



Language Acquisition Through Lifelong Learning Programme

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ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning is a programme funding by European Commission that ensures a large mobility of the European citizens, the achievement of important key competences and a general development of individuals (both at personal and professional level) and institutions from which they come from. One of the main aims of this programme is to create opportunities for languages achievement. In this respect, the second European key competence for lifelong learning refers to this aspect – communication in foreign languages. Learning foreign languages should be a desideratum for all European citizens. In this respect, each one of the three types of educational environments exerts important influences upon each individual in order to determine certain achievements. Mastering a foreign language assures a better insertion in labour market and social integration. The shift of perspective from formal education to the non-formal and informal ones has important influences upon the way in which language is achieved, the ways in which the language is used and the domain in which people apply the acquired competences. The present paper aims to investigate the way in which the Romanian citizens perceive the opportunities offered in this respect by European Commission through Lifelong Learning Programme and the way in which the English language is acquired by various persons while documenting, writing applications, communicating with their project partners, implementing projects and preparing formal post-implementation documentation.

Keywords: Language acquisition, Communication, Educational environments, Competence.

1. Introduction

During the history of linguistics, several theories regarding the ways in which language is internalized or a second language is achieved, produced a lot of debates among specialists in the field. One of these refers to the distinction between learning and acquisition of language and more precisely to the second language - English in our case.

According to Stephen Krashen, learning is the conscious process that is achieved during formal education, while acquisition is a process of internalizing language during non-formal activities, or lessons where communicative method is used. From this perspective, acquisition is the process that is focused on acquiring communicative competences rather than conscious attention paid to grammar structures and formal register. So, acquisition refers to the natural assimilation of language for communication and learning refers to formal study of language rules.

Stephen Krashen made the distinction between learning and acquisition and he identified five hypotheses regarding this subject. These are :

- the Acquisition- Learning hypothesis
- the Monitor hypothesis

- the Natural Order hypothesis
- the Input hypothesis – understanding input
- the Affective Filter hypothesis

The Acquisition –Learning hypothesis refers to the efficiency of unconscious acquisition that put an emphasis on communicative methods and vocabulary. On the other side, learning provides formal knowledge.

The Monitor is defined by Krashen as “the repository of conscious grammatical knowledge about a language that is learned through formal instruction and that is called upon in the editing of utterances produced through the acquired system”¹.

The Natural Order Hypothesis refers to the order in which certain concepts are acquired. The natural order of achieving concepts is independent and consequently, subjects that are supposed to be acquired should be provided in a logical form, starting from simple to complex. This hypothesis is closely related to the following one : the Input Hypothesis.

The input that a learner receives must be a little above the learners’s present skill level and of course, comprehensible for him, not grammatically sequenced, interesting or relevant for his areas of interests and sufficient from the quantitative perspective.

According to Larisa Avram, the input is defined as a factor that contributes to the language acquisition. In this respect, the primary linguistic data (PLD) are filtered through a language acquisition device (LAD) with the purpose of generating language acquisition.



Fig-1. relation between input and output according to Larisa Avram (Avram 2003,14).

The acquisition of language also supposes the existence of motivation for achieving new concepts. The attitudinal and affective factors that influence the process of language achievement are also taken into account. The role of these factors are known as the Affective Filter hypothesis. The communicative methods aim to bring the affective filter very low in order to reduce the anxiety of students, to take them “out of defensive” and to encourage the language acquisition.² In other words, a person with high affective filter will block the input that is directed towards him and will reject acquisition. On the other hand, a lower affective filter will allow the input to get in the language acquisition device and to transform it into competences. Personality characteristics and motivation are interrelated and contribute in an essential manner to this process.

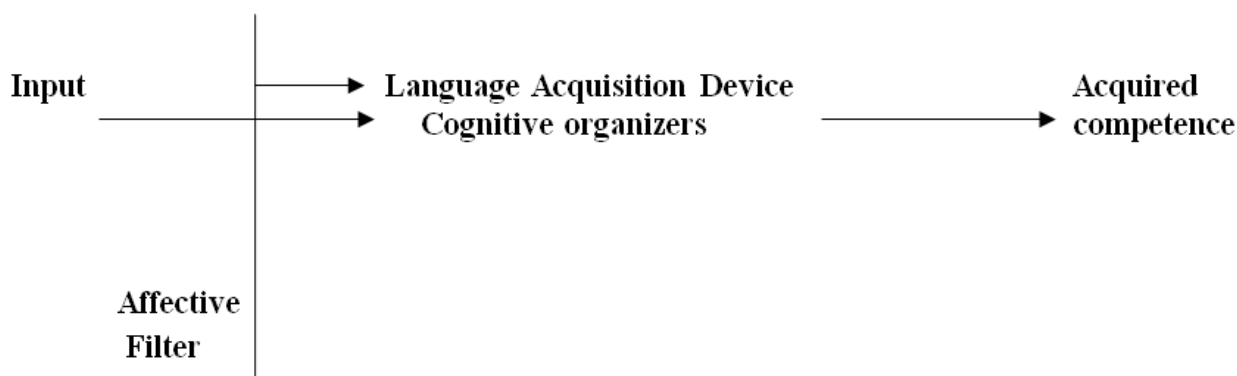


Fig-2. The effect of the Affective Filter in Language Acquisition (Krashen 2002,110)

In conclusion, there are distinctive features that establish the differences between formal processes of language learning and spontaneous language acquisition. The personality characteristics and the aptitudes are essential in language acquisition. They affect in a more or less manner the way in which linguistic input gets to one person.

