

Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) A History and Perspective on Practices and Theories of Language Acquisition

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Abstract: This paper is a discussion of the Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA[©]TM) method developed by Neyooxet Greymorning. The method is considered in relation to historical theories of first language acquisition from which it draws (e.g. Interactionism), and in relation to current approaches to second language acquisition, with which it shares some principles (e.g. the Total Physical Response method). My own experience in the method as a student, and that of Robert Hall as both student and teacher, are included in this paper to contribute to the literature on the ASLA method from the perspective of real practitioners.

Keywords: Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA), second language acquisition, second language teaching, endangered language revitalization

1 Introduction

A survey of current and historical literature on theories of language acquisition shows that the study of language acquisition can be said to fall under multiple fields of scientific research, including linguistics, where it is traditionally thought to be at home, behavioral psychology, and cognitive neuroscience. Theories of first and second language acquisition have implications for many dimensions of language education, and as will be discussed here, find useful application in language revitalization or revival work. This paper presents a cursory examination of Neyooxet Greymorning's method, called the Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA[©]TM) method, as it relates to some current and historical theories of first and second language acquisition, and its usefulness for language revitalization programs as compared to other methods of language instruction. I begin with a brief look at some theories on first language acquisition, because the ASLA method strives to mimic the conditions under which a child acquires their first language, and because theories of how this occurs informed the development of the ASLA method. Then, a look at Krashen (1982)'s method — because a lot is written by and about Krashen and his detailed framework — lays out some principles that are essential to the ASLA method. Then, I provide my own testimony of experience as a student in the method, followed by some thoughts on the relationship between theories of first language acquisition, methods of second language teaching, and language revitalization work. Concluding this paper are some thoughts from language worker Robert Hall.

2 History of language acquisition theories: A brief overview

There are many theories about how language is acquired and learned, and they can generally be divided into two categories: theories of first language acquisition and theories of second language acquisition. Three prominent theories of first language acquisition from the last century are Behaviorism, Mentalism, and Interactionism. B. F. Skinner (1957), a proponent of the Behaviorist theory, proposed that an infant acquires language by undergoing conditioning through stimulus and response, imitation, and reinforcement. Fundamentally, this theory found first language acquisition to be a result of factors in the acquirer's physical environment. This attribution was at

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the core of Chomsky's criticism and rejection of Behaviorism, and out of this rejection Chomsky developed his theory, called Mentalism or Innatism. Chomsky found that Skinner's Behaviorist theory could not account for the creative capacities of the language learner, and that those capacities are innate, or genetically determined (Stemmer 1990). In his theory, Chomsky proposed that language acquisition is possible due to the presence of a mechanism in the human brain called a Language Acquisition Device (LAD), part of the fabric of human genetic material (Chomsky 1992). Mentalism was diametrically opposed to Behaviorism, and as such, did not attribute significance to the role of the learner's environment on language acquisition. Meanwhile, Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky had developed socio-cultural theory, and thus laid the groundwork for Social Interaction Theory (SIT). SIT finds that first language acquisition is fundamentally derived from interaction with other human beings. It posits that the combined effects of exposure to language, production of language, and feedback on that production, lead to language acquisition (Gass & Mackey 2007). SIT, and likely other models in the Interactionist approach, are a relevant lens through which to consider ASLA, due to the centrality of interaction, and acknowledgment of both innate and environmental factors in language acquisition.

3 Some approaches to Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

There are a great many theories, frameworks, and hypotheses about Second Language Acquisition in the literature today. Methods in practice are fewer in number. For the purposes of this paper, I will examine three approaches to SLA: Krashen's theory, Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) method, and Greymorning's Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) method.

