Second Language Acquisition

Theory, Applications, and Some Conjectures

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Language Acquisition Theory

The following five hypotheses summarize current theory on language acquisition. (For technical discussion and supporting evidence, see Krashen 1994, 2004.)

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis

We have two very different ways of developing ability in another language: We can acquire language, and we can learn language.

Language acquisition occurs subconsciously. While it is happening, we are not aware that it is happening. We think we are having a conversation, reading a book, watching a movie. Of course, we are, but at the same time, we might be acquiring language.

Also, once we have acquired something, we are not usually aware that anything has happened; the knowledge is stored in our brains subconsciously.

The research strongly supports the view that both children and adults can subconsciously acquire language. Also, both oral and written language can be acquired.

Acquisition is sometimes referred to as "picking up" a language. When someone says, "I was in France for a while, and I picked up some French," it means he or she acquired it.

Language learning is a conscious process: When we are learning, we know we are learning and we are trying to learn. Language learning is what we did in school; in everyday language, when we talk about "rules" and "grammar," we are talking about "learning."

Error correction is supposed to help learning. When we make a mistake and are corrected, we are supposed to change our conscious version of the rule. If a learner says, "I comes to school every day," and a teacher responds with, "No, it's 'I come to school'," the learner is supposed to realize that the -s doesn't go on the first person singular form of the verb.

The Natural Order Hypothesis

We acquire (not learn) the parts of a language in a predictable order. Some grammatical items, for example, are acquired early while others are acquired

later. The order is not exact: Not every acquirer proceeds in exactly the same order. But the variation among acquirers is not extreme.

In English as a second language, for example, the *-ing* marker, the progressive ("John is playing the violin."), is among the first grammatical markers (function words) to be acquired, while the third person singular *-s* is acquired later. In fact, some adults who speak English as a second language very well have not acquired this marker.

Research has come up with some surprising facts about the natural order. First, it is not true that "simple" rules are acquired early and complicated rules are acquired later. Some rules that look simple (e.g., the third person singular) are acquired late. Others that appear to linguists to be complex are acquired early. This presents a problem to curriculum designers, who present rules to language students from "simple" to "complex." A rule may look very simple to a grammarian, but may actually be late-acquired.

Second, the natural order cannot be changed. We cannot alter the order in which students acquire language by providing explanations, drills, and exercises. A teacher can drill the third person singular for weeks, but it will not be acquired until the acquirer is ready for it. This explains a great deal of the frustration that language teachers and students experience.

The Monitor Hypothesis

Consciously learned language is only available to us as a Monitor, or editor.

The ability to produce language fluently and easily comes from what we have acquired. The grammar rules that we learned in school have only one function: They act as a Monitor, or editor.

When we are about to say something in another language, the sentence pops into our mind, thanks to our subconsciously acquired competence. Then just before we actually produce the sentence, just before we say it, we scan it internally, inspect it, and use our consciously learned system to correct errors. Sometimes we realize that something we said is incorrect after we say it, and we self-correct using the conscious Monitor.

It is extremely difficult to use the Monitor. In order to use the Monitor successfully, three very stringent conditions must be met:

- The Monitor user must <u>know the rule</u>. This is a very difficult condition to meet. Linguists tell us that they have not yet described all the rules of any language. Authors of grammar texts know fewer rules than the linguists. Language teachers do not teach all the rules in the texts. Even the best students don't learn all the rules that are taught, even the best students don't remember all the rules they have learned, and even the best students can't always use the rules they do remember: Some are simply too complicated.

- The acquirer must <u>be thinking about correctness,</u> or <u>focused on form</u>. This is very difficult to do. It is hard to be thinking about what you are saying and how you are saying it at the same time.

- The acquirer must <u>have time</u>. For most people, normal conversation doesn't provide enough time to think much about grammar rules. A few language experts can Monitor to some extent while conversing, but these are very advanced acquirers who only need to Monitor an occasional rule here and there, and who have a special interest in the structure of language.

