Overview of the Book

This book is intended to help you become a more effective and efficient student of a foreign language. If you have studied another language in the past, you know that the task of language learning is exciting but it can also be very challenging. The challenge stems in part from the basic fact that to become proficient in another language, you need to learn how to combine potentially new sounds and words in novel ways to create what are most likely unfamiliar structures. Learning how to do this, and practicing it, take time and effort.

Learning a second language is a very different experience from when you learned your first language! Children learn their first language completely naturally, apparently effortlessly and without formal instruction. If they are exposed to more than one language, they learn each language without difficulty. Moreover, they become competent native speakers in just a few years, in full command of the sounds and structures of their language, although they continue to acquire vocabulary over many years as their understanding of the world develops. And children are indistinguishable from other native speakers in their ability to interact socially with the language. They are native speakers.

Contrast this situation with that of an adult learning a second language. For the vast majority of us, this learning does not feel entirely natural, it is certainly not effortless, and formal instruction appears to be helpful for most of us (although it is typically not sufficient). The adult second language learner typically has a foreign accent, makes grammatical errors, does not have active control over the full vocabulary, sometimes

Preliminaries

Pal franse pa ki lespri pou sa. ‘To speak French doesn’t mean you are smart.’

HAITIAN PROVERB
has difficulty figuring out how to say even the most mundane things, and often does not understand what is being said. In many respects, the linguistic abilities of a second language learner are comparable to those of a very young child (say, 2 or 3 years old) who is learning a first language.

These observations certainly do not come as news to anyone who has tried to learn a second language. Further below, we focus on some of the differences between first and second language learning, and on why first language learning appears to be so easy. This will help us understand what we have to do to facilitate our approach to learning a second language (although it will never be totally effortless).

It is important to be clear at the outset about how the information that is conveyed in this book can be useful to the language learner. There is little evidence that explicit knowledge about the structure of a language leads directly and automatically to improvement in the ability to speak and understand that language. It is no substitute for extensive and well-structured practice in pronunciation, conversation, reading, and writing.

However, even a casual glance at any introductory textbook will show that the teaching of second languages appeals to familiarity with concepts about how languages work, how the sounds of language are produced, and how the sentences of a language are structured. You may be familiar with some of these concepts. However, our experience with students whose native language is English is that many of them have less knowledge than they would like to have about how their own language works, how its sounds are produced, and how its sentences are structured. Thus there is an added challenge involved in learning a second language, when these concepts are appealed to as a way of explaining how the second language works, how its sounds are produced, and how its sentences are structured.

Consider the problem of learning the sounds of another language. Because languages use different sounds, it is not possible to simply transfer the sounds of your own language into the language you are learning. This is true even if your language and the language you are learning use the same alphabet.

For example, instruction in English for German will try to relate the German sounds to English sounds. Here is a typical description of the German “long o” sound:1 “Long o. Spelling: oh, o, oo. Pronunciation: Like the vowel in English ‘so,’ but with lips extremely rounded and no offglide into an ‘ooh’-sound.”

Such descriptions raise lots of questions. You might know the answer to some of them, but not to all of them. What is a vowel? What is an offglide? What is the difference between a “long” and a “short” vowel? What is lip rounding?

And what about that strange letter ö? “Long ö. Spelling: öh, ö. Pronunciation: Somewhat like the vowel in English ‘burn.’ To produce it, say the German long e, then round the lips as for the long o. Do not allow your tongue to move toward the back of your mouth as you round your lips. Note the difference between the long rounded back vowel o and the long rounded front vowel ö.” Whew! How do I control my tongue so it doesn’t

1. Adapted from the website http://www.wm.edu/modlang/gasmit/pronunciation/.
move toward the back of my mouth? What happens if I don’t?

All languages have sounds that are similar to some extent to English sounds, but
different from them in how they are produced in the mouth. One of our goals is to help
you understand the common terminology that is used to describe these sounds. Such
terminology includes concepts such as “vowel,” “lip rounding,” and so on. Another is to
help you understand the ways in which sounds can differ from one another, and how
these differences correspond to the way different types of sounds are produced in the
mouth. Such understanding requires study of how the mouth is structured and how the
vocal cords, the tongue, and the teeth are used to produce different sounds.

