

<<Without language, one cannot talk to people and understand them; one cannot share their hopes and aspirations, grasp their history, appreciate poetry, or savour their songs>> [Nelson Mandela]

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Why this topic of research?

Why did I choose the topic on 'language acquisition'?

I have always thought I was going to do my research work about an illness or something about genetics, but I finally chose language acquisition.

Why did I change my mind to such a different topic?

When I had to choose my topic, I found myself thinking mostly about psychological issues. I had a lot of options in mind and I did not know which one to choose, but I finally decided 'language acquisition' for a few reasons.

First of all, I have always made myself these questions: "How can kids learn a whole language in just a few years and then, when we get older, it gets so hard for us to learn another language? What are the changes from the moment we are born until we grow up that make learning a language so much harder?"

My main objective with this work is to solve these questions. I want to investigate about how babies acquire their first language or mother tongue, and I am also interested in the acquisition of a second or foreign language.

A second reason is my little sister. She is now one year and a half, so it is the time when babies start to babble and try to repeat everything adults say. This situation made me ask myself the questions above again and add a few more to the list: "How can kids get to understand language so fast?". With less than two years of life they may not be able to speak but they can already understand most of the things you say to them.

Another reason is a documentary I saw. Just a few months before choosing the topic, I watched a documentary that was about babies. There it was mentioned (briefly, but

enough to catch my attention) how six-month-old kids are able to differentiate sounds of all languages in the world but when we get older, we can only differentiate the sounds of our own language because these are the ones our hearing is used to.

My final reason is English! With my research work I saw a great opportunity to improve my English and to get more self-confidence with the language looking for all the information and preparing the oral presentation.

I also applied to get my B2 English certificate last June and doing this work in English was a good way of increasing my vocabulary skills and grammatical proficiency.

1.2 Goals

My main objectives are to discover and solve the questions I have always had about language acquisition.

I want to investigate about how babies acquire their first language; how they can acquire two languages at the same time (bilingualism); what makes learning a foreign language so hard, and I also want to prepare some field work about learning English as a foreign language in our city.

1.3 Hypotheses

Here are my hypotheses:

1. What process do toddlers follow to acquire their mother tongue?
2. Do all children (no matter their mother tongue) follow the same process to acquire their first language?
3. Does bilingualism delay language acquisition?
4. What process do we follow to learn a second language? How is it different from the first language acquisition process?
5. Does personal motivation and our daily habits influence our English level?

1.4. Methodology and structure of the project

This project is divided into different parts, following an individual's chronological language acquisition process.

First, I am going to deal with babies' first language acquisition, explaining the main theories and following their development of communication. Most of the examples used in this part of the work are words said by my little sister.

Secondly, I am going to deal with bilingualism, its types and its differences comparing with monolingual language acquisition.

Then I am going to explain the process of second language acquisition and the factors that help to go through it properly.

The last topic is foreign language acquisition and the acquisition of English as a foreign language. To complete this topic, I handed out some placement tests to some *Batxillerat* students to know their English level. Later, I made them do a survey I prepared to compare if the age we start learning English, our motivation and our habits can influence our level.

2. WHAT IS LANGUAGE ACQUISITION?

Language acquisition is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and understand language and to produce words and form sentences as a way to communicate.

All animals communicate, as it is a very important surviving skill, but only humans have the ability to use complex systems of communication, and that makes our species different from the others.

<<When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the “human essence”, the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man>>¹

3. FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The acquisition of the first language (also called L1 acquisition) is the one that begins even before we are born, listening to our mother speaking and starting to differentiate some sounds.

It is the first language we learn, our mother tongue.

<<Language learning is not really something that the child does; it is something that happens to the child placed in an appropriate environment, much as the child’s body grows and matures in a predetermined way when provided with appropriate nutrition and environmental stimulation>>²

¹ Noam Chomsky. *Language and Mind*, p. 88

² Noam Chomsky, 1993. *First Language Acquisition, Nativism, and Learning*, p. 519

We *learn* a foreign language because we do it intentionally with someone teaching us, but we *acquire* a first language because it is an unconscious process that happens to the child - this difference was first established by Krashen.



Retrieved from the article

<http://www.alphadictionary.com/articles/ling001.html>

To acquire a language is something every child does successfully, regardless of the language you are acquiring.

It is the topic of cognitive science that has brought more controversy, especially due to the fact that it happens so quickly. Children before their first year start to understand and produce words, trying to imitate the adult's speech.

3.1. Main Theories

3.1.1. Behaviourist Theory

The behaviourist theory for language acquisition was first developed in 1957 by **Burrhus Frederic Skinner** (B. F. Skinner, 1904 - 1990), an important American psychologist and social philosopher.

This theory exposes how children acquire their native language due to the influence of their environment. It is considered a psychological process where kids are supposed to associate words with meanings because of the behaviour and reactions of the people around them.

The theory is based on a stimulus-response process: when a response has a positive reward in a stimulus situation, children are able to associate the stimulus with the response and save this information for a future use.

<<The behaviourist theory of stimulus-response learning, particularly as developed in the operant conditioning model of Skinner, considers all learning to be the establishment of habits as a result of reinforcement and reward>>³

3.1.2. Universal Grammar

Avram Noam Chomsky (1928), an American linguist and cognitive scientist, criticized Skinner's theory and presented the Universal Grammar theory as a completely new conception of language acquisition.

Chomsky is considered the "father of modern linguistics" and has had a really important role in the research of child language development.

In his theory, Chomsky considered language a human biological characteristic (usually referred to as **biolinguistic approach**). That is, an innate skill by which we acquire an already internalized knowledge that helps through the language development. It is usually known as "mental grammar".

Chomsky based his theory on the properties that all human languages share. He said that human brains contain the rules that are needed to produce language and that all languages have a common structure.

³ Wilga Rivers, 1968

3.1.3. Interactionist Theory

Contrasting with the innatist theory, the interactionist theory sees caregivers as a very important part of a good language acquisition process.

Lev Vygotsky (1896 - 1934), a Russian psychologist, developed a theory where children observe the speech and the interaction of the adults around them as a way of developing the ability to communicate by themselves.

Jerome Bruner (1915), a psychologist born in the United States, believes that learners, no matter their age, learn best and are able to retain more knowledge when it is something they have discovered on their own.

3.2. Stages of First Language Acquisition

3.3. First Language Acquisition process

In the process of acquiring a first language, we can make the difference between the pre-linguistic and linguistic stage:

- **Pre-linguistic stage:** Set of sounds and phonetic activities that babies do without a real meaning.
- **Linguistic stage:** It starts after the first word, when babies go from just sounds to link two or more of these sounds with a specific meaning (people, objects, places, colours, shapes, wishes...).

Children learn one or two words for each two hours they are awake (from ten to fifteen words a day), but they will only be able to use one of these words in their speech; they will need to listen to the other ones a few more times to say they have totally acquired them.

When kids start speaking, they play to modify words and make them easier to be pronounced. This process can happen in different ways:

- Children modify words due to their short-term memory. They cannot remember the whole word so they just acquire the initial or the final part, making them shorter and easier to remember.
- Kids change some sounds of the words. They may unify all the consonants to make the word more harmonic; pronounce less sounds than in the real word because of a syllable simplification; add sounds that did not exist in the original word...

Every kid is different so each one makes their own alterations of words depending on the sounds they find simpler.

Syllable removal examples (Catalan and Spanish):

Chupete - pete ; Diana - Nana ; camiseta - teta ; pelota - pota ; patata - pata

Consonant change examples (Catalan and Spanish):

- Changing **s** for **t**: *si - ti / sentar - tentá...*
- Changing **r** for **l** or **k**: *parque - paque*
- Changing **f** for **p**: *por favor - pavó*

Morphological modifications:

- Turning words from one grammatical category to another (e.g. changing a noun to use it as a verb: *pilota – pilotar*)
- Adding prefixes to some words (e.g. turning a positive word into a negative one: *pintar- despintar*)
- Using the word *no* in any sentence and in any position inside it to deny something, or *yes* in case they want to ask or confirm something.

