Second language acquisition, or SLA, is the process by which people learn languages in addition to their native language(s). The term second language is used to describe any language whose acquisition starts after early childhood (including what may be the third or subsequent language learned). The term „language acquisition” became commonly used after Stephen Krashen contrasted it with formal and non-constructive „learning”. Though SLA is often viewed as part of applied linguistics, it is typically concerned with the language system and learning processes themselves, whereas applied linguistics may focus more on the experiences of the learner, particularly in the classroom.

Researchers have found a very consistent order in the acquisition of first language structures by children, and this has drawn a great deal of interest from SLA scholars. Considerable effort has been devoted to testing the identity hypothesis, which asserts that first-language and second-language acquisition conform to the same patterns. Orders of acquisition in SLA do often resemble those found in first language acquisition, and may have common neurological causes. According to Ushakova (1994: 154), „the second language is incorporated into the classification system already available in the first language, relies on the previously developed semantic system, and actively employs first language phonology. This all means that the main driving force is not so much inner self development as it is use of first language development. To put it figuratively, second language is looking into the windows cut out by the first language”. In essence, Ushakova is arguing that an individual can only have a single inner speech – the one developed in the L1.

There are two general areas of interest with regard to L2 gesture research: the appropriation of culture-specific gestures and the interface between speech and gesture as related to Slobin’s thinking-for speaking hypothesis. In popular usage, „gesture” is generally understood as manual movements that frequently occur in the absence of speech, such as when someone waves to indicate leave taking. Such behaviour represents only one type of gesture, which McNeill calls „emblems”, or gestures whose meaning can be interpreted independently of speech. Another popular understanding of gesture includes pantomime, in which the entire body may be used to express meaning. According to McNeill, speaking and gesturing form a unit that must be analyzed as a whole, what he calls a „growth point”, a concept closely connected to Vygotsky’s notion of inner speech. The growth point of an utterance combines into a single meaning system – „two distinct semiotic architectures” – and, because each component of the unit possesses „unique semiotic properties”, each can surpass „the meaning possibilities of the other”. In
McNeill’s opinion, gestures are „material carriers of thinking” and for this provide „an enhanced window into mental processes” (McNeill and Duncan 2000: 144).

Most learners begin their acquisition process with a „silent period”, in which they speak very little if at all. For some, this is a period of language shock, in which the learner actively rejects the incomprehensible input of the new language. However, research has shown that many „silent” learners are engaging in private speech (sometimes called „self-talk”). While appearing silent, they are rehearsing important survival phrases and lexical chunks. These memorized phrases are then employed in the subsequent period of formulaic speech. Whether by choice or compulsion, other learners have no silent period and pass directly to formulaic speech. This speech, in which a handful of routines are used to accomplish basic purposes, often shows few departures from L2 morphosyntax. It eventually gives way to a more experimental phase of acquisition, in which the semantics and grammar of the target language are simplified and the learners begin to construct a true interlanguage.

Learners’ most direct source of information about the target language is the target language itself. When they come into direct contact with the target language, this is referred to as „input”. When learners process that language in a way that can contribute to learning, this is referred to as „intake”. Generally speaking, the amount of input learners take in is one of the most important factors affecting their learning. However, it must be a level that is comprehensible to them. In his Monitor Theory, Krashen advanced the concept that language input should be at the „L+1” level, just beyond what the learner can fully understand; this input is comprehensible, but contains structures that are not yet fully understood. According to Stephen Krashen (1981: 12), „the acquisition-learning distinction helps interpret findings in all areas in second language acquisition research and practice. One important area is the one of individual variation. At one extreme end of the continuum, some performers might utilize conscious knowledge of the target language whenever possible. Extreme Monitor users might, in fact, be so concerned with editing their output to make it conform to their conscious rules that fluency would be seriously hampered. At the other end of the continuum, we may find those who almost never monitor their output”.

