

The Strengths and Limitations of Acquisition:
A case study of an untutored language learner

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There is more than one way to learn a language. One way is through formal study, with or without a teacher, who may subscribe to one or another of various approaches and methods and who may or may not teach using grammar books, dictionaries and various kinds of texts. Regardless of the particular method used, perhaps the hallmark of such language learning is conscious attention (to a greater or lesser degree) to the patterns, regularities and rules of the target language. It is possible, however to approach language learning quite differently, without benefit of teachers or texts, but simply by "picking up" the language as a child would do. There are many who believe that the mind does best what it does unconsciously, and in the field of applied linguistics there are many who believe people will learn languages better by using them for meaningful communication than they will by studying them (Rivers 1980). Krashen (1980b; 1981; 1982), for example, argues that subconscious acquisition (not conscious learning) is the dominant process for adults as well as children, and may apply in a foreign language situation (through subconscious learning within the classroom) as well as in a second language environment.

For a language learner who is surrounded by the target language, the acquisition option means interacting rather than studying, acquiring the language by focussing on message content (what is meant or intended)

rather than message for (how it is said), and leaving the analysis of the language being acquired to the subconscious mind.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the progress made in learning English by a learner who has pursued the acquisition option over a period of five years. I will first describe the learner, "W," attempting to provide a fairly rich characterization of his personality, background, work and the social world he lives in. I will then provide a fairly broad (though partial) characterization of what has been acquired by W, as well as what has not been acquired. Finally, I will try to evaluate some current theories of second language acquisition, by discussing the degree to which they would predict or explain W's strengths and weaknesses in language learning.

1. Subject. W is a 35 year old native speaker of Japanese, who has been acquiring English in Hawaii for the past five years. Shortly after visiting the United States for the first time, he decided to emigrate to Honolulu. During the five years of this study, W spent three months in the United States⁵ in 1978, six months in 1979, and eight months in 1980. In early 1981, W received permanent resident status, and he lived in the U.S. continuously during the final two years of this study.

W comes from a very modest family background in Japan, and for family economic reasons had to leave school at age 15. This accounts for the fact that, unlike the vast majority of Japanese, W had no significant formal instruction in English, and claims to remember nothing from the limited instruction he did receive. His limited formal education might also be a factor in the pattern of his later language acquisition, since some studies have found a relationship between the level of education in the native country and an index of syntactic development (e.g. the Heidelberg study of the acquisition of German by Italian and Spanish immigrant workers, reported and discussed in Schumann 1978b). In spite of this modest beginning, however,

W has become an extremely successful adult. Teachers early on recognized that he had artistic talent, and on leaving school he was apprenticed to a well-known designer of hand-painted kimonos. After eight years of traditional training, he struck out on his own and gradually abandoned clothing and fabric design in favor of painting, translating traditional Japanese motifs into a contemporary style. Even before moving to the United States, he had begun to attract American and European collectors, and after moving to Hawaii he developed an international style (still rooted in Japanese cultural traditions) that has brought him considerable success. His work has been shown in many important exhibitions in the United States and Europe. Since his work has been commercially as well as critically successful, W enjoys all the benefits of a high income and considerable social prestige.

As a person, W is intelligent, sophisticated, and uninhibited. Those who have met him agree that he is an exceptionally extroverted and socially outgoing man, with high self-esteem and self-confidence. He is perceptive and intuitive, rather impulsive, and not at all afraid of making mistakes or appearing foolish, whether in his use of English or in any other aspects of the public presentation of self. All of these characteristics relate to personality factors which have been related to successful language acquisition (Brown 1973, 1980; Chastain 1975; Guiora et al 1975; Heyde 1977; Krashen 1980b, 1981; Naiman et al 1978; Rubin 1975; Schumann 1975, 1978b; Stern 1975).

While W had contacts with native speakers of English while in Japan, many of them spoke Japanese, and on other occasions W could rely on friends to act as translators. There were no doubt times when W had to communicate in English, but it is clear that when W first arrived in the United States his ability to communicate in English was minimal. The ensuing five years have seen continually increasing demands on his

communicative and linguistic skills in the new language. W is friendly and gregarious, and personalizes almost every interaction, through talk. This applies to casual conversations with shopkeepers, waitresses and others in his neighborhood, to focused professional talk with collectors, gallery owners and the media (he is interviewed frequently for magazines, radio and television), and to general but sustained conversations with friends. In all such situations, W shows a strong drive to communicate through English.