<i>No quiere</i>	<i>Agua sí</i>
<i>No sueño</i>	<i>Sí jugar</i>

- Using the infinitive form of some verbs instead of the right tense or regularize some irregular verbs.

Vuelto – Volvido

- Changing feminine and masculine words when the genre is just grammatical (e.g. we are not talking about a boy or a girl, we are talking about things that got their genre due to grammatical rules - *el llit, la casa, la cadira...*).
- Using the third person, even to refer to themselves.

Diana juega

Diana come

3.4. Key Concepts in First Language Acquisition

3.4.1. Motherese

People, especially mothers, tend to modify their language when they speak to toddlers, trying somehow to make language more likely for them to understand. This process is known as motherese (or baby talk): the language mothers use to talk to their babies.

It is proved that sentence simplification helps kids to understand and retain language. However, the use of made-up words just duplicates the work for the child because they will not only have to learn the wrong word (the word they are used to listening) but also the correct one when adults decide they are “mature enough” to do it and memorize it.

The 3-6 year old period has a really big influence on the future language development of children, and that is why it is so important to stimulate them in the right way: encouraging them to join adult’s conversations, telling stories and reading to them... or using some methods that help kids to acquire language properly.

3.4.2. Attrition

We define attrition as the deterioration of the mother tongue as a consequence of a long-term emigration from the native-speaking country (years).

We can find attrition in someone who has been out of his or her country for more than 10 years and has not got any contact with his or her L1 (or very briefly) through all that time.



Even though all languages can suffer from attrition, some research proves that native English-speakers are more resistant to it, maybe due to the fact that English is the most extended language all over the world.

Fist language attrition

Retrieved from <http://cup.linguistlist.org/>

3.5. Strategies to favour language acquisition

To acquire a language, kids need to interact with adults and with other children, they also need to be stimulated to learn and feel supported by their parents.

To help children acquire language, adults ought to:

- Make children join their conversations and make the appropriate pauses to let kids do their contributions.
- Ask children about their opinion and interests.
- Let kids speak without interruptions.
- Use sentences where the word that the kid has difficulty to pronounce appears repeatedly so he or she can memorize it.
- Use an appropriate vocabulary.

- Form short sentences and speak slowly.
- Use body language to help the kid to understand.
- Not ask a lot of questions directly, otherwise the kid will feel questioned and will not answer. It is better to use non-finished sentences (i.e. "Look! That is a...") to motivate the kid to speak.
- Act positively and cheer the kid when he or she says something correctly.
- Not compare the kid with other children.
- Read to them and tell them stories.

<<If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales>>⁴

⁴ Albert Einstein

4. LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN A BILINGUAL COMMUNITY

Bilingualism is defined as the ability to speak two or more languages (multilingualism).

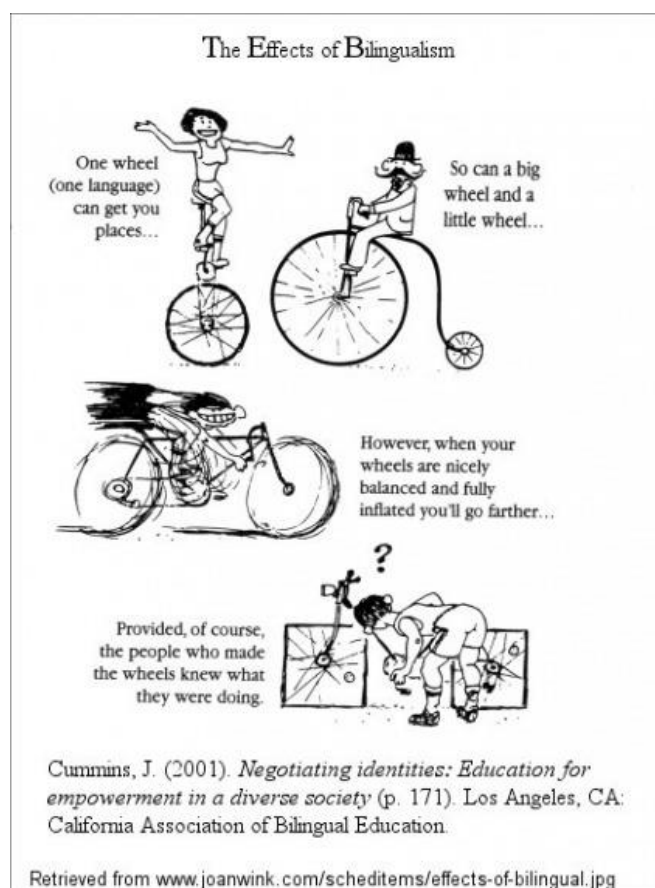
We can differentiate two types of bilingualism depending on the amount of people affected:

- **Individual bilingualism:** Individual attribute of someone who has access to two languages and that is able to use both of them to communicate.
- **Societal bilingualism:** Societal attribute of a community where two languages are used and where most part of the population is able to speak both of them.

4.1. Types of bilingualism

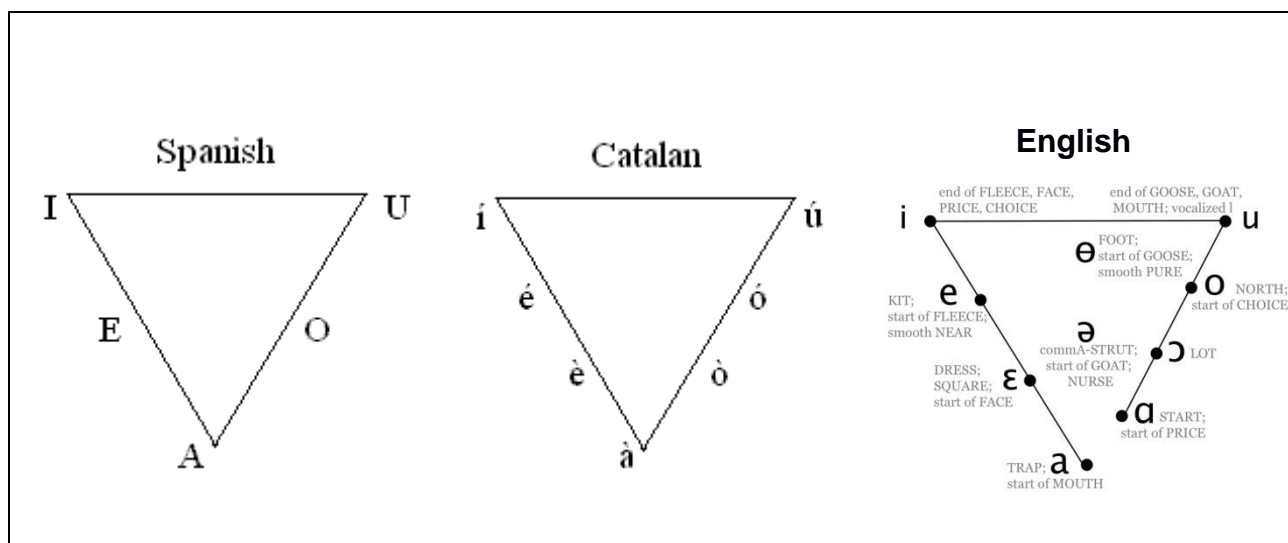
Not all bilinguals speak both languages with the same fluency. We can differentiate three types of bilingualism depending on the fluency people have in the two languages:

- **Balanced bilingual:** equivalent knowledge of both languages.
- **Dominant bilingual:** one of the languages is much more used and the speaker has a significantly better proficiency.
- **Semilingual:** the level of knowledge is insufficient in both languages.