Research indicates that we use grammar – that we Monitor – only when all of these three conditions are fully met (Krashen 1982, 2003). For most people, this happens only when they take a grammar test.

The Comprehension Hypothesis

We acquire language when we understand messages.

The Comprehension Hypothesis is the centerpiece of language acquisition theory. It attempts to answer the most important question in the fields of language acquisition and language education: How do we acquire language?

The answer is simple: We acquire language when we understand what people tell us or when we understand what we read. And there is no other way it can happen. While people differ in many important ways, they do not differ in the way they acquire language.

To be a little more precise, we acquire language when we understand messages that contain aspects of language (vocabulary, grammar) we have not yet acquired, but that we are "ready" to acquire.

To be even more precise, let us assume a simplified version of the Natural Order Hypothesis, that we acquire the rules of a language in a linear order: 1, 2, 3 . . . . The question "How do we acquire language?" can be restated this way: "How do we move along the natural order? How do we move from rule 3 to rule 4, from rule 987 to 988?" More generally, if "i" represents the last rule we have acquired, how do we move from "i" to "i+1," where i+1 is the next structure we are ready to acquire?

The Comprehension Hypothesis claims that we move from i to i+1 by understanding input containing i+1. We are able to do this with the help of language we have already acquired, our knowledge of the world, and context. For beginners, pictures are a great help in making input comprehensible, as are the body movements that are at the core of Asher's Total Physical Response method.

Here are two amazing facts about language acquisition: First, it is effortless; it involves no energy, no work. All that is necessary is to understand messages. Second, language acquisition is involuntary. Given comprehensible input, you must acquire – you have no choice.

Corollaries of the Comprehension Hypothesis

If the Comprehension Hypothesis is correct, several "corollaries" follow.

Talking is not practicing.

According to the Comprehension Hypothesis, we acquire language by input, not by output. Thus, more output, more speaking (or writing) will not result in more language acquisition. If you speak French out loud to yourself every morning while driving to work, your French will not improve. Rather, the ability to speak is the result of language acquisition, not the cause.

Speaking can help language acquisition indirectly, however. First, it is part of conversation, and conversation is an excellent way to obtain comprehensible input. What is important in conversation, however, is what other people say to you, not what you say to them. Second, actually using a language, actually speaking it, I suspect, can make you feel more like a user of the second language, like a member of the "club." We return to this topic later.

Given enough comprehensible input, i+1 is present.

If we provide students with enough comprehensible input, the structures they are ready to acquire will be present in the input. We don't have to make sure they are there, we don't have to deliberately focus on certain points of grammar. If this corollary is correct, it means the end of grammatically-based language teaching. It means the end of classes in which students focus on one rule at a time, "master it," and then go on to the next. It means the end of boring lessons and texts, stories whose real objective is to provide practice with the relative clause. It means all that is necessary for language acquisition is input that is interesting and comprehensible.

Language classes should not introduce grammatical rules even along the "natural order": The syllabus should not be based on any grammatical order. Rather, students will acquire the language in a natural order as a result of getting comprehensible input.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

Affective variables prevent input from reaching the "Language Acquisition Device."

The Affective Filter Hypothesis claims that affective variables do not impact language acquisition directly but prevent input from reaching what Chomsky has called the "language acquisition device," the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition. If the acquirer is anxious, has low self-esteem, does not consider himself or herself to be a potential member of the group that speaks the language (see Smith 1988 for discussion of this last factor), he or she may understand the input, but it will not reach the language acquisition device. A block – the affective filter – will keep it out.

The presence of the affective filter explains how two students can receive the same (comprehensible) input, yet one makes progress while the other does not. One is "open" to the input while the other is not.

Application

The Goal of Language Classes

The goal of language classes is to bring students to the point where they can begin to understand at least some "authentic" (real-world) input. When they reach this point, they can continue to improve on their own.