Of course there is another part to knowing a language: knowing how to make sen-
tences. Again, typical second language instruction uses concepts and terminology that
can be very useful. In learning a language such as Spanish, you will be taught about
“nouns” that have “masculine” or “feminine” “gender.” What is a noun? How can a
table be feminine? “Verbs” have “conjugations,” with forms in the “present,” “past,” and
“future” “tense.” But what is a verb, what is a conjugation, what is future tense? Does
English have future tense? And so on.

In summary, our goal is to help you understand these terms and concepts so that
you can put them to use most effectively. We want to help make the task of learning a
language more manageable. One of the ways that we’ll achieve this is to help you develop
the ability to think analytically about language so that you are tuned into the structures
of language and how they work. Understanding the task better will not automatically
improve your memory or the speed at which you learn, but it may help you focus on the
parts of the task that are most challenging for you.

You will also become familiar with the various dimensions along which languages
can differ, such as sounds, words, sentence structure, and culture. Being aware of the
ways in which the language you are learning differs from your own language may help
you appreciate why you make particular errors in the pronunciation of sounds or the
ordering of words within a sentence, for example.

Just below we provide a more detailed overview of the three sections that make up
this book:

Section I: Sounding like a Native Speaker
Section II: Thinking like a Native Speaker
Section III: Acting like a Native Speaker

Foreign accent, one of the most noticeable aspects of foreign language learning, is
the topic of Section I, “Sounding like a Native Speaker.” It is easy enough to spot a for-
eign accent in someone speaking English, but what does an “American” accent sound
like in Spanish or Japanese? What do you do when you speak foreign words that make
you sound, well, like a foreigner? Can you do anything to sound more like a native
speaker of the language? In addressing these questions, you will learn about making so-
called exotic sounds as well as combining them to form new words. You will also learn
how to avoid making the typical mistakes that may interfere with communication.
Section II, “Thinking like a Native Speaker,” delves further into language structure, focusing on how words combine to form sentences. Every language has to provide its speakers with ways of carrying out the same basic human activities of expressing and communicating ideas, intentions, and desires. The way languages do this is by combining words and other linguistic elements into phrases and sentences in particular and systematic ways. How a given language forms phrases and sentences is called its **structure** or its **grammar**.

But languages differ, sometimes subtly and sometimes dramatically. The structure of a language may be identical or very similar to English in certain respects and very different in others. Being able to deal effectively with learning the grammar of another language involves having an understanding of how one's own language works and recognizing the similarities and differences.

As will become clear in Section III, “Acting like a Native Speaker,” there is much more to learning a language than learning its structure. Language is a human phenomenon, and since an important part of how people define themselves is through culture, it is not surprising that language and culture are necessarily interwoven. In this section, we explore the link between language and culture in two ways. On the one hand, we introduce some of the roles that language plays in social interaction and examine how these roles can differ from one culture to another. One example relates to expressing emotions. Do all cultures express anger or insults in the same way? How about politeness? We will see that they do not. We'll also explore ways in which cultural ideas are reflected in language. One topic treated in relation to this concerns potential differences in how language is used by men and women in English as well as in other languages.

Before delving into these topics, however, we begin by giving you some information on some the most salient characteristics of language learning. We survey what particular tools children bring to the task of language learning that make them so successful. We also look at the learning environment in which the child typically acquires a first language. We sample some of the errors that children make in learning their first language, and we take note of the major stages in first language development.

We then turn to second language learners (that is, us) and compare our situation to that of a first language learner. On the basis of this comparison, we make some observations about where we have to focus our attention and energies in learning a second language. We also discuss the ways in which we as adults have certain advantages over a first language learner that we should try to make use of when possible.

