

# Language acquisition

Most of us acquire our first language subconsciously without noticing. When we study second or additional languages, at first we may not necessarily remember what we learn. Did you ever learn phrases, vocabulary or grammar only to find a few months later that you'd forgotten everything? In order for acquisition to occur the new language must enter long-term memory and become automatised – that's the difference between language acquisition and language learning. The ultimate aim of language teaching is that learners acquire language rather than just learn and practise it.

## Stages of Development

### Acquiring a second language

Many different factors affect how someone acquires a second language.

Affective factors such as

- attitude
- motivation
- anxiety
- willingness to communicate

Cognitive factors such as

- intellectual ability
- language aptitude
- language learning strategies

Language factors such as

- the learner's first language
- the language in the environment and
- the amount of instructional time

An optimal age for language learning hasn't been fully established, but some researchers maintain that early language learning is good as young children have an innate ability to acquire language naturally.

### First language acquisition

Research has shown that children pass through the following stages as they learn their first language:

- cooing (*vowel sounds*)
- babbling (*consonant + vowel, e.g da da da*)
- first words
- one-word utterances
- two-word utterances
- inflection (*changing words, eg. adding ing or s*)
- questions
- negatives
- complex sentences.

In a study into the acquisition of Irish as a first language, children began speak in the following order:

- questions
- possessors (*mo–my*)
- imperatives (*orders*)
- negatives.

## Tips to remember

- ☑ **Language learning isn't linear.** A learner may one day say or write a phrase correctly, and yet produce it incorrectly a few weeks or months later. This is a natural part of language learning.
- ☑ **Errors** are also a natural part of language acquisition, as learners make guesses about how the language works and test them out.
- ☑ **Challenging learners** is important for progression and

motivation. Language input (texts, audio pieces, new language etc.) should be one step ahead of where the learners already are.

- ☑ **Learners who can already communicate effectively** through the target language (eg. learners of Irish in a Gaeltacht school) should experience rich and varied input, and should be challenged to extend their vocabulary, use a range of expressions, synonyms and turns of phrase, and compare how different speakers use language.

- ☑ **Revision** is very important. The more often learners hear, see and use phrases and words, the more likely they are to acquire them. Rather than repetition and drill, encourage students to use what they've learned in new and creative ways – stories, dramas, tasks, puzzles.
- ☑ Use the **post-communicative stage** of communicative language lessons for explicitly focusing on grammatical features or errors



observed during the activity. Ask learners to reflect on what they found easy or difficult, on what they don't fully understand, or on similarities and differences with languages they already know.

✔ **Noticing** triggers and supports acquisition. After listening or reading, ask your students to reflect on what they noticed: what was good about the language; how was it different from what they might say or write themselves?

✔ Try to **awaken learners' curiosity** about language, because although they hear, see and use language all the time they may not actually notice its different forms.

✔ **Simple language awareness tasks** support development of curiosity and the ability to notice. For example ask students to compare words in the different languages spoken by their classmates and to try to pronounce words from other languages.

✔ Always **teach through the target language** because many learners don't have opportunities to hear it outside the classroom, and this limited exposure hinders acquisition. Teaching through the target language and using it incidentally throughout the day exposes learners to a wider and richer input, allows them more contact time with the language, and more opportunities to use it for real communication.

✔ **Explain to students** why you always speak the language they are learning so they understand how it helps them to learn, and don't ask to translate everything.

✔ Learners should hear a **wide variety of speakers** – native speakers, adults, young people, speakers of different dialects – as well as their teachers. This helps them improve their pronunciation and intonation, and understand and deal with differences in dialect. It is also an important motivational factor for learners to see the language being in everyday situations by real people.

## Features of language acquisition

**Interlanguage** is a mixture of features of the language being learnt and the student's first language and other languages he/she knows.

**Fossilisation** happens when errors are not corrected and become acquired as part of the language system. Watch out for persistent mistakes when children are using language in a task, as fossilised errors can be difficult to correct.

**Transfer** refers to the influence of languages a learner already knows on the language being learned. Differences between them can lead to negative transfer (for example *Tá sé fear* errors in Irish - transfer from *He is a man*). Positive transfer occurs when structures work in the same way (for example *Tá se mór.*)

## Bilingualism

Research estimates that 60% plus of the world's population is actually bilingual or multilingual, and that monolingual people are in a minority.

**Simultaneous or balanced bilingualism** means that a person is bilingual from birth. Both languages develop at the same time in a balanced way.

**Subtractive bilingualism** happens if someone loses their first language when they learn a second language, for example in the context of immigration.

**Additive bilingualism** means the second language is acquired in addition to the first language.

There are many **advantages to being bilingual** including cognitive development, imagination, openness, seeing the world in a dual way, problem solving and creativity.

## Further reading and information

This information sheet is part of a series of online resources developed through the work of the NCCA's Primary School Network. It summarises key points from a podcast about language acquisition which you can listen to at [www.ncca.ie/en/podcasts](http://www.ncca.ie/en/podcasts).

You will find more information about the Primary School Network on [www.ncca.ie/curriculumoverload](http://www.ncca.ie/curriculumoverload).