The Beginning Level

At the beginning level, there are several methods that work. They are consistent with the underlying theory outlined here, and the research confirms that they work. Here is what they have in common:

The classroom hour is filled with aural comprehensible input. Teachers help make input comprehensible in several ways. First, they provide context in the form of pictures and realia, and in the use of movement. In the powerful Total Physical Response method, language is taught using commands. The teacher gives the command, models the movement, and the student performs the action. Students are not asked to speak, only to try to understand and obey the command. The teacher's modeling of the movement is the context that helps make the command comprehensible.

Teachers also help make input comprehensible by modifying their speech. The adjustments they make, however, are not rigidly imposed. Rather, teachers naturally tend to talk a little more slowly and use somewhat less complex language as they try to make themselves understood.

The syllabus is organized. A comprehensible input-based method does not mean that we simply go in and talk to students. Comprehensible input-based classes have lesson plans and syllabi, but the syllabi are not based on points of grammar. Rather, they are based on activities (e.g., games, discussions of topics of interest, stories, projects) that students at that level and with that background will find interesting and comprehensible. Thus, an activity that might work for a university-level French class in Boston may not work for an elementary school EFL class in Taiwan.

All that is required of activities in comprehension-based classes is that the activity be interesting and comprehensible. There is no requirement that the activity provide practice with a particular grammatical structure. As the second corollary to the Comprehension Hypothesis stated, given enough comprehensible input, i+1 is automatically provided.

In comprehension-based classes, demands for output are low and students are not forced to speak in the second language until they feel ready. Of

course, students are not forbidden from speaking; in fact, they are warmly encouraged to speak. As noted earlier, speaking per se does not cause language acquisition, but it can invite others to talk to you, and it can lower the affective filter by making the speaker feel more like a member of the group that speaks the language.

In comprehension-based methods, beginning students are able to participate in activities while saying nothing, or very little. Complete sentences are not required, and errors are not corrected. Theory predicts that grammatical accuracy is a result of comprehensible input, not of output and correction, a prediction supported by the research showing disappointing results for error correction (Truscott 1996, 1999).

Grammar is included, but only for older students (high school age and older), not for children. In the Natural Approach (Krashen and Terrell 1983), grammar is done as homework. In TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling), used mostly in high schools (Ray and Seeley 2012), grammar is introduced in brief mini-lessons (pop-up grammar) that present simple rules.

Grammar is included for two reasons: First, to satisfy the curiosity some students have about the structure of language – in other words, as basic linguistics, a subject matter that is interesting and valuable; and second, to fill in some of the gaps left by incomplete acquisition, when conditions for the use of Monitor are met. (See "The Monitor Hypothesis," above.)

As noted earlier, acquisition will give us nearly all of a language, but not 100 percent. Writing that will be read by other people must be 100 percent accurate. Comprehensible input-based methodology for older students therefore provides for the conscious learning of rules that many people, despite extensive listening and reading, may not acquire. Such rules should be used only when they do not interfere with communication, as in the editing stage of composing. It is not expected that rules "learned" in the grammar activities will be available for spontaneous use in conversation. In other words, there is no expectation that "learned" grammar rules will become "acquired."

A Little of the Research

Comprehensible input-based methods have done very well in the published professional research literature. When tests are communicative, students in these classes typically acquire more than those in traditional, grammar-based classes. When grammar tests are used, there is either no difference, or comprehensible input students are slightly better. I present here just a few samples of the research (see also Krashen 1994, 2003).

Ali Isik's study (2000) shows that a combination of 75 percent comprehensible input and 25 percent grammar is more effective than 80 percent grammar and 20 percent communicative activities. Isik compared two groups of 20 high school students, low intermediates in EFL studying intensive English in Turkey. The comprehensible input group devoted seven hours a week to formal grammar study. The rest (22 hours) was TPR and communication-based activities, with minimal correction. Students in this section also read two graded readers per week. The grammar group devoted 24 hours per week (out of 29) to form-based activities, moving from mechanical to meaningful practice, with a focus on correct production: ". . . meaning was secondary and immediate correction was provided" (p. 251). The duration of the study was 36 weeks, a total of about 1,000 hours. Results presented in table 1 show that the comprehensible input group was far superior on all tests (all differences were statistically significant).

