

HOW TO ORGANISE ONESELF (OR FROM LEARNING TO ACQUISITION)

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Learning can be seen as a way of consciously organizing activities in such a way that they will parallel the brain’s unconscious functioning, thereby optimizing it. When what is to be acquired is very complicated, it may well be that learning helps us to acquire it more easily and more thoroughly. For instance, to acquire a language, it is often considered necessary to learn it, even though it is possible to acquire a language without learning it in a conscious, organized way (as is often the case with immigrants, for example). Doing drills and exercises, learning rules of grammar or memorizing vocabulary lists are all conscious activities which we organize in order to learn.

One traditional way of learning in an organized fashion is by being taught. People often learn languages by arranging to have them taught: they sign up for a language course (even if it is a private one by telephone). However, it is important to realize that the teacher can only help to learn, the actual acquisition is done by the learner. Moreover, it is not always possible to be taught what one wants to acquire. On the other hand, there are more and more facilities available for learning without being taught. So it is clearly very useful for every learner to know how to go about learning.

In order to organize your learning program better, three important phases need to be kept in mind: discovery, systematic practice and non-systematic practice.

First phase: Discovery

During this phase, you are going to discover just what it is you have to learn, given the communicative aims which you have set yourself. For example, if you want to know how to disagree politely, you are going to have to find appropriate words and expressions, discover which ones are used in certain kinds of situation, etc. You can learn these things from textbooks and grammars or by asking teachers, for example, but above all by studying authentic documents. These are documents (including video and audio, as well as printed texts) which have not been produced for the purpose of language teaching (as is the case with textbooks), but for the purpose of communication. In an authentic document, then, you will find examples of how the language is used for communication (how this or that grammatical tense can be used to talk about the past or the present, for example, or how to thank someone for doing you a favor). In this way, you can study how the language really works in real communicative situations.

In our view, this phase corresponds to the data-processing and rule-making phases of the acquisition process. It is very important for doing work on expression, because it is essential to collect the various items one wishes to learn to handle. However, it is not so important for comprehension, where it is possible to start immediately on the second phase.

Second phase: Systematic practice

During this phase, you work on the items you need to acquire one after the other. In terms of the acquisition process, this is still part of rule-forming, and it also involves a first stage of verifying and applying the knowledge concerned. Systematic work of this kind will sometimes cause you to carry out activities which may seem to be only loosely connected with knowing how to speak a language (some readers may find this to be the case with certain kinds of grammar exercise, for example), but it is through concentrating on specific points that this phase will prove fruitful. It can be compared to a tennis player who wants to improve and who therefore goes out jogging in the forest, an activity which does not seem to be much like tennis but which helps him to improve his stamina, which is the capacity he needs in order to play tennis.

During this phase, working on your own should not cause any problems, because you will be studying items which are going to be necessary to you individually. But at the same time you must not forget to work on all aspects of the knowledge you wish to acquire: when you are working on expression, you do not want just to be able to produce grammatically correct sentences: you want above all to use them appropriately in the communicative situations in which you are going to find yourself. And when you are working on comprehension, you must not forget to work on all the different kinds of documents you are going to have to deal with (short texts, long texts, recordings where people talk with particular kinds of accents, and so on) as well as on the different types of reading and listening you will have to do (knowing how to look for particular pieces of information, understanding so as to be able to criticize, etc.). Nor should you forget to allow time for memorization during this phase.

Third phase: Non-systematic practice

This phase corresponds to the parts of the acquisition process where we verify our knowledge and use it in actual communicative situations. This is going to help you to clarify your ideas and memorize things better as well as develop the know-how necessary to apply the knowledge to practical situations. You are going to learn how to react to the unexpected or the unusual, how to handle all the awkward little communicative problems which no amount of systematic work can prepare you for, any more than physical training, however well planned, can reproduce the conditions of an actual match. During this phase, it is important not to specify the linguistic details of the work you are going to do (the past tense, the vocabulary of the family, expressing disagreement politely, etc.). Instead, you will specify the situation: who you are speaking to, why, etc., so that you can see whether you can now use efficiently the knowledge you have tried to memorize during the systematic phase of your work. For this reason, this work cannot really be done alone. If you are working on expression, you have to have a partner. Ideally, of course, this should be a native speaker, but another learner will do, provided he or she plays the game in communicative terms. If you are working on comprehension, you must have authentic documents, and it is important for you to listen or read in the same conditions as those in which you are going to find yourself: if you are supposed to be able to understand a recording straight off, there can no longer be any question of listening to it ten times; but if you can use a dictionary, there is no question of doing without one either.

Thus, we have just seen, acquisition occurs in stages. It is important to plan your work so that it corresponds to these stages. We believe that this means that there will be three phases, though they will not be of the same length for comprehension and expression, since, understanding and speaking involve different mental operations.

References:

1. A Common European Framework of reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Council of Europe (2001) Cambridge University Press.
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