<<One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way>>⁵

⁵ Frank Smith



Vowel sounds of Spanish, Catalan and English

4.2. Early bilingualism

We refer to someone as being early bilingual when he or she has acquired two languages in his or her childhood (before 6 years old).

Children do not make distinctions between the two languages; they just acquire everything we offer to them, differentiating two ways of speaking and adapting their speech depending on their listener.

Children, in their first years, can produce any vowel, consonant or sound (even those ones that seem so difficult to reproduce when we hear them in foreign languages). When children grow up, they will learn to choose the sounds of the language they speak and will forget the other ones. However, if we teach a little kid more than one language since he or she is a baby (when the brain is in a period of full development), those sounds will remain in his or her memory and, in the future, he or she will be more capable to speak those languages.

In the beginning, bilingual children have a simpler mother tongue than monolingual kids of the same age because they have to acquire words from two languages, not just one. But it

is proved that, when they reach the age of 6, they get to the same level as other children and prove to have a better communication flexibility.

Children like to imitate. They imitate people around them when they are speaking, they imitate songs, they imitate sentences they hear on TV... When some of these things are in their second language, they make mixed sentences that contain components of the two languages.

This mix can happen in different ways (considering Spanish and Catalan the languages of the bilingual community):

- Using Catalan words in Spanish sentences: one part of the sentence is made in Spanish and the other one in Catalan.
- Trying to adapt a word in one language to the other one: kids catch the ending of some words in one language (Spanish) and use these endings with words from the other language (Catalan).

For example:

- Ending **-o**: *gat* - **gato** / *gos* - **goso**
- Ending **-ado**: *posar* - **posado** / *agafar* - **agafado**
- Ending **-mos**: *anem* - **anemos** / *tanquem* – **tanquemos**

5. SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Second Language Acquisition (also called L2 acquisition or SLA) is the process by which people learn a second language in addition to their mother tongue.

With this expression, we refer to the non-native language learning that happens while we are living and being exposed to that language environment.

5.1. Second Language Acquisition theories

5.1.1. Krashen's theory

Stephen Krashen (1941) is a North-American linguist and an educational researcher. He works as a linguist at the University of Southern California. He has published more than 485 books and works about second-language acquisition and bilingualism.

Krashen's theory of Second Language Acquisition consists in five hypotheses:

- **Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis**

Krashen made a distinction between *acquiring* and *learning* a second language.

On the one hand, *acquisition* happens naturally due to a subconscious mind process. The subject speaks without paying attention to neither the form nor the grammatical rules (natural communication) but to the communicative act. The interaction among speakers is essential to achieve a proper language acquisition.

On the other hand, *learning* needs a conscious study of language forms and functions. The learned system implies to have a conscious speech where we have to use our knowledge of the correct grammatical rules. It is the language taught as a foreign language in classrooms.

- **Monitor Hypothesis**

Krashen theorizes that a conscious learner has some kind of “internal grammar monitor or editor” that works planning, editing and correcting the speech of the speaker. It requires to have enough time to think, to focus on the grammatical structure and an internalized knowledge of the rules to follow, and that is why it is more effective in our writing than in our speaking.

Many second language acquisition experts agree with Krashen’s statement that teaching should be focused on natural communication and not on how to follow the rules.

- **Natural Order Hypothesis**

This hypothesis states that grammatical structures are *acquired* (and not *learned*) due to a natural and predictable order. It is based on the research that proves how some of the grammatical structures are acquired earlier than others no matter the L1 of the learners or their age.

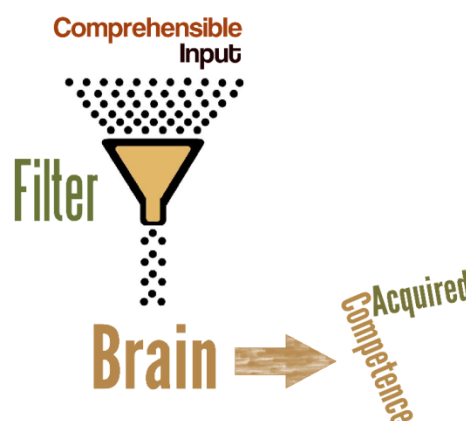
- **Input Hypothesis**

According to this hypothesis, the learner acquires (does not learn) a second language when he or she receives second language *input*. That is to say, they are exposed and are able to understand natural communication situations.

Furthermore, to be able to improve, this input has to be beyond the learner’s language level: $i + 1$, with i being the learner’s proficiency and 1 being the challenge a bit beyond their level. They will be able to understand this input thanks to the context and gestures of the speaker

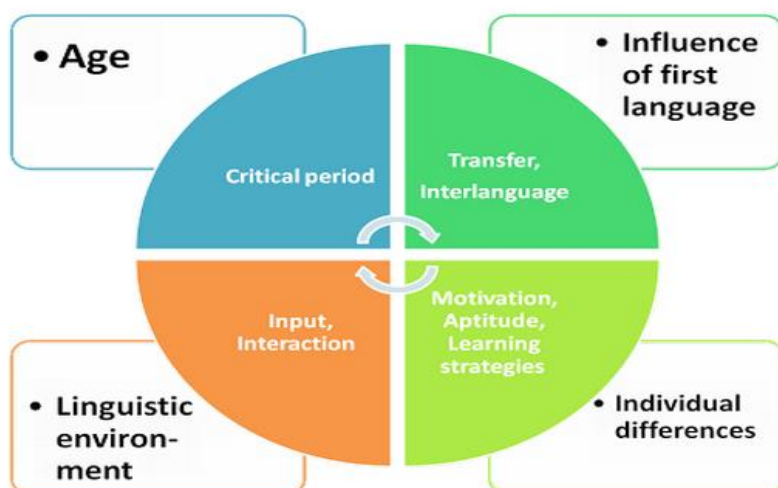
- **Affective Filter Hypothesis**

Krashen says that to achieve a better success in second language acquisition, the most important factors are motivation, low-anxiety, self-confidence and self-esteem. Otherwise, we will create a mental block that will stop us from acquiring language properly.



Second language acquisition theory of comprehensible input⁶ and affective filter

5.2. Important Factors in Acquiring a Second Language



A second language is not always acquired in the same way: a lot of factors influence the language learning process. We can differentiate between internal and external factors.

Factors that influence second language acquisition

Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/a/sheffield.ac.uk/all-about-linguistics/branches/language-acquisition/second-language-acquisition>

⁶ Comprehensible input: $i + 1$

Internal factors:

- **Age:** Children are in the age to learn. Their brains are prepared to acquire more information than an adult's one. That is why it is so important to start learning a second language as soon as possible, because it will get harder when we grow up.
- **Personality:** If we talk about speaking fluency and pronunciation, introverted learners may not develop their skills as much as an outgoing person. Also, their shyness when speaking comes due to the fact that they are more scared of making mistakes.
- **Motivation:** Enjoying language learning is one of the most important factors for a good acquisition progress. Learners who are motivated will make more effort to improve their language skills than the ones who are not, and they will use better **learning strategies**.

*<<Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. **Involve me** and I learn>>⁷*

External factors:

- **First language influence:** If the language you are learning is from the same family language than your mother tongue, it will be much easier to learn it (e.g. it will be easier to learn English for a Dutch native-speaker than for a Chinese native-speaker).
- **External motivation:** If teachers and parents encourage students to keep learning, their progress will be better
- **Linguistic environment:** Having access to native speakers or spending some time in the native-speaking country helps improving the level of the learned language proficiency.

