time. (Student: I *goed* to the school festival last evening. Teacher: Oh really? I *went* to the school festival, too.) This indirect method of feedback is seen as being polite and not causing the erring student embarrassment. However, with its use, one runs the risk of the student not recognizing that the recast was meant as corrective feedback or not realizing which element(s) the teacher was focusing on. More explicit correction methods have been found to be more effective with younger learners. (See Keyser, 2003.)

O. Students learn what they are taught.

Students often do not learn what they are taught when it is taught. Low motivation may be one reason, but because learning of language components is ordered, a student may be at the proper stage of language development to learn the structure that the lesson is teaching (Ellis, 2005). In addition, students learn outside of the classroom things never presented in a formal lesson in or out of the classroom.

III. Summary

Through the above discussion, we have argued that language is *not* learned mainly through imitation. Parents do *not* do very much correction of young children's errors. High IQ is *not* directly related to successful language learning, and motivation may *not* be the best predictor of language learning success. We have argued that beginning the language learning program early is *not* always better and that the majority of errors are *not* due to first language influence. Pronouncing every second language sound is *not* essential, and 1,000 words and basic structure is *not* enough for basic conversation. Teaching one grammar rule at a time is *not* effective, *nor* is teaching simple structures first. Not correcting students' errors does *not* necessarily lead to fossilization and materials *may* contain not-yet-taught items. Students do *not* easily pick up other students' errors, and implicit language correction may *not* be very effective. And students do *not* learn only or all of what they are taught. One's beliefs on second language acquisition should *not* be based on public opinion, but on classroom experience and research results.

References

- Kasper, G., & Wagner, J. (2011). A conversation-analytic approach to second language acquisition. In D. Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative approaches to second language acquisition*. London: Routledge.
- Clark, E. V. (2009). *First language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Cook, V. (2008). *Second language learning and language teaching* (4th ed.). London: Hodder Education.
- De Bot, K., Lowie, W., & Vespoor, M. (2005). *Second language acquisition: An advanced resource book*. London: Routledge.
- Ellis, R. (1985). *Understanding second language acquisition*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2005). *Instructed second language acquisition: A literature review*. Wellington, New Zealand: Auckland UniServices. Retrieved from <http://www.atriumlinguarum.org/contenido/instructed-second-language.pdf>
- Gass, S., & Selinker, L. (2001). *Second language acquisition: An introductory course*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Keyser, R. (2003). Implicit and explicit learning. In C. J. Doughty & M. H. Long (Eds.), *The handbook of second language acquisition*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (1993). *How languages are learned*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Long, M. (2003). Stabilization and fossilization in interlanguage development. In C. J. Doughty & M. H. Long (Eds.), *The handbook of second language acquisition*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

- Meisel, J. (2011). *First and second language acquisition*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Ortega, L. (2009). *Understanding second language acquisition*. London: Hodder Education.
- Paul, D. (2003). *Teaching English to children in Asia*. Hong Kong: Pearson Education Asia.
- Pinter, A. (2011). *Children learning second languages*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Saville-Troike, M. (2006). *Introducing second language acquisition*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Saxton, M. (2010). *Child language: Acquisition and development*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

The Author

David E. Shaffer, PhD (Linguistics), has been an educator in Korea for over three decades and is a long-time KOTESOL member. He is a professor at Chosun University teaching linguistics, teaching methodology, and skills courses in the graduate and undergraduate programs. In addition, he is a teacher trainer, graduate dissertation advisor, materials designer, and program developer. Dr. Shaffer is the author of books on learning English as well as Korean language, customs, and poetry. His present academic interests, aside from CBI, include professional development, loanwords, and cognitive linguistic constructs for effective teaching techniques. Dr. Shaffer is active in numerous ELT associations in Korea and regularly presents at their conferences. Within KOTESOL, he is presently Gwangju-Jeonnam Chapter President, a KOTESOL publications editor, and an International Conference committee member. Email: disin@chosun.ac.kr