

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO SECOND LANGUAGE  
TEACHING APPROACHES:  
THE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND THE CONSCIOUS  
RULE-LEARNING APPROACHES**

*Gebremedhin Simon\**

**INTRODUCTION**

The main objective in offering English service courses to Addis Ababa University students is to enable them to acquire proficiency in English for higher academic learning. The underlying assumption is that students will do well in their studies if their facility of communication in English in their field of speciality is high. So, when one is teaching English, he has to regard it as an ancillary subject - an aid in the acquisition of knowledge in the content areas.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that a lot of manpower is employed and huge financial expenditure incurred, it is alleged that most students still "... face great difficulties in thinking in abstract terms, in generalizing concepts and in comprehending things and phenomena in English" (English Panel, Curriculum Division, ME, 1982:10). It is common knowledge that most A.A.U. staff complain about the so many corrections they have to make in students' writings and speeches in English.

One would wonder why measures have not been taken to alleviate the seriousness of the problem. The students' declining standard of English is partly attributed to poor teaching facilities, staff, and the current teaching methodology i.e. the structuralist-behaviorist method which treats language learning as a mechanical process and supports the use of drills (below and on the level of a sentence) as a basic strategy and pays little attention to the needs of the learner and his motivation. The difficult task of employing appropriate forms in various situations is left to the second language learner. This approach creates a rift between language learning and communication.

The present study committed itself to finding a better approach that will facilitate the meeting of stated learning objectives. It made a comparative experiment on two teaching approaches namely, the contemporary Conscious Rule-learning or Structuralist, and the Language Acquisition.

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## THE CONSCIOUS RULE-LEARNING APPROACH

The conscious language learning is thought to be helped by error correction and the presentation of explicit rules. Error correction helps the learner to have the correct mental representation of the rules. Learners are made to attend to selected linguistic items of structures through such conscious learning activities as mimicry, memorization and patterns practice. The approach is based on the empiricist position that language acquisition is a kind of habit formation through conditioning and drill.

Basically, the structuralist approach to language teaching is based on the following five tenets. First language is speech, not writing. It is a collection of concrete observable signs and the task of a language learner is to master pronunciation.

The second property is that language is a set of habits which are acquired by conditioning or imitation. Memorization speeds up the process of establishing the basic treasury of sentences which can be extended by analogy.

The third is that second language teachers should teach the language, not about the language. The primary task of the teacher is to impose a set of conditioned speech habits on the student. Habits are realized by a systematic and conscious teaching of the language rules.

The fourth property is that language is what its native speakers say, not what someone thinks they ought to say. This may imply that the second language learner should indiscriminately imitate what native speakers say.

Lastly, languages are different and thus the second language learner should ignore his old language habits. Language teaching materials should give special emphasis to drilling the linguistic items most likely to conflict. The problems of interference, believed to be caused by the variations of languages 1 and 2, is suggested to be tackled by giving ample pattern practice based on the contrastive analysis of the native language (L1) and the target language (L2).

## THE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION APPROACH

The Language Acquisition Approach to second language learning is based on recent findings in first language acquisition. Krashen (1981) states that this approach is very similar to the process children use in acquiring first and second languages. It is the result of processes of creative construction by which the learner internalizes the rules of the second languages subconsciously. This approach requires meaningful interaction or natural communication in the target language, i.e., learners will be more concerned with the messages they are conveying and understanding rather than with the form of their utterances. Error correction and explicit teaching of rules are not relevant to language acquisition although second language teachers may modify their utterances addressed to their students to help them understand. (Brown and Hanlon, 1970; Brown, Cazden, and Bellugi, 1973;) Krashen (1981) states that second language learners need not have a conscious awareness of the "rules" they process and may self-correct only on the basis of a "feel" for grammatically.

Krashen (1981) stresses the fact that people communicate naturally with a language only if they have acquired tacit knowledge of it. In fact, acquisition means the tacit or implicit mastery of the natural grammar of the language and it is indispensable for the construction of connected discourse during meaningful communication (Widdowson, 1981; Ellis, 1982).

