

Linguistics – Third year – Lecture One

Second vs Foreign Language Learning /Acquisition:

Although the terms second language and foreign language are used here, and in most of the literature, interchangeably to mean the non-native language(s) that people learn, a distinction is sometimes made between them. This distinction is functional. It is based on the difference in the function of the non-native language that a person learns in his/her community. A L2 is termed a second language if it plays a social role in the community, i.e. it is a second language to those who have acquired a different language at home. The situation in Nigeria is a good example. In this country, there are several native languages: Fulani, Hausa, Igbo, etc. At the same time, English is also used as a means of communication among the Nigerians who come from different ethnic backgrounds, and hence speak different languages as their mother tongues. It is a lingua franca used for intercommunication, education, government, and business affairs, etc., by people of different native linguistic backgrounds. English is also a second language in the United States to those Americans whose mother tongue is Spanish, Polish Chinese, etc.

The term foreign language is employed to refer to an L2 which does not play a social role in the community of the learner. That is, when there is little, or no opportunity to use it, since there is no social need to do so in the community where it is learned. This is the case of learning French in the United States or Britain, German or Russian, Or English by Arabs living in Arab countries. English does not have an institutional role inside any Arab country.

This functional difference between second and foreign languages affects the degree of acculturation – the introduction to and the adoption of the culture of L2 – that the learning of a non-native language involves. When a second language is learned in its own culture, (as in the learning of English by an Arab in Britain) a great degree of acculturation is involved. On the other hand, in the learning of a foreign language inside the native culture for specific reasons, no such direct exposure, or not much exposure, to the culture of this language accompanies its acquisition.

Another difference that this functional distinction may imply is that which concerns what is learned and how it is learned. L2 learning settings may differ widely. The range from the naturalistic unconscious process of mastering a L2 through mere exposure (such as an Indian worker learning Arabic while working in the Arab Gulf) to the conscious study of L2, where the learner is guided through instruction in the classroom to learn the language. Acquisition has been used to refer to the first of these two, i.e. to the unconscious process, whereas learning is used to refer to the conscious process of L2 learning.

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a subdiscipline of applied linguistics which began in the mid-1960s (Gass and Selinker 2008: 8) with a new interest in learners' errors and language and to the scientific discipline devoted to studying that process. Second language refers to any language learned in addition to a person's first language; although the concept is named SLA, it can also include the learning of third, fourth, or subsequent language. The term acquisition was originally used to emphasize the subconscious nature of the learning process, but in recent years learning and acquisition have become largely synonymous.

The interest in SLA research emanates from its preoccupation with how learners acquire language and use it in communication. It involves the development of the knowledge of a complex system of sound, word, sentence structure, and meaning of any non-native language by children as well as adults, and it also involves the acquisition of the ability to use that system appropriately in different social settings.

It is noteworthy that SLA is closely related to psychology, cognitive psychology, and education. 'SLA has tended to follow in the footsteps of L1 acquisition research both in methodology and in many of the issues that it has treated. It is not surprising that a key issue has been the extent to which SLA and first language acquisition are similar or different processes' (Ellis 1985: 5).

To sum up, it should be made clear that the terms 'SLA' and 'Foreign Language Acquisition' have become used interchangeably, yet the former has gained sway in recent literature and has come to cover both classroom and naturalistic acquisition (Ellis, 1985). Technically speaking, Learning a FL is learning a language that is not generally spoken in the surrounding community

and learning an L2 is learning a language that is spoken in the surrounding community. Algerian students in an English class in Algeria are learning English as a FL.