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**THE DYNAMICS OF FIRST LANGUAGE (L1) AND SECOND LANGUAGE (L2) ACQUISITION PATTERNS AMONG FILIPINO CHILDREN: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY**

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**ABSTRACT**

This grounded theory study aimed to explore how some Filipino children, born and raised in an L1-speaking environment, acquired and mastered English first and learned or acquired their first language only later. While many researches have already been conducted on L2 acquisition worldwide, and in the Philippines, L1 studies have just also started to gain much attention, this phenomenon has not been explored. Hence, an apparent knowledge gap about the experience of these children exists. Interviews were conducted among parents and guardians of sixteen children who passed the inclusion criteria. Then, thematic analysis, coding, and constant comparative analysis were employed resulting in the emergence of the new theory. The Second Language Reverse Acquisition Theory contains five stages and two cutting points. The first stage is *prenatal exposure to L2*, which ends with the first cutting point of *the birth of the baby*. The second stage is *early childhood exposure to L2*, which ends as the third stage starts – *L2 acquisition first*. The third stage ends with the second cutting point – *exposure to L1*. The fourth stage is *L1 acquisition second*, and the final stage is *L1 and L2 dynamics*. A model was created to help explain the theory or the phenomenon explored. The new theory has implications for English language teachers and language teaching practitioners in general.

**Keywords:** Language acquisition, L1 acquisition, L2 acquisition, Language Acquisition Theory, L2 Reverse Acquisition Theory, Grounded Theory

**INTRODUCTION**

There have been a lot of theories formulated explaining how children acquire their first language (L1), or their second language (L2). Much of the studies that follow, however, only describe the processes or strategies how a particular child acquires a certain language. This current study goes beyond than this. While certain ways of acquiring a language whether first or second have been found out to be effective in various contexts (Brown, 1973; Hakan, 1978; Ellis, 1994; Cook,

2003), the main focus of this study is to establish a less explored pattern of how children first acquire and master the second language of the community before acquiring or learning their first language.

Meanwhile, to say that L2 is acquired first before L1 is quite uncommon. Language learners, children in particular, usually acquire their L1 first then move on to acquiring their L2 with the help of their L1. The reverse of this is not common and maybe never before heard. But this is happening in the Philippines. The Philippines has a lot of regional and ethnic languages or dialects used by Filipinos as their mother tongue or first language. Meanwhile, they commonly use the English language not only as a medium of communication in business and commerce, in media, in the government, and the like, but also as a medium of instruction in schools and universities. This usage makes English their second language. However, there is a unique pattern or sequence some Filipino children acquire English. Though born and raised in an L1-speaking environment, they acquired and mastered English first and learned or acquired the language of the community only later. This is what this grounded research would like to explore further. So far, studies conducted on this topic are very scant and are only quite related to this study. That is why the phenomenon explored here is approached with excitement but with due care. The closest idea related to this study is that of "child bilingualism." Defining bilingualism, however, has been an issue and a source of debate among researchers and scholars. If a child acquires more than one language more or less simultaneously, Swain (1972) has called it "bilingualism as a first language," while Meisel (1990) would like to call it "two first languages." These propositions however resulted to another debate on when to consider acquisition of two or more languages as simultaneous. McLaughlin (1978) suggested that if at the age of 3 the child had acquired more than one language, then it is simultaneous. Padilla and Lindholm (1984) argued to this, proposing that acquisition is simultaneous only if the child is exposed to both languages from birth onwards.

