# Acquisition vs. Learning of a Second Language: English Negation

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## General Remarks on Theories of Second/ Third Language Learning

Many adults, who are self-conscious about making mistakes, most of the time find learning as second language very difficult. A problem that does not occur with children, as they are totally unaware of their mistakes. Also, the situation in which a second language is learnt may have a great influence on one's success. Many students decide to learn a second or third language 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. Thus, the input is neither a genuine one nor the feedback constant enough. On the other hand, because of the universal characteristics of human language, young adults or adults learning a second/third language, already 'know' much about the underlying structure of every language. This fact can be seen in the stages of second language learning, very similar to those in first language acquisition. Thus, the learning of grammatical morphemes in learning English as a second language proceeds in similar order as in child's acquisition, no matter the system of native language. However, there is a high level of interference from one's native phonology, morphology and syntax in learning a second language by an adult than in the same process within a child up to the critical age (11 years old). The problem with young adults is that these interferences can persist longer or remain permanent with adults learning a second language, as the parameters of the first language are more difficult to reset than in adolescents or children – especially in phonology (foreign accent) and the use of nominative syntactic structures.

The theories regarding second language acquisition are quite debatable, especially because of the clear-cut distinction that has been drawn by Stephen Krashen in respect to the difference between L2 *acquisition* and *learning.* Thus, L2 acquisition is the process by which children unconsciously acquire their native language, while learning stands for the "conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them and being able to talk about them"[1].

- A theory about second language learning states that the principles of the UG (Universal Grammar) count only during the critical period, after which other

[1] Both theories are accepted, although they raise contradictory issues (Krashen 1982: 69).



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learning mechanisms, not specific to first language acquisition, operate in the process of second language learning.

- A second theory proposes that L2 is acquired on the same universal innate principles that govern L1 acquisition, which is why we may find the same stages of development, although the L2 grammar is not completely acquired due to non-linguistic factors that influence it.

**First Language Acquisition vs. Second Language Acquisition**

> The difference between acquiring first/ native language and learning a second/ third one is well-known by anyone who has attempted to learn the latter in school or when visiting a foreign country (Cook 1991: 13).

Even talented language learners, who supposingly should have more easiness in learning a second/third language, may require some instruction or, at least, find a useful dictionary and teaching grammar book. Although extremely fluent in our native language, some of us may have great difficulties in learning a second/ third language. Due to the uniqueness of language, in that there is no other complex system of knowledge more easily acquired, the younger one is, the easier seems to learn a second language. Recent studies have shown that young children who are exposed to more than one language before the age of puberty (that is before critical age), seem to learn all the languages equally well. Many bilingual and multilingual speakers acquired their languages early in life. For example, my brother (who is 18 years old now), started to be exposed to English language input at about the age of 1 year old (the input came from television cartoon programmes and later scientific ones – not translated into Romanian until 2 or 3 years ago). The interesting part is that he learnt English as well or better than Romanian, without any additional explanations. At the age of 6, he surprisingly uttered a Romanian sentence like *Mă duc să iau o fugă* – the correspondent of the English 'I want to take a run', which is indeed correct in English, but totally incorrect in Romanian. This may prove that he indeed is a bilingual child and not only has he acquired both English and Romanian at the same time, but he also alternatively used the two languages as springboard patterns for acquiring them. I strongly tend to believe that he has been more proficient in English language than in Romanian one until the age of 9 or 10.

As a conclusion, while children acquire their native language without explicit learning, a second language is usually learnt, though it may also be acquired or 'picked up' depending on the environmental setting and the input received by the second language learner.

Initially, children use an internal linguistic guide towards any possible external linguistic information in the form of an inner template called Universal Grammar – or UG for short – that "comprises all universal linguistic principles that pertain to all grammars and the way in which these are related" (Chomsky 1986: 56). Universal Grammar is also said to form the basis of all specific grammars of all possible human languages. Two important facts – namely that that UG is universal and also that children do eventually acquire their first language – suggest that the first language input (in this case Romanian) does interact with UG in forming a coherent model towards the target language (English). Children start with a UG-



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driven bio-program and transfer it into the language they are learning, which becomes their native language. In the matter of L2, the learner takes the native language grammar and accommodates it in the form of a second grammar; thus, L1 acquisition goes from bioprogram to 'native-language' grammar while L2 learning proceeds from 'native-language' grammar to L2. There is certainly a rule-based apparatus at work in formulating the L2 grammar – a grammar based on UG, but also to some extent influenced by the parameters of the L1.

