

## Teaching-Learning Asymmetry: Why Don't Learners Learn What Teachers Teach?



Narges Baktash<sup>1</sup> & Masoud Taheri<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English Studies and Applied Linguistics, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran  
*Narges.baktash@ut.ac.ir*

<sup>2</sup>English Department, Shahreza Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahreza, Iran

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### Abstract

Teachers of EFL, as well as teacher trainers, have always complained about mismatch between what they do in the language classes and the outcome of it in the real world. There has been much debate as to whether the mismatch results from learner variables, teacher inadequacies, program deficiencies, etc. The present paper reviews some existing learning perspectives and tries to come up with some hypotheses concerning the problem. One hypothesis put forward here to test in a comparative form is that the language learning environment and the strategies used by the teachers and learners do not match and therefore the efforts of both groups go down the drain. Implications of the possible confirmation of such hypothesis for language teachers are discussed and some conclusions are drawn on that basis.

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<sup>2</sup>Corresponding Author's Email:  
*masoudtaheri1979@gmail.com*

### Introduction

Experts have proposed different hypotheses about how languages are learned. From the early times in the history of language learning/teaching, it has been a routine procedure to compare the two processes of L1 and L2 acquisition as similar, sometimes identical (e.g. Guinne series in the early years of the 19th century and natural approaches later, specifically the Natural Approach by Krashen et al., or even the Audiolingual Method). Although this assumption has been challenged in recent years (e.g. Gass and Schachter, 1989), the idea that there are similarities between the two processes is still prevalent in many circles, leading many researchers to concentrate on the issue whenever the problems of SLA are discussed. That is, the issue of the comparison between FLA and SLA seems to be one of the major concerns of researchers in the field. Ellis (2021), as one of the prominent researchers in the area of SLA, for instance, holds that:

My initial concern was solely with what and how I should teach English. However, it soon became clear to me that students frequently failed to learn what I taught them and that there was an obvious gap between ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ (p.1).

A look at the latest research topics in both L1 and L2 investigations illustrates the point. Most papers or books in the area of SLA have at least one section on this issue. Of the more recent works on SLA, one can refer to Cook's (2000) treatment of the problem where he reviews the work done in this area and particularly where he quotes Ellis' (1994) comparison. That, in turn, is based on Bley-Vroman's (1989) assumption of the *Fundamental Difference Hypothesis*. This emphasis shows that there must be something of interest in the phenomenon of L1 acquisition which cannot be ignored when doing research in SLA. The research question addressed here, therefore, is:

**RQ:** What are the possible causes of the existing asymmetry between teaching and learning in the TEFL environment?

Based on the question presented, the following hypothesis was formulated:

**HO:** The mismatch between Teaching/learning environments and strategies used by teachers and learners leads to failure in TEFL environment.

## Method

### Design of the study

This review paper uses a comparative method to find the similarities and differences between teaching and learning environments as well as the strategies used by teachers and learners in TEFL.

### Procedures

The existing literature in the area of language learning/teaching was reviewed to find answer to the question raised and reject or confirm the suggested hypothesis. The premise in this review was the assumption that in the long-term language learning/teaching has always been based on a comparison between L1/L2 similarities and differences. The review, therefore, discusses these points as extracted from the literature as well as personal experience of the authors in their academic endeavor.

### Discussion of Points of Comparison

The first feature usually compared in the two processes is the ability to learn. Children are said to be endowed with a God-given ability to learn a language quickly and effortlessly. Language learning for children is mostly fun, rather than struggle. This ability, however, is said to disappear slowly, and by the time an adult begins the task of learning a second language this ability is completely gone. Ellis (2021, p.2) Ellis (2021, p.2) refers the interested researchers to the initial point of comparison between L1 and SLA as cited in the following sources:

For studies in the areas of interest such as Period Key studies, Key findings, Theoretical influences, Order and sequence of acquisition during 1960s and 1970s in sources like Dulay and Burt (1973), Cancino, Rosansky, Schumann (1978). These sources, according to Ellis (2021, p.2) conclude that just as children acquiring their first language went through clearly marked stages of development, so too do child and adult L2 learners acquire the grammar of an L2 in a more-or-less universal and fixed way. This finding challenged behaviorist accounts of L2 learning and the audiolingual method of teaching. L1 acquisition research (e.g. Klima & Bellugi, 1966; Brown, 1973).