While defining bilingualism that is widely accepted remains uncertain, these propositions are cited here to point out how relevant these are to the current study and in what sense they are different. It is true that this paper also describes how children acquire or learn their language, but it is only up to this. Its focus is on the pattern and experiences of children in acquiring two languages – the first language of the community and the second language of the community which is English. In this study, Filipino children, born and raised in an L1-speaking environment, acquired and mastered English first and learned or acquired the language of the community only later. So far, this phenomenon has not been really explored; hence, extensive knowledge gap about the experience of these children exists. This is the gap this study would like to explore and elucidate further.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Various studies conducted on the experiences of children acquiring their language supported the use of qualitative methods. Principles and theories on language acquisition among children can hardly be formulated when so little is known about their experiences. Hence, grounded theory study was chosen because it is very much appropriate to explain unfolding processes. The children's experiences in acquiring the English language first, then acquiring later the language of the community were unfolding processes. Before data gathering, appropriate consent and permission were obtained first especially among the guardians and parents of the children. Data collection, sampling, and data analysis occurred iteratively, and all sampling was purposive. To qualify for the study, each participant should meet the following: (a) the biological mother or father of the child, (b) speaks the language of the community, (c) their child is not older than 8 years old, (d) their child started to speak English only first; d) their child acquired and speak the language of the community later. Since the children could still not properly answer the interview questions, their parents were taken as the informants of the study. The study was conducted in one public laboratory school in Cebu City, Philippines. A mother of a 4-year old was interviewed for theoretical sampling to illuminate the experience of having a child who only speaks English which is no longer very much true to the other participants. Sampling took place until saturation occurred which happened at the sixth participant. There were a total of 16 participants, all of which are the mothers. The children aged from 5 to 8, 9 males and 7 females. All the children are already attending school, 5 in preschool, 6 in grade one, and 5 in grade two. After securing permission from the school, the participants were approached by the researcher and were informed about the study. They were asked if they could help by sharing their experiences about the phenomenon explored. They were given assurances that in no way this will harm them and their children, and they were told that their names and of their children will be held with utmost care and confidentiality. Recording the interview is only for the researcher not to miss any important points of the interview. Field notes were written right after the completion of each of the interviews. After the first interview data analysis started. Coding, classifying and sorting the data, memoing, and constant comparison were used throughout the process of theory generation. The outcome of the study was the grounded theory *the reverse second language acquisition pattern*.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The theory of *reverse second language acquisition pattern* contains five stages and two cutting points. The first stage is *prenatal exposure to L2*. *Prenatal exposure to L2* abruptly ends with the first cutting point of *the birth of the baby*. *The birth of the baby* ushers the second stage *early childhood exposure to L2*. During this stage, the process *without knowing it* also happens. The

third stage is *L2 acquisition first* in which the following processes happen: *unintended outcome* and *let it be*. A second cutting point occurs with *exposure to L1* that facilitates the fourth stage *L1 acquisition second* during which the child experienced the process of *a little difficulty*. The final stage is *L1 and L2 dynamics* during which the child mixes up L1 and L2 usage. *L1 and L2 dynamics* also include the process *contextualizing*. A model was created to help explain the theory or the phenomenon explored. The new theory has implications for English language teachers and language teaching practitioners in general.

### **Stage 1: Prenatal Exposure to L2**

*Prenatal exposure to L2* is the first stage of the theory. During this stage, the mothers shared that even during their pregnancy they already started listening to English music or watching English movies. Some of them got this idea from their friends or loved ones who shared them the idea. It was not very clear to them though the reasons for doing it. Nonetheless, they did it with a thought that it would redound to their child's growth and development later. They also recalled one of their teachers' advice in school recommending it as their basis for doing such. Eventually, they have also become used to with listening to music and have liked it as a routine or habit. This "pre-natal exposure" to second language might not have been well-supported by theories and other scientific evidences just yet, but it is apparent that these mothers have been doing it with good intentions in mind. And this could prove to be the difference-maker after all when comes to second language acquisition.

### **Cutting Point #1: Birth of the Baby**

The stage of *prenatal exposure to L2* ends with the birth of the baby. All the listening to English music and watching English films stopped especially during and weeks after the birth. Meanwhile, this birth also ushered in the coming of the next stage early childhood exposure to L2.

### **Stage 2: Early Childhood Exposure to L2**

The stage *early childhood exposure to L2* starts when the mothers went back to their old habit of listening or watching English music or videos during their pregnancy. This time though with their newly born. This stage lasts until the child started to talk English. During this stage, the process *without knowing it* also occurred. Just weeks after their child was born, mothers started playing some English music, enough for their newly born to hear it, and not so long, their babies started watching Barney, Dora the Explorer, and the like. They played some nursery rhymes whether the baby is awake or asleep and sometime the whole day. This had even become a strategy to amuse the baby or let them stop crying. This became the daily habit or routine of the mothers to play nursery rhymes for their babies.

