

## SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

*Adapted from the Florida's Training Module II, Second Language Acquisition*

Language acquisition is a process by which children learn how to use language for the purpose of communicating, and this accompanies the development of cognitive, social and psychomotor skills. Contrary to popular belief, children do not merely imitate what they hear; rather, they take in large quantities of oral data, so to speak, and reformulate it in their minds. What they produce is their understanding of what has been said around them. Proof of this can be found in the types of errors children make as they are mastering their first language.

The process of language acquisition entails a series of stages: pre-production, early production, and expanded production. The pre-production stage involves a period of taking in and processing of speech to allow time for comprehension. Early production is the stage in which one- and two-word utterances or responses are produced. During the expanded production, more complete phrases appear. Children produce different types of errors during these stages. These merely reflect the refining of the language model.

Children utilize a variety of strategies to move from one stage to the next and throughout the entire process of acquisition. General strategies include avoiding difficult sounds or sound combinations and repeating or exploiting easy sound combinations with great frequency. Replacing and rearranging sound to fit a particular need is another option that children exercise.

The most common strategy used in the initial period is probably trial and error. As children begin to put together the rules and mechanism of what makes language work, they use generalization as means of applying what they know to new situations. For example, when dealing with regular past tense ending (-ed), it may be added to verbs that take an irregular form, such as *goed*.

Second language acquisition is the process of internalizing a second language for the purpose of communicating with it. It presupposes the existence of a native language, and as such, a certain level of cognitive maturity.

Understanding the process of second language acquisition is important for several reasons. The most recent and innovative methods and materials are based upon theories of how a second language is learned. Thus, familiarization with the process will facilitate application in the classroom, as well as provide a base for the types of instructional strategies that are done with the students.

For language acquisition to occur, a certain type of atmosphere must prevail in the classroom. A comfortable, nurturing environment is of utmost importance for promoting communication. Children should learn to develop a risk-taking, positive attitude, while the teacher provides a meaningful context for language to flourish. A stress-free, low anxiety atmosphere will facilitate the language acquisition process.

Second language learners often have difficulties pronouncing a new language due to interference from their native language. This means that the native language system is blocking the new system on one of three levels:

1. In Phonological interference, sounds or sound combinations from the native language either do not exist in the new language, or they occur in different patterns that the student must learn. For example, the vowel sound in the word *it* does not exist in Spanish, whereas the initial sound in the word *this* does, but only between two vowels, and is considered to be a soft "d".
2. Grammatical interference refers to the way in which students use their native language patterns of structure and word order when learning a second language. An example of this is the use of the optional subject in Spanish. Students who come from a Spanish-speaking background may sometimes respond in sentences that have no subject, as this is common, acceptable practice in their native language. In Russian, the verb "to be" does not exist.
3. Lexical interference occurs when words across two languages sound similar, or even identical; but actually have nothing to do with each other. Words that sound alike are called cognates and usually derive from the same language. However, false cognates do exist. A classic example used

for English and Spanish is the similarity between the English word *embarrass* and the Spanish *embarazada*, which means "pregnant."

Some second language learners come from a phonetic language background. This essentially means that the native language follows a close sound-system relationship and is read as it is written. Spanish is a good example of a phonetic language. English, not having a regular type of sound-system correspondence, is not considered to be a phonetic language. In fact, reading in English is a particularly difficult task due to the lack of regularity in its spelling system. Letters or letter combinations, particularly vowels, often represent different sounds (e.g., today I *read*, yesterday I *read*) or one particular sound can be represented by more than one letter combination, as in the following examples which all contain the same vowel sound: *meat, meet, mete, piece, receive*.

Every second language learner experiences differences in the length of time he/she needs to learn the second language. For all students educated in two languages, a minimum of 4 and perhaps as many as 7 years, is required to achieve national norms in the areas of reading, social studies and science.

Immigrant students beginning to learn English between the ages of 8-11, with age appropriate literacy skills in their native language, appear to be at the optimal stage for developing academic skills in English. When instruction is provided only in English, they require 5-7 years to achieve the 50th percentile on nationally normed standardized tests in reading, social studies and science. This age group appears to master academic skills in English faster than older or younger students.

Children under the age of 8 who arrive in the United States with little or no prior school experience may take as long as 7-10 years, or perhaps longer, to achieve average performance levels in reading, social studies and science standardized tests. Adolescent arrivals with little or no prior exposure to English and who are unable to continue to receive instruction in their native language while mastering English and academic skills do not have enough time in high school to develop these skills at an average level.

