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Facilitator of the acquisition of foreign languages

## Awakening the inner linguist<sup>1</sup>

”No approach which relies upon knowledge, upon training, upon the acceptance of something that is taught, is of any use. (...) The failure of any such approach through the intellect has forced me to recognize that change appears to come about through experience in a relationship.”

Carl R. Rogers, 1954

”Without the function of experiencing one cannot create new meanings and new logical patterns and methods, nor can one account for their formation.”

Eugene T. Gendlin, 1962

”Life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans.”

John Lennon, 1980

We all speak and understand a language. Unless people have some disability, they will acquire the ability to communicate verbally with other people. Nobody speaks at birth. We all go through a process – from a stage in which we cannot understand nor speak a language to one in which we can.

This means we all possess the capacity to acquire a language, not to learn a language. It is an innate disposition, a biological drive which all children have. It is an example of what Carl Rogers calls the actualizing tendency (Rogers, 1980, pp. 118-121), an inherent disposition of the organism. Chomsky (2007) suggests that there is a Universal Grammar, an underlying, implicit

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article in Spanish is forthcoming in “En-foco”, 4/2020, <http://www.focusing.es/en-foco.html>”, The Spanish Focusing Institute’s online magazine.



tendency in human beings, and in no other species. In a household, all the people acquire the ability to understand and to speak. None of the pets do.

The specific language a child acquires depends on the context in which the child grows up. Children acquire – and apparently without much effort – the capacity to understand and speak the mother tongue. Later on – after having acquired the language – the majority of them, if they live in places where there are schools, learn the explicit rules of their own language. Under such circumstances they also learn to read and write their mother tongue.

Therefore, **acquisition** is a *natural* process, by which a child who is not disabled, acquires the capacity to understand and speak their mother tongue. It is an illogical process, by which the child implicitly acquires the ability to discern what is correct from what is incorrect. For instance, a child of 5 years of age or more, will most often be able to tell a foreigner what is wrong with what the foreigner says, and what should be said instead. But, almost never is the child able to say why something is wrong, and why the other thing is right. The child is, thus, hardly ever able to state the rules of the language explicitly. However, the child follows the rules as if they were natural. The child does not seem to need the explicit rules in order to be able to manage the language adequately.

The most efficient process of acquisition takes place in a facilitative environment, with strong and caring relationships, in which the child feels safe. The child experiments with sounds, sound patterns, syntax, relationships between words and expressions, declinations of verbs, etc. The process of completely managing their mother tongue begins when a child is born and lasts until approximately five years of age.

We can, thus, observe how close the process of language *acquisition* is to Gendlin's term *experiencing* (Gendlin, 1962, p. 230ff). The child experiences something and signifies that. The process of acquiring one's mother tongue is similar, and also attributes the linguistic label for such experiencing. Gendlin has shown us the importance of experiencing for a therapeutic change to take place. Equally important is the process of acquisition for establishing the management of the vehicle of signification, the management of one's mother tongue.

Experiencing is a *holistic* and *illogic* process. I believe the process of language acquisition also is.



The importance of acquiring the control over one's language is illustrated by the early life of Helen Keller (1880-1968). When she was 19 months old, she became both deaf and blind because of an illness, undefined at the time, but most likely meningitis or scarlet fever. This happened just at the time when she was about to develop her ability to speak. Her ability to think was also seriously affected. She had frequent tantrums and showed obvious and violent signs of frustration. Her teacher, Anne Sullivan, was in charge of teaching - or perhaps better said – facilitating a process by which Helen acquired the ability to understand and use language. Below is a testimony of when Helen experienced the understanding that **things have a name**, and how she felt when she discovered this. It occurred on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1887, three months before Helen had her seventh birthday.

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly.

I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten--a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me (Helen Keller, n.d).

Having acquired the capacity to communicate, the tantrums disappeared. Helen became calm, and could focus on overcoming her disabilities, acquired more communicative capacities, and she even acquired the ability to play the piano.

**Learning** is, on the other hand, a term I use to refer to more formal proceedings of explicit understanding, as well as the ability to name the processes that occur. One *acquires* one's mother tongue – including the implicit management of its complex rules, without being able to verbalize those rules, on the one hand. On the other hand one *learns* the grammar, the spelling, syntax etc of one's mother tongue.

While acquisition is an illogical process, learning is logical. In terms which Gendlin might have employed, “the results of the process of acquisition can be stated in terms acceptable to logical positivism and operationalism. The process of arriving at these results cannot.” (Gendlin, op. cit, p 226).

Thus, we may say that *acquisition* in some way relates to *experiencing*, as *learning* relates to *conceptualization*.



Learning is most relevant after having acquired the mastery of a language. Trying to teach a language in a logical way, before having acquired it, may even be counterproductive, as Rogers (1954) says regarding therapy.

Please pay attention to the “metalogue” between father (F) and daughter (D) below (Bateson, 1972, p 13).

F: ...the point is *no* mere words exist. There are only words with either gesture or tone of voice or something of the sort. But, of course, gestures without words are common enough.

.....

D: Daddy, when they teach us French at school, why don't they teach us to wave our hands?

