"The capacity to learn language is deeply ingrained in us as a species, just as the capacity to walk, to grasp objects, to recognize faces. We don’t find any serious differences in children growing up in congested urban slums, in isolated urban villages, or in privileged suburban villas."

(source: Dan Slobin 1994 cited in Fromkin et al. 2003, p.341)

Show what Slobin means by this statement, and then discuss critically whether this capacity to learn language is also available for the learning of a second language.

2000–2500 words

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There has been much controversy as to what line to take in our understanding of first (FLA) and second (SLA) language acquisition. Theorists have taken markedly different perspectives in an attempt to give some overall explanation of these very unique human capabilities. Through three major movements: ‘Behaviorism’, the ‘Nativist’ theories, and the extension to the Nativist approach, the Functionalist theories, linguists and psycholinguists alike have tried to come up with models to explain the human language learning capacity, both in first and second language acquisition. One thing that essentially sets the Nativist/Functionalist apart from the Behaviorists, however, is the idea of the language acquisition device (LAD) as a means of explaining certain observable phenomenon, such as language variability. It is by no means an exclusive division, as elements of each school of thought; structural linguistics/behavioral psychology, generative linguistics/cognitive psychology and constructivism as posited by Brown (2007) are useful in a combined, multifaceted explanation of how all languages are acquired. Slobin (1994 as cited in Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams, 2003) seems to subscribe to this innate ability, by pointing to a universal capacity within all human beings. Yet, in any discussion on language acquisition it is crucial to first consider whether or not FLA and SLA are alike, or share certain parallels. For this, it will be necessary to reflect on the effect of age on the process of acquiring a language, as there is an undercurrent running through this field in relation to age playing a major factor in a learner’s success in learning. This will lead to a look at the ‘critical period hypothesis’. Lastly, socio-linguistic influence will need to be touched upon in order to understand how context affects acquisition. It is the intention of this short exposition to tease out the intricacies of FLA and SLA,
in light of existing theories of language learning and acquisition, and look more deeply into the above stated areas of possible divergence. The discussion will attempt to show that there are some very significant differences between FLA and SLA, particularly in terms of ‘Universal grammar (UG) access’ as proposed by Chomsky for FLA and redefined for SLA by linguists such as Krashen. Also, an attempt will be made to suggest that differences are also marked by learner variability in the form of error, especially within the concept of ‘Interlanguage’ (Selinker, 1972 as cited in Brown 2007), making SLA a unique entity in itself.

Slobin, 1973 (as cited in Ellis, 1994), with his use of the word ‘ingrained’, points to an innate “language making capacity”, which children utilize in their first language acquisition (FLA). I think this places Slobin within the Nativist spectrum of thinking, alongside linguists such as Chomsky, who propose a language acquisition device, or LAD (Brown, 2000). That is, there is a unique, genetic predisposition for acquiring language. This LAD seems to be considered unique to the human species and it is what sets us apart from animals in terms of our interactions, even though as Fromkin, Rodman, Hyams (2003) suggest that animals also have sophisticated systems of communication.

There seems to be some argument as to the evidence to attribute to this ‘language acquisition device’ and some would say that it has been formulated only in response to Behaviorists such as Pavlov, Skinner, and Watson among others, being unable to account for a variety of unexplainable phenomenon. Nativists such as Chomsky (1964, as cited in Brown, 2007) have questioned Skinner’s operant conditioning model on the basis of wanting to discover psychological principles governing learning behavior,
rather than just describe processes, and put forward the LAD idea. Piaget seems to extend upon nativist ideas, but tries to explain theories in cognitive terms (Brown, 2007), which I believe leads to thinking about hierarchical taxonomies of cognitive processes, such as Bloom’s Taxonomy. This taxonomy also accounts for affective (emotional) and psychomotor (physical) skills, which will be taken up later in this discussion in looking at error and social interaction.

The major point that seems to present itself in the nativist perspective is the observation that not all language output is attributed solely to the input that one receives (Cook 1993). As White (1998) states, there is a mismatch of the input data to what comes out as language performance. This is significant, as there appears to be some unexplainable internal force assisting FLA.

Cook (1993) illustrates this clearly and provides fairly convincing support, that the discrepancy between input and output; this unique innate ability that aids in the language acquisition process is what many would refer to as Universal Grammar (UG). Cook (1993) uses Chomsky’s ‘poverty of the stimulus argument’ to account for why L2 learners know how to use aspects such as ‘binding theory’ when it hasn’t previously been overtly learned or taught. Cook’s (1993) use of this argument’ is mainly for SLA, however, can equally be applied to FLA in terms of children acquiring aspects of a language without overt reinforcement or knowledge of particular rules. This can be seen through many things, such as observations of young children hypothesizing plural rules for made up words, such as Berko’s (1958) classic example of the ‘Wug’ test. It illustrates a tendency to infer meaning based on rules that have been acquired through natural language input, but not explicitly taught. How
is it that children apply rules to new situations without being directed to do so? How do children know that a word actually belongs to a linguistic system?