### First Language Learning

#### THE BASICS OF FIRST LANGUAGE LEARNING

From the study of first language learning by children, we have learned a number of interesting and sometimes surprising things. (For a comprehensive linguistic survey,
It is of course quite obvious that very young children are not exposed to formal language instruction of the sort that we experience in school. Yet by the time they begin formal schooling, they are already competent speakers of their language(s). And this fact raises a number of puzzling questions: Who taught them and how was it done? Where were the language lessons? How were their mistakes identified and corrected? And, come to think of it, who trained the teachers?

The answers to these questions are surprising. No one teaches children language. There are no language lessons. In general, and contrary to popular belief, children do not acquire their language as a consequence of correction of mistakes by their parents and other adults (and older children) whom they interact with. Most of the mistakes that children make are not corrected by adults. When they are corrected, the children generally persist in making the errors in spite of the correction, sometimes for years.

And, of course, since there are no language teachers for first language learners, there is no teacher training for first language acquisition. So even if we wanted to correct our children's mistakes, except for the most obvious errors we would have a difficult time figuring out what the errors actually consist of and how to correct them.

It is true that when people speak to young children, they speak very simply and tend to repeat themselves. An early hypothesis was that adults organize their speech to children into language lessons, using a simplified version of the language called “Motherese.” However, it appears that this simplified speech simply reflects an understanding on the part of adults that children do not understand more complex speech. In fact, not all children are exposed to simplified speech, yet they all acquire language. (See Pinker 1994.)

Much of the evidence about what goes on in first language learning comes from detailed diary studies of children’s language development and the analysis of transcripts of interactions between adults and children. Many of the materials are available to all researchers on the CHILDES database (the Child Language Data Exchange System at http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/; see also MacWhinney 1995).

As we think about the difference between first language learning by children and second language learning by adults, the disparities become ever more astonishing. How can it be that adults, who are so much more educated and knowledgeable about the world, have so much more difficulty in learning a language? There is an old joke about an American who goes to Paris, comes back to the United States, and says to his friends that the French kids must all be geniuses—they can all speak French like natives!

But obviously, the reason that they can all speak French is that they are all natives. Learning a first language is what it means to be a native speaker. There is something special about the tools that the child brings to the task of language learning and about the language learning environment that makes acquisition of native competence by the child the norm. And in the adult, there are critical differences that make the task much different, and in general more formidable.
WHAT ARE THE CAPACITIES OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE LEARNER?

All scientists who specialize in the study of learning believe that human beings are born with powerful abilities for extracting patterns from the world around them, associating patterns with one another, and generalizing from particular instances to general rules. Many, but not all, believe that humans are born with specialized tools for learning language, exclusive of their ability to acquire other complex skills (like driving a car or playing a musical instrument or a sport such as basketball) and complex systems of knowledge (like chess or mathematics). We do not take a position on this issue here, but simply note that whatever capacities humans are born with, these capacities make them extraordinarily adept at learning a first language. Other creatures, regardless of what capacities they may have, cannot learn a language (nor for that matter can they drive a car, play a musical instrument, play basketball, play chess, or do mathematics).

But other creatures, especially highly evolved creatures, are capable of communicating with one another, and they are also capable of some extraordinary feats by virtue of their biological makeup. And many are capable of acquiring certain simple aspects of very complex tasks. For example, some primates and birds can count to as high as 6 or 7, some dogs have been taught to distinguish between “left” and “right,” some primates can do very simple arithmetic (addition and subtraction), and some primates have been able to acquire hand gestures that stand for objects and relations between objects. These species have impressive cognitive capacities, and the extent of these capacities has yet to be fully understood. But it is fair to say that they do not have the capacities that humans have, and they do not have language in the sense that humans have language.

