



**NEAR EAST UNIVERSITY**  
**FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

**Language Acquisition and Language Learning**

**Undergraduate Thesis**

**Prepared by: Nermin Baysan**

**Supervised by: Gul Celkan**

**1999**  
**Lefkosa TRNC**

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## 1. PREFACE

Not too long ago, I moved to Cyprus from Canada. Up until this enormous change in my life, I was living in an environment where everything was familiar to me. The language, the culture, the scenery, the people were all a part of my life for 23 years.

Although I am not a complete foreigner to Turkish, I still have a lot of difficulties in using the language. My only exposure to Turkish while I was living in Canada was at home. My mother would almost always speak Turkish at home, while my father used both English and Turkish. For this reason I never fully acquired knowledge of the language.

Now that I am living in a Turkish speaking society, my knowledge of the language, or my "competence" of the language, as Noam Chomsky would call it, is being tested on a daily basis. Sometimes I find myself having a difficult time explaining what I want to say which can be very frustrating.

This frustration at least, gave me the idea for my thesis topic, *Language Acquisition and Language learning*. I hope you enjoy it, and learn something in the process as I have.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

There are over five thousand languages spoken around the world. Learning to speak one of them is virtually effortless for most of us, so why is it commonly so difficult to learn a second language? For many years, linguists and social psychologists have asked these questions and have come up with some answers.

According to Chomsky, “[l]anguage is not a form of behaviour... On the contrary, it is an intricate rule-based system and a large part of language acquisition is the learning of this system.”<sup>1</sup> In “this system” there are a finite number of grammatical rules, and with a knowledge of these, an endless number of sentences can be produced. It is, as Chomsky called it, “competence” (ie knowledge of grammar rules) that a child gradually acquires, and it is this language competence that allows a child to be a creative language user. That is, children can produce an array of sentences on their own in different contexts without ever having heard anybody say the sentences before.

Studies have been executed to understand how children acquire a language. Chomsky says that children are born with a knowledge of the “principles of the grammatical structure of all languages,”<sup>2</sup> and this inborn knowledge explains the success and speed with which they learn a language. Many other works also suggest that all children go through the same stages of language development regardless of the language they are learning.

Indeed, there are distinct stages in the development of child acquisition that is similar to all children in the earliest stage of language development; a child begins by babbling. It wasn't until recently, that it was thought that all babbling is the same. In fact it is not the same. Every baby has its own unique babble and it was discovered that babbling is a baby's way of imitating the language and intonation they hear in her environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Harper, Jeremy. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*: Burnt Mill, Harlow, Longman Group Ltd., 1990 pp30-31

<sup>2</sup> Internet address: <http://www.viavale.com.br/english/sk-chom.html>



Shortly after a child's first birthday we begin to hear a child's first word. From this point on, we see a rapid increase in the child's knowledge of vocabulary. The utterance of one word, becomes two, two words become three and all of a sudden the child is forming full sentences and communicating comfortably with everyone. By the time the child is six and a half years of age, they have knowledge of more than twenty-six hundred words, and they have acquired knowledge of the language without ever been taught any rules.

Learning a language on the other hand, is an entirely different process. An American writer by the name of Stephen Krashen made a distinction between acquiring and learning a language. Krashen said that, acquiring a language involves the subconscious and is longer lasting and more successful in learning a language, whereas learning involves the conscious which results in only 'knowing about' the language.<sup>3</sup> So what this is saying is that, learning a language has to be more like a child's acquisition, which is developed with time as a child communicates in various situations.

Nevertheless, learning a language is not easy. One can take years of language classes and can still find themselves unable to communicate with a native speaker. Language learning through school is a formal version of what is spoken by native speakers, which is why a language student may have a difficult time understanding a native speaker. Idiomatic phrases, pronunciation of words, vary from culture to culture and hence pose as a barrier to the learner.

No doubt, learning a language like English has its difficulties, as do all languages. There is no theoretical explanation to explain the speed at which a person learns a second language, like English. One has to learn vocabulary, grammatical rules, intonation, pronunciation and much more. Having to learn a completely new set of vocabulary and a new alone is one difficulty. But there's also a new set of grammatical rules that have to be learned, pronunciations, intonations and so on.

The next few chapters are intended to look at these issues a little further by unravelling the mystery and the miracle of language acquisition, and to investigate the difficulties encountered in second language learning.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. p.31

### 3. LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN CHILDREN

*The acquisition of language "is doubtless the greatest intellectual feat any one of is ever required to perform"*

-Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (1933)



"WHAT'S THE BIG SURPRISE? ALL THE LATEST THEORIES OF LINGUISTICS SAY WE'RE BORN WITH THE INNATE CAPACITY FOR GENERATING SENTENCES."

Copyright © by S. Harris.

We've all seen or experienced the excitement a parent feels when their child utters their first word. Whatever the first word maybe, it is usually in the language child hears at home and it will most likely turn out to be the language the child acquires. What do we mean by acquiring a language? It simply means, "the subconscious process which result



in the knowledge of language.”<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon of language acquisition has bewildered many, and much research and scientific study has gone into the processes that result in the acquisition of a language. What researchers have discovered is that language knowledge develops in stages and therefore each successive stage more closely approximates the grammar of the adult language.

