Analysing and Synthesising a Second Language Learning Environment

From the moment we are born, until the day we die, we are constantly building communication skills to interact with our environment and other humans. Language acquisition is one of the most primary aspects of communication. As a child, acquiring deep meaning and understanding of one’s native language is a difficult process but it is learned through imitation, practice and multiple resources. Learning a second language is much more complex, but a rewarding process for any learner. It is an invaluable skill in today’s increasingly multi-cultural society. Language acquisition is a process that demands constant concentration, memorization, understanding, and ability to apply words, phonics and grammar to construct sentences that have meaning. In Ontario’s English speaking public schools, students are required to learn French from either the first or fourth grade. Reflecting on our experiences of learning French in separate fourth grade classrooms but in the same school district, the environment in which we were taught in, was not rewarding, as there were many setbacks to our learning experience. At this stage of life, we were still trying to grasp the complexities of English as our prominent language, therefore learning French on top of that caused confusion in our understanding and comprehension of both languages. Learning a second language within a classroom possibly one to three times a week does not allow students to fully grasp all of the structural techniques of the language. Thus, this paper will analyze learning a second language within classrooms using theories and perspectives on language, specifically focusing on the following three theories on how language is acquired: behaviourist, where language is learned through imitation and habit formation; acculturation, where language is learned through social and psychological integration of the learner; and interactionist, where language is learned through a process of social interaction (Coelho, 2004). This paper will conclude with our synthesis on how to structure a positive learning environment for learning a second language.

Stephen Krashen’s theory of second language acquisition is comprised of five main hypotheses. In the first hypotheses, the ‘acquired system’ or the ‘acquisition’, he relates the learning experience of a second language to learning one’s native language. “It requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances, but in the communicative act” (Schutz, 2007). He further emphasizes this hypothesis by adding a *learning* system that is more important than simply *acquiring* the language. Knowing the language, having a conscious understanding *about* the language is what is important in second language acquisition.

The environment that we were placed in to learn French was within different classrooms with a ratio of approximately thirty students to one teacher. This type of authoritative instruction was based on a linear model of communication where the teacher was the sole instructor and the students were recipients. We would learn grammar in groups, for example, learning nouns in one class, verbs in another, etc., and this made the application of the language structure difficult as we did not have a strong foundation of the words. We were thus unable to *learn about* the language as our focus was primarily on the phonetics of words.

The second hypothesis that Krashen speaks to is the monitor hypothesis. This looks at the influence of learning on acquisition. “According to Krashen, the acquisition system is the utterance initiator, while the learning system performs the role of the 'monitor' or the 'editor'” (Schulz, 2007). The notion of time, or lack thereof in our experience, is mentioned in this hypothesis. In our experience, the lack of time to learn a new and complex language was restricted as we were only given a few hours a week to comprehend the phonetics of the language. Limited student engagement and participation, lecture-style lessons where words that were to be studied at home were dictated for spelling and understanding, were all results of the lack of time available. Krashen’s third hypothesis, natural order, rejects the notion of grammatical sequencing and indicates that the goal of learning a second language is the language acquisition (Schultz, 2007). The fourth hypothesis, input, is a process of acquiring, not necessarily learning a second language. Krashen simplifies this hypothesis by using the equation ‘i+1’. The ‘i’ represents previously acquired linguistic competence and the ‘1’ represents new knowledge that learners should be ready to acquire (Krashen, 2003). In application to our experience, the ability of the French teacher to articulate the language coherently for us to completely understand and not only focus on the phonetics is deemed as important in this hypothesis. Looking back, we understand that the French teacher had to cover specific expectations in the curriculum, and with the limited time given, it was difficult for them to have students understand and comprehend completely.

Another setback was the lack of resources available. Commonly, our homeroom teacher and parents were unable to assist us in the learning process as they had little to no basic knowledge of French themselves and this caused anxiety and frustration for all. This relates to Krashen’s fifth hypothesis, affective filter, where outside variables influence the acquisition of the second language. Without the support from these variables, our negative experiences of learning a second language within the classroom contributed to us enrolling in French classes after the required standard.