The first language learner is exposed to spoken language from the moment she achieves consciousness in her mother’s womb, prior to birth. The sounds of language can be perceived by the prenatal language learner, and experimental evidence shows that the prenatal learner has already developed a certain sensitivity to the sounds and rhythmic patterns of the language that she will be learning. The ear develops in the 3rd week after conception and becomes functional in the 16th week; the fetus begins active listening in the 24th week. Prior to birth, while still in the womb, the fetus responds distinctively to her mother’s voice. Lecanuet et al. (1995) found that just prior to birth the fetus is able to discriminate reversals of vowel sounds, such as “bobí” versus “biba.” When the fetus hears the same sequence over a period of time, she becomes habituated to it (as measured by heart rate); when the sequence changes, the heart rate decelerates briefly, indicating recognition of the distinctive properties of speech. Other experiments have shown the sensitivity of the fetus to music.

Adults talk to the newborn child even though it is clear that the child cannot possibly understand what is being said. As the child gets older, but still cannot speak the language, adults continue to interact with him. Figure 1.1 is a sample of an interaction between Stefan, aged 14 months, and his mother and father (Feldman, CHILDES database). The child’s utterances are notated as *STV, the mother’s as *MOT, and the father’s as *FAT. We’ve highlighted the child’s utterances in boldface. Notice that the child is exposed to a considerable amount of talk, although he is very limited in his ability to
contribute to the conversation at this point.

For purposes of comparison, Figure 1.2 is a brief excerpt from an interaction between Stefan and his parents about 13 months later. At this stage, the child gives the impression of being a more or less fully competent speaker of the language, although there are still childlike mannerisms, like budleyley stuck instead of budleyley’s stuck. Particularly striking is the transition from being limited to producing utterances like badada at 14 months to saying things like I don’t like you sitting there just 13 months later.
In order to be able to achieve native competence in the target language, the learner must be able to carry out the following tasks, among others.

**Distinguish speech sounds.** As a preliminary to learning words, the learner must be able to distinguish the sounds of a language from one another. These sounds may be very similar to one another, like ‘th’ and ‘s’ in English, but distinguishing them is critical to understanding and being understood (consider the difference between *I thank my friends* and *I sank my friends*).

**Correlate sound differences with meaning differences.** Different languages distinguish different sounds, as we will discuss in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. Sound differences that are meaningful in one language may not be in another. So it is not simply a matter of hearing that two sounds are different; it is a matter of relating this difference to a difference in meaning. Being able to do this presupposes that the learner can link the sounds of the language to the meanings that are expressed. Of course, the sounds are not produced in isolation, but are produced in words, and it is the words, with their particular forms, that have meaning and may differ in meaning.
Understand the intentions of other speakers. The learner must understand why other people are making sounds. It is possible that the learner figures this out from the fact that the same sounds (that is, words and phrases) are being produced by others in the same kinds of contexts. For example, when there is a dog, parents may say *dog* and point to the dog. But then the learner must be able to understand what communicative function the pointing is intended to perform. Tomasello (2003) argues that in general, other animals, even higher primates, are not able to link the production of a symbol, such as a word, with pointing to an object and understand that the speaker intends the symbol to be treated as the name or description of the object. Understanding these complex intentions, Tomasello argues, is an essential prerequisite to acquiring a language, and only humans have this capacity.²

Understand what language is about. A word or a phrase may refer to an object, such as *book*. A word or phrase may also refer to an object with a certain property, such as *big book*, to an event, such as *the World Series* or *We ate the cake*, to a time, to a place, to an emotion, to an idea, and so on. In order to be able to understand what language is about, a learner must have an understanding of the world that the language refers to. The learner must have an understanding of things, properties, times, places, events, and so on, that may be guided by language but that must at least in some respects precede language. In order to be able to learn that a linguistic expression has a particular meaning, the learner must already have the meaning in some form as a consequence of experience in the world.

Put words together. The learner must have both the capacity to put words together to express complex ideas and the understanding that this is what other speakers are doing when they speak. Again, it is not clear whether this is a specific capacity of human beings when they come into the world or whether it is something that we all learn to do through experience.

With this background in place, let’s consider in a little more detail the course of first language development.

What is the course of development?

There are traditionally four stages of language development. These stages do not have sharp boundaries; that is, we cannot see dramatic transitions between them from one day or week to the next. But if we step back and look at the entire course of language development, we can see that things occur early in development that are subsequently lost, and things do not occur early that are fully in place at some later point.