Observations of children in different language areas of the world reveal that the stages are similar, possibly universal. Some stages last for a short time; others remain longer. Some stages may overlap for a short period, though the transition between stages is often sudden.<sup>5</sup>

During the first stage, which occurs within the first six months, “the infant begins to babble.”<sup>6</sup> It is believed that during this stage, children are learning to distinguish between sounds that are part of their language and sounds that are not. It was once thought that babbling sounds produced by deaf infants were similar to those of normal infants, therefore suggesting that babbling was not affected by what the infant hears in their environment. However, studies have suggested otherwise:

Vocal babbling of hearing children and manual babbling of deaf children suggest that babbling is a specifically linguistic ability related to the kind of language input the child receives.<sup>7</sup>

This proves then, that the human mind, even at this very early stage is sensitive to cues, which was demonstrated by Laura Petito and her colleagues from McGill University:

During the babbling stage of hearing infants, the pitch or intonation contours by them begin to resemble the intonation contours of sentences spoken by adults.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Harper, Jeremy. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*: Burnt Mill, Harlow, Longman Group Ltd., 1990 p.34

<sup>5</sup> Formkin, Victoria, and Rodman, Robert. *An Introduction to Language*: Fort Worth, Texas, Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1994 p.345

<sup>6</sup> *An Introduction to Language* p.345

<sup>7</sup> *An Introduction to Language* p.396

<sup>8</sup> *An Introduction to Language* p.397

Whereas, the babbling produced by deaf babies lacks the qualities of normal babies. That is, pitch, intonation etc... and it was discovered that they are “unsystematic, non repetitive and random”.<sup>9</sup>

Petito's conclusions then, is that babbling is the earliest stage of language acquisition, and that there is a co-relation between the types of babbling sounds to the infants environment. This also suggests that humans are genetically programmed to pick up language to communicate.

Of course the time a child utters their first word varies from child to child. Some toddlers may say their first word as early as nine months of age and others as late as two years of age. In any case, after the child utters their first word, it becomes the starting point of a rapid accumulation of knowledge, and the speed with which children accomplish the complex process of language acquisition is particularly impressive. Studies have also proved that all children, regardless of race or creed, experience the same language learning process. Although “it is not known how many processes are involved in language learning,”<sup>10</sup> it has been proven that all children learn languages in similar ways, whether the language is English, Turkish, Chinese or French.

### 3a. The One-Word Stage



DOONESBURY copyright 1982 & 1984 G. B. Trudeau.

<sup>9</sup>An Introduction to Language p. 397

<sup>10</sup> Moskowitz, Breyne. "The Acquisition of Language". *The Emergence of Language: Development and Evolution* Nov. 1978: pp.131-149



Usually around the child's first birthday, the infant begins to utter their first word. A child may begin with the knowledge of only a few words in their vocabulary. However, "as months go by, her lexicon expands with increasing rapidity."<sup>11</sup> The early words are mostly concrete nouns and verbs; hence more abstract words such as adjectives are acquired later. The one-word stage is also known as the "one sentence stage". With the use of intonation, the child can create questions. Some typical first words may be:

"mommy"	"cat"	"plane"
"daddy"	"dog"	"baby"
"car"	"yes"	"toy"
"train"	"no"	"dolly"

A child in this stage may only know, say, five words in all. However, by the time they reach the two-word stage, the child's vocabulary has remarkably increased to a hundred words or more, within a short period of time. The child knows which words to use when. That is:

the child, selects a word reflecting what is new in a particular situation... a newly acquired word is first used for naming and only later for asking for something.<sup>12</sup>

A typical one-word conversation between a mother and their young child may be:

Mom: What's that Susan? (pointing to a cat)  
 Susan: Cat.  
 Mom: Oh, look what the cat is doing? (playing with a ball of yarn)  
 Susan: Play. Play.

Children at the one-word stage can understand a lot of things their parents say to them. Although their half of the communication transaction may be one-word utterances, there is nevertheless a transfer of words between the child and adult.

While many of these single forms are used for naming objects, these words may also be produced in situations where the child is extending the use of the word. An empty bed may elicit the name of a sister who normally sleeps in the bed, even in the absence of the person named. During this stage, then, the child may be capable of referring to *Monica* and *bed*, but is not yet ready to put the forms together to produce a more complex phrase.

<sup>11</sup> "The Acquisition of Language" p.132

<sup>12</sup> "The Acquisition of Language" p.138

Well, in any case, it is still impressive that a child, who at this stage, staggers when she walks, and comes down stairs backwards on her stomach, can still talk this much.