Opponents to the UG idea, give reasons such as UG not being falsifiable (physically possible to make an observation that will disprove the idea), yet even if this were the case, Brown (2007) lists a number of other areas in which FLA cannot be explained so simply by the sole use of scientific method, such as: 1. A child being able to distinguish sounds in the environment, as babies seem aware that loud noises are something to fear. 2. The ability to organize linguistic data, such as pivot grammar. 3. Knowledge that only a certain linguistic system is possible and others not, and 3. The constant evaluation and creation of linguistic systems, that make simple empirical models inadequate.

Given the premise that there is an internal desire to learn or acquire language, the next aspect that comes to mind is in what way do we accomplish this task? Fromkin, et al, (2003) set out a systematic procedure in first language development that begins with developing awareness for the surrounding linguistic environment to the holophrastic (one word sentences) stage, to the telegraphic (sentences lacking some functional or grammatical morphemes) stage, and so on until native like competency of a language is realized. The process includes a babbling stage, which points to a very early experimentation with the communication system in children (and a similar stage in hearing impaired children). This is strong evidence that there is some kind of internal desire to create the sounds or signs of a language, within the surrounding linguistic system.

Yet, it may be argued that this early babbling is just a response to input received, and
that the child just mimics the sound, after a lot of repetitive stimulus, response and reinforcement, or in other words, Pavlov’s classical conditioning (Mangubai, 2007).

After all, this babbling stage begins after significant input has already been given, from around six months of age, increasing in frequency until around the 12-month period (Fromkin et al, 2003).

Slobin’s idea that the capacity for language is worldwide and indifferent of culture supports this nativist view that there is some form of universality that underpins all FLA (Fromkin et al 2003, Brown 2007). In an extension to the LAD idea set out by Chomsky, Slobin (1994 as cited in Fromkin et al., 2003) seems to propose a set of universal rules, that are supported in Cook (1993) by the ‘poverty of the stimulus argument’ to how we acquire a first language.

Cook (1993) discusses FLA in terms of UG being triggered by external stimuli. This idea of being able to gain access to UG is significant to the whole FLA/SLA debate. That is, one of the many arguments in the FLA/SLA distinction is the idea that access to a learning acquisition device is lost as we mature. Theorists in the line of Chomsky maintain that the capacity to utilize UG either diminishes or becomes non-accessible with age. Whereas, more recent theorists such as Krashen believe in the ability to gain access to UG, given the right kind of input, or as Krashen (1989) puts it as part of his input hypothesis; comprehensible input.

A central issue to the debate on whether SLA is similar to FLA, and whether age is a limiting factor is the discussion of the critical period hypothesis (CPH) as described in Brown (2007). With lateralization of the brain, as we get older, there is a loss of plasticity, which means that there is a loss in the neural pathways in the brain that
help us remember things, or make connections and understandings. Generally it is agreed that this tends to happen around the time of puberty, but linguists are still in dispute as to exactly when.

The significance of CPH is in terms of gaining native-like proficiency in a target language. Those in favor of the CPH theory will suggest that there is a certain biological cut off point to language acquisition, and consider it a major argument as to why FLA is different to SLA. That is, as Ellis (1994) and Cook (1993) point to, after puberty we lose the capability to access the LAD/language learning faculty, or the innate universals that made learning our first language possible.

So what evidence is there for the CPH? Most point to the so-called “forbidden experiment”, or cases of neglect; those who have been confined, isolated or even those children raised by animals. These cases in some way propose that individuals devoid of usual human social contact have an inability to learn language after a certain period, or have certain cognitive limitations, but those who learned some language during this critical time were able to recover and learn some language. Cases such as Genie and Kasper Hauser have been put forward as support for the CPH, as the children found it difficult to either regain or further their language abilities. However, these cases among others are very sketchy, and don’t provide conclusive proof of a critical period (Ward, 2007).

The loss of the LAD may only be with what DeKeyser (2000 as cited in Brown 2007) refers to as implicit learning, which refers to the ability to learn without overt instruction or conscious effort. This idea seems to point to the CPH as a limiting factor to certain capabilities, but does not necessarily mean that adult L2 learners are
unable to learn their target language to a similar level to native speakers of a language.

I believe that language is complex, and with the assistance of the idea of learning, as opposed to just acquiring, it is possible to become fairly proficient, even after the critical period. This focuses more on McLaughlin and Bialstok’s (1987, 1978 as cited in Mangubhai, 2007) cognitive learning in contrast with Krashen’s Monitor hypothesis. McLaughlin points to the capability of learned knowledge becoming acquired knowledge, and with Bialstok’s functional practice, explicit knowledge can become implicit, which is in direct contrast to DeKeyser and Krashen.