> *Acquisition* is a sub-conscious process identical in all important ways to the process children use in acquiring their first language, while *Learning* is a conscious process that results in knowing about language (Galasso 2002: 12).

The way in which a child acquires his/her first language differs in a crucial way from the way in which a young adult acquires a second language. Processes of first language 'acquisition' L1 (Romanian) are somehow fundamentally different from the processes involved in 'learning' a second or foreign language L2 (English). Statistical data taken from child first language acquisition do not in any way resemble those data taken from second language learning. English negation may raise some problems to Romanian-native speakers when acquiring English as a Second Language. This fact can be due to the fact that English, unlike Romanian, never accepts two negative elements within the same sentence. The English utterance will always allow only one negative verb-form, only one negative adverb, pronoun, preposition or words containing negative prefixes and suffixes. The question raised in this study is to what extent does the first language's L1 (Romanian) already-set parameters transfer and potentially interfere with the learning process of a post-critical-period of Second Language Acquisition L2 (English). Whatever drives the initial language acquisition motor for Romanian is no longer operative in the same manner for the student now learning English. The overriding question has been the following: to what extent does Romanian L1 parameterization play a role in English L2 learning?

**Case Study 1**

The study was conducted on 50 young adult students in the Faculty of Medicine, Craiova, who had elementary knowledge of the English language. Their age varied between 19 and 21 years old and the observation period lasted for six months. The time of observation was about two hours per week. Although the subjects had received previous input of the language, their level did not raise above the elementary (almost beginner) one. Due to this fact, they encountered great problems in learning English as a second language. One of them was the problem of learning the particularities of English negation. The study materials used were questionnaires about their previous contact with the English language and the problems they thought it raised to them and also a professional diary, where there were noted all the observations related to their initial level, problems that occurred during the period of the study and also possible causes and solutions.

In the first two months, some of the subjects showed little understanding of the English negation rules, always making assumptions on their native language, namely Romanian. Thus, they frequently used double negation patterns quite



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naturally without realizing the mistakes they were constantly making. As a consequence, they erroneously uttered: (*)'I don't want nothing', probably making assumptions on the Romanian allowed double negation *Nu vreau nimic*, instead of the correct English version 'I don't want anything'. After another stage of approximately one or two months, they began to be conscious about the main difference between English and Romanian (namely that the first one never accepts two negative elements within the same sentence, while the latter may) and the rate of erroneous double negation utterances dropped significantly. If in the first months, there was a percentage of 80 to 90 % incorrect use of the English negation, while at the beginning of the fifth month, the percentage decreased at 50 %. After another month and a half, all of the participants were able to create correct negative English sentences.

The length of the procedure (six months) may be considered quite a long one for some young adults to acquire such an apparently easy grammatical problem as the English negation. The main factor that led to this difficulty in acquiring the English negation was, first of all, the subjects' wrong suppositions based on their first language (Romanian), namely that English also accepts two negative elements within the same utterance. Although, the parameters set by the first language persisted in the first weeks of the study, they were completely reset in the last one and, thus, the students managed to correctly form negative English sentences. The difficulties that the students learning the English negation encountered may be due to the fact that they have passed over the critical age of 11 years old, which is crucial in the process of second language learning. Thus, before this age, children acquire a second or third language in the same way as they acquire their mother tongue. After this critical age, students are strongly influenced by the parameters set by their native language when learning a second or third language. The study performed comes to demonstrate once again that young adults, unlike children, find it more difficult to learn a language that is not a Romance one, because the process of parameter resetting takes more time. A possible cause for this may be that, during the process of learning a second language, a young adult involves rational thinking based on grammatical rules already set by their mother tongue (namely Romanian) and no longer use innate cognitive principles present during the first language acquisition.