This is interesting since it seems quite plausible in the real world. We see that children really learn their L1s easily, while for most adult learners this is a difficult job. In addition, despite the tremendous effort it takes for the adult learner, the result of second language learning is usually

not very encouraging. The child's language play seems to be superior to the adult's language struggle.

In an attempt to trace the causes of this significant difference in L1 acquisition and SLA, under different conditions, two main features of language learning conditions will be compared and contrasted here to see whether it is possible to draw some kind of conclusion as what may be causing trouble, i.e. bringing about this mismatch between teaching languages and learning them. In a different approach to this comparison, Cook (2000) refers to Ellis's (1994) suggestions on the features that can be compared in L1 and L2. Because of the prescriptive nature of the comparison, direct reference is not made to those suggestions. In doing this comparison from a more realistic point of view, the author has adapted the characteristics of child language from J. Doug McGlothlin (2001). He has observed his own child at work in learning English and has thus come up with certain assumptions which may in the first place seem common sense observations. However, for the purpose of this study such observations are points of departure without which moving ahead will be difficult, if not impossible. From all child language feature, I shall take the language environment and the strategies to discuss here

### **The Language environment**

The first, and probably the most significant, cause of mismatch can be traced back to the environment in which language learning takes place. In comparing the two environments, there are ten features of a child's first language environment that can be taken as the basis for comparison.

First, in the child language environment there is no pressure upon the child since there is no test, and therefore no grades. In addition, there is no standard that the child must meet in order to win the parents' approval. This, of course, does not mean that the parents feel no pressure to have their child speak earlier. It is because this pressure is not transferred to the child. Even if the parents try to do so, the child will not be in a position to respond to such pressure. This situation is quite contrary to that of the SLA environment in which there is direct pressure on the learner. The pressure of time, the pressure of test grades, and more than that, the pressure of need for language as a means of communication. The teacher's role, in comparison with that of the parents', is different too. The teacher will feel the pressure to help the learner develop his language skills more rapidly, but this pressure is very often transferred to the learner himself as a motivating factor.

That is why the pressure may sometimes backfire in that it may discourage the learner altogether. The similarity of the two situations is only known to the conscientious teacher. Larsen-Freeman (2001) looks at this feel of pressure in a positive way when she says that for her the most joyous moments of her life are those moments, "... and they don't happen every day, when you can see the penny drop. You've been working on teaching a particular tense or a reading passage, and all of a sudden, there is the moment of awareness. When you can actually see people go "Ahh! I see" Those are the moments I live for as a teacher. Those are the things that keep me going. It's the joy of watching others learn" (p.3).

The second factor in the child environment which affects learning is the factor of time. The child has all the time he needs, since he is not waiting for the bell to ring. There is no given period of time in which the child must learn or fail. Rather, there is enough time even for the child who takes a rather leisurely pace in his learning. In contrast with this is the given period of classroom instruction in SLA which is limited to 50 or 90 minutes at best, three times a week. Outside the classroom, there is little or no contact with the second language. The time pressure is expected to affect the learner in a positive way, but it usually works against the learner. The reason for this being that learner is under a lot of tension and this tense environment raises his anxiety, leading to a higher affective filter (Krashen, 1983). The high affective filter, in turn, affects learning negatively.

A third, and probably the most significant, factor in child language environment is lack of possibility of escaping into a language that the child already knows. It just cannot happen. Though he has no external pressure to study, there is no bell to let him out of class and no vacation when he can get away from the new language.

The importance of this factor can only be recognized when you think about the communicative value of the environment. In SLA, the natural environment is considered the richest source of input. This, however, can hardly be achieved in the classroom environment. The child will have to cope with the linguistic environment around him in order to survive. That is why the result of FLA is so clearly superior to SLA in every respect.

A fourth factor in the child language environment is the lack of any kind of sequence in what the child hears around him. Language as used by the adults around the child is only natural, not sequenced by grammar or vocabulary.

Compare this situation with the SLA environment in which the syllabus dictates the type of language the learner faces. Syllabus, as Widdowson (1990) emphasizes, is by nature sequential in that it puts forward some kind of grading. This grading seems inevitable in classroom teaching, though. What is important is the rationale behind this grading. The material so far presented in the form of EFL texts seeks to start with some kind of step-by-step procedure in which language is treated as disintegrated sequences of items, vocabulary or structure.

