



Electronic lectures on
Linguistics

Adapted from Yule's The Study
of Language

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Lecture 3

Second Language Acquisition

1. Introduction: Learning vs. Acquisition

Why is learning a second language (L2) often so difficult for adults, while children acquire their first language (L1) seemingly without effort? This lecture explores the cognitive, social, and affective factors involved in mastering a new language after the foundational acquisition of an L1.

2. Core Concepts

Acquisition vs. Learning:

Acquisition: The gradual development of ability in a language by using it naturally in communicative situations (similar to how a child learns).

Learning: The conscious process of accumulating knowledge of the features of a language, such as vocabulary and grammar rules (typically done in a classroom).

The Affective Filter: This concept explains why some people struggle to learn an L2. If a student is anxious, lacks self-confidence, or is unmotivated, their "filter" is high, preventing them from effectively processing input. A low filter (relaxed, confident state) is essential for language growth.

The Critical Period Hypothesis: This suggests that there is a biological window of opportunity (ending around puberty) during which language acquisition occurs naturally. After this period, language learning typically requires more conscious effort and rarely achieves native-like fluency.

Input and Output:

Input: The language the learner hears or reads. To be effective, it must be *comprehensible input*—slightly above the learner's current level.

Output: The learner's production. It is crucial for developing fluency and *noticing* the gap between what they want to say and what they are actually able to say.

3. Focus on Communicative Methods

Yule emphasizes that traditional methods (like the Grammar-Translation method) often failed because they focused on memorization rather than communication. Modern approaches prioritize:

Task-Based Learning: Using the language to complete real-world tasks (e.g., planning a trip, solving a problem).

Communicative Competence: The goal is not just grammatical accuracy, but the ability to use language appropriately for different social purposes (knowing when and how to speak).

4. Key Discussion Points for Students

1. The "Native Speaker" Ideal: Is it realistic or even necessary for adult L2 learners to aim for native-like fluency? Should we redefine success in L2 acquisition as "intelligibility" rather than "perfection"?
2. Environment: Can you truly "acquire" a language in a classroom, or is immersion the only path to genuine fluency?
3. Errors: Why do we fear making mistakes in a new language? How can shifting the perception of an "error" from a failure to a "learning opportunity" lower the Affective Filter?

5. Critical Thinking Activity: The L2 Identity Reflection

Ask students to share a time they felt they had a "different personality" while speaking another language. Discuss why using a new language can make us feel like a different version of ourselves, and how this relates to the "Affective Filter."

Lecture Supplement: Key Terms (Glossary)

Second Language Acquisition

Affective Filter: The psychological barrier that prevents learners from processing input due to stress or lack of confidence.

Comprehensible Input: Language that is understood by the learner, even if they don't know every word.

Interlanguage: The "in-between" linguistic system that learners develop, which has features of both their L1 and the L2.

Grammar-Translation Method: A traditional approach focused on memorizing rules and translating texts.