Babbling. When children begin to produce speech sounds, they “babble.” That is, they do not produce words of the target language, or even nonsense that sounds like the target language, or even exclusively sounds of the target language. The babbling stage

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2. Experiments suggest that a dog is able to recognize that when a human points to an object in the environment, the human intends for the dog to attend to the object also. See Hare and Tomasello, 2005, pp. 439–44.
lasts until 8 to 10 months of age. Toward the end of the babbling stage, children’s babbling begins to take on qualities of the target language. That is, the sounds are those of the target language, but the babbling is still nonsense.

**The one-word stage.** At about 1 year of age, children begin to produce single word utterances. During this one-word stage children’s vocabulary grows slowly. Comprehension typically exceeds production by a factor of about 10 to 1. A child typically produces on the order of 20 distinct words at 1 year of age, and about 50 at one and a half years.

**The two-word stage.** At around 2 years of age children begin to produce phrases. The first phrases consist by and large of two words; hence this is called the two-word stage. At around this time, the number of words that a child knows begins to grow significantly, as does the rate of increase in word learning. It is difficult to measure vocabulary size precisely, but it appears that at 2 years of age and beyond, a child is learning about 10 words a day. Note that the vocabulary size of the typical high school student is 60,000 words.

**Grammatical competence.** After the two-word stage, not only is there a significant growth in vocabulary, but children begin to show evidence that they have acquired or are in the process of acquiring the rules and constructions of the grammar of a language (see Stefan’s *I don’t like you sitting there* at age 27 months).

## WHAT KINDS OF INFORMATION ARE CHILDREN EXPOSED TO?

In order to understand the differences between first and second language learning, we should think a bit about differences in the learning environments for the two types of learners. There are three main characteristics of the first language learner’s environment to take note of.

**Quantity.** A first language learner is exposed to an extraordinary quantity of linguistic experience. In a typical transcript of an interaction between Stefan and his parents, 95 sentences were spoken by the parents in 34 minutes, or about three sentences per minute. Assuming that the child is awake and interacting with his parents ten hours per day between the ages of 1 and 3, the parents make approximately 650,000 sentences per year. If sentences spoken to young children average five words per sentence, the child has heard around 3,250,000 word tokens (that is, individual words) during the first year of linguistic interaction. Over the first four years this would come to over 2.5 million sentences and 13 million word tokens, even assuming an average of five words per sentence.

**Cognition and concreteness.** In general, the language spoken to children is about things that the children understand, especially when we are responding to what a child says or are trying to get the child to do something. We typically do not talk to very young children about politics or philosophy, or even about future or possible future events, at least not with the intent of communicating. Nor do we talk extensively to children who have only a very minimal understanding, to say the least, of calculus or theoretical physics. It is very likely that until children have the cognitive development to understand these matters, what we say to them is effectively meaningless, although they might assign some interpretation to it.
What we do talk to young children about most often concerns objects in their experience, such as food, animals, and diapers. The properties that we talk about are more or less concrete: hot, cold, sharp, and pretty. The events that we talk about are also concrete: eating, bodily functions, sleeping, and playing.

At the same time, we talk about other things in the presence of the child, and sometimes to the child, not knowing exactly how much the child knows. When the child’s understanding of the world grows, words that we use become meaningful to the child as she becomes connected to the context in which the words are used.

**Redundancy.** While the number of sentences and words that the first language learner is exposed to is very large, there is much redundancy in this experience. The same words and linguistic constructions are used over and over again, particularly when adults are talking to the child, rather than to one another in the presence of the child. Figure 1.3 is a sample interaction taken from a transcript with Stefan at approximately a year and a half. And for comparison, Figure 1.4 below is a portion of a transcript with another child, Eve, at 18 months, also in the CHILDES database. Here, *CHI is the child.