F: I don't know. I'm sure I don't know. That is probably one of the reasons why people find learning languages so difficult.

.....

F: Anyhow, it is all nonsense. I mean, the notion that language is made of words is all nonsense – and when I said that gestures could not be translated into “mere words”, I was talking nonsense, because there is no such thing as “mere words.” And all the syntax and grammar and all that stuff is nonsense. It's all based on the idea that “mere” words exist – and there are none.

D: But, Daddy...

F: I tell you – we have to start all over again from the beginning and assume that language is first and foremost a system of gestures. Animals after all have *only* gestures and tone of voice – and words were invented later. Much later. And after that they invented the schoolmasters.

So, Bateson implies that we should include the whole communicative situation, when we endeavour to acquire a foreign language, and that it is important that we have a much more holistic perspective in order to acquire it efficiently.

I am not arguing in favour of abandoning a conceptual way of learning, nor to abandon teaching. However, I sustain that learning approaches should support an acquisition approach, which is the foundation. Learning can in no case substitute for acquisition.



## The acquisition of a foreign language

For more than 30 years I have been dedicated to the acquisition of foreign languages by migrants. I have also facilitated other adults' acquisition of foreign languages. I, myself, have acquired the management of a number of languages, to a varying degree of proficiency.

I have experienced that when the acquirer is able to emulate the process of acquisition of one's first language, in a way as similar as possible, then risks of blockages are almost eliminated. In many cases, I have had to take care of traumas and blockages produced by teachers ignoring this important aspect of acquisition – as described above - and because of their counterproductive approaches.

To facilitate a process of acquisition, it is important to simultaneously eliminate previous blockages, as well as to apply an approach as similar as possible to the child's acquisition of their mother tongue. Therefore, we need to understand that process.

## What does the child acquire?

The child acquires the comprehension and the mastery of speaking their mother tongue. This means mastering the sound system, prosody, a reasonable vocabulary, a correct syntax, and conjugate the verbs adequately. Mastering all this takes place in the same order by any acquirer of any language.

The table below gives a brief synthesis of the process

<i>Years/steps</i>	<i>Acquisition</i>
1	Sound system, prosody/intonation, "motherese" (already established at the age of 9 months)
2	Vocabulary (members of the family, animals, vehicles, toys, food, body parts, domestic utensils). At the age of 1 ½ the child knows about 25 words, at the age of 6 - 15,000. (That is an average of 10 new words per day).



3	Phrases and sentence units – telegraphic quality (“There cow”, “Towel bed”) (“Dad hat, Dad <i>wear</i> hat, Dad is wearing a hat.”)
4	Complex syntax, connectors like “and”, “then”, complete phonemic combinations
5	Verb structure

A child says their first words at about one year of age, and tends to have a complete mastery of the mother tongue by the age of five. Before the child says any word, a lot of acquisition has taken place.

- The basic prosody is well established at the age of 9 months. This means that babies from Seville sound like adults from that area, when they do their *motherese*, a kind of language, but with no words. Babies in Japan sound like adults there, the London babies like Londoners, etc.
- A child maintains their ability to produce any sound from any language until 12 months of age. After that the child starts eliminating sounds that are irrelevant for its mother tongue.
- Until this age the child has spent a year focusing on listening, understanding, and only playing with the prosody and the sound structures of the language.
- There is a gradual development from single words, through telegraphic communication, two-word sentences, and then longer sentences, until the child is able to speak complete sentences adequately.
- When the child is four years old, a dominion of the syntax is established, for instance connectors to combine ideas.
- Finally, at age five the total verb structure is mastered.

A language consists of both oral and written elements. When children acquire their first language, they only acquire the oral language. Later they may learn to read and write. Many people never learn that. Because one cannot say something one does not understand, or read before they can write, it is necessary to acquire/learn the capacities listed below in this order:



- Listen
- Speak
- Read
- Write

This is the order in which we acquire a language.

### How? – a continued process of experiencing

Children find themselves immersed in the context of their language, surrounded by speakers of their very mother tongue.

They acquire their language through a process of production of meaning. Assuming that what people around them are saying makes sense, that there is an underlying meaning – they find that meaning. The process of acquisition is a process of discovery. Repetition is important in order to be able to carry out that discovery. To discover one needs multiple examples. One makes a hypothesis, and then needs repetitions to check the accuracy of that hypothesis, verify it or change it. The famous example: “Daddy *goed*” is an interesting one. This linguistic mistake shows how the child has acquired an underlying rule. (Verbs in English tend to have the suffix “-ed” in simple past; “walked”, “talked”.) Now, the child needs to acquire that the verb “go” happens to be irregular. The child may learn this by imitation, possibly by being corrected. Repetition probably also works for implicitly remembering vocabulary, verbal structure and the like.

It may also be that the child deduces the phonemic properties of e.g. a verb to indicate how it is declined. “-alk” (talk, walk, stalk) will take the form “talked” etc. Therefore, it is probable that the child pays attention to the beginning and the ending of the words, both prefixes and suffixes as an indicator of the changing meanings of that word.