⁷ There is some controversy with the origin of this quote. Some references attribute it to Benjamin Franklin and others to Xun Kuang, a Chinese philosopher who lived from 312-230 BC.

5.3. Stages of Second Language Acquisition

According to Krashen and Terrell's theory developed in 1983, people go through five stages to acquire a second language.

STAGES	TIME SPENT LEARNING	COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT
Preproduction	1-6 months	- Minimum ability to understand
Early production	6 months-1 year	- Limited ability to understand - One- or two-word answers - Uses present tense
Speech emergence	1-3 years	- Good ability to understand - Produces simple sentences - Grammar and pronunciation mistakes
Intermediate fluency	3-5 years	- Excellent ability to understand - Few grammatical mistakes
Advanced fluency	5-7years	- Almost native language level and speech ability

5.4. Key concepts in Second Language Acquisition

5.4.1. Silent period

Silent period is known as the period of time where the student has just started to learn a language and is not able to produce any speech so he or she just listens and tries to retain the information.

5.4.2. Interlanguage

Interlanguage is the modification of the second language that the learner does during his or her speech when he or she is not able to speak the target language properly yet.

The interlanguage has characteristics of the learner's mother tongue and it can also suffer from grammatical mistakes, due to the fact that the speakers may use the word-order rules of their native language, etc.

5.4.3. Language Transfer

Language transfer (also known as L1 interference) is defined as the use of the knowledge of one language to another one.

It can happen in any situation where the speaker does not have the native level of one of the languages or when we are translating something from one language to another (we may use the wrong sentence structure).

An example of language transfer mistakes are the ones we produce with *false friends*, which are words from two languages that sound familiar but have a different meaning.

5.4.4. Fossilization

With fossilization we refer to the loss of progress in second language acquisition. It can happen even if the learner is exposed regularly to the L2 and regardless of his or her motivation to learn.

Very few second language learners can achieve a native proficiency because, inevitably, at some point of the second language development, no more learning seems possible.

6. LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

The difference between second language acquisition and foreign language learning is basically geographical. While SLA takes place in the learned language environment, we learn a foreign language when being in our native country where the learned language is not spoken (e.g. learning the target language in classrooms).

English as a second or foreign language (ESL / EFL) is known as the use and learning of English by people with different mother tongues.

6.1. Difficulties for Spanish and Catalan speakers

Depending on our mother tongue, we produce different mistakes when we learn a second or foreign language. These are the most common mistakes of Spanish and Catalan native speakers:

6.1.1. Word order

In Spanish and Catalan, the order of the words inside sentences has a lot more freedom than in English:

- Subject – Verb

She didn't want to go

You were playing

- Adjective – Noun

English: *white cat / big house*

Spanish: *gato blanco / casa grande*

Catalan: *gat blanc / casa gran*

- Frequency adverbs' mid-position

English: She **often** played the guitar

Spanish: **Normalmente** tocaba la guitarra

Tocaba la guitarra **normalmente**

Tocaba **normalmente** la guitarra

6.1.2. Personal pronouns

Personal pronouns are usually unnecessary in Spanish and Catalan, but in English they are so important:

Ella no és italiana, [no] és espanyola.

*She is not French, **she** is Spanish.*

Possible mistake: *She is not French, is Spanish.*

6.1.3. Possessives

In Spanish and Catalan, we do not use possessives in sentences like:

*Mary se lavó **el** pelo*

*Mary es va rentar **el** cabell*

But in English it is necessary to use possessives instead of the definite article:

*Mary washed **her** hair*

6.2. Survey and Placement Test about the learning of English as a Foreign Language

6.2.1. Preparing the surveys and placement tests

I prepared some surveys and English placement tests to get some statistics about learning English as a foreign language. I handed out these placement tests to some *Batxillerat* students and to a class of an English school. When they already had their English level, they answered the questions of the survey I sent to them.

With the results of the surveys I wanted to prove if the age we start studying English, our habits and hobbies related to the language, the realization of extracurricular English classes and personal motivation influence our English level.

In the annex you will find all the copies of the placement tests. People who already knew their English level because they took a placement test before entering an English school just answered the survey.

L'aprenentatge de l'anglès com a llengua estrangera

* Required

Quants anys tens? *

Sexe *

A quina edat vas començar a estudiar anglès? *

- 1-5 anys
- 6-10 anys
- 11-15 anys
- 16-20 anys
- Més de 21 anys
- No estudio anglès

On vas tenir el primer contacte amb l'anglès? *

- Casa
- Escola
- Acadèmia
- Other:

Reps classes d'anglès extracurricularment? *

- Sí
- No
- Anteriorment

Durant quant temps? *

On?

Nom de l'escola i localitat

Veus series o pel·lícules en versió original? *

- Sí
- No
- De vegades

Utilitzes subtítols? *

- Sí
- No
- Depèn de la pronunciació

Quantes llengües parles? *

Anomena-les

Normalment escoltes música en... *

Pots seleccionar diverses opcions

- Anglès
- Castellà
- Català
- Other:

Busques les lletres de les cançons en anglès? *

- Sí
- No
- Només d'algunes cançons

Has viatjat alguna vegada a l'estranger? *

- Sí
- No

Vas aprofitar el viatge per practicar anglès? *

- Sí
- No

Parles sovint amb algú en anglès? *

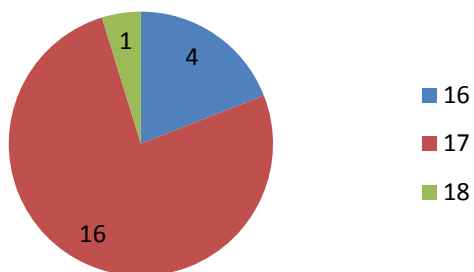
- Sí
- No

Nivell d'anglès

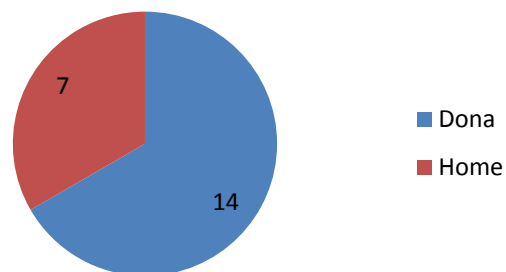
Segons el CEFR

6.2.2. Survey and placement test results and conclusion

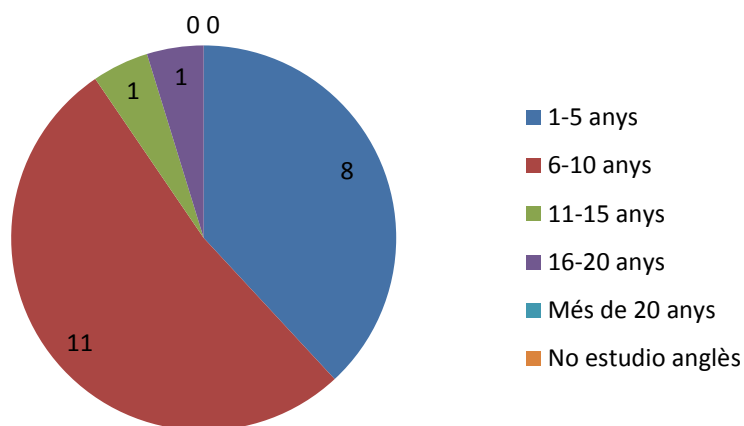
1. Quants anys tens?