Table 1: Comprehensible Input versus Grammar Emphasis

	comprehensible input	grammar
Oxford grammar test:	67.6 (5.0)	45.6 (9.6)
PET: reading	22.25 (1.07)	14.5 (4.26)
PET: listening comprehension	24.9 (2.29)	17.45 (3.3)
PET: writing	19.4 (2.6)	7.5 (3.3)

PET = Preliminary English Test standard deviations in parentheses
from: Isik (2000)

Two recent studies compared TPRS (Ray and Seeley 2012) with traditional methodology for first-year Spanish as a foreign language students in high school in the United States.

Table 2 presents results from Watson (2009), and table 3 presents results from Varguez (2009). In both studies, TPRS groups did significantly better than comparisons with similar backgrounds. In Varquez, a TPRS group with a lower socio-economic class background did as well as comparisons, who were from a high socio-economic background, a finding that suggests that comprehension-based methodology can make up for the effects of social class on school attainment.

Table 2: Results from Watson (2009)

group	N	mean
TPRS	50	63.9 (4.0)
Compar	23	58.2 (7.9)

TPRS group included two classes.
Measure: combination of listening, vocabulary/grammar (fill-in-the blank in sentences), and reading standard deviations in parentheses

Table 3: Results from Varguez (2009)

group	N	mean
TPRS	22	32 (4.7)
TPRS low SES	13	22.3 (38.2)
Compar	48	23.45 (21.2)

Comparison group included two classes.
Measure: combination of listening and reading standard deviations
in parentheses

The Intermediate Level: Sheltered Subject Matter Teaching

As effective as comprehensible input-based methodology is, it is not enough. Methods such as Total Physical Response, the Natural Approach, and TPRS provide students with "conversational" language. Many second language students need more: They need advanced, or "academic," language proficiency (Cummins 1981), the language of business, science, and politics. It is also the language of classical literature. One way to develop academic language is through sheltered subject matter teaching.

Inspired by the success of Canadian immersion programs (see, e.g., Lambert and Tucker 1972), sheltered subject matter teaching derives from one important concept: Subject matter teaching, when it is comprehensible, is language teaching, because it provides comprehensible input. Sheltered subject matter teaching has two important characteristics:

It is not for beginners and not for advanced speakers of the language. In sheltered classes, only intermediate second language acquirers participate. The input will not be comprehensible for beginners. Beginners are better off in TPR, Natural Approach, TPRS, and related methods. When we allow advanced speakers of the language into the class, there is a real danger that the input will no longer be comprehensible for intermediates. When all students are more or less in the same linguistic boat, it is easier for the teacher to make sure the input is comprehensible.

In sheltered classes, students and teachers are focused on subject matter, not on language. This emphasis on meaning, and not form, results in more comprehensible input, and thus more language acquisition. Sheltered subject matter classes are not "EFL math" or "EFL history" but are "math" and "history."

Research on Sheltered Subject Matter Teaching

Research on sheltered subject matter teaching has shown that students in these classes acquire considerable amounts of the second language, doing at least as well as students in regular intermediate language classes, and they also learn an impressive amount of subject matter. Thus, sheltered teaching is very time-efficient; students get both language and subject matter at the same time. Also, sheltered subject matter teaching provides exposure to academic language. I present here one example. (For others see Krashen 1991; Dupuy 2000.)