The most important characteristics of Monitor users are: successful Monitor users edit their second language output when it does not interfere with communication; this editing results in variable performance, that is, we see different types and amounts of errors under different conditions; monitoring generally improves accuracy level; monitor users show an overt concern with „correct” language, and regard their unmonitored speech and writing as „careless”.

According to Stephen Krashen (1981: 19), one of the second language research and practice areas that „the acquisition-learning hypothesis helps to interpret is work in second language aptitude and attitude, providing explanation for what had appeared to be a strange finding: both language aptitude (as measured by standard tests) and attitude (affective variables) appear to be related to second language achievement, but are not related to each other. It is possible to have high
aptitude and low attitude, low attitude, low aptitude and high attitude, or both high, or both low.” Foreign language aptitude, defined as the rate at which persons at the secondary school, university and adult level learn to criterion, has been measured by standardized tests such as the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) and the Language Aptitude Battery (LAB). According to Carroll, there are three major components of modern aptitude tests. The first, phonetic coding ability, is the ability to store new language sounds in memory. The other two components appear to relate directly to learning. Grammatical sensitivity, the second component, is defined as “the individual’s ability to demonstrate his awareness of the syntactical patterning of sentences in a language” (Carroll 1973: 7). Carroll makes it clear that although performance on this component does not require the subject’s actually knowing grammatical terminology, it does involve a conscious meta-awareness of grammar. Carroll contrasts this sort of knowledge of a language with the subconscious or tacit knowledge entailed in Chomsky’s term competence: “Although it is often said that linguistic competence in the sense defined by Chomsky involves some kind of knowledge of the grammatical rules of a language, this knowledge is ordinarily our conscious awareness… nevertheless, some adolescents and adults (and even some children) can be made to demonstrate an awareness of the syntactical structure of the sentences they speak… even among adults there are large individual differences in this ability, and these individual differences are related to success in learning foreign languages, apparently because this ability is called upon when the student tries to learn grammatical rules and apply them in constructing and comprehending new sentences in that language” (Carroll 1973: 7-8).

The inductive ability is the third ability to “examine language material… and from this to notice and identify patterns and correspondences and relations involving either meaning or grammatical form” (Carroll 1973: 8). In Carroll’s opinion, a typical method of measuring this ability is to present materials in an artificial language in such a way that the individual can induce the grammatical and semantic rules governing that language. It is probably through this factor that foreign language aptitude is most closely related with general intelligence.

Attitudinal factors that relate to second language acquisition will be those that perform one or both of two functions. First, they will be factors that encourage intake. They are simply factors that encourage acquirers to communicate with speakers of the target language, and thereby obtain the necessary input, or intake, for language acquisition. Secondly, attitudinal factors relating to acquisition will be those that enable the performer to utilize the language heard for acquisition. Simply hearing a second language with understanding appears to be necessary but is not sufficient for acquisition to take place. The acquirer must not only understand the input but must also, in a sense, be open to it. A list of attitudinal factors includes integrative motivation, instrumental motivation as well as empathy. Integrative motivation, defined as the desire to be like valued members of the community that speak the second language, is predicted to relate to proficiency in terms of the two functions. The presence of integrative motivation should encourage the acquirer to
interact with speakers of the second language out of sheer interest, and thereby obtain intake. A low filter for integratively motivated acquirers is also predicted for similar reasons. The integratively motivated performer will not feel a threat from the other group and will thus be more prone to engage in “receptive learning” (acquisition), rather than “defensive learning”. Instrumental motivation, defined as the desire to achieve proficiency in a language for utilitarian, or practical reasons, may also relate to proficiency. Its presence will encourage performers to interact with L2 speakers in order to achieve certain ends. For the integratively motivated performer, interaction for its own sake will be valued. For the instrumentally motivated performer, interaction always has some practical purpose. While the presence of integrative motivation predicts a low affective filter, the presence of instrumental motivation predicts a stronger one. With instrumental motivation, language acquisition may cease as soon as enough is acquired to get the job done. Also, instrumentally motivated performers may acquire just those aspects of the target language that are necessary; at an elementary level, this may be simple routines and patterns, and at a more advanced level this predicts the non-acquisition of elements that are communicatively less important but that are socially important, such as aspects of morphology and accent.