Krashen's work and research on SLA are compelling for a number of reasons, among them the fact that he has been engaged with the topic for almost 50 years. As stated earlier, language acquisition is a phenomenon that has the potential to be investigated through a variety of scientific lenses; Krashen's work spans applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, neurological studies, as well as pedagogical methodologies. His 1982 volume titled *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* is still very widely cited, and the theories therein are still very widely accepted. Krashen refers to his own theory as "Five Hypotheses About [SLA]" (Krashen 1982), though it is most commonly referred to in the literature as "Krashen's Theory of SLA". The five hypotheses, summarized below from Krashen (1982) are: (1) the acquisition-learning distinction, (2) the natural order hypothesis, (3) the Monitor hypothesis, (4) the input hypothesis, and (5) the Affective Filter hypothesis. The purpose of the following exposition of Krashen's theory is to highlight those aspects of this very well-known and widely written about theory which are similar and relevant to ASLA, in order to illustrate and further develop ASLA's place in the literature.

4 Krashen's theory

4.1 The acquisition-learning distinction

The most fundamental distinction in Krashen (1982)'s theory is that between language acquisition and language learning. The acquisition-learning distinction states that adults have "two distinct and independent ways of developing competence in a second language" (Krashen 1982:65). He states that second language acquisition in adults is similar, if not identical, to first language acquisition in babies/children — that it occurs through a subconscious process, that results in subconsciously acquired competence. Krashen writes that this also means the learner develops native-speaker-like intuitions about correctness and grammaticality in the subconsciously

acquired language. In Krashen's view, this is distinct from learning a second language, which he distinguishes from knowing about a language. Krashen's acquisition-learning hypothesis represents a rejection of the Critical Period Hypothesis (Penfield & Roberts 1959), which stated that success in language acquisition was correlated to the learner's age (Vanhove 2013). In other words, Krashen's theory proposes that a learner can successfully acquire a second language at any age.

4.2 The natural order hypothesis

Krashen (1982) proposes that there is an order or successional hierarchy that predicts what morphemes and grammatical constructions will be acquired by learners at what stage in their acquisition of language. His theory holds for the acquisition of both first and second languages. So far, his investigation of this has only been conducted in English.

4.3 The Monitor hypothesis

The Monitor hypothesis proposes that a learner's language acquisition and language learning function together to transform the learner's acquired competence into linguistic performance. This means that acquisition and learning each play a role in the ability to successfully produce the language at hand. In Krashen (1982)'s view, the learned competence (i.e. the portions of the language that are learned, not acquired, such as grammatical rules) plays a much smaller role than the acquired competence — it functions to edit the output with the consciously learned tools.

4.4 The input hypothesis

The input hypothesis attempts to uncover exactly how the subconscious process of language acquisition unfolds, or in other words, how a language learner progresses from one level of acquired competence to the next. The formulation of this hypothesis relies on abstract representations of language in the mind. Krashen (1982) proposes that curricula that present something like sequentially ordered, gradually increasing 'building blocks' of grammar are not ideal input to the language learner and may actually detract from the learner's successful acquisition.

4.5 The Affective Filter hypothesis

The Affective Filter hypothesis states how affective factors relate to SLA. Affective factors include motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety (Krashen 1982).

It is important to note that the work of Skinner, Chomsky, Vygotsky and Krashen represent part of a large body of literature on language acquisition; the majority of theories and frameworks in the current literature are rooted in a culture of academia that is dominated by Western views of knowledge and models of education.

5 Total Physical Response (TPR) Method

Perhaps one of the better known approaches to second language teaching among communities engaged in language revitalization work is the method developed by John Asher (1977) called the Total Physical Response (TPR) method. His work brought attention to several pitfalls of historical American models of language teaching. Some of the solutions to those pitfalls

embedded in TPR are shared by ASLA, and are significant to both methods' successes in turning out new speakers of endangered languages.

Asher (1977) conducted 21 experiments. The participants were children and San Jose State College students. One experiment tasked the students with responding to a command in a foreign language by acting out the command, beginning with simple imperative verb forms, then increasing in grammatical complexity. Students were able to correctly interpret and carry out a command as complex as "pick up the pencil and paper and put them on the table," after only 20 minutes of training in the TPR method.

Asher (1977)'s TPR method as well as his ideas have been very influential in language work. Among these ideas is the proposal that TPR demonstrates that language is acquired primarily through fluency in listening. Asher also proposed that TPR shows children are not more adept in language acquisition than adults, contrary to popular belief at the time. He also proposed that a playful approach to language teaching is more effective than a stressful one.

