

## ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS PROMOTING LEARNERS' LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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**Abstract:** External factors refer to the factors existing outside the learners but which influence the development of learners' language acquisition. Since such influence usually emerges from the environment where the learners live, those are also referred to as environmental factors. What could be influential on learners' language skill development and in what ways those factors affect language ability will be dealt with in this paper. As a conceptual paper, this article is written based on the writers' knowledge, beliefs, and experiences intertwined with their understanding of psycholinguistic theories obtained from various resources. It is claimed that various external factors that might have impacts on the acquisition and improvement of learners' language competence can be addressed to both formal and natural environments that are manifested in terms of linguistic input that abundantly exists and is frequently exposed comprehensibly to the learners. These ideas are useful to be taken into consideration and may have implications on the practice of language teaching and learning, especially in promoting effective language acquisition.

**Keywords:** external factors, input, language acquisition, language environment

### INTRODUCTION

As one of the psycholinguistic focal points, language acquisition is much discussed by specialists and practitioners in language studies. As it is a complicated matter, how language is acquired has still been much dealt with and sometimes even disputed by experts. The influence of socio-psychological theories such as behaviorism (Arnfast et al., 2010; Watrin & Darwich, 2012; Malone, 2014; Staddon, 2021), mentalism (Dietrich & List, 2016; Katz, 1964; Lattal, 2020; Moore, 2013), interactionism (Carter & Fuller, 2015, 2016; Mackey, 1999), and constructivism (Kalina & Powell, 2009; Liu & Matthews, 2005; Mondahl & Razmerita, 2014) on the principles of language teaching and learning implies that the problem of language acquisition still needs to be solved. Therefore, reviewing some possible factors, in this case, environmental aspects, that affect language acquisition is relevant because it may partly contribute to finding some solution to raising the effectiveness of language teaching and learning efforts.

Intending to provide useful insight, this conceptual paper tries to elaborate on the role of environment in language acquisition, the characteristics of formal and natural types of the

language environment, and the significance of input as a part of environmental aspects in promoting language acquisition.

### **The Role of Environment in Language Acquisition**

It is irrefutable that environmental factors, to some extent, have some influence on language acquisition. The strong claim is implied by the behaviorists who believe that language learning is a matter of habit formation (Arnfast et al., 2010; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; MacWhinney, 1997; Mart, 2013; Smith & Graybiel, 2016; Wu, 2020). Habit is formed through the chains of the stimulus-response-reinforcement process. Stimulus and reinforcement, moreover, are obtained from the environment. Without the existence of an environment that provides stimulus and reinforcement, according to this view, language acquisition will never take place.

As a consequence, the contribution of the environment to language acquisition is indisputable. First of all, it will provide stimulus to the learners. When the learners have given responses to the prevailing stimulus, the environment will give feedback and reinforcement as conditioning. In that way, the habit of using language is formed. In this point of view, linguistic input, which is supplied by the environment, is a *sine qua non* for language acquisition to occur because it will function as a stimulus to elicit a response. And, then, considering the response produced by the learners, the people in the surrounding environment will also provide feedback. When the response is inappropriate or improper, the feedback will be negative, thus rejecting the formation of a negative habit. When it is appropriate, on the other hand, the feedback will be positive, thus, reinforcing a positive habit. Hence, language habit is formed and gradually develops.

In the nativistic point of view, on the other hand, it is believed that human being is endowed with an inherent capacity to acquire language since one is born. That is what Chomsky (1965) called Language Acquisition Device (LAD). With the existence of this device, the human being develops language ability and mastery. However, this innate capacity will not be of much use unless there are primary linguistic data to be processed. This linguistic data function as a trigger to activate the device.

The question is where the linguistic data come from. The linguistic input which functions as a trigger to activate the internal language acquisition device is obtained from the environment. Therefore, although this point of view gives primary importance to the availability of innate capacity, the existence of environmental factors is also crucial because the environment will provide the input necessary to be present so that the internal device can

actively process. With this processing system, the language will be generated, created, and developed. Without the aid of the environment, linguistic data will never be obtained. Thence, LAD will never be activated; and finally, the acquisition will never occur.

From an interactionist point of view, it is claimed that to acquire language, there should be an interaction between innate capacity and linguistic input. It implies that importance lies not only on either side, internal or external, but rather on both. In other words, language is acquired due to interaction between learners' innate mental capacity and linguistic input (Ellis, 1986). The further implication is that environmental factors also play an important role in language acquisition.

This view seems to be more acceptable than the previously mentioned two others. This is based on the fact that a child, although provided with a language acquisition device, can hardly acquire a language unless he is exposed to linguistic input. On the other hand, although he is exposed to rich linguistic input, without possessing mental capacity, the input will be useless. The evidence supporting this view is that a child can produce novel and relatively perfect sentences despite some linguistically defective input received by him in the course of their initial interaction.