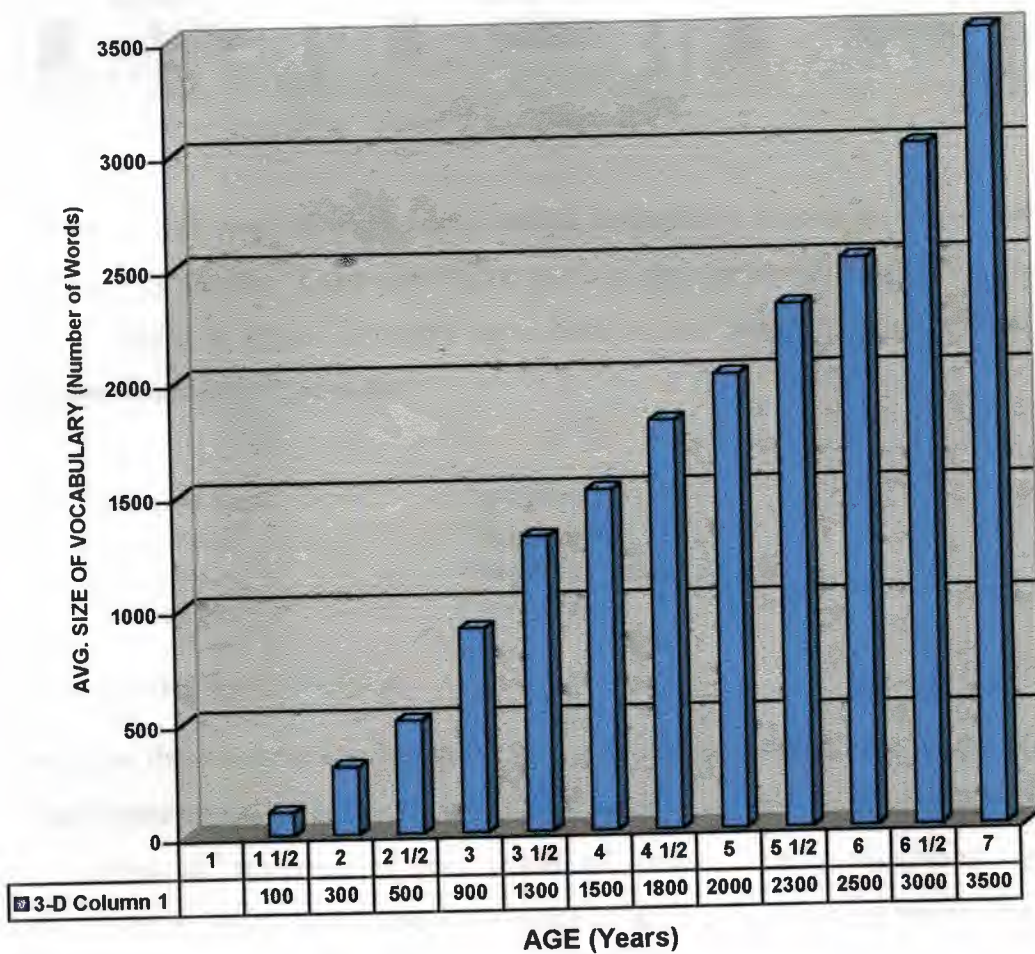
### 3b. The Two-Word Stage

By the time the children are uttering two-word sentences, they have reached their second birthday. At this stage, "the child is uttering two-word sentences with some regularity, [and] her lexicon may include hundreds of words."<sup>13</sup> (see graph on next page)

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<sup>13</sup> "The Acquisition of Language" p.138

### A CHILD'S AVERAGE VOCABULARY SIZE



As can be noted by the graph, there is a rapid increase in the child's knowledge of words from 1½ years of age to 2½ years of age. Even more dramatic is the increase from 1½ years of age to 6½ years of age. Within a four year span, the child's knowledge of vocabulary not only increases from approximately 120 words to over 2,600 words, but





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A two and a half-year-old child was observed asking for a second serving of cake from her mother by saying, "Cake two. Cake two" as she was holding up her plate to her mother. This is a typical utterance for a child in the two-word stage. Other typical utterances found in this stage are:

"Mommy sock"	"car vroom"
"my monies"	"doggy bad"
"cat sleeping"	"beepbeep bang"
"Andrea play"	"toys play"

### 3c. From Telegraph to Infinity

There is no three-word stage in child learning. After the second stage, there becomes a gradual improvement in syntax of the child's speech. At this point, the child begins to utter phrases or sentences of two words or longer. Early telegraphic speech is characterised by short, simple sentences made up primarily of content words that are rich in semantic content, usually nouns and verbs, but sometimes lacking small and simple functional words, such as "in", "on", "at", "the", "is", "can" etc...

Only the words that carry the main message-the "content" words- occur. Children often sound as if they are reading a Western Union message, which is why such utterances are called telegraphic speech.<sup>14</sup>

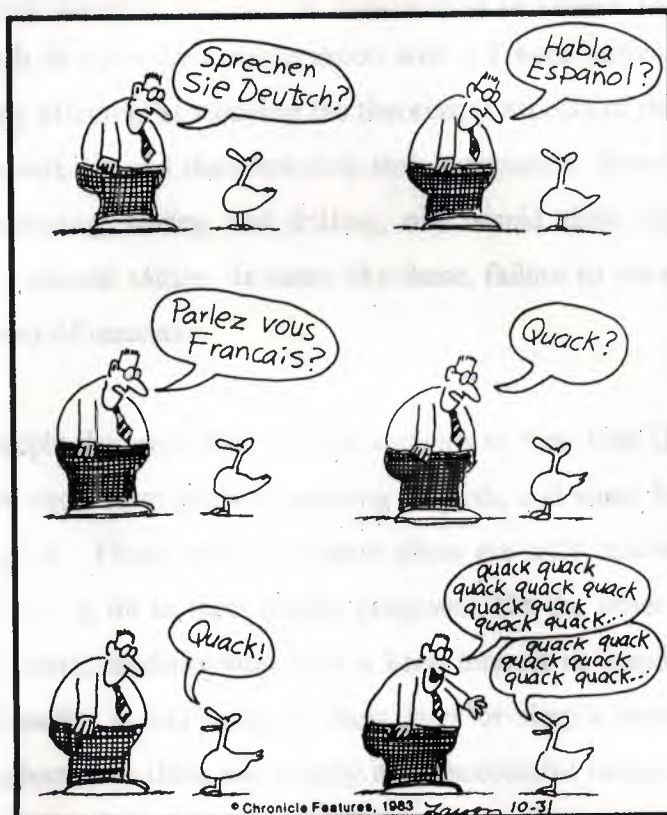
Some examples of typical phrases uttered at this stage are:

"What that?"	"Sammy want a ball"
"Angela go there?"	"Cat drink milk"
"This shoe all wet"	"Grandma buy Angela candy?"
"Mommy, Santa's coming?"	"Daddy go to work"

Children between the ages of two and three speak utterances such as these. While this type of "telegram-format" speech is being produced, eventually prepositions are added.

