

Difficulties of becoming bilingual

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The only language men ever speak perfectly is the one they learn in babyhood, when no one can teach them anything! ~Maria Montessori

It used to be thought that children picked up their mother tongue largely through mimicry. Noam Chomsky argued in the late 1950s against such a simple mechanism, pointing out that children acquire the ability to understand their native language very early, regardless of its complexities, and are able to speak it creatively by the time they are just a few years old. This facility cannot be completely explained by the limited exposure infants have to language, or by correction from parents. He reasoned that the only way to account for the success and speed with which children learn their mother tongue in childhood is to assume that we have an inborn ability to grasp the grammatical principles of all languages - and that all languages have a systematic set of 'parameters' designed to be easily acquired by children.



This inborn mechanism for spontaneous language acquisition seems unique to childhood and is quickly lost. If Chomsky and his followers are correct, this is because the 'mental switches' which determine how we understand and process structures and sounds are irreversibly set in childhood. Puberty is sometimes seen to mark a 'critical period' after which it becomes more difficult to acquire and speak a language in the spontaneous way that children do. This is especially true of the finer points of pronunciation, so that when we learn a language as adults we almost inescapably retain a 'foreign' accent. Infants have already lost some of their ability to discriminate foreign sounds by the age of ten months! The biological mechanism which predisposes us to acquire languages as infants extends to gender as well. Girls start talking 1 or 2 months earlier than boys, and even in the womb, female fetuses move their mouths more frequently than males. Regardless of age, women are in general more verbally adept in both their L1 and in L2*.

Although apparently necessary, this uniquely human gene is not sufficient to guarantee language production. Children must also be able to interact in the language (for example, hearing children of deaf parents do not learn to speak by watching TV). Assuming they have ample interaction, by the age of one, most babies start to talk, and by two, they have a vocabulary of 50-100 words. For several years after, they acquire 6-10 new words a day. This phenomenal ability is not limited to just one language. Children who are exposed to two or more languages simultaneously and consistently from an early age will naturally acquire these languages. Such exposure is rarely formal: millions of unschooled children in Africa and elsewhere are bilingual, and in many cases, multilingual. The attempt to duplicate these natural processes via immersion in programmes taught in the second language - for example in Anglophone Canada

to French - has met with mixed success.

Most linguists accept that mastery of a second language depends on sufficient and comprehensible input. What is 'sufficient' depends on one's goals. While it is possible after childhood to learn aspects of a language in a short period of time, becoming fluent in a language for most people takes many years. Also, learning the conventions of the written system of a language is different than learning to speak it. Even native speakers of a language need years of formal education to become adept in the academic use of their first language. The pressure to learn a second language for academic purposes in a short time often results in schools focusing on teaching for immediate examination purposes, and many students may barely be able to function in the second language outside the examination hall.

Academic fluency, which is the type of language facility we usually have in mind when we talk about 'language standards', depends largely on the ability to understand written texts. A text can be incomprehensible if as little as 2-5% of the vocabulary is unknown. For this reason, the vocabulary of second-language school materials is usually deliberately 'controlled'. The drawback, however, is that by the end of secondary school many students are still unable to cope with authentic second-language materials. For example, native English-speaking undergraduates have a vocabulary level of around 20 000 words. By comparison, Cantonese-speaking undergraduates in Hong Kong have English vocabulary levels of 2 000 - 5 000 words.

Motivation is generally recognised as the key to successful conscious learning of a second language by older children and adults. We learn one or more languages in childhood in order to communicate with family members or significant others in our community. As we grow older, our needs change and affective factors become more complex. Without motivation and reward - even if it is only a sense of accomplishment - learning does not take place. Low motivation and low 'language standards' are a vicious circle, and it may come as no surprise to learn that in a recent survey only 47% of Hong Kong secondary students indicated they had a 'strong' motivation to learn Chinese and English as academic subjects.

Given such constraints on the acquisition of a second language, can we realistically expect that Hong Kong can become a community of functionally bilingual or trilingual citizens? We will look at some ways this might be accomplished in the second part of this article.**

* L1 and L2 stand for first language and second language respectively.
** The second part of this article will be published in the next issue of *Word Power*.