The first study done with adult students using sheltered subject matter teaching showed that university students at the University of Ottawa could both learn psychology and make progress in a second language at the same time (Edwards, Krashen, Clement, and Krudenier 1984; Hauptman, Wesche, and Ready 1988). Participants, who were volunteers, had already studied one semester of college psychology in their first language (English or French), and had at least low intermediate knowledge of the second language (French or English). The sheltered course was second semester psychology (in Hauptman et. al., one experimental group did sheltered psychology for two semesters), and was supplemented by a half-hour weekly session with a language teacher, who did no direct grammar teaching but focused on comprehension, on content, and on "developing strategies for effective reading and class interventions" (Hauptman et. al., p. 445).

In general, subjects made progress in second language acquisition equivalent to students in regular second language classes and acquired subject matter just as well as students who took the same course in their first language.

Self-Selected Reading: The Bridge to Academic Language

Sheltered classes can be helpful, but they cannot do the entire job. In his analysis of text complexity, Biber (2006) reports that classroom discourse is closer to conversational language than to academic language.

Self-selected reading forms a bridge between "conversational language" and "academic language" (Cummins 1981). This idea is confirmed by data from Biber (1988), who analyzed texts in terms of linguistic complexity, and reported that fiction fell about midway between conversation and academic texts (abstracts of technical journal papers). It is also consistent with the tremendous amount of research showing that those who do more recreational reading show better development in reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. These results hold for first and second language acquisition, and for children and adults.

Research on Recreational Reading

Multivariate studies

Research consistently shows that there is a positive relationship between the amount of free reading done and various aspects of second and foreign language competence when the amount of formal instruction students had is statistically controlled (Stokes, Krashen, and Kartchner 1998; Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Constantino, S. Y. Lee, K. S. Cho, and Krashen 1997).

Case histories

Case histories provide convincing verification of the power of reading. Particularly interesting are the *Sweet Valley* studies. Cho and Krashen (1994, 1995a, 1995b) reported that adult second language acquirers made obvious and impressive progress in English as a second language simply by reading books from the *Sweet Valley* series, novels written for young girls *(Sweet Valley Kids, Sweet Valley Twins)* and teenage girls *(Sweet Valley High)*. Subjects did not attend ESL classes; their main source of English was the novels. All subjects had lived in the U.S. for a considerable amount of time before starting their reading program, but had made little progress in English.

In-school free reading

Studies of in-school free reading include a comparison group that engages in traditional instruction while the experimental group does self-selected reading. There are different models of in-school free reading (sustained silent reading, self-selected reading, extensive reading), but they all have this in common: Students can read whatever they want to read (within reason), and there is little or no accountability in the form of book reports or grades.

In my reviews of the research on in-school free reading (Krashen 2004), I have concluded that with very few exceptions, students in these programs progress in reading at least as well as those in comparison groups, and often do considerably better. The most successful studies are those that last for longer than one academic year. Short-term studies produce positive but less spectacular results, most likely because it usually takes readers some time to settle in and find suitable reading material.

The evidence supporting free reading is especially strong in English as a foreign language (Krashen 2007).

Narrow Reading

Most foreign and second language classes provide students with exposure to a variety of topics. Beginning-level texts typically jump from topic to topic (e.g., shopping, ordering food, families); "readers" usually include several different kinds of short articles (e.g., nonverbal communication; mind, body, and health) and short stories; and introductory courses in literature usually give the student only one short example of each author's work. Only later, in advanced courses, does a second language student "specialize," e.g., by taking classes in 20th-century fiction, and only the most advanced students focus on the work of a single author. The assumption behind this is that exposure to different topics, genres, and styles is beneficial.

I propose that narrow input is much more efficient for second language acquisition; in other words, it is much better if second language acquirers

specialize early rather than late. This means reading several books by one author or about a single topic of interest.

The case for narrow reading is based on the idea that the acquisition of both structure and vocabulary comes from many exposures in a comprehensible context; that is, we acquire new structures and words when we understand messages, many messages, that they encode. Narrow reading facilitates this process in several ways.

First, since each writer has favorite expressions and a distinctive style, and each topic has its own vocabulary and discourse, narrow reading provides built-in review.