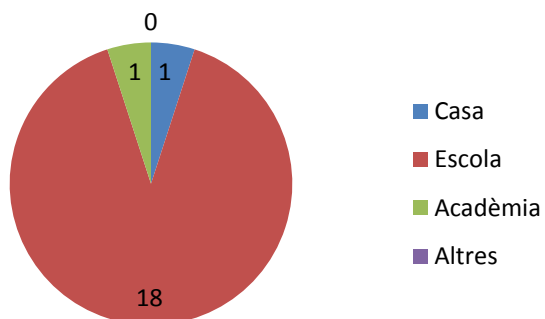
2. Sexe



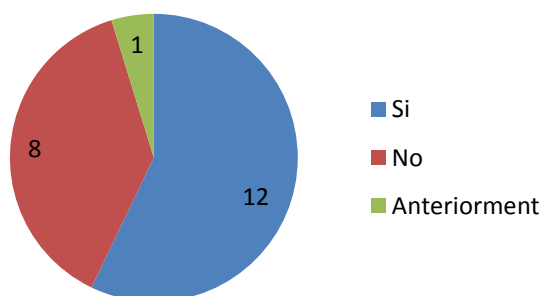
3. A quina edat vas començar a estudiar anglès?



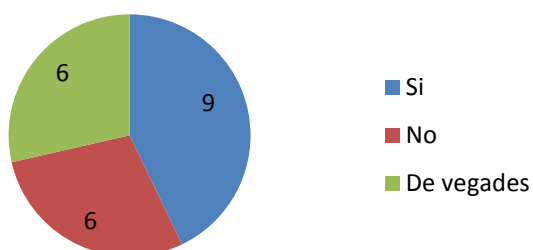
4. On vas tenir el primer contacte amb l'anglès?



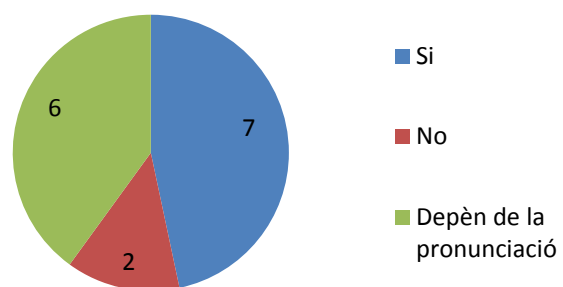
5. Reps classes d'anglès extracurricularment?



6. Veus series o pel·lícules en versió original?



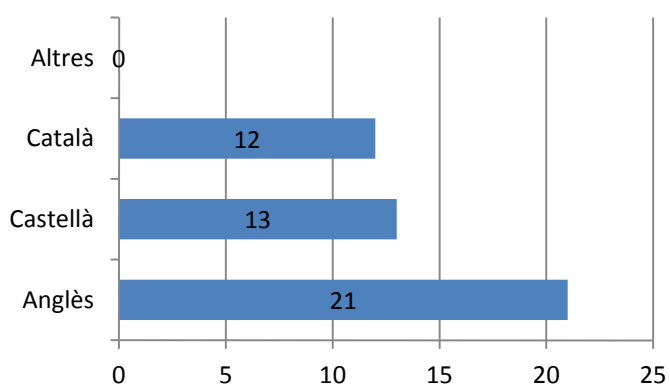
7. Utilitzes subtítols?



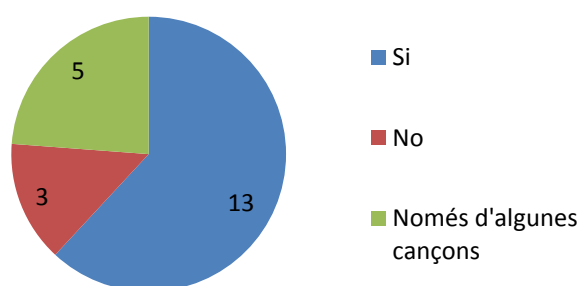
8. Quantes llengües parles?

Castellà, català i anglès	11
Castellà, català, anglès i francès	5
Castellà, català, anglès i alemany	1
Castellà, català, anglès i portuguès	2
Castellà, català, anglès, francès i alemany	2

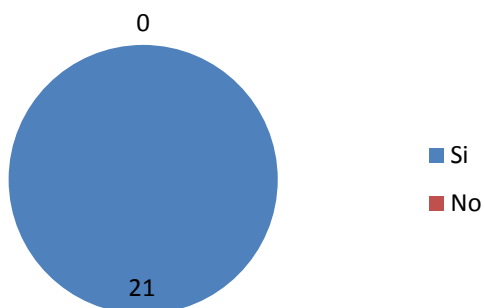
9. Normalment escoltes música en...



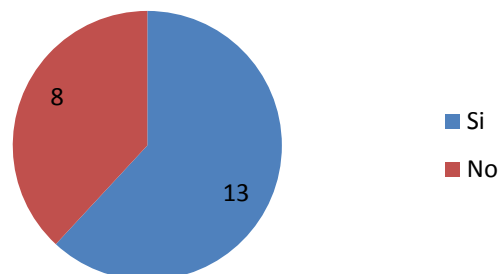
10. Busques les lletres de les cançons en anglès?



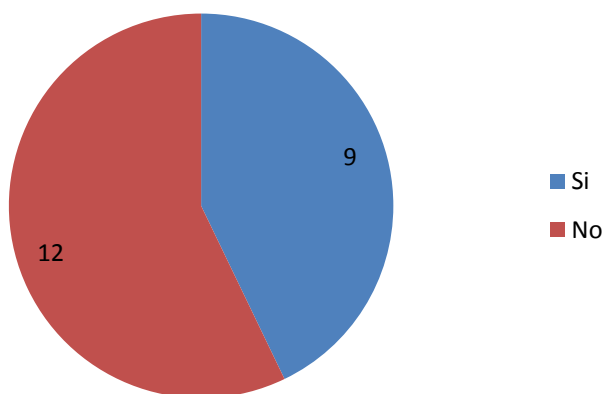
11. Has viatjat alguna vegada a l'estranger?



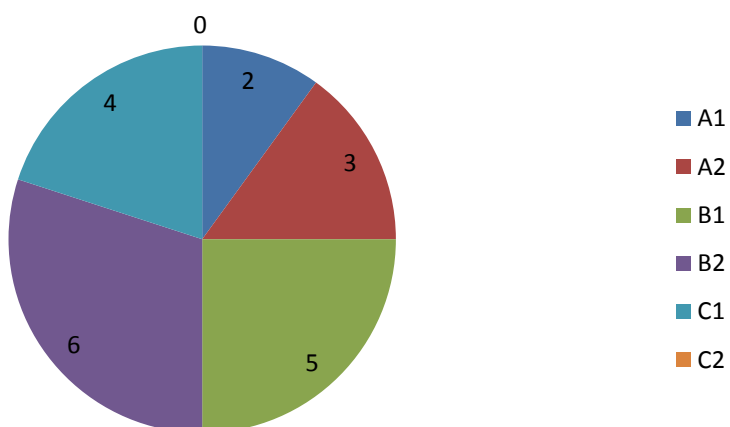
11.1. Vas aprofitar el viatge per practicar anglès?



12. Parles sovint amb algú en anglès?



13. Nivell d'anglès



Conclusions:

Age they start to learn English	English level
1-5 years	3 C1 2 B2 2 B1
6-10 years	1 C1 3 B2 3 B1 2 A2 2 A1

Use of subtitles in movies and series in original version	English level
With subtitles	1 C1 1 B2 4 B1 1 A2
With subtitles depending on the pronunciation	3 C1 2 B2
Without subtitles	2 B2
Don't watch movies and series in original version	2 A1 2 A2 2 B2

The results of the surveys prove that people who started to study English at a earlier age have a higher level.

Furthermore, people who do not watch movies or series in original version are the ones with a lower mark (except for a person with A2 that watches films with subtitles and two people with B2 level that go to an English school).

Also, most of the students with the higher levels are able to watch movies without subtitles depending on the pronunciation of the characters (British English is often harder to understand than American English).