In short, it is reasonable that language acquisition occurs only due to interaction between the mental linguistic capacity possessed by the learners and the linguistic input provided to them by the environment. The role of external factors, thus, is as essential as that of internal factors, in the sense that both contribute greatly to facilitating language acquisition.

### **Formal and Natural Language Environments**

In conjunction with the nature of linguistic input, the language environment can be categorized into a formal and natural language environment (Kameli et al., 2012; Krashen, 1976). When the focus of the speaker is on the forms of the language, the environment is said to be formal. When the focus is on the content of a communication, on the other hand, the language environment is natural (Alatis et al., 1981; Dulay et al., 1982).

An example of a formal language environment is a language classroom, when there is an explanation about the rules of how to form past perfect progressive tense in English, for instance. A formal environment may also happen in any instances when conscious linguistic knowledge and manipulation of linguistic items are required, such as the presentation of drills and exercises. In those circumstances, when students are doing the exercises, they do not care whether or not "John had been sleeping for two hours when his girlfriend called him." The

most important is that whether they can use correctly the form “had + been +V-ing.” In that case, students are engaged in a formal environment.

On the other hand, in case the teacher is instructing the students to do the exercises, or when he is giving advice, or when he is managing the class, or when he is interacting with them by using the target language, the situation becomes natural. That is because the focus at that time is not on grammar or linguistic forms but rather on the conveyance of meaning or message.

Usually, the examples of natural language environments are referred to as conversational situations among people in natural settings, such as between a customer and a shopkeeper in a store, between a passenger and a ticket seller in airport counters, among children in their playground, and so forth. In those cases, the focus of the conversation is not on the grammatical forms but on the message to be communicated.

Sometimes, the distinction between formal and natural environments is not clear-cut. In a language classroom, for example, when the teacher makes a meta-talk about the rules of language, the situation is formal; however, when he switches to asking whether the students understand the explanation, it becomes natural. Consequently, when the target language is used as a medium of instruction in a language classroom, learners can be exposed not only to the formal environment but also to natural ones. That is the most effective to improve learners' language acquisition.

The contribution of either type of environment in facilitating language acquisition and development is undeniable. A formal language environment is beneficial for language learners in that it provides them with formal knowledge of language rules which can be used as a monitor (Dulay et al., 1982). It might, then, enable the learners to produce or correct sentences with accuracy. Besides, it may also satisfy the curiosity of adult learners when they learn a language because they are generally interested in knowing language rules,

Its defect, however, is that it is questionable and, perhaps even worse, doubted whether formal knowledge about rules of a language has many benefits on language operation ability. This doubt is reasonable based on the fact that one who can recite rules is not a guarantee that he is also proficient in using the language. Similarly, knowing the rules might even hinder the learners from doing a lot of practice in producing the language because they are afraid of making mistakes. So, there is a gap between knowing the rules of language and the ability to use the language. A formal environment is only good to attain the former but not the latter. To accomplish the ability to use language, practice is highly required. This can be found in a natural setting.

The contribution of the natural language environment, on the other hand, is that it enhances the development of communication skills, for natural exposure will trigger the subconscious acquisition of language (Dulay et al., 1982). When one is engaged in a communicative event, for instance, the focus of the conversation is on content rather than on forms. Thus, one strives very hard, exerting any strategy, being able to understand and be understood. Consequently, one will be successful, with such effort, in communication. Hence, communication skills are acquired.

The beneficial effects of natural exposure on language acquisition have been demonstrated by some studies. Carroll (1967) found evidence that students who study in a native speaking country performed the target language better than those who study in a foreign environment where there is only a formal classroom situation and meager practical situation. A similar finding is also reported by Scott, Saegert, and Tucker (1974), who made a study about learning English in Egypt and Libanon. They reported that those who were taught other subjects by using English as a medium of instruction have better proficiency than those who only have formal language classes. The result of the immersion program in Canada also confirms this point (Dulay et al., 1982; Alatis et al., 1981).

The main defect of the natural environment, nevertheless, is that there is a probability that the input is incomprehensible. Besides, when the learners are exposed to a natural language environment too early, there will be a lack of a silent period because they are demanded to communicate in the target language regardless of the immaturity of their language proficiency. The silent period is necessary to provide emotional preparedness for the acquisition of language.

Assuming that environmental factors are essential to promote language acquisition and development, some aspects can be related. Those are (1) the opportunity to use the language, (2) the emotional climates of learning situations, (3) the nature of linguistic input (Littlewood, 1984).