At the same time, W has shown no interest whatsoever in studying English. He has never taken an English class and is not interested in doing so, for which he gives several reasons: he was never good at school; he doesn't want to be a student, of any kind; he is extremely busy, and simply doesn't have time. Beyond these excuses, it is clear that W is not interested in studying or analyzing the language outside of its actual use in communication. He owns a Japanese-English dictionary, but reports that he has never used it. He has never, to my knowledge, either used a grammar book or consulted a native speaker regarding the grammatical rules of English. I have never heard him ask a native speaker to explain the difference between two words or ask whether a particular word is appropriate or idiomatic. In his own words, W is a language acquirer, not a conscious learner:

I know I'm speaking funny English / because I'm never learning /
I'm only just listen / then talk / but people understand

(tape transcript 11/1980)

My English is only just pick up some language and talk /
that's all, right?

(tape transcript, 6/83)

2. What has been acquired?¹ If language is seen as a means of communication, as a tool for initiating, maintaining and regulating relationships and carrying on all the business of life, then W has been a successful language learner, with one major exception: he does not read or write English. More precisely, the acquisition of reading ability has just begun. When he arrived in the United States, W could not read a menu, and consequently ordered club sandwiches (which he knew would be on most menus) for more than a month. Menus long ago ceased to be a problem, and there are some other types of limited reading that he has been able to handle. For example, when looking for a condominium to purchase, he learned to read the special abbreviated style of real estate ads. He can get the gist of personal letters, but usually prefers to ask a native speaker to read a letter aloud to him, and clear up any possible misunderstandings. He has others write his own letters, and even his checks. All further comments about his acquired English ability, therefore, apply only to the comprehension and production of oral language.

One of W's greatest strengths is in the area of "strategic competence" (Canale 1983), the use of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies which are called into action to facilitate communication, compensating for limiting factors in performance such as the inability to remember a word or to make a grammatical sentence. Typical examples would be the use of paraphrase, requests for repetition, clarification or slower speech. W's confidence, his willingness to communicate and especially his persistence in communicating what he has on his mind are striking. In the following example, W uses paraphrase and expansion of content to get his message across and asks for clarification and confirmation to be sure that he has gotten the native speaker's intended message:

W: Doug / you have dream after your life?
 NS: whaddya mean?
 W: OK / everybody have some dream / what doing / what you want /
 after your life / you have it?
 NS: you mean after I die?
 W: no no / means next couple years or long time / OK / before
 I have big dream / I move to States / now I have it / this
 kind you have it?
 NS: security I suppose / not necessarily financial / although
 that looms large at the present time
 W: but not only just money, right?
 NS: right
 W: so what dreaming?
 NS: well / I guess first you worry about the basics / then if
 you have that / then maybe prestige / ultimately peace of
 mind and enlightenment
 W: so means you want famous and happy?
 NS: shit / I'm not interested in being famous / no / you know
 we're still trying to find our place in the community / we're
 displaced to you know / we've come as far as you have
 W: where from? / you're from mainland, right?

(tape transcript, 4/81)

W is a good conversationalist in many ways. He enjoys small talk, and frequently adopts a bantering, teasing manner in conversation. He is skilled at listening to what people say and picking up topics for further development, yet he is not at all a passive conversationalist, but introduces topics frequently. Moreover, the topics he raises are almost always relevant to previous topics. I have never observed any instances of conversation coming to a halt because he has raised a topic or commented on a topic already on the floor in a way that would indicate he had not understood what the previous speaker said.

W is good at narratives. Even in the earliest period, his narratives or "reports" were interesting, if brief and largely unstructured:

Anyway / June twenty six I come back here many bad happening /
 but not my business / and someone take my jewelry / and camera /
 clothes / everything / anyway I'm so bad / but now is OK everything

(story of a burglary, tape transcript,
 8/78)

Later stories are well-structured as well as entertainingly

presented:

W: listen / today so funny story
NS: yeah / what happened?
W: you know everyday I'm go to MacDonald for lunch
NS: yeah
W: and today I saw so beautiful woman / so beautiful clothes /
makeup / everything / but so crazy!
NS: how? / what do you mean?
W: talking to herself / then she's listen to some person /
everybody watch / but no one there / then somebody / local
woman I think say 'are you OK?' / 'can I help?' / but
beautiful woman she doesn't want talk to local woman / she's
so snobbish! / so funny!