One of our experiences of learning a second language mirrors the behaviourist’s perspective in which the learning process was through imitation and habit formation. “This view emphasizes the importance of the language environment: children imitate the language they hear and receive positive reinforcement in the form of praise or the satisfaction of achieving communication,” (Coelho, pg. 142). Behaviourists, such as B.F. Skinner proposed that language is learned through operant conditioning. This is a notion that requires positive reinforcement in order for the learner to repeat a desired behaviour. On occasion, our French teachers would praise us with stickers, good marks, etc., when we applied our understanding of what was taught. This positive reinforcement encouraged and motivated us to continually try to apply our new knowledge even with the time constraints, lack of student engagement and inability to gather assistance from outside resources. This type of conditioning made our experiences positive, but there were setbacks that made the experience difficult (ie. lack of time, lack of outside resources and assistance, etc.)

Within our different classrooms there were moments when we were called upon to orally reply to a question or statement made by the teacher. Initially, we would articulate the words inaccurately and the teacher would assist us on the correct pronunciation, which resulted in our understanding of the phonetics of the word. According to Coelho (2004), this would be an example of habit formation where we practice correct sentence structure and word pronunciation. We used our prior knowledge of the English language and how words *should be* pronounced and applied that to the French language. Unknowingly, this resulted in what behaviourists call imitation, where we match the sounds of the language that we are familiar with to a second language that we are beginning to learn (Sawani). There were instances when we would be corrected by our French instructors, but because of the many limitations (ie. high student to teacher ratio) this was not an ongoing support technique.

Acculturation, posed by John Schumman is an environmental-oriented theory that states that second language acquisition is the result of acculturation. Acculturation is defined as the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language (TL) group (Schumann, 1986). This model argues that to be successful in second language acquisition, learners must be socially and psychologically closer to the speakers of the second language trying to be learned. According to Schumman, we would not have completely gained the benefits of acquiring French as a second language because we were not entirely integrated into the social and psychological aspect of the language since we were only taught French for a few hours a week. However, in the eighth grade, we were both given the opportunity to visit Quebec on a school trip. This was a great experience because we were able to interact with people who spoke French and we were engrossed in the culture. This gave us a more personal experience to the understanding and dialect of the language. In addition, we found that our pronunciation of certain words improved after the trip. Thus, Schumman’s acculturation model of second language acquisition applied to our experience with learning French in a positive way.

Piaget proposed a universal theory of language development. According to Piaget, the context in which language is learned is unimportant and not influential. Children are constantly constructing their knowledge and “changes in knowledge or cognition are unidirectional and emerge as the biological nature of the human organism unfolds” (Garton, 1992, page 7). Piaget coined the terms assimilation and accommodation, which humans use throughout their lifetime because it assists them with making sense of the world. Assimilation refers to the way in which people change new information so that it fits with their existing knowledge. Whereas, accommodation refers to the way we change our current perceptions based on new knowledge (Siegler & Alibali, 2004). Assimilation and Accommodation assist in second language acquisition once learners already have a foundation or basic knowledge of what words mean to them. For example, while learning French, we would associate similar words in English to French. However, we soon learned that even though the words are spelled nearly identical to the pronunciation, the meanings are different.

Learning through social interaction is more of a transactional model of learning in which all learners are communicating with one another. However, in our experiences, there was little to no social interaction when learning the second language, as we had no opportunity to interact with anyone who spoke fluent French besides the instructor. Interactionists believe that “second language learners need frequent opportunities to engage in extended, purposeful interactions in the target language with adults or more proficient peers,” (Coelho, pg. 146). Without this social interaction, it makes learning a second language that much more difficult to comprehend.