Furthermore, the ideal environment for acquisition of a second language is to provide the learner with personally meaningful language intake that is comprehensible but that also contains enough new linguistic data so that creative construction process continues to be stimulated. In Language Acquisition classes, if students show some evidence of interference from their native language, it is normal; it shows that they have not mastered (or rather acquired) the relevant structures in the second language.

## THE EXPERIMENT

As it has been mentioned above, the study was conducted to determine whether the Language Acquisition Approach to language teaching is more effective and functional than the Conscious Rule-learning Approach in enhancing students' proficiency in English. Six sections of freshman Social Sciences students were selected and assigned into two groups, the study and the control groups, by lot.

A pretest was administered before the experiment was initiated and the results showed that there was no significant difference in English language proficiency among the groups.

The three sections of the study group were supplied with a set of topics that A.A.U. Social Sciences freshmen would find meaningful and interesting, and related to their courses. The students were expected to select topics and initiate discussions. Each study group class was divided into further smaller discussion groups consisting of a maximum of four students. These small groups worked independently in the selection and treatment of the topics. Each member had a turn to come prepared and present his views to others on topics assigned to him. To keep the students busy, each member was then expected to write a report on what the group discussed.

The instructors in the Language Acquisition classes were advised to a) avoid linguistic corrections, b) be extremely supportive in the learner's struggles towards independence from the teacher and towards peer interdependence, c) allow time for learners to work at their own pace, and d) keep the learners busy. Moreover, they were told to encourage exploratory discussion (thereby giving full weight to continuous reading), and work tasks carried out in groups involving collaborative discussion and planning.

Accordingly, instructors followed these procedures and they met their respective study groups three times a week for six consecutive weeks, each period lasting one and a half hours.

The control group which had three sections was supplied with teaching materials based on the conscious Rule-learning Approach. The materials consisted of adequate linguistic descriptions of selected items, i.e., the descriptions of the uses of "would", "could," "should" and conditional sentences, and adequate exercises that would help students to form the desired linguistic habits. They consisted of oral drills and simple sentence completion exercises. The instructors had a dominant role and were told to lay more emphasis on rule explanation and doing the exercises orally. They were to allow the production of correct utterances only.

The Conscious Rule-learning classes continued for six weeks, each week consisting of three periods of one hour and half each.

### THE RESULTS

A post-test was administered at the end of the study. It contained both oral and written parts.

The sums of the scores of the control groups, 1A, 2A and 3A are 1362, 1089 and 1223, and the aggregate sum of the control groups is 3674. The means of the control groups are 56.75, 47.35, and 50.96, and the aggregate mean of the control group is 51.75.

The sums of the scores of the study groups, 1B, 2B and 3B are 1674, 1216, 1385 respectively and the aggregate sum of the study groups is 4275. The means of the study groups are 62.00, 67.56 and 62.95 respectively, and the aggregate means of the study groups is 63.81.

The variances of the control groups are found to be 129.85, 143.60 and 213.43, and the aggregate variance of the control groups is 173.08. The variances of the study groups are 127.54, 200.50, and 196.33 respectively, and the aggregate variance of the study groups is 169.76. The standard error for the pairs (see table) was obtained and the significance difference was calculated by using t-test.

As it is indicated in Table II, all the cases show significant differences.

Table I: Summary of Post-test results

C.I.	C.G. f	S.G. f	C.G. c.f.	S.G. c.f	Mid.
21-25	1	-	1	-	23
26-30	2	-	3	-	28
31-35	7	-	10	-	33
36-40	7	-	17	-	38
41-45	6	5	23	5	43
46-50	7	9	30	14	48
51-55	12	6	42	20	53
56-60	12	8	54	28	58
61-65	6	8	60	36	63
66-70	3	8	63	42	68
71-75	6	9	69	51	73
76-80	2	7	71	58	78
81-85	-	4	-	62	83
86-90	-	2	-	64	88
91-95	-	1	-	65	93

C.I. - class interval

C.G. - control group

f - frequency

S.G. - study group

c.f. - cumulative frequency

Mid - class mid-point

Table II: Significance difference test results in Post-test (Hypotheses test)