<sup>14</sup> *An Introduction to Language* p.400

## 4. SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING



*The Far Side*. By Gary Larson. © 1983, 1984 Chronicle Features, San Francisco. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

As we've previously seen, a child can grasp or 'acquire' a language without having any formal instruction on grammatical rules, sentence structure or vocabulary. So, if learning a first language (L1) seems to come so 'naturally' to children, then learning a second language (L2) should be just as easy, right? Well, unfortunately for most of us, learning a second language is a difficult and tedious process.

Most of us have experienced the difficulties encountered in learning to speak a second language in school. Second language courses are mandatory in most schools around the world. Whether the class is French, English, German, or Mandarin, we've all had some exposure to a foreign language during our educational careers. For some, this exposure to a foreign language in school may be for years. In Canada for instance, French is a mandatory course from sixth grade to tenth grade (except in Quebec). In the last two years of high school, it becomes an elective. In which case, Canadian students have a choice of continuing with French, or picking up another language like Mandarin, German or Japanese. Therefore, in total, all Canadian students after they've graduated from high



school, have a minimum of five years of exposure to French. However, you will find that even those students who earned high grades in French throughout their schooling find it difficult to carry on a conversation with a French native speaker. Why? Because they were only effective at studying the theoretical aspects of the language and not using the language verbally and therefore they lack experience. Even after hours and hours of studying, reviewing, testing and drilling, one would think learning another language would be like second nature. In cases like these, failure to learn a second language may be for a number of reasons.

Take for example the preparatory school students at Near East University. Some of these students have short-term goals in learning English, and some have a genuine interest in learning English. Those with short-term plans are only concerned with finishing prep school and moving on to their degree programs. On the other hand, there are students who want to learn, students who have a keen interest in learning English because they realise the benefits it will bring to them later or simply because they enjoy learning English. Students like these are usually more successful language learners than the ones with short-term goals.

Age is an important factor in second language acquisition. To put it simply, the younger you are, the easier it is to learn a language.

Language is unique in that no other complex system of knowledge is more easily acquired at the age of two or three than at the age of thirteen or twenty.<sup>15</sup>

Biologists have found that neurological changes in the brain occur which account for the difficulties encountered as a person gets older.

Although both organic (brain) and experiential (practice) explanations can provide plausible accounts of children's apparent advantage in learning a second language, the explanation of choice among specialists and nonspecialists alike is that children's advantage lies in the brain—a neurological state of readiness in the child, a state of shut down for the adult.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *An Introduction to Language* p.422

<sup>16</sup> Bialystok, Ellen and Hakuta, Kenji. *In Other Words: The Science and Psychology of Second-Language Acquisition*: New York, New York., Basic Books Publishers, 1994 p.52



Another reason why it may be difficult to learn another language in school for example is because, most of the time classes are conducted in a methodological manner, just like a math or science class would be taught. Most often we find language teachers lecturing more on the language rather than having an interactive class. The most effective way in teaching language students a language is to get them involved as much as possible. By having the students engage in verbal communication during class hours, the student obtains practice in speaking where he would otherwise not have the opportunity outside the school environment.

Many individuals attempt to learn an L2 by taking a class in high school or college. The student is exposed to the language only in a formal situation and usually for no more than a few hours a week. Even in intensive courses, the learner does not receive constant input or feedback.

Every child who has ever taken piano lessons has heard repeatedly, you can only improve if you practice. Well, the same goes for language learning.

When you consider the thousands and thousands of people who leave their native country and move to a foreign country, where the language, culture, scenery – everything is different, people usually learn to cope with the changes. They are thrown into a situation where they have to learn a new language because their very livelihood depends on it.

Most people pick up on the basics, or just enough language to get them by. However beyond that, their language “competence” doesn’t seem to improve no matter how long they’ve lived abroad.

Again this all depends on the individual and how much effort they are willing to put into learning another language.

Multi-cultural countries like Canada, America, Australia and England welcome thousands of immigrants from around the world into their country every year. In cases like these, we will usually find that children adjust faster to their new surroundings than the parents do. If we look at an immigrant family three years after they have moved, we most likely find the children have grasped the new language and are able to speak fluently, whereas the parents are still struggling. Most of the time, immigrant adults will

never learn a second language like their children, no matter how long they have been living away from their native country.

...even in ideal acquisition situations, very few adults seem to reach native-like proficiency in using a second language. There are individuals who can achieve great expertise in writing, but not in speaking. One example is the author Joseph Conrad, whose novels have reported to have become classics in English literature, but whose English speech is reported to have retained the strong Polish accent of his first language.<sup>17</sup>

This might suggest that some features (eg. vocabulary, grammar) of a second language are easier to acquire than others (eg. phonology). With many observations such as these, this puts forth the theory that, after a critical period has passed (around puberty), it becomes very difficult to acquire another language fully.

Having observed many families like these in Canada, one can conclude that children are indeed gifted language learners, and that environment plays a key role in the language one learns. Take these situations for example:

The [American] businessman looks enviously at his children, admiring their impressive ability to learn Japanese. In spite of attending an American school, they have "picked up" enough Japanese to be included all the activities of the neighbouring children. They play with other children, talk about their favourite comic books, order their own food in restaurants, and they do this in what sounds to him like native Japanese pronunciation.