Second, background knowledge is a tremendous facilitator of comprehension. An acquirer of English reading a novel about lawyers, who already understands the legal system in the U.S., will understand the book much better than someone unfamiliar with the courts and legal procedures in the U.S. The reader with better background will also acquire more English from the novel, because it is more comprehensible. Narrow readers gain more contextual knowledge as they read narrowly: The more one reads in one area, the more one learns about the area, and the easier one finds subsequent reading in the area (and the more one acquires of the language). Reading a novel about lawyers will make subsequent novels about lawyers or the court system in general more comprehensible, especially if they are written by the same author.

An example of this can be termed "the first few pages" effect (pointed out to me by Mari Wesche; see also Yang 2001). Intermediate students reading a novel in the foreign language often report that they find the first few pages of a new author's work tough going. This is due to the fact that the context, the story, is new, and in addition, the reader has not adjusted to the author's style. After this initial difficulty, the rest of the book goes much easier. Providing only short and varied selections never allows language acquirers to get beyond the initial stage. Instead, it forces them to move from frustration to frustration.

It may be argued that narrow reading produces only the ability to read in one area. This is not true. Deep reading in any topic will provide exposure to a tremendous amount of syntax and vocabulary that is used in other topics. Any technical field, for example, will use "subtechnical" vocabulary, words such as *function, inference, isolate, relation,* etc. (Cowan 1974).

Also, readers typically do not read only one author or in one area for the rest of their lives; they gradually expand their reading. (For evidence that high school students gradually expand their reading interests as they read more, see LaBrant 1958.)

The clearest advantage of narrow reading, however, is that it is potentially very motivating. In any anthology, it is certain that most topics are not of great interest to most readers. The combination of new vocabulary, unfamiliar style, lack of context, and lack of interest in the subject matter insures that

much of this kind of reading remains an exercise in deliberate decoding. In contrast, narrow reading on a topic of real interest has a chance of resulting in the reader really reading for the message, for meaning, in early stages of language acquisition.

The evidence for narrow reading includes the *Sweet Valley High* studies we discussed earlier, as well as the finding that young readers in general like to read books that are part of series, that is, books with the same characters and a continuing story line (Ujiie and Krashen 2002; Krashen and Ujiie 2005).

Integrating Self-Selected Reading into the Curriculum

Self-selected reading can be done as sustained silent reading, mentioned earlier, a little each day. Another possibility is as sheltered subject matter teaching, with the focus of the class being popular literature and the goal being to help students form a reading habit in their second language. (For some suggestions for utilizing self-selected reading for literature study, see Donalyn Miller's *The Book Whisperer*, aimed at native speakers of English but applicable to second language readers as well.)

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The Compelling (Not Just Interesting) Input Hypothesis

It is by now well established that input must be comprehensible to have an effect on language acquisition and literacy development. To make sure that language acquirers pay attention to the input, it should be interesting. But interest may be insufficient for optimal language acquisition. It may be the case that input needs to be not just interesting but *compelling.*

Compelling means that the input is so interesting you forget that it is in another language. It means you are in a state of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). In flow, the concerns of everyday life and even the sense of self disappear – our sense of time is altered, and nothing but the activity itself seems to matter. Flow occurs when readers are "lost in the book" (Nell 1988) or in the "Reading Zone" (Atwell 2007).

Compelling input appears to eliminate the need for motivation, a conscious desire to improve. When you get compelling input, you acquire language – whether you are interested in improving or not.

The evidence for the Compelling Input Hypothesis includes improvement as an unexpected result; there are many cases of readers who had no conscious intention of improving in another language or increasing their literacy, but simply got very interested in reading. In fact, they were sometimes surprised that they had improved.

I included several cases like this in *The Power of Reading* (Krashen 2004, pp. 22–24): Both students and teachers were surprised by the students' clear improvement in English after they became avid readers.

