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**ADVANCES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING:
WHY ARE THEY SO MUCH SLOWER THAN ADVANCES IN
TECHNOLOGY?**

Reviewer: Jiří STRAKA

Abstract:

The reason behind publishing the article in this journal is that the author has been actively co-operating with academic workers involved in research in the area of military technology. This article presents some issues of language learning and teaching. The complexity of the process of language learning and language acquisition is clarified. The most frequent problems of adult language learners are approached from the point of view of both language specialists and learners - mostly technically oriented academic workers. Krashen's theory of language learning and language acquisition is explained. The process of language learning is a complicated and almost never-ending process. Each learner expects something different from language learning and each of them has also different pre-dispositions to learn a foreign language. There is no universal or ideal methodology to efficiently teach foreign languages.

1. Introduction

While progress in the area of technology is breathtakingly fast, the progress in research dealing with learning languages does not show any breakthrough findings.

The specialists in technologies generally and in military technologies especially all over the world do understand the necessity of learning languages, or better to say at least the necessity of learning English. But if they start learning English as adults, they often come across various problems. Although usually highly-educated, they have to face the challenges accompanying language learning that they do not understand but try to fight boldly. Even worse problems might occur when scientists have to undergo language exams – this is a frequent and broadly discussed issue in the military context; in fact, STANAG 6001 has triggered lots of nightmares, I know. Since the scientists' ways of thinking are, as a rule, far away from those of language specialists, this article will try to shed a bit of light on the darkness of language learning processes.

2. Which is the best theory in teaching and learning languages?

Although mostly very practical and down-to-earth, language teachers are also involved in different theoretical areas – they for instance try to find out a theory that would help them in effective language teaching. Spolsky [5] specifies even more precisely what the language teachers are looking for: "...simple and effective method that will suit all kind of learners" (Spolsky, [5] 1990, p 1). Such a tempting idea – but can we imagine anything like that? Should there anything like that exist, all people would speak perfect English; but apparently this is not the case. Spolsky himself is very sceptical about finding such a method – he claims that a theory that might suggest only one method must be wrong (Spolsky, [5] 1990, p 2).

3. What makes finding the best theory for language learning so complicated?

In the process of language learning there are too many questions to answer. To start with, we do not have a "standardized learner". Each learner is of different age, family background, education, motivation and so on and so forth (see Fig.1).

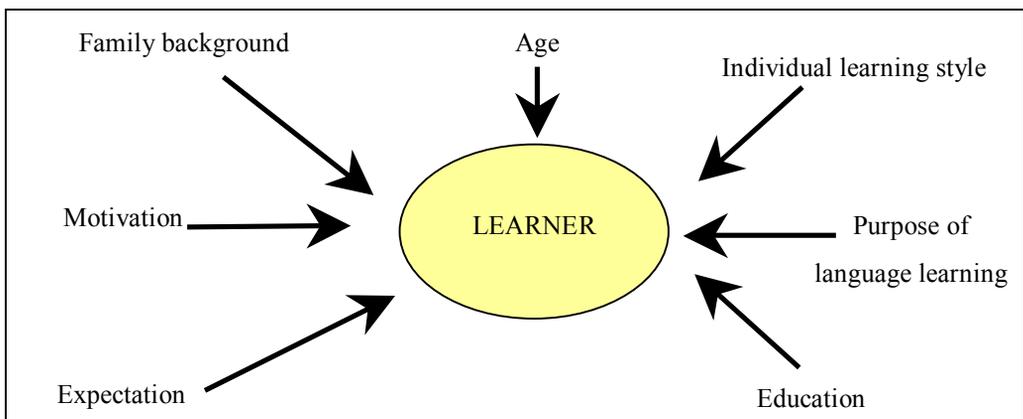


Fig. 1. Factors in language learning

Another thing to be considered is the learning itself – can we exactly find out whether learning has taken place? What do we mean by learning? Do we all have in mind learning of vocabulary? Grammar? Saying basic phrases? This process is in fact hidden and, again, highly individual. Spolsky [5] asks simply and logically: "What is the criterion of having learned?" (Spolsky, [5] 1990, p 3). To be more specific, we will also ask ourselves what we mean by knowing the language (see Fig. 2).