(tape transcript, 1/81)

Anyway / she went school interview / then this woman say you
need form / writing where born and da-da-da-da / then
audition / so then she's waiting letter and one day mailbox
inside she find letter / she's so scarey / she doesn't know
what's inside / so anyway she's pass / she's so happy and she
talk and boyfriend and boyfriend's so happy, yeah? / but this
is trick / boyfriend is very smart and top guy / he call and
school / he say I have a very special friend / please pass /
but guy is so stupid / he tell something, you know, and she
said how you know? / this letter coming this afternoon / why
you know? / so then she's so mad him / so then separate / and
she stop dancing / she start smoking / she start drinking

(excerpt from the story of
"Flashdance," tape transcript,
6/83)

W is also good at routines for ordinary transactions, such as
ordering in restaurants:

Waiter: Are you ready to order?
W: Yes/ ah / I like teriaki steak, medium rare, rice, salad,
thousand, coffee

(field notes, 2/80)

There is at first glance nothing special about W's order, which seems to
be just a list, unless one realizes that its structure derives from an
extended routine which is standard for the restaurant in which the
interaction occurred:

Waiter: Are you ready to order?
 Customer: yes, I'd like teriaki steak
 Waiter: How would you like your steak?
 Customer: Medium rare.
 Waiter: Would you like rice, french fries or baked potato?
 Customer: Rice.
 Waiter: Soup or salad?
 Customer: Salad
 Waiter: What kind of dressing do you want?
 Customer: Thousand.
 Waiter: Anything to drink?
 Customer: Coffee.

(hypothetical)

W is also good at picking up examples of formulaic speech, chunks of language which are picked up whole and used whole. It is clear that W has used this as a major language learning strategy. He listens carefully and extracts formulaics from television commercials ("thank you very much," from a well-known tire commercial in Hawaii), from records ("what did you say your name was?," from a record, played over and over), and from friend's conversations (e.g. "Look at her!"; "You're a bitch!"; "Gimme a break!"). The frequent use of formulaic, idiomatic stretches of speech sprinkled liberally throughout W's conversations, frequently gives the impression of a high level of fluency in English.

3. What has not been acquired? In a word, grammar. W's fluency in conversation and interaction is not matched by a corresponding level of grammatical accuracy. In fact, he manages to get by with very little control of any of the significant grammatical structures of English.

The following table indicates W's general lack of progress in acquiring nine commonly studied English grammatical morphemes:

	July 1978	November 1980	June 1983
Copular BE	95%	94%	84%
Progressive ING	92%	90%	90%
Auxiliary BE	91%	89%	85%
Past irregular	25%	55%	51%
Plural	5%	32%	21%
3rd singular -s	0%	21%	24%
Article	0%	6%	2%
Possessive -s	0%	8%	10%
Past regular	0%	0%	0%

Accuracy order for nine grammatical morphemes in obligatory contexts.

If language acquisition is taken to mean (as it usually is) the acquisition of grammatical structures, then the acquisition approach may be working, but very slowly. Perhaps the most significant fact about the above table is that, using 90% correct in obligatory environments as the criterion for acquisition, none of the grammatical morphemes counted has changed from unacquired to acquired status over a five year period. Moreover, for the three morphemes which do seem to be acquired, a simple frequency count is somewhat misleading. W's high score for the progressive marker -ING may be inflated by the fact that it is extremely difficult to establish obligatory contexts for the progressive in English. For example, when W says "now color is fade," a likely gloss for what he means to say might be "now the color is fading." However, English seldom requires the progressive, and since alternatives such as "the color is/has faded" are acceptable such examples are not scored as errors of the progressive. In the case of both copula and auxiliary BE, W does supply these in almost all required cases. The only exceptions are sentences which have comment-topic structure (e.g. "different my accent" for "my accent is different"), and sentences in which English requires a dummy subject followed by copula (e.g. "he feel like not right" for "he feels it's not right"). However, W's use of COP and AUX falls far short of native-like speech; he uses the copula when native speakers would not, and produces some odd constructions:

they is funny English
I'm never studying
200 I'm sign
my father is die and year
other company making is more
beauty
before I'm always I'm talk
very fast

gloss

they speak funny English
I never studied
I signed 200
my father died a year ago
the other company makes more
beautiful ones
before I always used to talk
very fast