Elements of TPR have been adapted into many methods for language teaching, including the development of Evan Gardner's "Where Are Your Keys?" (Gardner & Ciotti 2018), which is utilized by several Indigenous language revitalization programs. Some findings from research with TPR are particularly relevant to a comparison with ASLA. For example, Asher (1977) found that the successful facilitation of learning through TPR increased with the increased complexity of the foreign language command. In other words, simpler commands did not correlate to greater retention; complex commands did. Another interesting finding was that the most significant impediment to language acquisition was to elicit translation by the student back into English. In my own experience learning Hinono'eitiit (Arapaho) through ASLA, facilitated by Neyooxet Greymorning, I observed these two things to be true and reflected in my own learning and that of my fellow students. I will say more about this in the next section.

6 The Accelerated Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) method

The ASLA method developed by Neyooxet Greymorning is a method by which a learner acquires a second language at an accelerated rate. Like Krashen's theoretical framework, the ASLA method relies on the distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Students of a course which employs the ASLA method acquire a second language in a way that is proposed to emulate the way that a first language is acquired, i.e. beginning with a short list of words, and quickly moving to two or three word phrases, in systematic acquisition of whole concepts in the language, all guided by an instructor trained in the method.

Something that sets ASLA apart in the conversation about language learning and language teaching is that it is a method that is applied and practiced, which yields results and produces speakers, such as Ty Steinhauer, whose family used ASLA to teach him his ancestral language Cree, or the Listuguj Migmaq community of Quebec (Greymorning 2011). ASLA is neither a theory transformed into practice, nor a hypothesis made into an experiment, but a method, and it has been such since moving from its inception to practice in 2003. This may be why ASLA succeeds where many other methods for teaching language falter or fail.

In preparing this essay I was surprised by how little has been published about ASLA. I will share my own experience in the method, following a statement that strikes me as very pertinent to ASLA's place as a language teaching method. This quote reports an observation about second language teaching by Tséhesenéstsetotse (Cheyenne) speaker, elder, teacher, and activist Richard Littlebear:

Richard Littlebear thought there was too much stress today in classroom second language instruction on superficial grammatical analysis that just does not work. It makes no sense to have students who can name colors, body parts, and the like in isolation, but who cannot participate in conversations, give simple directions, tell a story, take part in a drama, carry out instructions, and the like. (Cantoni, ed., 2007)

Before taking up Arapaho as a 30-year-old graduate student, I studied French from childhood until high school, and Mandarin from high school through college and afterward. In these language courses, just as Richard Littlebear's statement points out is common practice, instruction began with numbers and colors and basic vocabulary, simple verb conjugation paradigms, time adverbials and the like. Class time was not allotted for conversations in the language; in fact, instruction did not ever change from being mostly conducted in English, even after many years of study in both languages.

In my Arapaho class, conducted in the ASLA method by Neyooxet Greymorning, English was never part of the language instruction, save perhaps a few occasions. The students would sometimes converse in English during class time, and following those moments, I recall it being challenging to initiate the switch back into Arapaho. The times when translation into English occurred as part of the lesson, I noticed, those words or concepts in Arapaho proved more challenging for the students to retain. I think that this is true because students in the ASLA method, unwittingly, and probably for the first time if they are monolingual English speakers, are acquiring language in a way that is completely different from their past language learning experiences. They are not acquiring the language by translating from Arapaho into English and back into Arapaho in their heads. They could not do this if they wanted to at first. In the way the ASLA method works, the students likely do not actually know the semantic content of an utterance until they have uttered it several times. For example, an image of a woman standing next to and handling a horse that is jumping up above ocean waves crashing on a beach is paired with the sentence *Hisei tenounoot woxhoox henihcihceno'oot hihcebe heetec*. The student repeats this phrase each time they encounter this photograph. The first, second, maybe third time they utter this phrase, they most likely cannot identify which words correspond to which elements of the photograph they have just described. Then, as they continue to interact and engage with the language, these concepts are revealed, and internalized in a way that results in acquisition and retention. The lack of English and lack of translation in my Arapaho class is only one way in which ASLA differs from other second language teaching methods. In fact, it is a greater task to pick out the ways in which ASLA differs from other language teaching methods, and simpler to search for ways in which it is the same, because the similarities are few and the differences are many.