His wife spent most of her time at home, but was warmly welcomed by her neighbours. One local woman who wanted to practice her English was happy to teach her some Japanese. This gave her enough Japanese to have conversations when she was invited over to the homes of other neighbours for tea and demonstrations of flower arranging. She quickly gained enough ability to do the shopping and banking; and although she made many grammatical errors, she was easily understood and effective.

In Toronto, the Vietnamese carpenter's assistant has learned English that is highly adapted to his work needs. He knows all the technical terms used in house construction, even words that are unfamiliar to native speakers of English. But most of his knowledge is receptive, because he mostly takes orders from his boss and then carries them out. Even though his boss would like to give him greater responsibilities as a foreman, a promotion is not possible because he has not developed enough oral proficiency to issue orders in English.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Yule, George. *The Study of Language*: New York, NY, Cambridge University Press. 1985 p.205

<sup>18</sup> *In Other Words* pp.204-205



#### 4b. Theories on Language Learning



Up to this point, we've looked at the differences between 'acquiring' a language in and learning a language. Stephen Krashen defined language acquisition as "the process by which children unconsciously acquire their native language". Whereas language learning, was defined as a "conscious" process which results only in 'knowing about' the language, that is, knowing the rules, being aware of them and being able to talk about them.

What is being suggested then, is that second (or foreign) language learning needs to be more like the child's acquisition of his native language. A child is never consciously 'taught' the language, nor does he ever consciously set out to learn it. Instead he hears and experiences a considerable amount of the language in situations where the child is involved in communicating with an adult – usually a parent. When we compare it to the method used in traditional forms of foreign language teaching, we see why the method is generally unsuccessful. Traditional teachings concentrate on getting the student consciously to learn items of language in isolation, often unconnected with any real communication situation. The focus was not on communicating, but on a piece of language that might later be used to communicate.

This traditional form leaves no guarantee to the student that an item learnt will successfully be used in communication or remembered for any length of time. Language has to be acquired as the result of some deeper experience than the concentration on a grammar point, just as it is when children learn their first language. Therefore, the more a language learner uses language to communicate, the better he becomes at communicating.



## 5. CULTURE AS A BARRIER TO UNDERSTANDING

*To change your language you must change your life.*

- Derrek Walcott, *Codicil*<sup>19</sup>

*Language is a city to the building of which every human being brought a stone.*

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Letters and Social Aims*<sup>20</sup>

"O.K. class, repeat after me, 'This is a book'", upon which the class dutifully responds, "This is a book." "Good", the teacher says in praise. Placing the book on a desk she then asks: "Where is the book?" in which the student responds, "The book is *on* the desk." "Good, now please give me the book" says the teacher gesturing. The student dutifully hands over the book, guessing that this might be the correct response based on what he could make out of the teacher's gestures and facial expressions.

This exchange is typical of any beginners English (and other language) conversation lessons. We can probably agree, uneventful and tedious as the case may be, that the student is learning a new language. But what exactly is the student learning? What they are learning is this situation is repetition, reproducing the same words as the teacher: "This is a book". Sure, through drills such as these, they learn how to ask the basic *wh*-questions, and to reply using prepositions *in* the bag, *on* the desk, *by* the chair etc... But in a controlled environment such as this, there is a lack of reality. Let us go back to the question "Where is the book?" The point of the lesson is to teach the student how to ask questions, but what is peculiar about this question is that the question is completely staged. In fact, it's not a question at all, because the teacher already knows the already the answer. What the teacher is really saying is, "Show me that you know how to answer the question."

The teacher goes on to "ask" the student: "Please give me the book." Here, the teacher is trying to demonstrate the imperative form of English. Outside of a classroom demonstration this command would strike us, depending on intonation, as anywhere from pleading to abrupt.

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<sup>19</sup> *In Other Words* p160

<sup>20</sup> *The Study of Language* p228

Language and society are in many ways closely linked. Therefore, in order to be really efficient in a language, you have to know culture as well. Unfortunately, culture cannot be taught in a classroom. Which is why teachers face a dilemma when teaching a language. Language learning in school is a

distort[ion] of the reality of language use, because the language taught in school is usually more formal than the language used by native-speakers...we cannot teach a language for long without coming face to face with social context factors...<sup>21</sup>

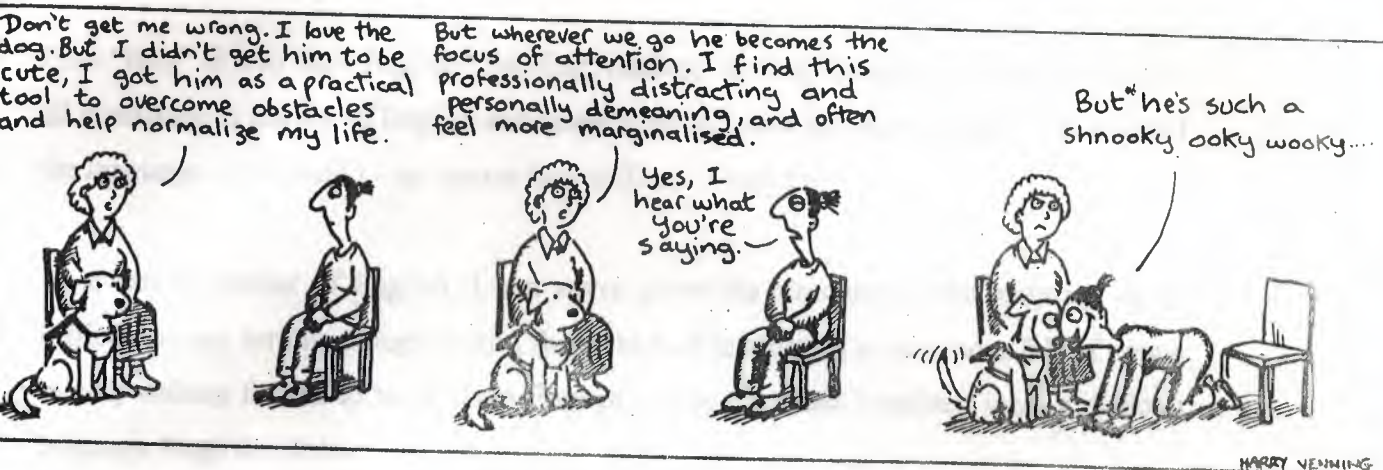
I asked a group of forth year English students at Near East University what this headline meant to them: "KILLER GETS LIFE". The test was to see how what they predicted the article might be about. These students were of course able to read the words, "killer", "gets", and "life", but they were not able to understand what it means without having read the article. The majority interpreted this headline as something along the lines of, a killer gets a new life, that a killer has died and gets a new life. Nobody could guess the correct answer as to what the article is about. To any native speaker, upon reading a headline such as this, it is understood immediately that a killer has received a life sentence in jail for committing a murder.