*Without Knowing it.* Most of the mothers had no thought or specific intentions that doing it could significantly make their babies acquire the English language used in the tape or videos. They just really thought that it would just be fine and that there is nothing wrong with it. Eventually, without the mothers knowing it, this seemingly unconscious repetitive acts or habits of exposing their children to English inputs make the children acquire the language. Hence, this is where stage three starts: *L2 acquisition first*.

### **Stage 3: L2 Acquisition First**

*L2 acquisition first* is the stage when the children start to produce or utter English words after a significant period of exposure to that language. During this stage the following processes occurred: *unintended outcome* and *let it be*.

*Unintended Outcome.* *Without knowing it* in stage two results to *an unintended outcome* in stage three. This unintended outcome refers to the event in which the child starts to produce utterances in L2. To the mothers this comes as a surprise to them. They did not realize, or *without knowing it*, that what they have been doing (*early childhood exposure to L2*) would eventually result to *L2 acquisition first*. Most of the mothers underestimated the effect of their children's frequent exposure to nursery rhymes. One mother only wanted his son to be acquainted with the letters of the English alphabet but ended up getting proficient with the language.

*Let it Be.* Though acquiring the L2 for the children was an unintended result, the mothers did not do any significant attempts to stop their children from acquiring English and help their children acquire the language of the community. Instead, they just *let it be*. They allow their children to continue acquiring English and what they did as parents was they were the ones who adjusted to their children by trying their best to talk to their children in English as this seems to be the only that they would understand each other. By the time the children reached three years old, they were already producing sensible English phrases and sentences, and their caregivers and the immediate people around them have left with no choice but to communicate them back in English.

### **Cutting Point #2: Exposure to L1**

As the child starts to walk and meet other people around, it seemed inevitable that the child would be being exposed to the first language of the people. Children overheard it from the conversation of the parents and the people near or around them who are customarily speakers of the first language of the community but only started to use English for the sake of their children. This somehow made the children wonder and created in them an interest on the language used by the people that they seemed to be quite unfamiliar with. Hence, this exposure to L1 led the children to the fourth stage *L1 acquisition second*.

#### **Stage 4: L1 Acquisition Second**

While typical children in the community and the Philippine setting in general get acquainted with and acquired and mastered the language of the community first, which is the language spoken by most of the people, and started acquiring or learning English later, children in this study are an exception to this case. They acquired and mastered the L2 of the community first and the L1 later. In all of the cases, they only started acquiring the L1 of the community as soon as they also started going out from their homes and started attending school. This is the time they got exposed to other children and other people using the first language of the community. This exposure led them to acquire the language.

*A Little Difficulty.* The children met some form of difficulty as they tried to acquire the first language of the community. This was evident, as narrated by the mothers, by the time their children started attending school. Subject in Mother Tongue was especially hard for them, and some teachers handling subjects using English as medium of instruction also used the mother tongue in some of their discussion. Though with a little difficulty in trying to understand and acquire the language, these inputs helped and facilitated their acquisition of the language; hence, *L1 acquisition second.*