7. INTERVIEWS

7.1. Interview 1: MIREIA LLINÀS GRAU, PhD. linguist and English Philology teacher at the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*

Cristina (interviewer): There are some theories that try to explain language acquisition (cognitive theory, imitation theory, innate theory...). In your opinion, which one is closer to reality and why?

Mireia Llinàs (interviewed): In my opinion the theory that you mentioned, innate theory (usually called Universal Grammar) is the one that seems to be more adequate. Although there are many different factors in the process of language acquisition, a lot of research shows that the child, when she⁸ is born, has some kind of innate knowledge that makes possible for the child to learn any language in the world. Without this innate knowledge it is harder to explain many different things that you see in the process of language acquisition. The fact is that there are patterns that are followed by all children independently of their language, so there are many things about the process of language acquisition that are explained with the theory of Universal Grammar, the Chomskyan theory.

C: Why is it harder to learn a second language than acquiring a mother tongue?

M: A first language, a mother tongue, all children independently of their intelligence or any other issue, acquire their mother tongue. They cannot not learn it, it is inevitable. It's a process that all human beings (if nothing is wrong, if there is no illness) go through this process. Learning a second language is something that you voluntarily engage in, so it's not something natural.

⁸ We use "she" when we refer to a baby

When you are learning a second language, you already have another language on your mind, so you already have a particular grammar of your own language and the process is not as automatic as L1 acquisition. But of course it depends on the individual.

C: All kids (without any *neuro-sensitive* or learning problem) follow the same process to acquire language?

M: Yes, exactly. All kids, when the time comes, which is at around 12 months more or less, once it starts all kids follow the same pattern independently of the L1. The initial languages of all languages in the world show properties that are extremely similar. For example, they don't produce morphology. The speech of kids very often doesn't include plural or past tense, they don't include certain words, auxiliaries or determiners, they omit many things. And you find this in early languages of kids all around the world. So yes, they follow the same pattern.

C: Which are the most common difficulties that appear during language acquisition?

M: We have to make a difference between L1 and L2. In first language acquisition you cannot really talk of difficulties because the process is natural, it follows steps. They begin putting certain sounds together making syllables, then they put the syllables together making words, then they construct small sentences... There are no difficulties, unless there is some kind of pathology.

In the process of a second language acquisition, it depends on the individual. Many factors influence SLA: motivation, age, memory... All this different things are important in the process of SLA, so you find different types of difficulties.

C: If a child acquires two languages at the same time, will it take longer for him to start speaking? What's the influence among these two languages (one language over the other)?

M: Usually this is true. Usually one of the two languages is not used and that's why it comes a little later. They usually start a little later because it is as if the child is wondering with which one to begin.

Sometimes they mix the two languages together. If a child has parents that speak a different language, the child starts speaking one of the languages, maybe with the parent that is more often with the child, and then the other language comes later. But sometimes, for example if a child has Catalan and English at home and the child produces Catalan first, then you will possibly find structures in Catalan that are English structures. For example, a Catalan girl may begin saying "blanca casa" instead of "casa blanca" using the English adjective-noun order. So languages influence one another, it is a very interesting process.

C: **Is it true that as we learn more languages (L2, L3, L4...) it starts becoming easier to learn another one? Which factors make it possible?**

M: I think this is true but again all depends on the individual, on the age and some other factors are also important but it is as if the mind becomes more flexible making it easier to go from one language to another if it is already adapted to this process.

So it seems to be true but of course if you go from Catalan to Spanish, to Italian, to French, to Portuguese... as all these languages are typologically similar in many things, it may be easier to go from one of these languages to another one; but if you want to learn German or Chinese, they are so typologically different then that may be a problem. So the similarity between languages seem to make the process easier.

C: **Is it harder or easier to learn a L2 depending on which is our mother tongue?**

M: Yes, it certainly is. If you are a speaker of Catalan and you want to learn Italian, that would be easier than if you are a speaker of Chinese; but again it depends on the individual because it is a talent or so. There may be a Chinese speaker who can very

easily learn Italian because his or her memory is very good, but in principle if you have a language which resembles the language you are going to learn, the process is facilitated.

C: In your opinion, is it good that we adapt our language when we speak to children or we should speak normally?

M: This is a very long and hot debate among researchers. The topic is motherese and it is used as the language that mothers use to their children. Very often as a mother I have done this and you talk on a different way to your child when the child is a baby, many people do that. But now, does that help the child? I don't think so at all, so if a mother doesn't want to do that it is not a problem. I have seen people who don't do that on purpose because they think: <<I should speak to my child as I talk to an adult>>.

I think it doesn't help them but if you do it it's not a problem because the child will get all the structures in the language from other context. Because very often what we do is simplify the language to the child. A characteristic of motherese would be this, a simplification of structures, very often a simplification of words, we use one word and not the adult word. This is not a problem because the child will end up knowing the word for "dog" instead of the imitation of the sound "gua-gua".

I don't think it helps the child but I don't think it harms the child either because in the process of language acquisition, if the child has no pathological problem and no difficulties, then the child will end up acquiring the language anyway.

7.2. INTERVIEW 2: NOEMÍ LLEVADOT, speech therapist at CDIAP Parc Taulí (Hospital de Sabadell)

Cristina (interviewer): Existeixen diverses teories que parlen sobre l'adquisició del llenguatge (teoria cognitiva, teoria de la imitació, teoria de l'innatisme). Segons el teu criteri, quina de les teories és la que més s'apropa a la realitat i per què?

Noemí (interviewed): El llenguatge s'adquireix, no s'aprèn, per tant per adquirir llenguatge necessites un model, necessites que algú et doni un model i tenir tu com a nen la necessitat de haver d'expressar-te i la necessitat de fer servir aquest model que a tu t'han donat.

Teoria de la imitació, sí. Si parlem de la teoria de l'innatisme, tots els nens som supervivents, per tant si no tenen el model de demanar alguna cosa (*dóna'm*) perquè ningú els hi ha dit *dóna'm*, ja es busquen ells la manera de fer-se entendre, potser no per la paraula *dóna'm*, perquè ningú els hi ha ensenyat, però et senyalaran o et faran un crit o ho expressaran amb la mirada o amb la cara. Per tant, és la que més s'apropa a la realitat jo crec que és una mica de tot, no és una teoria única.

La teoria cognitiva sempre en funció de la capacitat cognitiva del nen, que tindrà més o menys facilitat per aprendre el llenguatge. Per exemple, hi ha nens molt espavilats però que tenen un trastorn del llenguatge bestial que el que fan és compensar el trastorn del llenguatge que tenen i es busquen la vida per comunicar-se; però hi ha altres nens que tenen un trastorn del llenguatge però també tenen un dèficit cognitiu, per tant ja no tenen altres capacitats compensatòries per aquest trastorn del llenguatge i tenen moltes més dificultats per saber estar, per estar atents, per entendre el que passa al seu voltant i per aprendre.

C: Per què resulta més difícil aprendre una segona llengua que la primera?

N: Jo crec que és en funció del moment en que la vols aprendre; és a dir, el que dèiem abans, una llengua s'aprèn per necessitat, perquè jo tinc la necessitat de comunicar-te alguna cosa, amb lo qual primer de tot, el que un nen ha de tenir per adquirir un llenguatge és intenció comunicativa.

Aleshores, si una segona llengua l'aprèns quan ets petit, com abans millor, és molt més fàcil que aprendre-la quan ets més gran per diferents motius: perquè cognitivament representa que estàs molt més preparat, ja que fins als set anys el cervell s'està formant i s'estan formant les connexions, per això es diu que les nens són com esponges; i a nivell sensorial, l'orella és molt més fina quan ets petit i no quan tens vint anys. Per això és molt més fàcil adquirir una segona llengua quan ets petit que no quan ets més gran.