Personality factors are interrelated with motivational factors. Briefly, it is hypothesized that the self-confident or secure person will be more able to encourage intake and will also have a lower filter. Traits relating to self-confidence (lack of anxiety, outgoing personality, self-esteem) are thus predicted to relate to second language acquisition. Empathy, the ability to put oneself in another’s shoes, is also predicted to be relevant to acquisition in that the empathic person may be the one who is able to identify more easily with speakers of a target language and thus accept their input as intake for language acquisition. Empathy appears to interact with other attitudinal factors. Two other personality factors, not related to self-confidence, are also predicted to relate to success in second language. Attitude toward the classroom and the teacher may relate to both acquisition and learning. The student who feels at ease in the classroom and likes the teacher may seek out intake by volunteering, and may be more accepting of the teacher as a source of intake. Positive attitudes toward the classroom and teacher may also be manifestations of self-confidence and integrative motivation, and for this reason may also relate to acquisition. If aspects of aptitude relate directly to conscious language learning, attitudinal factors generally relate to subconscious language acquisition.

According to Stephen Krashen (1981: 37), the good language learner is an acquirer, who first of all is able to obtain sufficient intake in the second language, and second, has a low affective filter to enable him to utilize this input for language acquisition. The good language learner may or may not be a conscious learner. If he is, he is an optimal Monitor user.

Immersion and motivation are the most frequent responses to the question of what factors influence successful second language acquisition. It is an unquestionable reality the one that learning a language in the country of the target
language, often combined with self-study, ensures a successful acquisition of it. Approaching the second language acquisition process from the good language learner perspective implies an entire list of conclusions: the study of grammar alone is not enough, the mixture of formal and informal experience with the second language enhances the success, the immersion in both formal and informal environments is advisable.

The good language learner profile is counterbalanced by the bad language learner one. Consequently, we may consider the existence of three types of bad language learners: the very worst has neither acquisition nor learning abilities; in the specialists’ opinion, this might be the result of both attitudinal factors (lack of interest in the target language and its speakers and self-consciousness, high anxiety, etc.) as well as low aptitude or interest in grammar. The second language student who seems to get nothing from the class or the natural environment may be of this sort. Two other varieties of bad language learners have been identified: the underuser of the Monitor will progress as far as his attitudes will take him; the Monitor overuser will be limited by his conscious knowledge and will suffer from a lack of spontaneity. It has been proved that all varieties of performers will be helped by a classroom where intake for acquisition is available in a low anxiety situation. It is not necessary to avoid conscious learning, just put in its place. Such a recommendation is similar to Carroll’s assertions: „Persons with limited sensitivity to grammar may be better off in courses that de-emphasize grammar and concentrate on exposing the learner to large amounts of the second language in actual use. Nevertheless, many of them will find it profitable to note carefully, and to try to correct, the errors they make in second language utterances. Others, as they use the language more and more, may find it satisfactory simply to wait until a natural correction process takes over, somewhat the way children learn to speak their native language in increasing conformity with adult norms” (Carroll 1977: 3).

Undoubtedly, acquisition is central and compulsory for real proficiency in a second language and learning is a useful supplement available only in certain situations. Attitude is the single most important factor in second language learning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ABSTRACT

The theme of the process of learning a foreign language continues to be a favorite subject for specialists and not only for them. Acquiring linguistic competences, in the case of a foreign language, presupposes a multitude of stages and analyses, of key factors and strategies, as well as a correct evaluation of the cognitive potential. A sine qua non condition of the success of this kind of initiative is represented by the motivational definition. The aptitude and the attitudinal factors create the premises of linguistic success or failure. The assimilation of the theoretical knowledge has to be doubled by the practical part of the study of a foreign language.

Key words: aptitudes, strategies of learning, observance