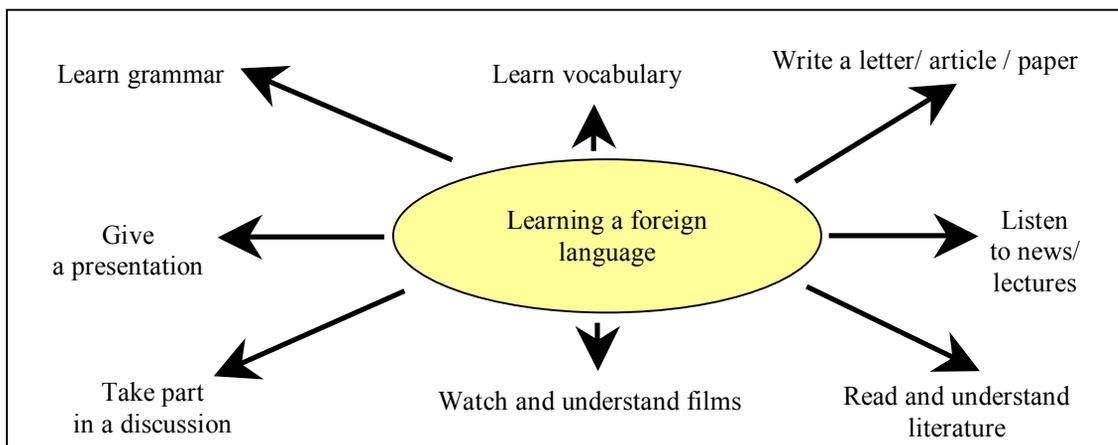


Fig. 2. What is learning a foreign language?

In accordance with language learning theories the understanding of this expression varies a lot. Grammar-translation theories valued highly the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and syntax which we can describe as the knowledge *about* language rather than knowledge *of* language meaning the ability to use it. Another theory called audio-lingual put a lot of emphasis on learning the whole phrases using correct pronunciation. So in its understanding, knowing language was probably demonstrated in memorizing and recalling these phrases. As the approaches to language learning have become more eclectic, the definitions of key terms and their interpretations have also changed. The advent of communicative approaches to language learning has brought a distinction between language *knowledge* and the *ability for use* (Hymes, 1972, in Dubeau [1], 2006, s. 21).

4. Secret of easy learning – age? Natural environment?

One of the thoughts taken usually for granted is that the younger the learner is the easier he/ she learns a language. That of course is true, to certain extent, so to say. But it depends. The experts suggest there is a "critical period" at the end of the puberty, after which it is almost impossible to acquire the second language without accent. But this relates to only one part of a complex system of language – acquiring phonology and, as a result, sounding as a native speaker. Further, Krashen [3] has offered the

Monitor Theory that deals with adult language acquisition. This theory, even with some flaws, is still quite popular nowadays. It offers two systems of developing ability in second language – *language acquisition* that is subconscious and occurs in natural environment, in a similar way as kids learn mother tongue, and *language learning* which is a conscious process of learning, usually happening in a formal environment (Krashen, [3] 1981, p 1). This might suggest that more desirable situation in order to reach language acquisition is being exposed to the informal environment, e.g. in a country where the target language is spoken, and to acquire the language naturally. *Language learning* might seem less effective at the first sight. Generally speaking, children can acquire language better and faster in an informal environment, while adults may benefit more than children from formal learning. But this is a very simplified generalization. In fact, it is not enough to expose the learner to an informal environment, but there must be intake, too (intake: "all input that is understood", Krashen, [3] 1981, p 102). In other words, the learners have to be exposed to appropriate language both in written and spoken forms. But good teaching methods and classroom atmosphere can also create conditions in the classroom that will lead to acquisition: "...the classroom may serve as an "intake" informal environment as well as a formal linguistic environment" (Krashen, [3] 1981, p 47 – see Fig. 3).

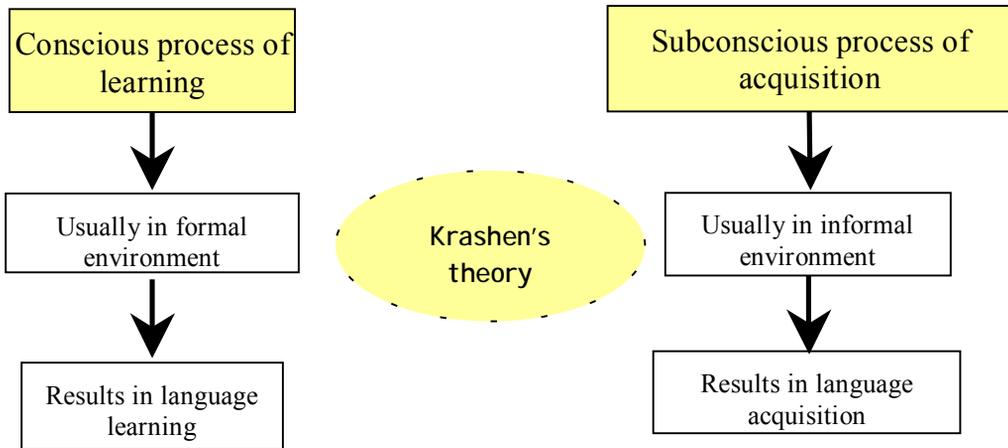


Fig. 3. Krashen’s theory of language learning and acquisition

I believe this is a very important fact to be taken into consideration, since I often hear military professionals dreaming of being sent to an English speaking country and expecting the stay to be panacea. Undoubtedly, any communication in foreign language and especially the one occurring in the environment where the target language is spoken contributes to the improvement of language skills. But on the other hand, we have to be very careful not to overestimate the sole influence of the environment.