The role of the first language in the second language acquisition

¹ Richards J.,Rodgers Th.1999, *Approaches and methods in language teaching*, Cambridge University Press,p.18

² Krashen S.and Terrel T.,1995, *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom*, New York.

When learning speaking, at a very early age, children manifest an innate tendency towards a correct, universal grammar. The first language acquired represents a model for the second language. From this perspective, scientists developed studies based on contrastive analysis to determine whether the errors (syntax mainly) are determined by the projections from the first acquired language. The first language surface structure can be used with second language content lexicon inserted³. This thing happens mainly in the case of languages having common roots. While learning English, German students will make fewer errors at the syntactic level than the Spanish ones. The presence of subject in a sentence is not compulsory in Romanic languages. For this reason, the students who acquire English will present the tendency to drop the subject.

According to Skehan, transfer is the influence resulting from the differences between the target language and mother's tongue and their similarities. Transfer can be positive (when a first language structure or rule is used in a second language utterance and that use is appropriate or "correct" in the second language) or negative or the interference⁴.

Specialists mention three criteria that should be met for a transfer to be established :

1. Similarities between native and second language performance – according to this criterion, the second language performance looks as if it is connected to the system of the mother tongue.
2. Inter-group heterogeneity. This means that second language learners of a particular language who have different mother tongues should show differences in performance from one another. For example, Romanian and French learners of English should make some different errors. Meeting this criterion is important to rule out simplification or developmental explanations of an error.
3. Intra-group homogeneity focuses on the consistency of second language performance of a group of learners who do share the mother tongue. For example, there should be some consistency in the English errors of Romanian learners of this language.⁵

From a semantic point of view, the intercultural contact is essential in analyzing linguistic interferences. The need for cultural norms knowledge is essential for language users, in order to judge the social situation correctly and, consequently, to produce appropriate speech.

Intercultural contact affects the motivated behavior of the persons who learn a second language. The sociolinguistic competences strictly affect all language communication between representatives of different cultures, even though participants may often be unaware of its influence.

The reasons for which the intercultural contact is important in language acquisition are the followings :

- Communication with members of other cultures;
- Development of second language competences.

The role of the first language influence is a major topic of second language acquisition research, with multiple lines of argumentation depending on the theoretical framework adopted. The natural order in the grammatical development of second language acquisition is a subject of linguistic comparative study. Specialists highlighted that the same elements of a second language are learned first, it might be assumed that transfer from mother tongue is less important than if it were to find that the order of acquisition is different for speaker of different native languages.

According to Newmark, first language influence is not proactive inhibition, but is simply the result of the performer being "called on to perform before he has learned the new behavior". Newmark suggests that acquisition is the answer for language interferences⁶.

In conclusion, mother tongue plays an important role in language acquisition but is not the only factor that affects it.

1.1. Environments Where the Second Language Acquisition is Produced

The way in which the world evolves and the rapid changes produced at all levels of society, economy, etc., requires a shift of perspective in educational paradigms. From this point of view, the way in which a person acquires and uses languages is very important for his or her insertion in society and labour market.

³ Krashen S.,2002, *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, Oxford: Pergamon, p.72

⁴ Saville-Troike M.,2006, *Introduction in Second Language Acquisition*, Cambridge, CUP, p.19 - when a first language structure or rule is used in a second language utterance and that use is inappropriate and considered an "error".

⁵ Skehan P.,2008, *Interlanguage and Language Transfer* in Spolsky B. and Hult F.M.: *The Handbook of Educational Linguistics*, Wiley – Blackwell,p.419

⁶ Krashen S., 2002,*Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, Oxford:Pergamon,p.71

The interaction that produces changes in a person's system of education can have various sources. Specialists in education classified the types of education taking into account the environment where a person can achieve new knowledge, skills, attitudes. From this point of view, education can be produced in :

1. Formal context
2. Non-formal context
3. Informal context

The shift of perspective mentioned in the first paragraph refers to the stress that nowadays is put upon other environments (except institution like schools, universities) where education is produced, with a special focus on non-formal contexts of education. Recently, Council of Europe highlighted the importance of non-formal contexts of education. The formal education systems cannot alone respond to the requirements of the modern society and consequently, the non-formal educational practices are encouraged. From this perspective, the institutions providing non-formal activities should be permanent partners for lifelong learning education and to make non-formal education accessible for all social and professional categories(COMMISSION 2000). The idea of non-formal environments where certain educational achievements are produced has its roots in Denmark where the philosopher and thinker N.F.S. Grundtvig expressed his thoughts regarding the free educational opportunities available for everyone. The practices used in non-formal activities are specific and they can produce acquisition of certain skills in accordance with the need of the target group, have a focus on clearly identified needs and are flexible in organization and methods used.⁷Non-formal education has been seen as the "ideal" type of education because it is addressed to the real need of training of a person or social group and it comes with real solutions for various well-defined problems from society.