Have you ever been in situation where you found yourself the only person laughing at a joke on television? Or in a, in a room full of people, with Consider for a moment when you or somebody you were with, was watching a film or television program in a foreign language. When a native speaker watches or even reads comics in their mother tongue, they usually understand everything. This is because they are familiar with the culture and thus they have a better understanding of what is being communicated. On the other hand, when movies and television programs are not in one's native language and you're not familiar with the culture, then you loose the background necessary to understand what is being said. Think back to when you saw a movie in subtitles. There are usually idiomatic expressions that are not unique only to it's own culture and there for cannot be translated without loosing meaning.

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<sup>21</sup> Stern, H.H. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*: Oxford University Press, 1994 p191





Understanding culture also helps understanding literature. When reading literature, it is usually beneficial to know the background of the piece of work, such as the author, his or her previous works, the year the work was published etc... Take for example nineteenth century British literature. The nineteenth century was also known as the Victorian Period. The unique characteristics of the period is reflected in the works of the time. Society was very class oriented, in which novels written during this era tended to write more about aristocracy as opposed to the lower classes. Most of the novels written during the nineteenth century were not very complex in nature. Jane Austen's novel, *Persuasion* is a good example of the style used at the time. Novels written during this period were more interested in characters, family life and social life.





## 6. PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN LEARNING ENGLISH

How “easy” is it to learn English? Spelling, reading, writing, speaking, pronunciation, are all confusing to learner of English and sometimes to native speakers aswell. Yet it’s still the language of the world – no matter how difficult it may be.

As a native speaker of English, I had never given the structure of the language or its difficulties any serious thought until I found myself instructing a classroom full of young minds, waiting for me to teach them English. Only then had I realised what a difficult language English can be.

### 6a. Spelling – Pronunciation Problem



Drawing by Leo Cullum © 1988 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

English is perhaps one of the most difficult languages in the world to learn because of its spelling-pronunciation hurdle. Of course here are some rules to spelling in the English language, but that isn't to say that the same rule applies to all words.

If we look at English spelling, it is easy to understand why there is a need for a phonetic alphabet. Different letters may represent a single sound, as shown in the following instances:

to too two through threw clue shoe

A single letter may represent different sounds:

dame dad father call village many

A combination of letters may represent a single sound:

shoot	character	Thomas	physics
either	deal	rough	nation
coat	glacial	theater	plain

Some letters have no sound at all in certain words:

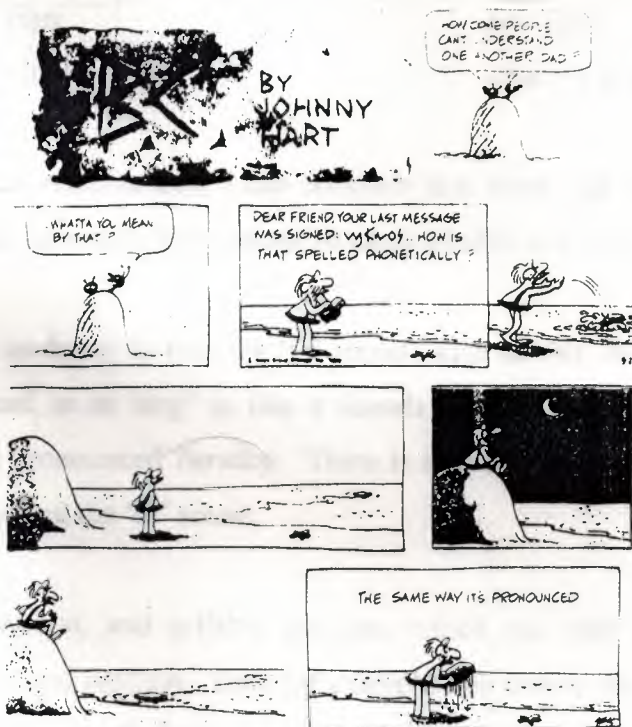
mnemonic	whole	resign	ghost
pterodactyl	write	hole	corps
psychology	sword	debt	gnaw
bough	lamb	island	knot

Some sounds are not represented in the spelling. In many words the letter u represents a y sound followed by a u sound:

cute	(compare coot)
futile	(compare rule)
utility	(compare Uzbek)

One letter may represent two sounds; the final x in *Xerox* represents a *k* followed by an *s*.