5. What you should avoid when learning a language

In the Monitor Theory, which has already been mentioned, Krashen [3] claims that a learner uses his/her conscious learning only as a monitor – his idea is that when we speak in a foreign language, our utterances are "initiated by the acquired system" while "...our conscious learning may be used to alter the output of the acquired system" (Krashen, [3] 1981, p 2). In other words, the Monitor works as a "corrector" inside us. Is it good to have this Monitor? Generally speaking, yes. Good language learners use the Monitor in an optimal way as a supplement to acquisition. On the other hand, there are learners who underuse or overuse it (Krashen, [3] 1981, pp 37-38). We can easily imagine that the underusers will not be able to use the self-correction properly while the overusers can end up in minimal communication, as they will be very anxious about making mistakes (Krashen, [3] 1981, pp 15, 16). So try to think about it in your language learning and communication. You should not be over-concerned about making a mistake, but at the same time you should try to use your monitor to reduce the mistakes.

6. What is your opinion?

I like discussing problems related to language learning with my students and colleagues from other than language departments. They often surprise me and sometimes they fervently defend their opinions that are apparently in sharp contradiction with the theories of language learning and/or teaching. Nevertheless, it is fully justifiable for them to present their opinions and, in a way, they enrich me and they contribute to my better understanding of their ways of thinking.

One of the frequently discussed questions is *how the learners best remember new vocabulary* or expressions. Some of them prefer to hear new words, others prefer to see them written. Still others want to use them in practice as they can best remember them in such a way. These ideas could be summarized in a Chinese proverb: "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand" (Hutchinson, Waters, [2] 1994, p. 128). Moreover, the preferred and most effective ways of learning are also a part of research area that is focused on learning styles. "This research suggests that different learners approach a task with a different set of skills and preferred strategies" (Lightbown, Spada, [4] 1998, p 40 [3]). Being aware of these differences, as well as respecting them is very important for both learners and teachers. Although the learners have to accommodate to the teaching methods used in the concrete language course they attend even if these methods are not in accordance with their learning style, they can learn independently at home, using the methods that best work with them. An important implication of the issues of learning styles for the language teachers is not to consider one concrete method or textbook to be universal for all learners. I fully agree with Lightbown and Spada that "We can all benefit from a variety of learning experiences. However, there is clearly some truth to the intuition that certain ways of

approaching a task are more successful for one person than for another." So feel free to learn the way that is most effective for you and make your teacher familiar with your preferences. If possible, they will try to address your needs in the classroom.

Another idea from the learners that I have often come across is: "*I am nervous when I have to speak in English. What helps me a lot is for example being in a pub and having some alcohol. That puts me at ease and I am much more fluent and confident.*" Believe it or not, the research addresses also this kind of problems. In the sophisticated language of researchers we call it anxiety. The literature gives a lot of examples proving that there is a relation between the success in language learning and anxiety. A significant correlation was reported between test anxiety and success in French taught at an American university. "The correlation was negative ($r = -0.48$) indicating that low test anxiety was associated with greater success." (Krashen, [3] 1981, p 32). As to relating alcohol drinking with lowering anxiety, there was also some research done. The Alcohol Study has shown that Thai sentences were pronounced in the best way after 1 to 1.25 ounces of alcohol. The researchers say that "alcohol induced a "flexible psychic state" with temporary lower inhibitions." But a positive influence of alcohol has been proved only with certain amount of it and it worked only with pronunciation, not with other tasks (Guiora et al, 1972, in Krashen, [3] p 33). So – do not blindly believe the myth of being better at English after a couple of beers.

Still other question that can often be traced in the heads of highly educated learners is: "*Why cannot I master English? I am not stupid, am I?*" In my teaching practice, I have met many people whose academic achievements were excellent, but their language level seemed to somehow petrify on, say, lower-intermediate level. Some of these learners with academic background relatively easily accept it as a fact, but sometimes they have problems to come to terms with it – which is understandable. So what does the research say about this issue? In fact, high IQ has influence on learning things like grammar and vocabulary – in other words the things *about* the language. But in case of language in communication, "research has shown that learners with a wide variety of intellectual abilities can be successful language learners" (Lightbown, Spada, [4] 1998, p 112). So do not worry about a slow progress in your language learning, it has actually nothing to do with your intellectual qualities.

7. Conclusion

This paper addresses the problems in language learning/teaching viewed differently by researchers and language specialists. It has not attempted to cover all possible differences in their perception of language learning/teaching process, but it focused on highlighting some of the most frequent issues discussed by both language teachers and learners.

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Introduction of Author:

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