More recently, Lao (Lao and Krashen 2009) described the case of Daniel, a 12-year-old boy who came to the U.S. at age eight from China. Daniel's Mandarin proficiency was clearly declining, despite his parents' efforts: They sent Daniel to a Chinese heritage language school, but it was clear that Daniel was not interested in Mandarin. He was also not an enthusiastic participant in a summer heritage language program supervised by Dr. Lao, even though it included free reading.

Subsequently, Dr. Lao gave Daniel a few books written in Chinese to take home. One was an illustrated chapter book, *The Stories of A Fan Ti.* Daniel loved it. The book was a bit beyond his level, but thanks to the illustrations and his ability to understand some of the text, Daniel was very interested in the stories and begged his mother to read them to him. When Dr. Lao learned of this, she loaned Daniel more books from the *A Fan Ti* series, in comic book format. Daniel begged his mother to read more, from two to five stories every day.

Daniel liked the books so much that he would do the dishes while his mother read to him. Both Daniel and his mother were quite happy with this arrangement. Daniel's Mandarin was clearly improving, but he wasn't aware of it, nor was he particularly interested. He was only interested in the stories.

The Compelling Input Hypothesis also explains why self-selected reading is typically more effective than assigned reading (e.g., S. Y. Lee 2007).

An important conjecture is that listening to or reading compelling stories, watching compelling movies, and having conversations with fascinating people is not simply another route, another option. It is possible that compelling input is not just optimal: It may be the only way we truly acquire language.

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3

A Conjecture on Accent in a Second Language

Scientists use the term *conjecture* when their generalization is based on such flimsy evidence that it does not deserve the label *hypothesis*. This is such a case. My conjecture is that accurate pronunciation in a second language, even in adults, is acquired rapidly and very well. We simply do not use our best accents because we feel silly.

Restated in more respectable terms, we have an "output filter," a block that keeps us from doing our best, from "performing our competence." This block is powerful, and it is difficult – maybe impossible – to lower or weaken it with conscious effort. (The output filter differs from the affective, or input, filter. The affective filter prevents input from reaching the language acquisition device. The output filter prevents us from using what we have acquired.)

Here is the flimsy evidence. Much of it is based on my own experience, but I suspect, after presenting these ideas to a number of audiences and getting reactions, that others have had similar experiences.

1. **Variability:** Our accents in second languages vary, depending on how we feel. We are influenced by the situation, especially whether we feel we are being evaluated. When I speak French to someone who doesn't speak English (or at least not very well), where there is no audience, and I am comfortable with that person, I must say that my accent is not bad. On other occasions, I have been told that I speak French without a trace of a French accent.

Here is an example of the latter, an experience I hope some readers can identify with. I was visiting Ottawa in the early 1980s, meeting with former colleagues, discussing, in French, our work on sheltered subject matter teaching, which had begun when I worked there a few years before. I was very comfortable with the group I was talking with; they included a close friend and my former French teacher. I was doing very well. While I was at the chalkboard, making a point, a stranger entered the room. My mind raced: This man is probably a native speaker of French, or at least much better than I am, and

he probably thinks my French is terrible. My accent and fluency deteriorated immediately and involuntarily. In other words, my output filter went up.

One of the most accomplished polyglots in the world, Dr. Kato Lomb of Hungary, reports that she has had similar experiences. At the time I met her, she was 86, and had acquired 17 languages and was working on Hebrew. I visited Dr. Lomb several times, and we spoke English (her English is excellent). On one visit, my wife and daughter came with me. Dr. Lomb remarked to me that she felt her accent in English had been better when we were alone. She explained that she felt quite comfortable with my wife and daughter, but the fact that she did not know them as well as she knew me caused a small amount of self-consciousness and hurt her performance. Dr. Lomb is an enormously successful language acquirer and an experienced interpreter; if she feels the effects of the output filter, we can be sure others do as well.

2. **Our ability to imitate other dialects of our first language, as well as foreign accents:** Given sufficient input, we can all do these things to at least some extent. The point is that we do not, because we would feel uncomfortable doing so. The output filter holds us back.