More than once in my Arapaho class, I felt momentarily taken aback by some occurrence there. The most salient episode in my memory proceeded as follows: Greymorning asked me, in Arapaho, what the lion was standing on. There were more than 100 images in front of me. One displayed multiple lions crossing a desert plain, and another showed a lion jumping across a narrow creek, but in only one image was a lion doing nothing more than standing. I replied in Arapaho that the lion was standing on a rock in front of the ocean under a setting sun. Greymorning knew from our conversations that I was raised monolingually in English, that I studied Mandarin for more than ten years beginning at age 15, that I excelled in a Chinese Language & Literature major as an undergraduate, and that I lived for six months in Beijing to improve my language skills, speaking hardly any English during that time. After I described the image of the lion in Arapaho, he asked me to repeat it in Mandarin. I fumbled for the words, stuttered, frustratingly could not find the word for lion (though I recall it now, too late), and

ultimately produced a very not-eloquent sentence in a language I had spent countless hours, years of my life studying. This struggle, juxtaposed with my grasp of Arapaho, of which I had only twelve or so hours of instruction under my belt at that moment, was extremely illuminating to me.

At that point in the semester, however, I did not feel surprised anymore. It only took two, maybe three hours in the classroom to realize that this method would continue to impress me in more ways than I can imagine at this stage of my life and career. Though experience has shown me that I possess an above-average adeptness for language learning, I was repeatedly humbled by failures to produce the correct utterance in Arapaho, pronounce that Arapaho utterance well, or successfully identify the image that Greymorning was using Arapaho to describe. As he guided me to understanding, I was even quite privy to his tactics, yet still unable to get there on my own, but when I did, it always felt like a “Eureka!” moment, or prompted me to say to myself, “Of course! Why was I struggling? It’s so obvious!”

6.1 Language loss, language revitalization, language teaching

Innumerable languages have been lost from North America since the onset of colonization due to a number and variety of causes. Despite this fact of language loss, there are also language communities that have significantly increased their number of speakers, and even revived a language from dormancy (i.e. zero ‘speakers’) using only archived documents for source material (Hinton 2011), through language revival/reclamation/revitalization programs. There are a great many such projects and programs in place that aim to increase the number of speakers of North America’s endangered and dormant Indigenous languages.

It is important to note that the term ‘speaker’ is problematic. Distinguishing competency by whether an individual regularly communicates aloud in a language comes from a model of measuring linguistic ability that does not account for the various types of speakers, such as semi-speakers (Dorian 1981), rememberers, ghost speakers, and neo-speakers (Grinevald 1999), who may not be considered when assessing the vitality of an endangered language, though they possess valuable knowledge of it. That said, an attempt to quantify the success of language revitalization programs by assessing the demographic of the ‘speaker’ population is also inherently problematic. What can be said is that these language revitalization programs would not exist without language teachers. Something that is special about ASLA is that students of the method, by virtue of experiencing the method, are already on track to become facilitators of it. They have witnessed, and been subject to, the ways of the method which others find shocking and mysterious. Perhaps the efficacy of the ASLA method is shocking to observers because it upends the Western paradigm and seeks to emulate the methods of the real language learning experts, i.e. infants, rather than eliciting categorically organized word lists, like a linguist doing documentation fieldwork. Perhaps it is thought to be mysterious because relatively little is published on the ASLA method — this may be in part due to the fact that many individuals who practice the method and use it to teach their language are at work in their communities, and not focused on publishing.