#### **Stage 5: L1 & L2 Dynamics**

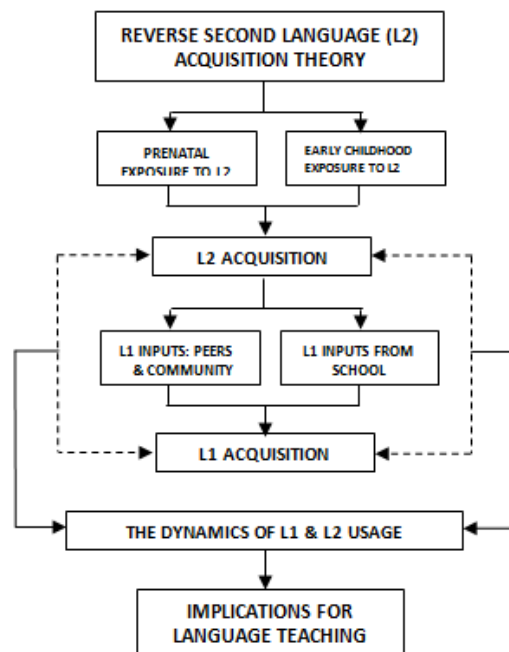
Now that the children have already a good grasp of both L1 and L2, the dynamics of the usage of both languages started. One mother noticed that although her son started to pick up some L1 words from his playmates in the neighbourhood, his mastery of L1 was slow, because when her son is in school, most of the time, if not all, he only speaks English since his classmates also speak English. While it is true that the children in this study have all acquired L2 first, a few of them acquired also their L1 quickly. As one of the mothers revealed, her son seemed to have no difficulty at all in picking up the L1. The child could use terms or names in L1 and its L2 equivalent at the same. Even at his age, the child seemed to know very well when to speak English or Cebuano. This is what is referred to as *contextualizing.*

*Contextualizing.* A mother noticed that as soon as her son started interacting and playing with other children in the village who are non-L2 proficient, her son seemed to be very interested and had fun upon learning some new L1 terms. This has even sped up when she transferred her son to a school where L1 usage is widespread or very common. She narrated that although her son has learned to speak *Cebuano*, he can switch to English seamlessly as the situation or need calls it. The statements made by the mothers on their children's usage of both languages were significant. First, it shows that children could already use both languages with seeming ease and fluency. In addition, children seemed to already have possessed a good sense of sociolinguistic

and pragmatic competence as they could already use one language over the other, or a combination of both in different contexts or situations.

**Generated Grounded Theory**

A child can easily acquire a second language if he has been exposed to it frequently and as early as when he was still a baby, or earlier when he was still in the womb (*Stage 1,2*). These exposures lead to acquiring and mastering first the second language of the community and doing the same for the first language later (*Stage 3, 4*). The later acquisition of the first language is inevitable because it is the language used by most of the people in the community where the children live. As the child interacts with the people, he unconsciously acquires the language of the community which is the first language of the people, in addition to his first acquired language – the second language (L2) of the people. In addition, school could either facilitate more on the acquisition or mastery of either L1 or L2. This all depends on school’s language environment (*Stage 3,4*). Meanwhile, whether or not the child should use L1 or L2 depends on the context and appropriateness of the communication milieu (*Stage 5*). The theory generated can be summarized as follows: The second language (L2) of the community can be acquired and mastered first over the first language (L1) if the child is exposed or used to it first. This is now what the researcher called as the *Second Language (L2) Reverse Acquisition Theory* (Illustrated in Figure 1 below).



**Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Reverse Second Language (L2) Acquisition Theory**

## **Implications**

While there have been a lot of methods and strategies design to facilitate second language acquisition, it is apparent in this grounded study that enough exposure to the target language is indeed very effective for its acquisition. Hence, the implied lesson here for teachers and L2 practitioners is quite obvious and simple: Expose the students to the target language. If it did not work, maybe the issue now is the extent and the amount of exposure. The good thing though about exposure to the target language is there seems to be no harm with overexposure. Therefore, the recommendation would be: Overexpose the students to the target language. This works in many schools. Teachers use only the target language as the medium of instruction. No sliding back and recourse to the first language. If the school administrators, office clerks, the security guards, and even the janitors tried their best to use only the target language, the students would have no way out, but immerse themselves in the language and soon acquire it. As easy as it may sound but this would surely take a lot of will and determination among teachers, administrators and all stakeholders.

## **CONCLUSION**

Second language reverse acquisition theory is a new grounded theory that explores the experience of children who acquired the second language of the community first, before acquiring the first language. It describes how exposure to the target language inputs plays a very important role in language acquisition, whether it is first or second. If the child is sufficiently exposed first to the second language (L2) of the community, he could acquire and become proficient with it first, before he would do the same with people's L1. If this happens, it reverses the usual pattern of L1-to-L2 acquisition, resulting to L2-to-L1. This is what this study called as the *second language reverse acquisition theory*.

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