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*FAT: you got a budleyley with ya there, huh?*  
*MOT: oh boy.*  
*MOT: the budleyley's goin(g) kaboomps too?*  
*STV: no.*  
*STV: budleyley stuck.*  
*FAT: yeah.*  
*FAT: whoops!*  
*STV: <xxx> [>].*  
*MOT: do you <you want> [<] Bob the puppet or not, Stefan?*  
*FAT: you want Bob the puppet?*  
*MOT: do you wanna see Bob the puppet?*  
*STV: yeah.*  
*MOT: yeah, ok.*  
*FAT: mama is gonna bring that out.*  
*MOT: I am.*  
*MOT: and maybe Bob would like to read the book too.*  
*FAT: yeah.*

**Figure 1.3**

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*CHI: more cookie.*  
*MOT: you xxx more cookies?*  
*MOT: how about another graham cracker?*  
*MOT: would that do just as well?*  
*MOT: here.*  
*MOT: here you go.*  
*CHI: more cookie.*  
*MOT: you have another cookie right on the table.*  
*CHI: more juice?*  
*MOT: more juice?*  
*MOT: would you like more grape juice?*

**Figure 1.4**
Notice that when the parents talk to the child, they repeat what they say and what the child says, and sometimes add elaborations. Typically the contexts for young children are very concrete, involving such things as food and drink.

**WHAT KINDS OF MISTAKES DO CHILDREN MAKE, AND WHY?**

Our intuition tells us that children learn language by imitating the language spoken around them. Examination of the transcripts shows that the adults speak like adults (unsurprisingly), while the children speak like children. In a way this is a puzzle: if children imitate adults, why don’t they speak just like adults do?

A number of answers have been offered to explain this puzzle. They are not mutually incompatible, so they may all be right, at least to some extent. Here are some of the most plausible answers:

- **Memory:** Young children have limited memory. As a consequence, they are unable to remember the full form of a word and so they truncate it. Similarly, they are unable to process long sentences and thus cannot learn complex linguistic constructions at the early stages of language learning.

- **Articulation:** Young children are unable to produce the more complex sounds and sound combinations that they hear, and therefore they produce approximations, such as *baba* instead of *bottle*.

- **Structure:** Young children do not have immediate access to the full range of grammatical structures that occur in human languages and therefore are able to acquire and produce only a limited subset.

- **Generalization:** Young children do not have enough experience to recognize that certain forms are exceptional and have to be learned separately, so after they have learned a general rule, they tend to use it even when it should not apply. Hence we get children’s forms such as *goed* instead of *went*.

- **Cognition:** Young children have a very restricted mental representation of the world and little or no understanding of abstractions like time, emotion, and opinion. Therefore they are unable to understand talk about these things and are unable to acquire the words and constructions that are used to express ideas about them.

**SUMMARY: THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF FIRST LANGUAGE LEARNING**

To summarize to this point, we have seen that young children are very good at learning language. While they make mistakes, they are presented with an overwhelming amount of redundant information about how the language is supposed to be used, and they therefore have a very good basis for correcting their mistakes. The amount of linguis-
tic experience that children are exposed to may well make up for memory limitations that children may have, since repetition relieves the child of the burden of having to remember what was said. Moreover, since language is a crucial aspect of the interactions between children and adults, it allows for children to get their basic needs met.

Second Language Learning

Let’s turn now to the situation of an adult second language learner by comparing it to that of the first language learner.

CRITICAL PERIOD

There are two very salient properties of first language learning. One is that it is accomplished naturally and quickly by all typical children without formal instruction. The second is that as a person approaches adulthood, he or she loses the ability to naturally and quickly acquire a language. Some scientists have proposed that there is a “critical period” for language learning during which the parts of the brain devoted to language acquisition remain active and after which they turn off. It has been suggested that the end of the critical period correlates with the onset of puberty, which is one mark of the transition to adulthood.