The repetition in the language heard around a child is tremendous. The child will not have to go from one chapter to another, or to deal with new material every minute. This repetition reflects the daily life around him. In other words, though a child's language environment might seem too rich, too unstructured, and too confusing, it does contain within itself the ability to tell the child where to begin and how to proceed. In contrast, again, the second language learner's encounter is mostly with new material. Repetition in the form it exists abundantly in the child language environment is scarce, sometimes non-existent in the EFL context.

The sixth point of interest in comparing child and adult language acquisition in terms of the environment is in what forces the child to learn. Both the words and the world around him are new to him. Thus, the child is not only learning a language but also discovering the world at the same time. This discovery brings curiosity, along with it a powerful motivation to learn a language. A very effective explanation for this issue can be found in the new Vygotskian view on language acquisition, specifically in the idea of *the zone of proximal development*. By the ZPD, vygotsky means to explain the difference between the child's capacity to solve problems on his own, and his capacity to solve them with the assistance of others (Schutz, 2002).

In most cases this motivation is either absent in adult classroom language learning, or too weak to have any positive effect. In fact, many classroom teachers demotivate the learners by trying too hard to motivate them.

A very fundamental help in the child first language environment is that language is related directly to the world around him. It is always presented as a living language. The new language is not a translation of something he already understands in another language. Neither is it a secret code that must be translated into another language.

The most effective approach in second language teaching is now considered to be the communicative approach in which rare moments of living language can be simulated, albeit very

artificially. The world knowledge of the adult L2 learner is both an advantage and a disadvantage in this respect. It is an advantage in that it rids the adult from having to rely solely on language, what the child is confined to because of limited cognitive development which allows exploiting symbolic means other than instinctive ones, and use other communication means. The disadvantage, though, is more significant because for many this forms the fundamental difference between the child and adult language environments- what has been referred to as the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (e.g. Gass and Schachter, 1989). This is particularly important since it deals with issues such as availability or absence of U.G. in adult language learner, cross-linguistic influence (previously known as interference), physiological growth causing problems in speech organs in producing certain sounds in the target language, etc.

Another opportunity which certainly helps in enriching child language environment is the chances a child finds to listen to the new language as it is spoken by naive-speakers. There is considerable variation in this though, i.e. some children have more language around them than others. However, children with the least chances still have a lot more language around them than any non-native speaker has in the formal contexts of language teaching and living in a culture that does not speak the language that he is studying.

In addition to the many opportunities that the child environment provides for the language to be heard around him, it also provides the child with many opportunities to speak the new language and be understood. His parents and older brothers and sisters are native speakers of the language, so that when he speaks, he can immediately get the reinforcement that his words deserve. This may sound a little behavioristic in nature, but in fact it may be explained by the new approaches to language acquisition in which feedback is given a role.

This is an opportunity which a second language learner rarely enjoys. Depending on the type of the context of language acquisition, a learner may have from very little to no chances of speaking a foreign language outside the classroom. Even within the classroom, there is usually little time to allocate to every learner in every session. And when there is, the context is so *devised*, to use Widdowson's (1990) terms, that it is of no value in learning.

Another very controversial difference between the two environments is the type of language that a child hears around him, and the adult non-native learner has access to. Much of what the child hears is simplified for him. When a person is speaking to a young child, he does his best to

get across his meaning in the language that the child can understand. Because the child can communicate by his actions how much he understands, the speaker can tailor his language to the child's level. This is quite different from listening to a person speaking to a group. It is very personal, and the many small problems of communication can be quickly detected and solved before they become real hindrances to real learning.