Tot i que també té molt a veure amb la manera en que tu li ensenyes aquesta segona llengua, perquè si tu li ensenyes la segona llengua de la manera en que jo vaig fer a l'escola "tema 1: colors, tema 2: animals de la granja, tema 3: verbs passats..." no es tracta d'un aprenentatge natural d'una llengua i, per tant, no és funcional i costa molt més d'aprendre; però si tu ensenyes una segona llengua d'una manera en que jo tinc una necessitat (a partir de contes o jugant), l'aprenentatge és molt més natural i no tracta sobre si aquest dia només toca fer verbs.

Per tant el per què és difícil aprendre una segona llengua, no es tant el per què sinó el com.

C: Tots els nens (entenent que sense cap problema neurosensitiu o d'aprenentatge) segueixen el mateix procés d'adquisició del llenguatge?

N: Jo crec que el secret és aquest, que tinguin la necessitat de comunicar-se. El llenguatge existeix perquè simbolitza algo i perquè jo et vull dir algo a tu que en aquell moment no veig i no toco i, per tant, t'ho vull comunicar, necessito una paraula que simbolitzi allò i que tu i jo tinguem un canal de comunicació pel qual ens entenguem.

Per tant per comunicar-nos necessitem un idioma o uns símbols. De símbols en poden haver molts. Els nens amb retard, per exemple, utilitzaran símbols que no seran paraules, sinó dibuixos, el sistema pictogràfic, gestual, dactilològic... És el seu canal per comunicar-se. Per tant cada nen aprèn a la seva manera depèn de la necessitat.

Si que és cert que hi ha nens amb retard que no poden adquirir el llenguatge de forma natural, i no l'aprenen; però segurament és perquè tenen altres deficiències associades. Ara per exemple acabo de veure a la feina una nena de 2 anys que no diu ni *mu* i que ara comença a dir papa i mama, però no l'encerta: et pot dir a tu papa i mama com li pot dir a la mama papa i al papa li diu mama, però es fa entendre. Segurament aquesta nena va com una moto, va molt ràpid i per tant segurament el seu problema no és que hi hagi un trastorn del llenguatge ni un retard que li provoqui una dificultat per aprendre sinó que possiblement pateix d'un Trastorn del Dèficit d'Atenció que fa que no es fixi en com parles o el que dius i d'aquesta manera ella no aprèn.

Hi ha nens que no tenen cap problema però que no estan suficientment estimulats. Hi ha pares que si que estimulen molt els seus nens però hi ha altres que no, però sobreviuen i adquireixen el llenguatge de forma natural i sense dificultats, ja que el llenguatge és a tot arreu i encara que els seus pares no li expliquin contes, veuran la televisió o els altres nens li diuen coses al pati de l'escola. El problema és quan els pares no estimulen als nens i aquests tampoc van a l'escola bressol. Per això hi ha nens amb retard del llenguatge que no tenen cap trastorn associat però que no han estat suficientment estimulats i no han tingut un model per a poder adquirir aquell llenguatge.

C: Quins són els factors principals que provoquen un retard en l'adquisició d'una primera llengua?

N: Principalment que hi hagi algun tipus de dèficit, algun tipus de retard, algun síndrome i que no hi hagi estimulació de l'entorn.

C: Quines són les dificultats més comunes que es produeixen durant l'adquisició del llenguatge?

N: Les dificultats que trobem més en la primera infància són el retard de la parla. El primer símptoma d'alerta de que hi ha alguna cosa que no funciona és un retard de la parla. Una vegada que es comença el tractament i comences a estimular la parla i a estimular el llenguatge, ens trobem que a més a més hi ha altres coses que no funcionen i que aquell retard del llenguatge era una conseqüència d'allò altre: d'un dèficit cognitiu, d'un dèficit d'atenció, un síndrome... Si tu estimules aquella parla i el llenguatge continua sense avançar, aleshores si que podem dir que hi ha un trastorn del llenguatge; però si tu estimules i aquell llenguatge avança i tot va bé aleshores segurament estàvem tractant un retard del llenguatge causat per una falta d'estimulació, per falta de necessitat...

A on jo treballo, en atenció precoç, de nens que només tinguin un retard de la parla no en veiem. La majoria a logopèdia, el 99% de nens que tractem són nens que acaben amb diagnòstic de trastorn del llenguatge, dèficit d'atenció o trastorn del llenguatge i dèficit d'atenció o alguna cosa sindròmica.

C: Com resol un logopeda aquestes dificultats? Com se sap en quin moment és necessària la intervenció d'un especialista?

N: Des de que són bebès, hi ha moltes senyals d'alerta en que tu pots veure si s'ha d'intervenir o no: la mirada del bebè, el plor o el no plor, si es gira o no quan hi ha un soroll, si balbujeja o no balbujeja, si respon a les paraules de l'adult...

Com a llenguatge, si un bebè va fent i va tirant, que a nivell evolutiu va fent i va caminant quan toca, va fent sons i balbujejos, però que als 2 anys de cop i volta no diu gairebé res, allà hi ha una senyal d'alerta de que a nivell de llenguatge ja passa alguna cosa. Aleshores si amb 2 anys un nen no diu res, només fa sons, només senyala o té moltes dificultats per comunicar-se ens indica que a partir d'aquí la psicòloga ha de fer una valoració on haurà de passar unes proves que són quantitatives però que també es

valoren molt qualitativament i la informació que la família et pot aportar, i a partir d'aquí es valora si es necessari o no el tractament de logopèdia.

Al treball venen molts nens que arriben a P3 i que no diuen res, aleshores la psicòloga fa la valoració i ens trobem amb molts nens amb retard de la parla i en funció del tractament i de si la evolució del llenguatge és bona o no, fem un diagnòstic. El tractament acaba als 4 anys i mig i després nosaltres ja els hem de donar d'alta.

Molts d'aquests nens que arriben a P3 tenen un TEA (Trastorn Específic de l'Autisme), que no és un trastorn cognitiu sinó que és de comunicació. També de llenguatge, però el trastorn del llenguatge és una conseqüència del problema de comunicació. A la zona on estic jo, a Sabadell ens arriben molts d'aquests nens i una de les teories d'aquesta abundància de TEAs és la contaminació, ja que a aquella zona hi ha concentrada molta indústria.

Nosaltres com a logopedes treballem en 3 àmbits: de cara al nen, de cara a la família i de cara al context del nen. El nostre objectiu és donar pautes i estratègies tant al nen, com a la família, com a l'entorn (l'escola o la guarderia, l'entorn educatiu).

Amb la meua intervenció jo treballo amb un tractament que afecta tant al nen com a la família, perquè el meu objectiu es fer a la família competent i que sàpiguen com han de treballar amb el nen perquè aquest tingui una bona adquisició del llenguatge. Jo a aquest nen el veig només tres quarts d'hora a la setmana i per tant miracles no en puc fer. Qui està més hores amb el nen? Qui sap quin és el context del nen i els moments en que és més adient intervenir? La família. I per tant, a mi com a logopeda el que m'interessa és que la família sigui competent davant d'aquest nen. L'ideal seria que el logopeda pogués anar a l'entorn natural del nen, és a dir, a casa; però això no pot ser i per això el treball conjunt amb la família és essencial.

Un altre dels meus objectius és que els pares entenguin el nen i sàpiguen com funciona, perquè aquest retard del llenguatge és conseqüència d'alguna cosa de la que els pares s'han de saber adonar per, juntament amb les meves estratègies, puguin canviar moltes actituds i molts comportaments de cara al nen. Això fa que el nen es relaxi i que no es bloquegi, perquè el que ens trobem és a molts nens amb retard o trastorn del llenguatge

en que el problema és que han “tirat la tovallola” al veure que tenen dificultats i que tot el dia se’ls hi està dient: <<Què? Com? No, així no, que no t’entenc...>>, així que aquests nens callen perquè pensen que es tornaran a equivocar. I com no diuen, no practiquen; i com no practiquen, no aprenen: un peix que es mossega la cua.