I can imitate some aspects of a British accent. I have acquired the rules for doing so subconsciously and have no idea what kind of articulatory adjustments I am making when I do it. I do not, however, use my British accent when speaking to someone from London. My perception is that it would be rude, and even ridiculing, as if I were making fun of his speech, or as if I were representing myself as someone I am not.

Similarly, we can imitate foreign accents in our first language. Obviously, we do not do this in ordinary conversation. It would, we feel, be perceived as rude.

There are domains in which the use of these accents is permitted – in plays and jokes, for example. Even in these situations, however, their use is sensitive. In plays, dialects must be rendered very accurately, and in jokes their use can be demeaning.

Our ability, yet reluctance, to use accents and dialects again shows that we do not perform our competence fully and that there are powerful affective forces holding us back.

3. **The alcohol study:** Guiora, Beit-Hallahmi, Brannon, Dull, and Scovel (1972) asked subjects to drink different amounts of alcohol after eating a candy bar. Not unexpectedly, they reported that subjects' short-term memory decreased with greater consumption. Accent in a foreign language, however, was best after subjects drank 1.5 ounces of bourbon. It was less accurate with both less and more than this amount of alcohol. There was, in other words, an optimal point of inebriation. As most of us know, alcohol has the effect of lowering inhibitions. My interpretation of these results is that alcohol lowers the output filter, at least temporarily. Too much alcohol, however, disturbs control of the speech apparatus.

4. **Stevick's example:** Stevick (1980) describes a Swahili class he taught at the Foreign Service Institute that had three students in it. One was at a significantly higher level than the others. When the top student had to drop the class, the number two student suddenly showed a dramatic improvement. My conjecture is that his output filter lowered, freed from the inhibiting influence of the better student.

Discussion

To understand what factors are at work here, we need to consider what language is for. Sociolinguists tell us that language has two functions: to communicate and to mark the speaker as a member of a social group. A part of language that plays a major role in marking us as members of a social group is accent. Accent has little to do with communication; we can communicate quite well in another language having acquired only some of the sound system. Accent tells the hearer who you are, where you are from, in some cases your social class, and in other cases your values. When we identify with the members of a group, we talk the way they do.

Beebe's review (1985) confirms this. We do not always imitate the speech we hear the most. Children usually talk the way their peers talk, not the way their parents or teachers talk. (In some cases, children do talk like their parents; these children identify with adult values, rather than with those of other children, confirming that it is group membership that counts.)

My conjecture is that accent is acquired rapidly but is not performed, because we do not feel like members of the group that uses it; we are not members of the club (Smith 1988). Either we do not wish to be members or have not been invited to be members. And even after we feel we are at least partly in the group, we can feel suddenly excluded, resulting in a stronger output filter.

If this conjecture is correct, it has interesting implications for pedagogy. Despite the numerous "accent improvement" courses available, there is no evidence that second language accent can be permanently improved by direct instruction. Even if we could improve accent through instruction, however, the effect might be harmful. Getting people to talk like members of groups they do not belong to may be similar to convincing someone to wear inappropriate clothing – a tuxedo at an informal lunch or a jogging suit at a formal dinner.

This conjecture does not suggest that all those with accents in their second language who live in the country where the language is spoken have

failed to become members of society. In fact, it suggests the contrary. Most second language acquirers have good accents. Listen to them carefully. They are rarely perfect if they began the second language as adults, but they typically acquire an impressive amount of the sound system. They certainly do not speak the second language using only the sound system of their first language. The problem is that we usually make "all or nothing" judgments with respect to accent. Either it is native-like or "accented." In reality, many speakers of second languages acquire substantial amounts of the second language accent. In addition, it is likely that we hear them under less than optimal affective conditions; with lower output filters, they may sound even better.

If this conjecture is correct, another conclusion we can draw is that only our "best" accents, produced under optimal conditions, should be considered when judging accent quality or when discussing the limits of adult acquisition of pronunciation.

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