

# SECOND-LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND THE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

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## Abstract:

*As a branch of applied linguistics, language education or educational linguistics<sup>2</sup> has had a long history dating back in ancient times. However, at present, under the influence of globalization, second-language acquisition<sup>3</sup> has become a sine qua non condition for any potential employee or employer in the knowledge society. Basically, democratic regimes and developing countries encourage language education which they regard as an important asset in the process of globalization. Moreover, the study of foreign languages significantly contributes to the development of any human being's personality and implicitly of any society by eliminating cultural biases and borders. Currently, countries which fail to understand the importance of second-language acquisition deprive their citizens of a key social and cultural development factor. Last but not least, we could say that at present the ability to speak English has become synonym with acquiring a universal language. In consequence, educational policies should seriously focus on the study of the new lingua franca<sup>4</sup>, i.e. English, while accepting as an undeniable possibility – given the rapidly changing political and economic environment – the fact that another language (such as Chinese or Spanish etc.) may replace English in time.*

**Keywords:** language education, system of education, lingua franca, globalization, English for specific purposes.

## Introduction

The study of language acquisition implies the development of linguistic theories and also of pedagogical methods, which, in an ideal system of education, should complete each other and be correlated for the benefit of the potential foreign language users. In Romania, educational policies emphasize the importance of foreign language acquisition to a great extent. Still, in our opinion, this emphasis should be more strengthened in higher education, where the use of foreign languages for specific purposes is an instrument by which students and future researchers can have access to up-to-date information in their field of study.

Language is not a science in which all experts agree to what is right or wrong. Nor is there a court of critics or professors that has either the power or the ability to settle the controversial issues about language all the time. In short, there are no agreed-upon absolute concepts in the worlds of language.

It is both ungenerous and sometimes superficial to blame only the educational system, which is a carrier not a cause of the decline of our perception of a real language as this appears in digests, advertising, the radio, on television, in the gossip columns, picture magazines, comic books, the inspirational best-sellers and the cinema etc.

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Spolsky and Francis M. Hult, *The Handbook of Educational Linguistics*, Singapore: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010;

<sup>3</sup> According to Muriel Saville-Troike. *Introducing Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2006, pag. 2, second-language acquisition "...refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language. The additional language is called a **second language (L2)**, even though it may actually be the third, fourth, or tenth to be acquired. It is also commonly called a **target language (TL)**, which refers to any language that it the aim or goal of learning."

<sup>4</sup> See Ute Smit, *English as a Lingua Franca in Higher Education. A Longitudinal Study of Classroom Discourse*, Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter GmbH&Co. KG, 2010.

It is true that many of our primary schools, through the system of mass-promotion, place a premium on mental laziness. It is also true that many of our high-schools proceed on the make-the-work-interesting-to-the-student theory – which hardly leads to the development of the intellect. Finally, it is true that the college, therefore, is forced to neglect its main function – which is to mentally produce mature leaders – in favour of performing the elementary education duties that are properly the province of the primary and secondary schools.

School is an instrument of our society and it also should be an agent of intellectual ferment. Unfortunately, school teaches the virtues of attentiveness to things, techniques, machines, spectator sports and mass amusement instead of teaching the virtues of attentiveness to knowledge, wisdom and the works of the creative imagination. It is also true that educators in primary schools no longer really teach the child the basic skills (how to read, write, speak, listen and figure), the non-possession of which works against the development of attention.

School – there are, of course, notable exceptions – has in general become a kind of asylum or a refuge rather than an educational institution. Our real scope is to keep adolescent boys and girls, regardless of educational aptitude, desire to study or lack of them, from running the streets, getting into trouble and becoming intolerable nuisance in the community. The easiest way to keep them willing to submit to the school's control is to provide for them a vast amount of "amusement" and work to do.

This seems a fair statement but if our culture does not desire to create rational men but rather producers and consumers, most young people today are not able to enter industry or other types of gainful employment. The best method of occupying the time of such young people is an important problem and the solution to this problem requires an extended educational period (not only 3 or 4 years in universities), regardless of the immediate value of the education as such. In our opinion, the extension of the educational schedule might prove a socially wise enterprise within modern societies.

Our system of education may have to depart from the usual academic and vocational disciplines if it is to appeal to most people in this country. It is clear that this conception of the schools is a realistic one. It simply tunes in on the wave-band of our society in general and in free countries like our own.