Faig coses tant simples com ensenyar als pares a jugar i en que tot és a través del joc perquè, com aprèn el nen? Jugant. A un nen no el puc ficar davant d’un mirall i intentar que pronuncii correctament *patata*, així que els hi he d’ensenyar jugant. Per tant ensenyo als pares com han de treballar quan estant jugant, com han de corregir i com no han de corregir al nen, quins contes han de mirar i com els han de mirar... i estratègies que poden utilitzar des de que el nen s’aixeca fins que se’n va a dormir:

No els hi pots dir: <<No, tota no, pelota. Se dice pelota>> Perquè si al cap del dia només li diem no, no i no, el nen deixa de parlar. A més que si utilitzem la paraula *tota* i *pelota*, li estem donant els dos models, l’incorrecte i el correcte, i nosaltres mai hem de parlar malament al nen; per tant quan el nen digui *tota*, nosaltres els hi hem de dir: <<Ahhh, la pelota! Quieres la pelota? Toma la pelota!>>, i d’aquesta manera li hem dit 3 vegades *pelota* correctament.

Una altra cosa que fan molt els pares és preguntar constantment als nens: <<Què és això? Què és allò? De quin color és això? De quin color és allò?>>, i aquí el que estem fent és posar en examen al nen i el nen el que fa és no contestar per por a equivocar-se. En canvi, si el que li diem és: <<Mira! Això és un... Ala! Això és de color...>>, una frase inacabada, el que li està dient és *vinga digueu que sé que ho saps* i, per tant, el nen s’atreveix. Si d’aquesta manera no contesta, vol dir que aquella paraula encara no l’ha après, amb la qual cosa t’està donant una senyal de que aquella paraula la hem de treballar i ha d’aparèixer 2 o 3 dies diverses vegades per a que la pugui adquirir.

Sembla tot una escola de pares més que un lloc de logopèdia perquè treballem molts hàbits, límits, rutines... ja que tot això és importantíssim pel nen; i així podem trobar una estona per a que els pares estiguin amb els nens o els hi llegeixin un conte cada dia, cosa que normalment no fan.

C: Si un nen/a aprèn dues llengües a la vegada, triga més a començar a parlar? Depèn de les llengües? (Rus/català) Quina influència té una llengua sobre l'altra?

N: Per experiència (sobretot pel que passa aquí amb el català i el castellà), els nens quan comencen a adquirir llenguatge no saben si el que diuen és en català o castellà, aleshores encara que ells parlin català a casa, si a l'escola bressol han après la paraula "pelota" perquè amb el seu amic que parla castellà li diuen "pelota", el nen l'aprendrà en castellà, però si a casa no han utilitzat mai aquella paraula, sinó que a casa n'hi diuen "pilota" i ho continuarà dient així. Per tant, al començament el nen parlarà castellà i català de forma indiferenciada.

Però arriba un moment que els nens se n'adonen que aquí es diu "pilota" i allà es diu "pelota", però per a ell no suposa cap problema, fins que més endavant es tornen a adonar que aquesta persona els parla d'una manera determinada i els hi diu "pelota", per tant, quan els nens parlin, li diran també "pelota"; al contrari que a casa, en que el pare els hi diu "pilota" i, els nens, responen amb "pilota".

D'aquesta manera, quan un nen d'una família catalanoparlant es troba amb el seu veí castellanoparlant, canvia ell mateix la seva parla. I si vol dir "m'aniré a comprar un llit", a aquest veí li dirà "me voy a comprar un llito", perquè ell no sap que "llit" es diu "cama", però s'adona que hi ha moltes paraules del castellà que acaben amb -o i, per tant, el nen fa la reformulació lingüística pròpia, sense ni tan sols adonar-se'n.

Els nens, no aprenen a diferenciar llengües fins que van a P-4, aproximadament. A aquesta edat és quan comencen a posar etiquetes de "això és castellà i això és català".

- Està bé que parlem amb els nens petits adaptant el nostre llenguatge?

Amb els nens petits és necessari parlar de forma molt contextualitzada, amb molt suport visual, és a dir, tota la informació auditiva ha d'estar complementada a nivell visual, reforçant amb els gestos, amb les expressions, amb els objectes i el context.

Per exemple, si jo et dic *jamalim jamalam*, tu no m'has entès, però si jo et dic *jamalim jamalam* i senyalo una taula, tu entendràs a que em refereixo. Això els hi passa molt als nens, per això, complementant la informació auditiva, ajudem a que la comprensió sigui bona, i si la comprensió és bona, estarem ajudant a una bona adquisició del llenguatge.

Però adaptar el llenguatge fent servir paraules que no són (onomatopeies, etc) mai a la vida, perquè li estem fent fer una doble feina al nen.

A un nen li ensenyem a dir *gua-guau* i, de cop i volta, ara ja no és una *gua-guau*, ara resulta que és un gos. Per què donar-li doble feina? Si és un gos, és un gos sempre.

Quan el nen comença a parlar, pot ser que ell mateix digui l'onomatopeia perquè així li és més fàcil dir la paraula, ja que les onomatopeies només són un conjunt de sons que no tenen cap sentit.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The main objectives of this research project were to investigate about first and second language acquisition, the acquisition of language in a bilingual community and foreign language learning.

Now that I finished this project, it is time to see if my hypotheses have been proved after these months of work.

1. What process do toddlers follow to acquire their mother tongue?

There are a lot of theories that try to explain first language acquisition. Some say acquiring a language is something we all have in our genetics; others explain how children make a connection between the words they say and adults' response to those words, and some more think toddlers need to discover language by themselves, imitating adults' speech.

Kids modify their words due to their short-term memory. Since they cannot remember the whole word, they just produce the last syllables or change the sounds and unify the consonants to make words more harmonic.

2. Do all children (no matter their mother tongue) follow the same process to acquire their first language?

Yes, they do. That is the main point that the Universal Grammar theory uses to explain language acquisition as a genetic factor: all children, no matter their mother tongue, follow the same process and use the same sentence structures in their first years of life.

3. Does bilingualism delay language acquisition?

Bilingual children do not have the same fluency when they start to speak, because they have to learn words from two different languages and have to learn to adapt their speech depending on their listener. However, when they reach the age of 6, they prove to be more fluent and capable to maintain a conversation than a monolingual kid.

4. What process do we follow to learn a second language? How is it different from the first language acquisition process?

The process to acquire a second language is slower than the one by which we acquire a first language, but both of them are similar.

In both, we can identify a period where the learner stays silent because he or she cannot produce any words yet. Later, there is the period where the speaker can produce one- or two-word sentences, and the level of understanding increases.

The main difference is time. First language acquisition happens in a very short period of time. In a couple of years, kids are able to have a conversation and to produce long sentences. However, in second language acquisition, we need an average time of 5 years to be able to have a good speech fluency.

5. Do personal motivation and our daily habits influence our English level?

Yes, they do. In my surveys I could see that people who usually do things or have hobbies related to English have a better English level.

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11. ANNEX

<<Words – so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become in the hands of one who knows how to combine them.>> [Nathaniel Hawthorne]

Find the answered placement test in the next few pages and the links of the online survey and its results.

Link for the online survey:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1rw09XDOCwMr9qWnw3yEM39s7qmOlrEKPe6uODo9j8Qc/viewform>

Link for the survey results:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/177lmWbAjM3mbpnUVPBpkt1igMyPZny49-HxtgkRWx3s/edit#gid=1070433285>