Others have suggested that there is no critical period specific to language, but that as we age there is a gradual falling off of the capacity to learn complex skills naturally and accurately. In this view, the loss in our ability to acquire native competency in a language is paralleled by a loss in our ability to acquire expert facility in playing a musical instrument or a sport. As is the case with language, we are able to learn to do these things as adults, but lack the deep intuitions and instinctiveness that we develop when we begin to learn them as children.

There is evidence that some aspects of a language are more difficult for second learners to acquire than others. While some adult learners are able to acquire the sounds of a second language without an accent, the older a learner is—the further beyond very early childhood—the more likely he will have an accent. On the other hand, it has been argued that the acquisition of vocabulary does not get more difficult with age.

Finally, the ability to acquire native-like facility with the grammatical rules of a second language appears to diminish with age. Whether there is a particular critical period for language in general, or different critical periods for different aspects of language, or no critical period at all is an open question that is actively debated. (See, for example, the references at the end of this chapter.)

Whatever the case may be for a specialized critical period for language, the fact remains that adults are not as adept at language learning as children. And we do not have the advantages that the child has. This means that we have to approach the task in a very different way than the child approaches it.
DISADVANTAGES

In addition to the fact that they have passed out of the critical period, adults are at a disadvantage in learning a second language in other ways.

Motivation. The first language learner has an extremely strong motivation to learn the language. This motivation may be in part biological and in part social. In any case, there is no conscious decision on the part of the child about whether to learn the language or what language to learn. The child simply must learn the language of the surrounding environment.

In order to be successful in learning a second language, an adult must seek the strongest possible motivation. In an academic setting, the motivation is in part external—there is a requirement to be satisfied, there is a grade to be assigned, and so on. But what would be far stronger is a genuine desire to learn the language and a sense of enjoyment in doing so since the work involved is considerable and can be very tedious. In order for the effort to be successful, the learner must find a language to learn that is so attractive to study that putting in the effort is itself appealing. A book cannot tell you what your motivation might be, but we strongly urge you to find a language to study where your motivation is as strong as possible.

Strong first language. As a consequence of having spent many years hearing and speaking our native language, we have developed very rapid mental computations for translating between sounds and meaning. When we hear something in our language, we know immediately what it means, and we typically understand the words and the intentions of the speaker as reflected in her use of particular phrasings, intonation, and style. We may have a good idea of the social group or groups that the speaker belongs to.

Similarly, when we want to say something, typically the words spring to our tongue to express the thoughts that we have. We do not have to remember the words or figure out how to pronounce them. We have been practicing the articulatory gestures that are necessary for us to be able to sound like a native speaker for years, perhaps dozens of years. No wonder that we are able to sound “just like” native speakers! This level of competence and this amount of practice make up a good part of what it means to be a native speaker.

And we know exactly where to put the words in order to make our sentences grammatical. In English, the subject usually comes first, and when the subject is finished, we add the verb or sequence of verbs, followed by the object and perhaps adverbs and other similar expressions. The ordering of words is different in other languages, but in each language, the speakers have been practicing their entire lives putting the words where they are supposed to go.

Thus, the habits connected with the first language are very strong in the adult. In order to develop some level of competence in a second language, the habits of the first language must be identified and controlled, even suppressed, when they differ from those of the second language. The situation is very similar to that in which American drivers and pedestrians find themselves when they go to Great Britain (and when the British go to parts of Europe or to the United States). In the U.S., cars must be driven on
the right side of the road; in England, cars must be driven on the left. After driving for many years in the U.S., we have the habit of making a left turn into the right-hand lane of the road we are turning on, as shown in Figure 1.5.

But in Great Britain, the left turn must be made as in Figure 1.6.
It is very natural for someone with U.S. driving habits to make a left turn into the right lane, something that can be quite dangerous if there is oncoming traffic, as in Figure 1.7.

The solution here is to control U.S. driving habits by putting them aside while creating an equivalent British driving habit. Creating the British driving habit does not mean forgetting how to drive in the U.S.; it simply means becoming conscious of the old habit and learning how to suspend it while the new habit is being implemented. Learning a second language requires the same type of suspension of an old and very well learned habit.