Increasing globalization has created a large need for people in the workplace who are able to communicate in multiple languages. Although the need to learn foreign languages is almost as old as human history itself, the origins of modern language education can be found in the study and teaching of Latin in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (dominant language of education, commerce, religion and government in much of the Western world), but it was displaced by French, Italian and English by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The study of modern languages did not become part of the curriculum of European schools until the 18<sup>th</sup> century and it was based on the purely academic study of Latin (students of modern languages did much of the exercises, studying grammatical rules and translating abstract sentences; oral work was almost minimal).

Innovation in foreign language teaching began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and became very rapid in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest applied linguists included Jean Manesca, Heinrich Gottfried Ollendorff and Henry Sweet. The last mentioned linguist was a key figure in establishing the applied linguistics tradition in language.

Older methods and approaches – such as the grammar translation method or direct method that had been used in the past (Otto Jespersen, Harold Palmer and Leonard Bloomfield) – were replaced by new methods corresponding to the new scientific advances. With these methods, students generate original and meaningful sentences to gain functional knowledge.

In our country, language education took place as a general school subject or in a specialized language school. There are many methods of teaching languages related to second-language acquisition theory. They refer to approach, method and technique. The structural view treats

language as a system of structurally related elements concerning grammar translation and audio-lingual method. Structural methods include the oral approach/situational language teaching.

A method consists of a plan for presenting the language material to be learned, which should be based upon a selective approach. The instructional system must be designed considering the objectives of the teaching/learning, how the content is to be selected and organized and the types of tasks to be performed; the roles of the students and the roles of the teachers.

Nowadays, blended learning combines face-to-face teaching with distance education frequently electronic, either computer-based or web-based. This has been a major point in the English language teaching over the last years.

When talking about language skills we mean listening, speaking, reading, writing and the use of that particular language; however, study skills and knowing how one learns have been applied to language classrooms with various results depending upon age, the level of knowledge within the surveyed classes and the aptitude to study a foreign language that some people may not possess.

In foreign language teaching pair and group work give opportunities for more students to participate more actively. Such activities also provide opportunities for peer teaching.

English has always become big business, perhaps the UK's richest natural resource, marketed with considerable skill and professionalism throughout the world. There are several reasons which explain its expansion: "...thanks to socio-historical developments, the military power exerted by English-speaking nations and, more recently, the socio-economic power of (English-dominated) international companies and organizations – English has become the main language of international relations and trade, international media and communications, international business and also academia. While the perspective domains are highly diverse, they are – as already reflected in the repeated use of 'international' – marked, on the one hand, by English in its function as *lingua franca* or common medium of communication amongst multilinguals /.../”<sup>5</sup>

In the last ten years, global setting of the English language has reached astonishing proportions from China's revolutionary English language policy to the publication of the Macquarie Dictionary of Australian English, as well as to the near-total Anglicization of international trade and politics, from OPEC to summitry.

We may say that language belongs to each one of us, to the child as much as to the professor. Everyone uses words even if nobody thinks of the words he/she uses. What is it about language that makes people so passionate and curious? The answer is that there is almost no aspect of our lives that is not touched by language. We live in and by language. We all speak and listen. We are all in some senses political, and so is language. We might consider that English is a universal language. The emergence of a language that could write the world is the fulfilment of a dream that goes back to the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and the beginnings of global consciousness itself.

Language is backed up by massive English-language training programmes, on international business that – in textbooks, language courses, video programmes and computerized instruction – is worth hundreds of millions of pounds to the economy of the UK. The English language is now one of Britain's most reliable exports, as Malcolm Bradbury stated. In other words today's *lingua franca* is an ideal British product “needing no workers and no work, no assembly lines and no assemble, no spare parts and very little servicing; it is used for the most intimate and most public services everywhere. We call it the English language...”<sup>6</sup> Any literate, educated person in the world is ‘linguistically deprived’ if he does not know English.

English is not simply a vital means of intercommunication for the scientific community, it also, almost unconsciously, provides the everyday basic vocabulary. Professor Yash Pal, a renowned scientist, noticed that many different standard terms are used in computer programmes and they have led to the creation of a jargon. In consequence, many speakers do not even notice that the common

<sup>5</sup> Ute Smit, op.cit., pag. 2.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.miguelmillop.com/practice/intermediate/readingcomprehension/theimportanceofenglish.pdf>.

words they use are, in fact, English words. English has become the one foreign language that much of the world wants to learn. One basic force is an international need and desire to communicate. The more English-speaking the world becomes, the more important this language becomes to all societies. English is the language of the 'mass industries' – news-journalism, radio, film and television. Almost any international press conference held to disseminate information about an internationally significant event will be conducted in English.

