

ORDER OF ACQUISITION

Introduction

"Order of acquisition" is one of Krashen's 5 hypotheses. It is described in his "Natural Approach" book and has been tested and examined by numerous studies. There is no such thing as a list of all the features of any language in the world. Nobody even knows what all the features are of even one language. Consequently there is no such thing as a list of the "order of acquisition" for all the features of even one language. (Es obvio) So it is useless to ask for it!

The studies that **do** exist are limited to things such as;

- compare two features of one language to see which comes first
- report on features of one language to see which feature seems to occur at about the same time as another feature
- study the stages of acquisition of ONE feature. Most of these studies describe acquisition of English.

Example of acquisition of a single grammatical feature (“*ser*” vs “*estar*”)

The book I have nearby right now is Lee and VanPatten's "Making Communicative Language Teaching Happen." I will summarize pages 23 -25. I will intersperse my own comments here and there. If you want *pure stuff* without Gross's comments, read the book! <smile>

In English, the acquisition of the following four verb morphemes tends to follow this order: -ing , regular past tense, irregular past tense, 3rd person present tense -s.

ESL textbooks tend to put the 3rd person present tense -s in the first part of the level one book. It violates the order of acquisition, but it is easy to teach and test. And then EFL teachers (in foreign countries) complain, "After four years of English, my students still forget to put the -s on." I have spoken with teachers of English in China, in Francophone countries, and in Hispanic countries. Some of them forget the -s also. After all, it **is** late acquired.)

In an earlier message, I referred to subjunctive in Spanish being acquired earlier than gender. I was oversimplifying to make a point. Each language feature actually has stages of acquisition.

For example: negation. If you have little kids, notice this: At first negation is simply NO followed by a phrase. Then NO moves inside the phrase and "don't" is also used in an unanalyzed way. Then the idea of "-n't" attaching to modals in an unanalyzed way. Finally the whole system of auxiliary verbs and the correct usage of "not" and of contractions.

Just as negation has stages of acquisition, so do other features. In the same earlier message, I mentioned "*ser* and *estar*" being late acquired. Again I oversimplified in order to make my point. Actually there are stages to copular verbs (to be) in Spanish. You other language teachers will recognize stages one and two in your own level one classes.

1. No copular verb at all. (In other words, the kids say things like "Tommy tall." Are you having an "AHA!!" moment now? This is the first stage of copular acquisition. Don't gouge your eyes out when your kids talk this way. Simply acknowledge that they are into stage one now and continue to provide abundant comprehensible input.

2. Generalization of copular. (The kids start saying "*is*" for every single copular, regardless of subject. In Spanish they say "*es*" for everything. It's just a stage.)

3. *Estar* + progressive. (Notice that this is everywhere in the LICT books. Good! As your students enter stage 3 they will acquire it. In the meantime they hear it a lot and reproduce it in stories even though they have not really acquired it in their spontaneous, unrehearsed speech.) Some Spanish teachers in the US are at stage 3. □ They LEARNED stages 4 and 5 in school, they know the rules, but when they are engaged in spontaneous, unrehearsed speech they show their acquisition level.

4. *Estar* + location.

5. *Estar* + adjectives of condition.

Relate this process to all grammar. Subjunctive is not acquired in one fell swoop, gender usage is not acquired in one fell swoop. It all has stages. However, 3-yr-old and 4-yr-old Hispanic kids use "*haya*" and "*vaya*" (irregular subjunctive forms) correctly all of the time. But they still get "*el*" and "*la*" wrong (gender) with some nouns.

Those of us who are not native speakers still goof on gender, even after thirty years of working with the language. It is less frequent than when we first started teaching, of course, but there are always slip-ups. This shows us that gender is actually pretty late acquired, even though it is easy to teach and to test.

Why you should NOT try to follow the "order of acquisition" in your teaching.

Teachers think that if only they knew the order of acquisition for their language they would know what to teach when. WRONG!! Just speak the language comprehensibly and naturally (Gross says, "Shelter vocabulary, DO NOT shelter grammar.") ALL of your students will acquire in the natural order. They are each at different stages for all different features, so don't try to alter or "enhance" their order of acquisition.

Let me illustrate by describing a typical English-speaking child:

After the huge vocabulary spurt at 18 months, the first grammatical feature that appears is word order. A 2-year-old child may very well say, "I don't want to," or "Daddy be home soon." The child would NEVER say, "To I want don't," or "Home be soon Daddy."

At 3, the grammar explosion takes off:

1. The "-ing" ending is first, with statements such as, "I eating."
2. Next come the prepositions "in" and "on" (I sitting on Daddy.)
3. Then plurals
4. Next come possessives "Birds is sitting on Daddy's shirt!"
5. Then "a" and "the" begin to be used with regularity and accuracy.
6. Next is the tricky past tense. During ages 3, 4, and 5, they go through stages of past tense acquisition. They may say, "I goed," or "I hitted." What is happening is that they have internalized the "-ed" past tense and are now applying it generally.

What if some poor mother tried to speak to her child without using "a" and "the" until the child was 3 years old, waiting for the moment in the "order of acquisition" chart? Isn't it obvious that the child would NOT suddenly begin to use "a" and "the" at that time? It took three and a half years of hearing the articles before the child's developing semantic map gets around to actually mastering them!

A final word about how to use this information in class

If you want to know your students' acquisition levels, talk to them! ("Monday class discussion" in the 5-day lesson plan.) Notice where each student seems to stumble or break down or the most common errors. Make sure that you are giving accurate, clear input. Give them a 15-second grammar lesson if you like, particularly to those students who request it.

DO NOT think that the student retell of stories is their actual level of acquisition. It is not. It is full of memorized phrases that they output as if they were vocabulary words. They have not internalized the structures in those phrases; that is obvious when they talk in an unrehearsed, spontaneous setting.

One thing I have noticed about the order of acquisition: IT IS ENTIRELY BASED ON MEANING!

The features that carry the greatest amount of meaning are the first to be internalized. (Verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs of time) Those features which do not significantly interfere with making oneself understood are acquired later. Those features which put "polish" on the language are the latest to be acquired even if the rules for them are quite simple ("Who" vs "Whom" in English is often never acquired by native English speakers. The rule is the same as "I" vs "me" yet it is perceived as polish rather than changing the meaning.)

If you are worried about "fossilization" of bad grammar by your students, I can reassure you that fossilization is a feature of input. If they get abundant incorrect input, they will

fossilize it. That's how "*He don't*" and "*We was*" become fossilized in some English speakers.

In summary, your job is to speak the best language you can, keep it comprehensible (and interesting, kids won't attend to your input if you don't keep it interesting) and let the acquisition occur!

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