

Second Language Acquisition

Given the complexity of language development, several myths have arisen about learning and acquiring a second language. In a 1992 article titled "Myths and Misconceptions About Second Language Learning," McLaughlin identified several of the following myths (myths 1, 3, and 4).

Myth one

Students can learn a language quickly and easily

Contrary to popular belief, learning a language is a lengthy and arduous process even for children. Teachers or parents should not expect instant, miraculous results from students who are learning another language. To become proficient in another language, students must progress through various overlapping stages spanning several years:

- **Pre-production/Comprehension Stage:** Students communicate with gestures and actions. They build receptive vocabulary and refine their listening skills. During this phase, called the "silent period," students try to make sense of what they hear, but they do not engage in language production. Even though they do not speak, language acquisition has begun.
- **Early Production Stage:** Students speak and/or write using yes/no answers, one or two words, lists of words, or short phrases. They continue to expand their receptive vocabulary.
- **Speech Emergence Stage:** Students' speech production improves in both quantity and quality. Students speak and/or write in longer phrases and complete sentences and they use a wide range of vocabulary.
- **Intermediate Fluency Stage:** Students engage in conversations and produce connected narratives orally and in writing.
- **Advanced Stage:** Students speak and write in connected and unified paragraphs about most situations.

Children do not just "pick up" a language; they need a strongly supportive and rich environment.

Myth two

Students automatically learn another language when immersed in an environment where everyone speaks that language

Simply placing students in a second language environment in hopes that the students will learn it through osmosis is not enough. The language must be used in such a way that students understand the messages. To access the messages, students rely on context, knowledge of the world, and

other clues including gestures, examples, illustrations, and caretaker language.

Students acquire more language when they are exposed to language which is comprehensible and just slightly above their current level of competence; for this reason, teachers must offer strategies for making the material accessible. Also, they must be especially careful to challenge students without frustrating them. Anxiety and lack of motivation result when there is too much disparity between the students' level of language proficiency and the level

of language they must understand. When the language is too far beyond the students' current level of proficiency, students conclude that they cannot learn the language.

The main function of the teacher is to provide input in an environment that is conducive to language learning. High anxiety, defensiveness, and insecurity prevent language acquisition. Thus, students need a comfortable environment where they are self-confident, highly motivated, and willing to take risks with the language. Language development occurs when students experiment with the language and attempt to figure out and apply the rules governing that language. For this reason, it is very important to maintain the interest of the learners and to give them the confidence that they can learn the second language with a certain degree of accuracy and fluency.

Myth three

All students learn a second language in the same way

As with first language acquisition, students follow the same process for language development, but they learn a second language at different rates and in different ways. This also applies to language minority students from different cultural backgrounds who may experience additional conflict in school because their ways of learning and communicating may be different from the ways of their American peers. Therefore, a good teacher will include a variety of instructional activities ranging from demonstrations, group and pair work, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, individualized instruction, and other strategies which take into account the variety of experiences and cultural backgrounds of second language learners.

Myth four

Students have acquired a second language once they can speak

It is easy to assume that if students can converse comfortably in a second language, they can read and write the second language with equal ease. However, there is much more involved in learning a second language than learning how to speak it. While students may have developed the ability to communicate orally, their use of the language is often limited to social interactions. Similarly, heritage language learners may speak their home language only with family and peers. Thus, their vocabulary may have become restricted in some contexts while it may be extensive in others. Exposing both sets of students to a variety of audiences will help them broaden and vary their language.

Additionally, some students may be functionally illiterate in their first language. This is especially true of heritage language learners who may have learned the language at home, but who have been schooled in the US. It is also true of immigrant students who may not have received any formal schooling in their native (home) country.

Myth five

Students need to learn grammar and vocabulary before they can speak

In and of themselves, the practices of learning words and breaking down and analyzing language components do not lead to language production nor do they lead to proficiency. While grammar and vocabulary are essential parts of language, they are only enablers which allow students to communicate. Students learn a second language more easily if they engage in meaningful activities requiring the use of the language and its components. For example, conjugating verbs is useless in itself, but correct verb forms become essential within the context of narrating one's daily activities.

It is equally important to use caution in correcting students' errors. Systematic grammatical correction of errors does not improve the learners' language abilities. On the contrary it may hinder their motivation to use the language by placing emphasis on the form rather than the message. More effective feedback includes rephrasing and expanding on what the students have expressed.

Resources

Curtain, Helena and Carol Ann Bjornstad Pesola. 1994. *Languages and Children: Making the Match*. Longman Publishing Group.

Krashen, Stephen. 1988. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Prentice-Hall International.

McLaughlin, Barry. 1992. "Myths and Misconceptions About Second Language Learning: What Every Teacher Needs to Unlearn" from *Educational Practice Report: 5*. National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning.



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