**Perceptual biases.** Adults can have similar difficulty in distinguishing the sounds of a foreign language. Yet, a very young child is more or less neutral with respect to the sounds of language, although he already has some preference for the sounds of the language in the environment. After 10 or 20 years of being exposed only to the sounds of this language, the first language learner has become extremely adept at picking out very fine distinctions among sounds that signify differences in meaning. When an adult is exposed to the sounds of a new language, he naturally imposes the habits of hearing on the new language, even though the new language may have very different sounds and very different distinctions than does the old language.

**Limited input; limited redundancy.** The young child is exposed to a vast amount of information about a first language. In general, the adult second language learner, particularly in an academic setting, is exposed to dramatically less information. Moreover, the adult second language learner is an adult and is therefore not being spoken to patiently and redundantly for 10 to 15 hours per day by attentive parents about a limited range of topics such as food and basic bodily functions. In contrast, the adult second language
learner is talking to other adults and wants to talk about the wide range of topics that interest adults, which certainly go far beyond food and basic bodily functions. Finally, the child has basically nothing else to do besides learn the language (as well as other basic aspects of social interaction), while the adult has many other important things to do.

So, to put the difference in the starkest terms, the environment for first language learning, on the one hand, is perfectly well designed to give the child every opportunity to learn his native language. On the other hand, the environment makes it anything but easy for an adult to learn a second language, and the adult’s greater maturity and range of interests may actually work against his being successful. This being said, the adult does have some potential advantages over the first language learner.

**ADVANTAGES**

There is no question that compared with a young child, an adult has advantages in acquiring certain types of knowledge. We have already noted that young children are incapable of learning complex systems of knowledge such as calculus and physics. They are also incapable of learning about grammatical rules, although, of course, they are capable of acquiring these rules unconsciously. An adult, on the other hand, can explicitly or implicitly learn a grammatical rule and then proceed to focus on practicing the particular language patterns relevant to that rule.

The adult also has the ability, in principle at least, to consciously structure the learning environment. The adult can focus on particular difficulties, can talk about problems and identify ways to solve them, and can (again in principle at least) make language learning something that is fun rather than a chore.

We have seen that even with motivation, adults are handicapped by the fact that they do not have as much **useful** experience with the language that they are learning as the child does. We stress “useful” because it is relatively easy for an adult to be exposed to a second language for hours and hours a day, for example, by listening to the radio or watching television. There is a difference between this type of experience and that of the child, however. As the child develops and begins to interact with her parents and other adults, her linguistic experience is not only very extensive but also very redundant and overwhelmingly about things that the child cares about and understands. It is this involvement with and understanding of what the language spoken in the environment is about that makes it relatively easy for the child to correlate the words and phrases with the relevant aspects of the physical, social, and emotional environments. Without such understanding, the language that the child hears is effectively little more than noise, and the child can do nothing useful with it.

It is therefore most effective for the adult learner to enter or create a learning environment where what is being talked about is fully understood by the adult. Moreover, there should be substantial repetition and elaboration, so that the adult, like the child, does not have the opportunity to forget things that are once learned.
With this as a basis, we turn now to the heart of this book and focus on sounding, thinking, and acting like a native speaker.

**Exercises**

1. Think about your own experiences in trying to learn a second language. If you are studying a language now, keep a diary about what aspects of the language you find most challenging and what aspects you find easiest. For example, are there particular sounds that are very difficult for you? Are there vocabulary items that are hard to remember, no matter how many times you review them? Are there grammatical constructions that you find difficult, while others seem very straightforward? Are there particular environments where language learning seems to be easiest? Keep track of these things so that it will be productive for you to reflect on them as you proceed through the various topics covered in this book.

2. Another difference between first and second language learning is that children are typically exposed to many different speakers, while adult learners in the classroom are typically exposed only to the speech of the instructor (and possibly speakers on CDs or other media). Do you find it more challenging or less challenging to follow what is being said in another language when you are confronted with a variety of speakers as contrasted with a single speaker?

**References**


Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES). Online: http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/.