Whether we support or oppose spelling reform in English, it is clear that to describe the sounds of English, or any other language, we cannot depend on the spelling of words.<sup>22</sup>



<sup>22</sup> *An Introduction to Language* p183



Turkish, (the nationality of all my students) on the other hand, is a more simple and straightforward language where spelling and pronunciation always coincide. That is, the alphabetic spelling is a representation of the way it's pronounced. Therefore, Turkish students often times have a difficult time at the beginning with spelling, reading and pronouncing English words because of its diverse attributes. Even native speakers can occasionally find themselves referring to the dictionary to get the correct spelling of a word, never mind a learner of the language.

Although I have only spent three months with my beginners English class, I have noticed some commonly mispronounced words, such as:

### WORD

looked'

there, their

stop

Sophie

what

where

tiger

climb

### PRONUNCIATION

*look – ed*

*dair*

*s-top , is-top*

*soap – e*

*vat*

*vair*

*tee – ger*

*clim – b with the "b" stressed*

From my observations, I can conclude that there are features of English pronunciation that may generally be expected to cause trouble to a foreign learner. Among them are:

a) The tendency to read the 'th' sounds such as *this*, *that*, and *Thursday*, to be read as a 'd' sound, as in 'dog' so that it sounds like *dis*, *dat*. The word Thursday on the other hand is pronounced *Tursday*. There is an obvious difficulty with all Turkish students in pronouncing the 'th' sound.

b) Intonation, and syllabic division, which can only be learned through experience, imitation and repetition. Take for example two almost identical questions (literally, except for the last word) that are completely different in meaning: "What are we having for dinner, mother?" And "What are we having for dinner, liver?" Clearly, to a native speaker there is a stress difference between the words "mother" and "liver". If the second



question is read in the same intonation as the first, then it would sound as if the question is directed to a piece of liver. However, when there is a stress added to the word, "liver" the question indirectly asks, "Are we having liver for dinner?"

c) They will also find it difficult to decipher the phonemic difference between certain words, such as leave and live, mat and met, hall and hull, crate and great, where and were. This is a problem that can be solved in time on its own by listening to native speakers.

To illustrate some of these problems mentioned above, I have taken a reading passage that was read in class from their course book, *Active Comprehension 2*, called "A Piece of Cheese".<sup>23</sup>

### A piece of cheese

One day a **crow** flew past a window. The crow saw a piece of **cheese**. It took the cheese. The crow flew to the top of the tree with the cheese.

A **fox** saw the crow and the piece of cheese. The fox was **hungry**. It wanted the cheese. It called to the crow, "Crow, your **wings** are so **beautiful**. You fly faster than any other bird. Your **claws** are prettier than any other bird's claws. Your **beak** is the most beautiful beak in the world. But you cannot **sing**."



The crow was very happy to hear the fox's words. But the crow wanted the fox to hear it sing. So the crow opened its beak to sing. The cheese fell out. The fox picked up the cheese and ran away with it.

The fox said the crow was beautiful. It did not say the crow was **intelligent**.

<sup>23</sup> Till, Julie. *Active Comprehension 2*: Walton Street, Oxford, 1996 p2

I was interested to see how stress, intonation and pronunciation were carried out in this simple passage. I had six students read aloud the same passage. Below are the words they had difficulty with:

### WORD

"piece"

"the"

"fox"

"beautiful"

"wings"

"other"

"words"

### PRONOUNCIATION

"pis"

"da"

"fock"

"be-ew-t-ful with a stress on the 't'"

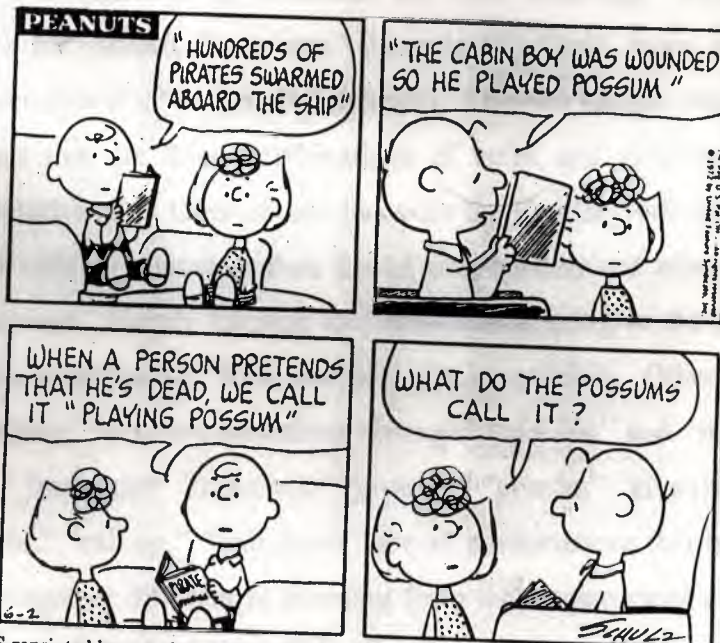
"vings"

"a-der"

"vords"

Some the sentences were read with incorrect intonation such as: "It took the cheese.", where most of the students stressed the word "cheese" to make the sentence sound like a question was asked. In the sentence, "A fox saw the crow and the piece of cheese", the phrase "piece of cheese" was stressed.

### 6b.Idioms



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Idioms are very common in everyday language use. Idioms are similar in structure to ordinary phrases except that they tend to be frozen in form and do not readily enter into other combinations or allow the word order to change. Thus,

- a) *she put her foot in her mouth*  
 has the same structure as  
 b) *she put her bracelet in her drawer.*<sup>24</sup>

Some popular idioms are: "spill the beans", "raining cats and dogs", "like a kid in a candy store" and "close but no cigar". Idioms are special kinds of phrases. It is a group of words which have a different meaning when used together from the one it would have if the meaning of each word were taken individually. This is where foreigners to English run into some problems. They usually don't know that the words have a special meaning together and often misinterpret what someone is saying. Take these very idiomatic expressions for example used to ask a person how they are: "What's up?" "What's new?", "How's it going?", "How's life?"