Another striking feature of W's interlanguage is his almost total lack of subordination or other sentence combining devices (other than and and because), for example in an utterance like "This is little over and size, and everything finish and show and Derek" (gloss: this is a little oversized, so when everything is finished we'll show it to Derek). In general, W's interlanguage fits well with a distinction proposed by Givon (1979, 1982) among communicative modes, based on the relation between discourse and syntax. Givon distinguishes between the syntacticized mode of communication that is typical of a fully formed native language, especially in the formal/written registers, and a discourse-pragmatic or pre-syntactic mode of communication characteristic of early child language, pidgins and early second language competence. The features Givon identifies as typical of the discourse-pragmatic mode all apply to W: topic-comment structure, loose conjunction, pragmatic government of word-order, and scant use of grammatical morphology.

4. Some theories of second language acquisition. There are a number of theories and models of second language acquisition which might be evaluated for their ability to explain W's acquisition and non-acquisition of different aspects of English, but I will discuss only two: Schumann's acculturation model, and Krashen's highly articulated, provocative and influential theory of second language acquisition.

Schumann's acculturation model for second language acquisition.

Perhaps the best known case of an unsuccessful adult language learner is that of Alberto, a 33 year old Costa Rican, the least successful language learner among six studied by Cazden, Cancino, Rosansky and Schumann (1975). In a number of follow-up studies, Schumann (1977, 1978a, 1978b) developed evidence that Alberto's lack of linguistic development could be attributed largely to his social and psychological distance from speakers of the target language and the fact that his pidginized speech was adequate for his needs. In a similar vein, Shapira (1978) has reported on the case of Zoila, a 25 year old Guatemalan Spanish speaker, who evidenced very little development in the English grammar over an 18 month observation period. Shapira suggests that negative affect played a decisive role. Zoila did not come to the United States out of choice, and Shapira hypothesizes that she had negative feelings towards all things American and limited instrumental motivation to learn just enough English to communicate. Kessler and Idar (1979) have compared the acquisition of English by a Vietnamese mother and child. The lack of change in the mother's acquisition level, even during a six-month period in which she was interacting daily in English at work, was hypothesized to be the result of affective variables operating negatively for the mother, who found adjustment to her new way of life difficult, and positively for the child, who needed English for peer relationships.

In all of the above mentioned studies, there is an assumption that if communicative needs were greater and psychological and social distance less, much greater control of the grammatical structures of the target language could have been acquired, even without formal instruction or conscious attention to the patterns and grammar of the language. This assumption is made explicit in Schumann's "acculturation model" (Schumann 1978b), which claims that two groups of variables, social and affective, cluster into a single variable of acculturation, which is "the major causal variable" in second language

acquisition, i.e. that the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target language group controls the degree to which he or she acquires a second language. Schumann argues that adults often don't acquire because they don't get involved in real communication because of problems of attitude, motivation, language and culture shock and so on, and that if affective factors are favorable, the adult's cognitive processes will automatically function to produce language acquisition (Schumann 1975, 1978a; see also Macnamara 1973, Taylor 1974).

While the acculturation model has a great deal of intuitive appeal, the evidence developed in support of it to date is less than conclusive. For example, Alberto, the poorest learner of six in the Cazden et al study, was not only the most psychologically and socially distant from target language speakers, but also the oldest of the six, and the only other adult in the study turned out to have had significant prior instruction and knowledge of English. Another study by Stauble (1978) compared 40 and 50 year old learners on a developmental continuum established for English negation observed in the acquisition of English by 10 and 12 year olds. Based on a questionnaire concerning social and psychological distance factors, Stauble concluded that there is a hierarchy of importance among the factors, with psychological variables outranking social variables and motivation outranking other psychological factors. However, she could have concluded that social distance does not matter at all, since the most socially distant of her subjects acquired the most control over English negation. The argument that psychological factors are the most important is not particularly convincing either, since Stauble's best and middling subjects had identical psychological distance scores. Finally, it should be noted that once again the poorest learner in the group was the oldest.