1.2. Lifelong Learning Programme

According to European Commission, Lifelong Learning comprises "all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and employment- related perspective."⁸

The lifelong Learning Programme is mainly focused on non-formal education (Youth in Action, Grundtvig), but it has also an important component of formal education- Erasmus. Linguistic dimension of the programme is reflected by the vocabulary that is achieved by the participants, by the oral communication skills and writing abilities achieved during the stages of the projects (preparation, implementation, evaluation).

The four main objectives of the Lifelong Learning Programme are :

1. Making the mobilities of the European inhabitants a priority
2. Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training systems
3. Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship
4. Enhancing creativity and innovation at all levels of education and training by promoting the acquisition of transversal key competences and by establishing partnerships with other countries.

1.3. Presentation of the Main Sectorial Specific Programmes

1. Comenius Programme is the first component of the Lifelong Training Programme. It is addressed to all public and private pre-university institutions and to all members of the education community carrying out their activities in this field : pupils, all categories of teaching staff, as well as to local authorities, parent associations or NGOs working in the field of education. Comenius financially supports the development of school partnerships, projects for teaching staff, school partnership networks, as well as the attendance to initial and continuous training sessions in order to enhance the quality and to reinforce the European dimension in education.

2. Grundtvig Prs aims to provide educational alternatives and to improve the access of those who, regardless their age, wish to acquire new skills through adult education alternatives. Grundtvig meets the teaching/learning needs of the adults and it is addressed to institutions or organizations ensuring or facilitating their education.

Through specific actions and activities, Grundtvig Programme aims are:

- To increase accessibility, quality and volume of mobilities in Europe, for the persons involved in adult education;

⁷ Kamil M. 2007, *Looking again at Non-formal and Informal Education towards a New Paradigm*, University of Tsukuba, p.11

⁸ Mackiewicz W., 2013, *Lifelong Foreign Language Learning*, <http://www.celec.org/>, pdf, at 29.01.2015

- To improve the quality and to boost the volume of the cooperation between organizations involved in adult education in Europe;
- To assist the persons coming from vulnerable social categories and contexts, especially elderly people and those who left education without basic qualifications, in order to offer them alternative opportunities of education;
- To facilitate the development of innovative practices in adult education, as well as their transfer from a participant country to another;
- To support the development of IT content based on new technologies, the development of the services, practices and innovative pedagogical methods for lifelong learning;
- To multiply the pedagogical approaches and improve the management of the adult education organizations.

3. Erasmus Programme is a sub-action of the Lifelong Learning Programme that allows the exchange of students and professors from European universities. The funded programme for higher education started in 1987 and, in 2007, it became part of Lifelong Learning Programme. The European Commission's statistics mention about 3 million students that have participated to this programme. The specific objectives of Erasmus programme are related to the process of innovation in higher education and to create a specific European area in the higher education domain. Erasmus manages both centralized actions such as : multilateral projects, thematic networks and accompanying measures and decentralised actions like students' mobilities or Erasmus Intensive Programmes.

4. Leonardo da Vinci Programme aims to support the participants of the initial and continuous training activities to acquire and use knowledge, skills and qualifications in order to ease the personal development, to boost the employment capacity and to facilitate the employment on the European Labour market. Improving the quality and increasing the volume of mobilities across Europe of the persons involved in professional education and initial professional training, is one of the specific objectives of Leonardo da Vinci sub-action. Stimulating the cooperation between institutions or organizations providing learning possibilities, companies, social partners and other relevant institutions across Europe and facilitating the development of various innovative practices in the field of professional education and training, except for the superior level are also taken into account by Leonardo da Vinci sub-action. This programme provides the connection between the educational policies and the vocational education training.

2. Conclusions

The analysis of language acquisition through Lifelong Learning Programme represents a theme of actuality in the Romanian educational environment. The main aim of the present paper was to present the way in which people participating at this type of projects produce English language acquisition. All the programmes of Lifelong Learning Programme provide important contexts for language and intercultural development. The shift of perspective from the methods and manuals provided by the Romanian system of education until late '90s to non-formal environments of education is very well sustained by the Lifelong Learning Programme. Even if for the most of the sub-programs language development is not a main purpose, the language acquisition is produced by participating at various stages of project life cycle.

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