In our experiences, moving into the higher grades of learning French, there were times where we would interact with our classmates in social settings to enhance our ability to carry on a conversation in the second language. Indeed, this is a form of social interaction, but it was not as fruitful had it been with someone who was fluent in the language. Stephen Krashen, who is a theorist and researcher of the acquisition of learning a second language, proposed the idea of comprehensible input. This entails that the second language cannot go too far above the learners’ current development level and the meaning of the words in the second language has to be easily applicable to the learners’ prominent language (Coehl, 2004). This relates to Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development where the difference is focused on what a learner can accomplish individually and what they are able to achieve with help from teachers. This will then enable the learner to have a better understanding of the language and apply it with comfort in a social setting. Unfortunately, in our learning environments, interacting with fellow peers who were also struggling with the language did not help the learning process and added more confusion.

We understand that teaching a second language is a difficult task for the instructor, especially if students are not engaged with the lessons and/or have no interest in learning the language. Having this knowledge, if we were teaching a second language, we would structure our classroom to be more interactive, both physically and virtually. We would move away from the traditional linear model to a transactional model of communication. In terms of language acquisition, using the three theories stated previously in an integrated fashion would enhance student comprehension and understanding in applying the language. Unfortunately, our French instructors only touched upon these theories and perspectives. Had they fully executed a combination of each perspective, the learning outcomes would have been different. With the understanding that French is only taught a few times a week, our new model of the learning environment would stay within the classroom but would also take students’ learning outside of the classroom and into a virtual environment.

In the classroom, we would move away from the teacher lecturing, into a more student-centered learning environment that includes group work, presentations, jigsaws, multi-media, and most importantly, integration with other subjects. For example, when learning grammar, the teacher would initiate the lesson with basic material and place students in smaller groups to learn from one another. Once they have some time in groups, we would come together as a larger class to discuss what they have learned and what they are still questioning. Due to the time constraints, the most important aspect of our new model of teaching a second language is the continued support and learning on a classroom website.

Currently, we are moving towards a technology-based learning environment and teachers are encouraged to utilize technology both within and outside of their classrooms. Instructors who are teaching a second language would benefit from the use of classroom websites and blogs. We would encourage students to participate on the classroom website outside of class time. Student engagement would increase as they are given more time in an environment that facilitates French language acquisition. They would be in a setting that would be familiar to them and would allow them to ask questions with confidence and engage in discussion. This extra time within a virtual atmosphere would enable the teacher to better understand the students’ strengths and weaknesses.

In our new classroom, we would utilize this model by constantly having online discussions about what was taught and what questions arose that we were unable to address in class. We would also facilitate a school-wide website where all students who are enrolled in French classes are able to interact with one another outside of the school. This way, students who have a deeper understanding of the French language can assist those who are struggling. This reflects a transactional model of communication, where students will be able to learn from one another and also learn from their teacher outside of the classroom environment.

Other ways of encouraging student participation and understanding is with the use of audio books and computer programs to assist them in learning the pronunciations of words and sentence structure. Using these innovative forms of technology, students are provided with a private, stress-free environment in which they can practice at their own pace and receive instant feedback through the integration of automatic speech recognition (ASR). This type of program is useful as students are given a sentence; they are to repeat it and then are provided feedback on their pronunciation of the words (Hişmanoğlu, 2006).

“It is undoubtedly clear that learning is not a simple, unitary phenomenon,” (Hunter, 2010). Learning a second language constitutes repetition, habit formation, imitation, innate qualities, accommodation, assimilation and social interaction. Incorporating these learning methods into a second language learning environment, encourages a positive outcome for students, as it will enable them to better understand and apply their new knowledge. It is not only important to incorporate these methods, but to also be aware of the time constraints and understanding that acquiring any new language requires the learner to be fully engaged during class time and motivated to learn beyond the classroom. Second language acquisition embodies the application of behaviourist, acculturation, and interactionist theories. Utilizing these theories along with current technology will enhance the students’ understanding, comprehension and application of a second language whether it be French or any other foreign language.

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