From the age of 1 until about 2 ½ the child will do “over-extension” (compensate their lack of active vocabulary, compared to the number of concepts the child knows. E.g. “doggie” may be employed to refer to any known animal (Hilgard, p. 313). Similarly, a skilled adult (who did not know or remember the word “cow”) said: “Milk from a feminine bull.” So, we see that over-



extension is formally incorrect, but it can be highly precise and quite efficient as a means to communicate.

When parents correct the child, they often do that in an empathetic and acceptant way, as if we were programmed to use the basic Rogerian attitudes when engaging in facilitating our children's language acquisition (Ribert, 2017).

### Similarities between acquiring a first language and acquiring a foreign one later

Acquiring a foreign language also tends to take about five years, to reach a mastery of the target language. This is if acquirers focus sufficiently on prosody, making sure that what they say sounds good (as native as possible), spend enough time in a facilitative environment – in which they are exposed to the language they are acquiring.

The acquisition of the first language is basically experiential. The child experiments with sounds, and when they fit, the feedback from the environment is positive, and when the child's production is similar to the verbal production in its environment, the child internalizes this, probably connecting to its Universal Grammar Scheme (Chomsky, 2007). Doing this as an adult, acquiring a foreign language is absolutely possible. Acquirers doing so have, as I have experienced it, been much faster, and have acquired an oral language, far closer to the one native speakers have.

### Differences between the acquisition of a first and a second language

When acquirers are more than one year old, they will have difficulties pronouncing sounds that don't exist in their mother tongue. This does not mean it is impossible, but it will not be as easy for them as it is for babies.

If one is not immersed in the second language one is acquiring, one needs to compensate for that, preferably by being exposed to the new language on a daily basis.





Babies, toddlers and children acquire their capacity to understand and to speak while their brains are developing. Furthermore, they do not possess abstract concepts, as adults do. They also seem quite happy to engage in topics which are concrete, and according to adults, not sophisticated.

Above, I described the ability to acquire language as part of what Rogers called the actualizing tendency. Acquiring a specific language can be regarded as part of self-actualization<sup>2</sup>. Bohart (2013, p 86-87) says. “Self-actualization .., refers to maintaining and enhancing that portion of the phenomenal field which is the ‘self’. ... The self is a conceptual *map* that the organism develops in order to help it cope”. So, acquiring a language means acquiring a map by which to navigate. Another language is another map, different from the first one, with a different logic. The more rigid the first map is, the more difficult it is to acquire the second (and third and fourth and so on).

This also explains the major effort adults have to make, compared to children, in coping with the inability to express what they experience, when trying to do so in a foreign language. In one’s mother tongue it is possible to a much higher degree to express oneself – to engage in the process of self-actualization -, than it is in a foreign language one does not master so well. This tends to affect the attitudes adult acquirers have toward themselves, as well as to the process of acquiring a foreign language.

### The acquirer’s attitudes

The attitude of a child is calm and relaxed. Children have no awareness of the immenseness of the task of acquiring language. They do not even consider it a task. Thus, the reference to John Lennon in the beginning.

Most children acquire their mother tongue within relationships that take care of them. Their linguistic acquisition is simply an integral part of their relationships, and their mastery of language improves the quality of their relationships.

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Mark Harrison who asked me about this at a workshop, and thus helped my thinking on this issue.



## Consequences for adults' acquisition of foreign languages.

Most adults are not immersed in the context of the foreign language they are acquiring. According to my experience, it would not be good, and definitely not for a beginner, to be completely immersed in the context of a language one does not master. You need to be able to express yourself, and you do that in a language you master. This is what I mentioned as part of the self-actualization above.

But you need to be exposed to the language you are acquiring, and preferably every day. The radio, television, podcasts, the internet are ways to get exposed. If you listen to, or watch programs in which the context is familiar, you are able to experiment quite a lot. Examples may be a football match, or a program on cooking, and when you are more advanced, podcasts on topics of interest to you. Listening to music is essential. Humming along with the tune is a good way to compensate for “motherese”. There are very well developed language applications online. [www.duolingo.com](http://www.duolingo.com) is the best I have come across. It is very intuitive, based on an acquisition approach, and it covers a number of languages. There are versions free of charge which work well.

Find a facilitator instead of a “teacher”. A facilitator can help with your sounds, the prosody, and make sure that your attitudes towards yourself and the language acquisition process are not negative. Focusing can be a potent tool to work on such negative attitudes, or possible blockages you have.

## Facilitation

I have argued that both a mother tongue as well as a second language is acquired, not learned. For people who want to be helpful to others who are in the process of acquiring a language, it is important to stop teaching, and start facilitating. In a set of notes (Ribert, 2017), I have briefly delineated the Rogerian attitudes as necessary for the facilitation of foreign languages.



## Conclusions

I have briefly tried to outline the basic principles for the acquisition of foreign languages, inviting you to have a focus on sounds and prosody. Trying to be immersed in a context in which you can listen to the language you are acquiring, as well as giving you an opportunity to play with it. The immersion should be controlled, in particular when you are a beginner, using sentences and expressions that are meaningful to you. I have suggested using music, applications from the internet, as well as looking for someone who can be a facilitator, rather than looking for a teacher.

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