

First and second language acquisition: A brief comparison

First language acquisition	Second language acquisition
An instinct, triggered by birth	A personal choice, required motivation
Very rapid	Varies, but never as quick as FLA
Complete	Never as good as a native speaker, though good competence can be achieved
Natural (no instruction)	Natural or guided (for synthetic languages grammatical instruction is required)

Note the following facts concerning first and second language acquisition

- 1) The level of competence acquired with SLA (second language acquisition) depends not so much on the time spent learning a language as the time at which one begins.
- 2) In general linguists maintain that a first language is acquired, i.e. that knowledge is stored unconsciously, and that a second language is learned, i.e. that knowledge is gained by conscious study of the second language's structure. However, this distinction is not watertight and SLA can involve acquisition to a certain degree. FLA (first language acquisition) does not, however, learned as no instruction is required. Remember that you know your first language before you start school.
- 3) There is a critical period, that of puberty, around 12 or 13 years of age, after which it is difficult, if not impossible to acquire a second language with the same degree of competence as the first language. The decline in ability to acquire a second language may also be connected with the lateralisation of the brain just before puberty, i.e. with the fixing of functions in one or other of the two halves of the brain. The decline in acquisitional ability after lateralisation/puberty is a widespread phenomenon and affects other activities such as sports, playing music, etc.
- 4) Because SLA is very largely conscious it is dependent on factors such as motivation and personality. This does not apply to FLA which is triggered by birth, i.e. it is an instinct in the biological sense of the word. Remember that no-one ever refuses to acquire one's first language and that no-one dislikes one's own first language. Because FLA is an instinct there is no choice involved, contrast this with a second language.
- 5) Note that something which is acquired does not require conscious decisions when activated. However, if you have learned something, like the rule of chess then you must

think consciously about how to move the pieces. An unconscious activity, apart from language, acquired in childhood would, for instance, be the ability to ride a bicycle.

- 6) Your first language is acquired without too much input from your surroundings. Furthermore, this input does not have to be ordered: children make sense of what they hear and create the order needed to stored knowledge of their first language themselves. It is not necessary to speak to young children in a babyish way: children do not end up speaking like this anyway.
- 7) First language acquisition is not dependent on intelligence or special ability for languages. Everyone acquires their native language fully and properly. What is true, of course, is that some people have a greater stylistic range and larger vocabulary in their native language, but that is not connected with first language acquisition. You learn style in school when you learn how to write the standard of your language and you learn specialised words consciously after childhood.
- 8) First language acquisition is connected to cognitive development with the latter preceding the former somewhat. With the second language (acquired after puberty) you have all the cognitive structures necessary to deal with the language.
- 9) You cannot forget your first language, although it may become inactive if you spend many years speaking just a second language. Backsliding, reverting to a lower level of competence, making mistakes you know mistakes, are features of second language acquisition only.
- 10) There are certain phases in first language acquisition: one-word, two-word and multi-word stages. Furthermore, in early childhood children make maximally simpler generalisations about language, e.g. that all verbs are weak. After a while they correct themselves (when they just hear the adult forms). Once they have acquired the latter they remember them.
- 11) In FLA children make errors, systematic ill-formed structures based on the level of acquisition on which they happen to be. In post-puberty SLA individuals make mistakes which are often random and erratic, though a degree of regularity can be recognised here. With SLA there can be interference from the first language, i.e. structures from L1 are carried over into L2 where they do not occur natively. Interference obviously does not occur in FLA.
- 12) FLA children build up competence, the internalised knowledge of one's native language, from the performance of others, i.e. by accepting spoken input from those people surrounding them. The parents are obviously important here, but siblings and playmates can play an equally important role if they are present.
- 13) In the strict sense bilinguals are those individuals who have acquired two languages simultaneously in early childhood. Normally, one of these languages will be dominant, but the degree of competence in the non-dominant language is still very high and far exceeds that of a second language learned after puberty.