This fact has brought about a lot of controversy since many L2 researchers have tried to adapt the same attitude towards adult learners and try to simplify their input. Two points are worth bringing up here:

First the input in child language environment is not always the same. This has been shown through the lack of uniformity principle in first language by people such as Bley-Vroman (1989) who has claimed that since input in child language is not uniform in amount and type across languages, one cannot claim that it has any crucial effect in child language development. That is, the uniformity principle itself is being questioned now, even in FLA. The evidence comes from cultures with different traditions concerning child care. Take the Chinese mother for example, who has very little time to spend on talking to the baby, being at work most of the waking hours of the baby. The Chinese baby, therefore, gets much less input than the Russian baby, who enjoys the Babushka system of child care. The Babushka's responsibility is directly to help the baby, much of which comes in the form of language input. Mothers in the world differ in their linguistic behavior towards their babies, though the result is not much different: all normal children learn their first language without much trouble, regardless of the amount of language they hear around them or whether the language is simplified or not.

The second point concerns the concept of simplification itself. As Corder (1981) says, in SLA simplification is a problematic term since it does not tell us much. How could you simplify a language that the learner does not speak? You can simplify what somebody knows and express the idea in easier terms. But when it comes to SLA we are dealing with known ideas but unknown terms. This is what makes the situation more complex than the child environment. The child does not have the concept, nor does he know the terms. The simplified language, or motherese, functions differently from the teacher talk in which he is only trying to help learners express what they know in another language. Simplification is not possible since it is logically impossible to change the unknown! If one means simplified structure of the language, then language teaching will not be



fulfilling its function since the interlanguage the adult develops will be of little help in his real-world communication. We should not forget that the goal of adult second language learning is not similar to that of the child first language acquisition. The adult will have extensive needs which require a more semantically and syntactically developed language than that in child language. That is, child language is not always effective in communicating higher needs, such as reasoning.

### **Learning strategies**

The above ten differences which bring about some of the reasons why there is asymmetry between teaching and learning in SLA have their roots in the environment in which the two, i.e. the child and the adult learn a language. There are, however, other differences which cause this underachievement by the language teachers who try their best with little success. Of these, the learning strategies the child uses will be discussed since they seem to be effective in child-adult communication, though not always readily available in adult second language communication.

A child is not in the least interested in language for its own sake. In fact, a young child never focuses his attention upon language at all. He is too interested in his toys, in his playmates, and in the things that he can find that are not to be played with. Language is always of secondary importance, and all of his early language learning is peripheral learning. To a child, the value of language is measured by its ability to help him better enjoy his primary interests. If he breaks all the imaginable rules of grammar and pronunciation, and yet gets the response he wants, he feels as if he has been completely successful. This explains why children are happy to use words and constructions that they do not hear from anybody else, as far as people around him understand what they say. Such words function for them, and that is all they care about.

In the adult case, though, this is not true. The second language learner language has to be of the type people understand and use routinely. This, of course, does not mean that they have to speak perfectly well, but it has to meet certain standards, otherwise it will be dismissed as incomprehensible. What is usually referred to as global error in IL is probably the language which does not serve the function of communication (The distinction between local and global error has been around since early 70`s. See for example Burt and Kiparsky, (1975; Parupali,2018). That is, incomprehensible language will not serve the purpose and will therefore lead to a breakdown in communication. The parents will have to cooperate with the child to the end, the native speaker faced with a non-native does not feel that kind of responsibility.

Looking at the problem from a different angle, the child does not let the language he does not understand bother him the least. The confusion and frustration an adult experience in contexts he does not understand a language is too much. For the child, however, this is as much disturbance as water disturbs a duck's back. The reason for this is that language is never the center of a child's attention, while for an L2 learner it is the whole thing.

The repetition a child enjoys in his daily life helps him learn a language. These repetitive events give the child a sense of security and order, based on which he understands the order in the events of his life and also begins to understand the order in the language that is associated with those events. This is different from the repetition one observes in the language environment of adult learners. Here, repetition is a negative feature, not much of a help in the learner's developing IL.

Whatever captures the child's attention in the environment will help him learn because he focuses his attention on that one thing, excluding the rest of the world for that moment in time. Thus, the language associated with that object of interest is brought to the front and center, and all the rest of the language around him is temporarily pushed back into the shadows.

Now, if we compare this with the adult case of language acquisition, we can easily detect the great difference. An adult tends to get first confused then discouraged when he receives too much new information at one time. He attempts to take in all that is presented to him, often with the result that he does not learn any of it well. Because of this, care must be taken not to present too much at one time to an adult language learner. The excess causes the adult problems because he may try to take in all that is around him with the result of failing in doing so for the most basic of them. In other words, while the child is in control and selects what he likes best, the adult lacks the ability to focus on the material at hand while excluding the rest of the world.