The opportunity to use the target language may refer to exposure, frequency, and practice. Exposure to the target language is undeniably important. When one has never heard or read English, for example, one cannot acquire it. Being exposed to the target language, moreover, may enable the learners to imitate. Imitation is one of the strategies to acquire language at the beginning level. In addition to that, frequency is also crucial. When a learner frequently hears a certain structure, he might easily memorize it. Before being able to analyze the rules to generate utterances, sometimes memorization is necessary. Finally, besides exposure and

frequency, practice also seems essential, especially to attain automaticity in using the language. Practice will enhance fluency.

The emotional climates of the learning situation refer to the affective or emotional preparedness of the learner to learn. Not all input, even when directed or addressed towards the learner, is perceived by their mind. It depends on whether or not the learner is psychologically ready to receive it. Without such mental readiness, any input provided by the environment will not be of many benefits. Therefore, so that the exposure to the input becomes effective, the learner should have emotional readiness and willingness to learn and receive input. Otherwise, not much can be expected.

### **The Importance of Input in Language Acquisition**

Input is indispensable to promote language acquisition. However, not all input is effective. According to Krashen (1985), to be effective, linguistic input should be comprehensible, interesting, and relevant for the learners. Exposure to incomprehensible input will not have any effect on improving language acquisition. When beginners are exposed to a natural target language speech on television or radio, for instance, they will absorb relatively no information, for the language is too far beyond their linguistic capacity. The benefit might merely be the recognition of some sounds, but that is of little use, if any, for improving language acquisition. Comprehensibility, therefore, is of prime importance to promote language acquisition.

In addition to that, the input should also be interesting to the learners to be attended to. When learners are not attracted to the content of the input, either because it is too culturally bound or irrelevant, they will not have any curiosity to pursue it further. It means learners are not ready and open to perceive the input; thus, making it ineffective to be intake. Krashen (1985) suggests some evidence to support his statement about the importance of input to promote language acquisition, namely dealing with caretaker speech, silent period, age differences, the effect of exposure, method comparison research, and immersion program.

Caretaker speech is the speech of parents or others in contact with children. The speech is modified so that it enables children to understand, thus making communication successful. Although it is intended only for communication and not to teach language, children benefit from it to acquire language. The inference is that children can acquire language because they understand the language addressed to them.

The phenomenon of a silent period can also be taken as evidence to support the importance of comprehensible input to promote acquisition. Children cannot produce target language utterances directly after being exposed to a new language. They need to accumulate data by

listening and understanding the language to develop competence. The time needed for that is called a silent period. Krashen (1985) argues that during this time, children are making use of comprehensible input to improve their language ability. In this point, however, Krashen is criticized by McLaughlin (1987), who says that comprehensible input cannot, by itself, account for the development of learners' understanding of the grammatical system. Understanding messages is not enough, and Krashen does not say anything about how learners progress from understanding to acquisition.

Another argument deals with age differences. Krashen (1985) maintains that older acquirers progress more rapidly than younger learners. That is because having more knowledge of the world, contexts, and extra-linguistic information, the former can obtain more comprehensible input than the latter. Besides, older learners are more capable of conducting communication than younger ones, e.g., use negotiation to attain comprehension, because they are more mature and experienced in manipulating conversational strategy.

The effects of exposure to the target language also support the view. The longer the people live in a native-speaking country, for example, the more proficient they will be. This is not only because of mere exposure but because of the exposure to comprehensible input. Exposure to incomprehensible input will not be of much use.

In the teaching and learning process, the method that relies on providing learners with more comprehensible input is more effective than that with less. Comparing the results of using a grammar-based method and that of using the audio-lingual method only produces insignificantly different results, for both do not provide a sufficient quantity of comprehensible input. The case is different when the methods to compare are grammar-based versus natural approaches. That is because the latter supplies more comprehensible input than the former.

Still, another argument deals with the success of the immersion program (Acar, 2019; Chen & Tsai, 2020). This program is successful for it provides the learners with a sufficient quantity of comprehensible input. In such a program, the target language is used as a medium of instructing not only skill courses but also content subjects. Such a condition is very advantageous for the learners because they can receive a sufficient quantity of comprehensible input.

Those theoretical concepts implicate that the designers of language improvement programs and teachers, to promote effective language acquisition, should create the target language environments in such a way that learners are frequently exposed to rich and comprehensible language input and gain a lot of opportunities to practice using the language.



## FINAL REMARK

In short, external factors are very crucial in promoting language acquisition. Among those factors is the environment in which learners can obtain models to imitate, stimuli to respond to, feedback to reject, input to comprehend, and chances to reinforce the formation of language habits. There are two kinds of language environments: formal and natural. Both types are crucial to promoting language acquisition. The former is beneficial to provide and reinforce linguistic or grammatical competence (Fisenko et al., 2021), whereas the latter encourages the improvement of communicative skills (Dumitriu et al., 2014; Some-Guiebre, 2020). With all these, learners develop their target language ability by actively participating in authentic communicative events.

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