The topic of problems with current models of language pedagogy, of the importance of heritage language education (see Brinton et al. 2017) and the topic of language as inextricably linked to individuals’ identity and their health (see Whalen et al. 2016), are emergent in the growing field of language activism. What is perhaps not discussed enough in the literature is the shift from researching and writing about these issues, and how to solve them, to taking action. ASLA can have a role in this shift. Language activists, linguists, and other individuals involved with language revitalization programs have devoted countless hours and entire careers to saving endangered languages. Unfortunately, many of these programs are faced with constant, countless

obstacles, ranging from budget cuts, to the death of speakers, to students moving to different cities, to lack of incentive to speak the language, and the lack of incentive to prioritize language learning over so many other obstacles that the same communities face.

7 Thoughts from Robert Hall

Robert Hall is Director of Native American Studies at Browning Public Schools. He was a student of the ASLA method in Greymorning's Arapaho class in 2008, before teaching the same class in 2014 in his own heritage language, Niitsii•po'•"sin¹ (Blackfoot). Robert and I had a conversation about the ASLA method, about his experience as a student and also as a practitioner of the method using it in his community for language revitalization purposes. Robert told me pieces of the story of his journey with his language, that in the beginning he felt convinced he may never learn it, because of methods that were being used to teach it. He identified persistent struggles such as the lack of a singular orthographic system, and resistance against the ASLA method. Robert said of one type of such resistance:

Imagine if you spent your whole life teaching French. You even got awards for being such a great French teacher. But it takes two years to get students to be able to tell a story. The fact that [ASLA] is so effective sadly works against it, because people hear how effective it is and think "Oh, that's b*llsh*t. (Hall, p.c.)

I offered some thoughts and observations on different paces of acquisition among students in my class, who by the end of the semester had all achieved almost the exact same level of proficiency, and asked Robert if he had had similar experiences, as a student or as an instructor in the method.

I think the power of this method is that while you're teaching you're also assessing. You can gauge everyone's level. It's almost the opposite of no child left behind – you don't go as slow as the slowest student, you go as fast as the fastest student. The method creates a landscape, where you need to know the target language in order to operate in this landscape – it triggers a survival mode in your brain. (Hall, p.c.)

As Robert mentioned, there is some sentiment of disbelief around ASLA's efficacy. There is nothing really mysterious about language acquisition. Scientific inquiry into the phenomenon has been taking place for many decades, and a great deal is known about it. However, to be a student of the ASLA method is to see and feel that which Robert describes in his analogies of a landscape and a survival mode. As mentioned in the example about the woman handling the horse jumping above ocean waves — the learner does not even know what they are saying, but they are saying it with flawless syntax and agreement morphology, never having learned a single bit of grammar, nor how to write or spell in the language. Those pieces of language are all in place in the learner's mind, and as they navigate the landscape of the language, surviving in it without thinking about the 'how' or 'why' of the grammar, it becomes known to them. The pace of the method prevents a learner from becoming hung up on that one word that they struggle with. In a survival situation, there is no time to fix your shoelace or go backward for the one thing you forgot that is not essential.

¹ There are several different orthographic systems used to represent the Blackfoot language; this is in the Big Bull writing system, devised by Blackfoot elder William Big Bull (Big Bull 2018).

Robert brought up one challenge specific to endangered language work that is addressed by use of the ASLA method:

Learning an endangered language isn't the same as learning Japanese or German because those languages have a speech community and they have a lot of media [...] the class that's learning the language is the speech community – and therefore that's why ASLA is even more important, because it sets up a landscape where the people in the class will be the speech community. (Hall, p.c.)

I asked Robert if he finds the ASLA method well suited for use in schools on the reservation.

Yes. I'm using ASLA and instructing my teachers to use ASLA. The teachers who have adopted ASLA are finding so much success. But the hard thing is that, for a lot of peoples' language expertise, they can't keep up with the students. But that's such a better problem to have than to talk about how their students aren't learning. (Hall, p.c.)

8 Conclusion

This is a critical time for endangered languages, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, to which Native American communities have an exceptionally high vulnerability. There is no shortage of technology and software available for use in language documentation and revitalization work, nor of devoted, brilliant human beings putting them to use. ASLA fits into this picture by affording language teachers the opportunity to increase the efficacy of their teaching methods and the retention of their language learners. Individuals who have first-hand experience with the ASLA method believe in its power to make a difference.

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