Another very important point of difference in these two strategies is the child's choice to be picky based on the ease of the language around him. He does not think about the world economy or foreign cultures. He thinks about the people around him, and the things he can understand and can easily be given a name.

Obviously, this choice is not available for the second language learner. He will have to learn a language through a content which may or may not be of any interest to him, nor can he be picky about the subject of his interest, since the type of communication at hand will differ from the unilateral child-parent talk.

A natural joy for the child comes when he can call an object by its name. This natural desire helps him learn the language. Although it may seem strange to the adults around, the child receives real joy from just pointing to something and calling it by name. He never thinks it is stupid or silly to say something that others might consider obvious. If the adult learner acts this way, he might shock people around him. Krashen was probably wise in recognizing this as a crucial factor in SLA, though he has not been able to provide a satisfactory explanation for the appearance of the filter all of a sudden.

A further important point of difference here is the child's natural desire to participate in the life around him to help learn language. He just wants to see what others do and follow them, including using language. He might, of course say things he does not understand and imitate others only out of curiosity, which is natural. But this helps him speak the language in the context of real life. The second language learner, on the other hand, has his life and language learning as two separate things. He is learning a language, but living a natural life which may be quite irrelevant to the language learning experience. Imagine a student doing Persian Literature and learning English as a second language only 3 or 4 hours a week. The two contexts of life and education just don't match, no matter how he tries.

For the child, knowing the pronunciation of the words helps in attaching meaning to sound sequence that he already knows. This is because the word becomes a part of his speaking vocabulary at the same time that he learns the meaning. Clark (1993) believes that the first meanings that appear in the child's lexicon come from a variety of ways. At this stage, semantic fields begin to grow, and new words are added to these fields. This may not be all that significant a process in second language learning. It could, however, be exploited in helping the learners in that the knowledge of lexical pronunciation may be used in cognitive tasks provided for the learners. This has been also supported by SLA researchers such as Rod Ellis. Ellis (2008) has noted that such considerations, i.e. insight coming from first or second language, should only be used in developing tasks for SLA, not as guidelines in teaching.

A characteristic of child language learning strategies which has tempted many language leaning researchers in SLA is that the child immediately puts to use the language he is learning, and uses his success in communication to build up his confidence. He does not try to store up his knowledge for use at a later date. He applies it in context as soon as he can. And every time he uses a piece of

language successfully, it is reinforced in his mind and his confidence grows. This confidence, in turn, encourages him to use the new language even more, thus bringing him more reinforcement, more confidence. This confidence cycle built upon successful usage of the languages is difficult to establish and keep going in an adult learner. A learner without confidence is in trouble from the very beginning, but one who possesses the confidence that comes from success, even though limited, can overcome a host of other learning problems.

A final characteristic of the child language strategies, and probably one which has received the least attention in terms of the L2 learning strategies, is the tremendous ingenuity that a child brings to the task of language learning. He has no fear of failure, neither has he any inhibition. He plunges in head first, attacking the problems with all the resources that he has. Just imagine the case of associations the child makes between objects and words. Many of these associations are obviously wrong (to us), but he does not know they are wrong and he does not care. He sees the world through different eyes, and orders it in different ways. This makes the child different from an L2 learner in that the latter cannot ignore the established conventions and bring ingenuity to the task of real-life communication where he is expected to be using a language which is mutually understandable. For example, adult communication has to follow certain rules without which there will a breakdown of communication or misunderstanding of different types. Grice's (1975) maxims has captured some of these rules.

### Conclusion

The ten differences mentioned in terms of environmental characteristics and strategies that the child uses but the L2 learner does not have access to or is not capable of using, may be a possible reason for the asymmetry between teaching and learning. Thus, the claim that we teach well but the learners don't learn is only based on the assumption that there must be a one-to-one relationship here, a claim which obviously the existing evidence does not support. Learners learn what they want and what they can, not what we try to teach them, even in the best of our intentions. Efforts such as Krashen's Natural Approach or any other natural approach is rendered useless because the environment they try to create and the strategies they try to employ are all devised, not natural in the real sense of it. Perhaps it is time to think about what Caleb Gattegno said years ago: **We need to subordinate teaching to learning!**

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