Interlanguage, as adapted by Selinker (1972 as cited in Brown 2007) is an important concept in SLA, as it describes the L2 learner’s pre native-like state, between not knowing a TL and knowing it. It can be thought of as a continuum, starting from the decision to begin an L2 to the time when a learner is confident enough to say they have acquired a language. Richards (1971) implies that the position on this continuum can be determined through the investigation of learner errors.

According to Corder (1967 as cited in Tono 2003), one commonality between FLA and SLA is learner errors. He states that some of the strategies adopted by the L2 learner are similar to that of the L1 learner. This has important implications as it points to a similar processes happening in FLA and SLA. If their errors are similar, then we would be able to utilize ideas from FLA to analyze SL learner’s errors, and therefore know how far L2 learners have advanced within their interlanguage stage. However, one of the many arguments against the similarity of FLA/SLA is that of the L2 learner’s inability to achieve success in their L2, while L1 learners seem to all succeed. To explain this we need to look to a number of different affecting factors that
inhibit success in a second language, such as L1 interference, the variability in learner language and fossilization.

Interference, also referred to as language transfer, is the positive or negative influence that L1 has on the L2. Bhela’s (1999) case study gives evidence that there is a definite influence from the L1 on L2. The study points to a reliance on L1 in responses to questions in the target language (TL), therefore causing errors in the TL, because of differences between languages. According to this idea, the greater the differences between languages, the greater the amount of errors. From this first language interference, we can see that certain errors in SLA are caused by something very different to the regular errors we find in FLA and this L1 interference is something that makes it difficult for many L2 learners to effectively acquire a TL.

In Interlanguage, there can be variation either within the learner’s own framework (cognitive), within a context, or between different situations, and of course over time (Ellis, 1994). It can be either systematic or free variation. The mental state and the situational context will have contributing influence in learner error.

Another factor unique to SLA that makes it difficult for the L2 learner is Fossilization. Brown (2007) discusses this concept as a normal part of the language acquisition process, roughly defined as, the semi-permanent acceptance of incorrect linguistic elements into a person’s second language competence. L2 learners seem to get stuck at a certain stage or with a certain misconception. However, fossilization is not necessarily permanent, as Brown (2007) suggests 'stabilization' as another term to replace it, which allows room for balance and adjustment in language acquisition.

To gain a better understanding of the way in which competence is achieved in
language acquisition, we need to look at not only intra-learner processes, but to the influences of the external environment on a learner. This is where Hymes’ (1972, 1967 as cited in Brown 2007) ‘Communicative Competence’ (CC), later redefined by Bachman (1990 as cited in Brown 2007) as simply ‘Language Competence’, can help. The most significant difference comes in the move away from a grammatical focus, to a more pragmatic one.

I believe functionalist such as Grice, with his work on the cooperative principle and maxims, would maintain that Pragmatic competence underlies the whole process of language acquisition. However, a more balanced view would be it taking up a substantial role within the idea of language competence. Ellis (1994, p.165) defines sociolinguistics (as part of language competence) as “the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts.” For a learner to be successful in their language acquisition, they must be able to not only acquire the words and grammar, but also need to be able to apply it to a certain context, as well as understand the requirements of that context.

In a social context, motivation seems to be a major aspect to consider. With L1 young learners, their ego-centric nature tends to ignore interference that is not consistent with their individual needs, yet parents, at least in the early stages, provide external motivation in the form of praise and reprimands. However, with older L2 learners the acquisition process requires a lot more extrinsic stimulation, to effectively acquire an L2. In my own struggle with Japanese as an L2, I found that intrinsic motivation is stronger in the initial stages, but as time went on, it became increasingly important to get external motivation. Having a real life need to know some expression was a
greater motivating force to remember it. When the need vanished, so did the need to remember the phrase. Use insured activation of competence within me. A little like the triggers that Cook (1994) talked about for UG.

In this discussion it has been necessary to think about FLA and SLA in terms of various theories in linguistics. Although there is still some contention as to the acceptability of the UG idea, it remains a significant consideration in how learners acquire a first and a second language. More precisely, it is the main area of controversy, as some believe that access to the learning acquisition device becomes inaccessible with age. Also the aspect that particularly distinguishes SLA from FLA is the concept of Interlanguage, and support for this comes in the form of learner errors. Moreover, as shown within this essay, language acquisition should not be considered in isolation, but within a social context. So, in light of Slobin’s (1994, as cited in Fromkin et al) statement and consideration of how it can be applied to SLA, I have to say that both FLA and SLA share certain parallels, yet there are very specific differences that must be taken into consideration. When thinking about taking up a second language, it is necessary to understand that the process will be different to your first language acquisition.

Number of Words = 2,928
References


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