If you were to ask a student of English, "How's it going?" They will most likely look at you with a blank face and ask, "How's *what* going?", obviously not understanding what the *it* is referring to.

Take a look at this next group of idioms and their meanings: "look out" (beware, be careful), "look for" (seek), "look into" (investigate), "look down on" (despise), "look after" (tend, take care of), "look up to" (admire). Like the idioms mentioned above, these are expressions that are fixed combinations of verbs and particles. The root of the problem in understanding these idioms lies with the English verb and the way the verbs are combined with an almost endless list of prepositions and adverbs to create a new supply of meanings. Merely learning *look* and *out* will not give the learner the idiomatic meaning of the combination "look out" (beware, be careful). Other examples are: "see through something" and "see something through", "go fast" and "stand fast", "run up", "run through", "make up", "make out", "give up", "give in", "give out", "play up", "play down", "call for", "call up", "call down", are all combinations that have to be learned as expressions altogether different in meaning from their component parts. They must be learned and learned the hard way, if English is to make any sense to a foreign learner.



The worst feature about them is that their existence and paramount importance in the process of learning English is not even generally recognised or studied at school.

Foreign learners sometimes have a difficult time being able to decipher the plural form of nouns. Most nouns have a plural form that is changed by adding the suffix-s, -es, -ies; these are known as countable nouns. Uncountable nouns on the other hand, don't change form, that is, they don't take the suffix-s, -es or -ies, as in: water, rice, electricity, money, rain, food, ice etc... The irregular forms can also cause some problems such as child-children, woman-women, tooth-teeth, person-people, mouse-mice etc... Words like these may pose as an obstacle in the beginning, but are quickly overcome with some practice and repetition.

Native speakers of English can rely on their intuition when using articles (a, an, the), but to learners of English, these can often cause problems because many other languages use them quite differently or not at all.

While some languages like French, German and Spanish have articles, they are nevertheless gender articles which can still cause problems with native speakers of these languages when learning when to use articles in English. Turkish on the other hand, doesn't have any articles in the language which makes it difficult for Turkish students to understand where and when they are used. Foreign understanding their use to students and in other languages like French and German where every noun is either masculine or feminine.



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## 7. CONCLUSION

So what can we conclude from all this? To put it simply, learning a second language at a later age is a much more challenging process than a child's learning of a language. We can say that children are gifted at learning languages and that children can learn a second language more easily because they are better language learners. But what makes them so? After all, in almost every skill that we can measure, we normally assume that children are less proficient at learning than adults are. To think most adults are capable at solving algebraic equations and understanding other complexities in life, while a child is learning his numbers and how to read.

Biologists, linguists and social psychologists attribute this skill in children to their brain. "Children's brains are designed to learn languages in a way that adult brains can no longer replicate."<sup>25</sup> This scientific explanation seems legitimate enough, but there are also other factors that hinder an adults learning, and one important factor is time. Children don't have the responsibilities that adults do, like going to work, paying bills, cooking dinner, raising children etc...Hence, they do not have much time for themselves, let alone time to learn a new language. Children, on the other hand, don't have any responsibilities and don't lead a chaotic life and can therefore learn a second language in their spare time.

We then took a look at a child's earliest form of communication, babbling, and found the significance in a child's babbling. As Petito and her colleges at Magill University discovered, babbling between deaf babies and normal babies differ. Hearing infants produce the same pitch and intonation contours as the adults of their environment. Whereas the babbling of deaf babies are more unsystematic, random and non-repetitive.

From the babbling stage we looked at the first word stage, where the child's knowledge of vocabulary is at less than a hundred words. By the second word stage, the child is speaking two word "sentences" with clear syntactic and semantic relations. After the two word stage, the child begins stringing utterances of two, three, four, or five words or longer. Their utterances carry the main message across and could be easily understood.

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<sup>25</sup> *In Other Words* p52



By the time the child reaches their fourth or fifth birthday, they are fluent speakers and improve at a fast rate.

All the while, the child has never been exposed to rules on how to produce grammatically correct sentences. They learn everything on their own. Subconsciously, their little minds are working at warp speed, soaking up everything in their environment like a wet sponge.

We took this examination of a child's acquisition of language and compared it to the difficulties that are encountered when learning a second language. It is believed that learning a second, or third language after puberty is more difficult because of the neurological changes that occur in the brain.

We then looked at how a typical language class is conducted and found the problems that lie behind class instruction for the student when they go out into the real world. Class instruction is staged, and too formal. Therefore it doesn't prepare the students for the real language used by native speakers.

Cultural barriers, as well as other barriers, such as the intricacies within the English language hinder the learning process of a second language learning. Hence, second language learning is rarely as successful as first language acquisition. Ideally, learning a second language would be just as easy as the first, but unfortunately it's just not so. Most of us have taken years of foreign language lessons at school, and found, regardless of the success accomplished at school, that we are still ill-equipped to have a conversation with a native speaker.

As I can say from my own experience, learning a second language is very challenging. In order to learn a second language, you have to be patient and above all practice, practice, practice as often as possible and not be afraid of making any mistakes. Which is, I think, the biggest barrier most adults, and I, have to overcome, is the fear of making a mistake.



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