The demands of modernization, technological change and international bank funding, still largely controlled by Anglo-American corporations, provide the main reason for global English, the language of the multinational corporations. Many multinational Japanese companies (like Nissan or Datsun) write international memoranda in English. In Kuwait, the university's language centre predominantly teaches English, much of it highly specialized.

The pressure to learn English in this environment is strictly commercial. A businessman who does not know English and who has to run to his bilingual secretary is at a serious competitive disadvantage. Everybody talks English and even the minutes of the meetings are written in English. Company executives take courses to improve their proficiency and, of course, they will warn you: "You wouldn't get a job at a certain level if you didn't speak good English." What is true of individuals and companies applies to countries, too. If people do not know English, they cannot benefit from multinational development programmes. The power of English is not confined to the invention and manufacture of new technology. All major corporations advertise and market their products in English.

English as the language of international pop music and mass entertainment is a worldwide phenomenon.

It is the non-linguistic forces – cultural, social, economic and political – that have made English the first world language in human history and instilled its driving force. Language is neutral, passive: only the uses to which it is put make it active. How comes that English can inspire astonishing affection not only among those who speak and write it as their mother tongue, but also among those for whom it is a foreign language? The richness and power of English was summarized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the great German philologist Jakob Grimm. The founder of comparative philology, Jakob Grimm, "... hazarded to guess more than three-quarters of a century ago that English would one day become the chief language of the world, and perhaps crown out several of the then principal idioms altogether. 'In wealth, wisdom and strict economy [he said] none of other living languages can vie with it.'"<sup>7</sup> But is it, in fact, "better", "superior", "more expressive", "richer" than other languages? English is highly idiomatic. On the other hand, the English language has three characteristics. The gender of every noun in modern English is determined by meaning and does not require a masculine, feminine or neuter article. The second practical quality of English is that it has a grammar of great simplicity and flexibility. Nouns and adjectives have highly simplified word-endings. Nouns can become verbs and verbs – nouns in a way that is impossible in other languages.

Above all, the great quality of English is its teeming vocabulary, 80% of which is foreign-born.

English as a world language is sustained by another elusive quality – its own peculiar genius. The arts of speech and literature have been perhaps the special contribution of the English people to European culture.

Today, in this new global state, English is probably finding more variety of expressivity and more local colour than at any time since its "golden age". Spoken and written, it offers a medium of almost limitless potential and surprise. As we can see, English, as a second language of many speakers in countries throughout the world, is more likely to survive to inevitable political changes of the future.

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<sup>7</sup> H.L. Mencken. *The American Language*. New York: Cosimo, Inc., pag. 372.

As for our country educational system regarding foreign languages, especially English, researchers and professionals testified as to the existence of a language system, which is part of our education. This is the reason I am asking myself why our curricula use the foreign language mostly optional, sometimes only in the first year of education?

The main policy arguments in favour of promoting foreign language education are the need for multilingual workforce as well as intellectual and cultural benefits as a consequence of greater inclusion in global information.

### Conclusions

All in all, it is vital for educational policies to include second-language acquisition among its main strategies. Thus, it would be desirable and advisable for foreign language teachers and professors to place the verbs *to think*, *to compare* and *to understand* at the core of the didactical process. Of similar importance it is that those who teach English / any other foreign language and those who lecture on language education should encourage learners to preserve their linguistic and cultural identity. In this respect, we would like to comment on the importance of translations for the dissemination of knowledge and the consolidation of cultural identities. Thanks to second-language acquisition (and we refer here to the effort of translators to adapt unknown texts to other more widespread languages), ‘marginal’ cultures (such as the Romanian culture) can be known all over the world. In this respect, we would like to quote George Steiner who noticed that “The new status of Eastern Europe has occasioned a veritable tide of translations into English and into the relevant languages. Czech, Polish, Hungarian and Romanian literature are beginning to reach the Anglo-American world-audience. In turn, Western texts, long forbidden, are being imported.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, we would like to underline the fact that today’s knowledge society cannot exist outside second-language acquisition. In the ever continuously changing political and economic environment, culture – and together with it language learning – is permanently altered by the newly created concepts and devices. If English / Chinese / Spanish or any other language is spoken by the majority of the world population and gains the statute of a lingua franca in the future, perhaps the old myth of Babylon will become obsolete.

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<sup>8</sup> George Steiner. “Preface to the Third Edition”. In *After Babel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

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