Case	C.G.	S.G.	C.G. $\bar{X}$	S.G. $\bar{X}$	C.G.S (n-1)	S.G.S (n-1)	C.G.S <sup>2</sup>	S.G.S <sup>2</sup>	SP	t-comp (0.05)	t-tab 0.05	Significance
1	1A n-24	1B n-27	56.75	62.00	11.40	11.29	129.85	127.54	11.34	3.18	2.021	Significant
2	2A n-23	2B n-18	47.35	67.56	11.98	14.16	143.60	200.50	12.98	4.08	2.021	Significant
3	3A n-24	3B n-22	50.96	62.95	14.61	14.01	213.43	196.33	14.33	4.2	2.021	Significant
4	2A n-23	3B n-22	47.35	62.95	11.98	14.01	143.60	196.33	13.01	4.02	2.021	Significant
5	1A n-24	2B n-18	56.75	67.56	11.40	14.16	129.85	200.50	12.64	2.74	2.021	Significant
6	3A n-24	2B n-18	50.96	67.56	14.61	14.16	213.43	200.50	14.42	3.70	2.021	Significant
7	AGGREGATE		51.75	63.81	13.16	13.03	173.08	169.76	12.99	2.2	1.977	Significant

n= number of observations

C.G.= Control group

S.G.= Study group

C.G. $\bar{X}$ = mean of C.G.S.G. $\bar{X}$ = mean of S.G.

C.G.S.= Standard deviation of C.G.

S.G.S.= Standard deviation of S.G.

C.G.S<sup>2</sup>= Variance of C.G.S.G.S<sup>2</sup>= Variance of S.G.

SP= Standard error

t-comp. = t-Computed

t-tab = t-tabulated



What do the above tables show? Except for the teaching approach which remained a variable, all other factors were kept constant. The study shows that the study groups performed better in the post-test than the control groups, and that the study groups were better in their English language proficiency than the control groups. According to this study, the Language Acquisition Approach to English Language teaching is more effective than the Conscious Rule-learning Approach.

Admittedly, at the initial stages, instructors were very much dismayed by the types and numbers of errors committed by students. It was also discouragingly difficult to make the groups talk. Students were reluctant to talk, to ask and even to choose a topic for discussion. Besides, each group wanted its particular teacher's instruction in deciding which topic to select.

To start with the control groups found the drills easy to handle. Students felt secure and understood that they were doing these exercises in order to help them pass Freshman English examinations. Appropriate grammatical explanations were given and feedback was given in a form of correction.

The control groups, after the third week, started to lose interest in the grammatical exercises. The exercises became routine and motivation among the subjects gradually became low. In general, students preferred doing the writing exercises to the listen-and-repeat drills. There was a lot of hesitation for fear of making errors although errors were rampant.

On the other hand, motivation was observed to increase in the study groups gradually. The groups, without waiting for guidance from their particular instructor, started selecting topics both from the set of topics provided and from their own based on what they individually found useful. Each member had an opportunity to ask, report and comment on certain issues raised by the groups. An authentic communication situation, where everybody was saying something without worrying whether his speech contained errors or not, was created.

A prominent characteristic among the study groups was the students ability to develop self-confidence and group inter-dependence. The students became talkative in the sense that they had lot of things to say about an issue and, according to one instructor, the final stages of the study were infinitely rewarding. Intimacy reached a high level among the study groups. The students produced long rambling and meaningful sentences with ease.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the mere parrotting of segments of sentences in order to form correct habits of language use does not result in the mastery of language. It has further indicated that motivation decreased among the control groups, and the inhibition to use language in connected discourse was high. Errors persisted and dependence on teachers was a predominant feature in classroom activities.

From the Language Acquisition classes, it can be concluded that language rules are subconsciously internalized in the process of meaningful communicative interaction. Errors are considered to be a normal phenomenon in language acquisition; they are "corrected" only when the learner subconsciously acquires the appropriate rules and develops a "feel for grammar". The emphasis is on creating a rich linguistic environment whereby learners are exposed to a learning atmosphere conducive for ample creative participation.

Thus, if English has to remain an effective medium of instruction in the University, two recommendations can be made based on the results of the present study: 1) In order to enhance language intake and create meaningful learning activities, extensive reading in English must be encouraged, and 2) Freshman English classroom instructions must be shaped in such a way that they facilitate student participation and involvement in problem solving tasks, and learning through discovery.

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