**Case Study 2**

The second case study involved 50 children (aged between 7 and 8 years old) within the Arts School, Craiova who started to learn the English language at the age of 5 years old. Their English language knowledge level was an elementary one and as far as grammar was concerned, they had not received any conscious grammatical input. Thus, they were explained briefly the rules of English negation, supported with lots of examples and then they were involved in activities for practicing the new language structure. The observation period was of two months, and the method used was that of face to face interviews with each child and also a professional diary where there were noted all the failures or successes of the children during the process of learning the English negation.



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Even if, at the beginning, the children incorrectly uttered sentences like 'John don't like anything', the problem did not last for too much time. More precisely, the children started to almost perfectly utter the correct English sentences (like 'John doesn't like anything' or 'John likes nothing') after almost one month after the study started. There should be mentioned the fact that they responded very well to reinforcement and imitation, rather than to explanation of the rule. Even so, the mistakes they made did not show that they used their mother tongue as a pattern for learning the English language. They did not have problems in acquiring the simple negation in English, but a few problems regarding the use of 3rd person singular or personal pronouns. This fact indicates the supposition that children before the age of 11 years old do not use their mother tongue as a springboard for acquiring a second language, but they use the same inborn principles as they have used when acquiring their native language.

**Conclusions**

The results of this study may lead to the conclusion that, when learning a second language after the critical period, a person uses different conscious methods based almost 80% on the knowledge of the native language. Thus, the period of resetting parameters undoubtedly lasts longer than in the case of children acquiring a second language, before the critical age/period. English learning is nothing more than an impoverished version of Romanian acquisition as English learning is precisely *Learning* involving tactic cognitive awareness to the subject being studied, whereas children do not really approach and study their L2 in quite the same manner as adults approach and study their L2.

Therefore, after the results of the studies presented above, we have come to the conclusion that Krashen's first theory is more reliable than the second one, meaning that young adults encounter many more difficulties when learning a second language than a child who starts learning a second language before the age of 11 years old. One of the strongest arguments supporting this conclusion is the difference between the period needed by the young adults learning English and the children acquiring the English language, respectively six months and two months. Another important reason why we should agree with Krashen's first theory (namely that the principles of the UG can be taken into consideration only before the critical period, after which other learning mechanisms, not specific to first language acquisition, operate in the process of second language learning) is found in the nature of incorrect utterances both of young adults and of children. Thus, the young adults had problems with assimilating the English negation because they were making strong suppositions on their native language (Romanian), although they were explained the grammatical rules and process. In contrast, children acquiring the English negation did not make mistakes connected to the wrong suppositions connected to Romanian double negation. The causes of their mistakes could have been lack of attention, hyper-activity or unconsolidated previous English knowledge. Anyhow, further studies need to be conducted in order to sustain our findings.



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## L'acquisition et l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère: le problème de la négation dans la langue anglaise

L'acquisition d'une langue étrangère représente un domaine d'activité et de recherche très important qui peut donner des informations sur le processus d'acquisition d'une langue étrangère chez les enfants et en même temps sur la modalité d'apprentissage d'une seconde ou troisième langue étrangère chez les adultes, après l'âge critique. Le but de ce travail est de déterminer les différences mais aussi les similitudes entre les deux processus, respectivement l'acquisition et l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère. Le thème concerne principalement l'acquisition de la négation en anglais avant et après l'âge de 11 ans – considérée comme un âge critique dans la littérature de spécialité. Dans cet ouvrage on présente deux études de cas, le premier qui a impliqué les étudiants à la Faculté de Médecine de Craiova, âgés de 19 à 21 ans, et une autre étude impliquant les élèves d'une école primaire de Craiova, âgés de 7 à 8 ans, tous les deux groupes apprenant la négation dans la langue anglaise. Une seconde ou troisième langue peut être apprise par rapport à l'âge des participants, car les enfants ont tendance à apprendre une langue étrangère approximativement de la même manière qu'ils apprennent leur langue maternelle, tandis que les adultes emploient des stratégies linguistique différentes.

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