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Subconscious language learning: reality or science fiction?

The spread of eLearning is popularizing subconscious language learning. This method is much discussed by experts, and in this article we explore why.

The spread of eLearning is making a new form of language learning, based on subconscious learning, increasingly popular. The subconscious acquisition of language skills is a concept that linguist Stephen Krashen has been researching for decades, and still much debated in both the scientific and teaching communities.

The difference between "learning" and "acquisition"

To better understand this model of learning, it is important to understand the theory and research on which it is based. To do so, let us consider one of the leading theorists of this method, linguist Stephen Krashen.
According to Krashen, humans become fluent in a language in two ways: by **acquiring** it or by **learning** it. Acquiring a language refers to an unconscious process, similar to that used by children to acquire their mother tongue. While learning a language is a conscious process that leads the individual to study and know the rules to be fluent in a language.

However, nowadays there is much less distinction between these two terms that are used interchangeably because the definitions of "learning" and "acquisition" are identical. Learning is defined as "acquisition of one or more cognitions," while acquisition is the development of a skill, habit, or quality.
Comparing these definitions, it is easy to see why "learning" and "acquisition" are thought to be synonymous. Krashen offers an interesting solution to this problem, giving new meanings to distinguish these two terms and restoring the truth of the distinction between the two: **learning is conscious**, while **acquisition is subconscious**.

In light of this distinction, we can conclude that learning is knowledge consciously developed through instruction or study. Acquisition, on the other hand, is the development of a skill, quality or habit using the subconscious part of the mind. Thus, if a person wants to become a doctor or lawyer, it is necessary for him or her to learn and remember a large amount of information. To do this, the person must consciously devote attention to study. To become an athlete or musician, on the other hand, it is necessary to train and practice constantly to achieve outstanding performance in sports or musical performance. To do so, the athlete trains by beginning an "automatic" acquisition process because he or she is subconscious. Thus, according to Krashen's definition, **learning is associated exclusively with the conscious activity of the mind**. In contrast, acquisition is associated with the activities controlled by the subconscious part of our mind. Another distinction between learning and acquisition is that the former is centered on the 'teacher, while the latter is centered on self-learning guided and supervised by coaches.

The problem of languages in business and academic education

Most traditional methods of learning a foreign language use conscious learning and memorization. They teach various language skills separately, hoping that the student will remember what he or she has read, been told or demonstrated. However, our brains are programmed to forget after reaching a certain amount of knowledge to protect us from information overload. This is why we hear about the so-called 'forgetting curve'.
In addition to forgetting content, students face another problem with this approach: the recall of consciously learned information is very slow. In addition, it is often advised to use repetition of content some time later to remember more information. This advice is practical and useful for learning and storing theoretical information such as the study of medicine or laws. However, it is an unhelpful advice for language learning, since the memorized information does not allow students to produce in the immediate two or three words needed to establish a conversation. This issue is very common in Italy where students, despite beginning the study of English in the first year of elementary school (at age 6), arrive at the end of high school with very low levels of English proficiency. **Less than 20 percent**, in fact, reach a high level (C1 or C2) of English proficiency at the end of high school, after 12 years of learning the language.

The solution of the subconscious learning method

According to Krashen and proponents of the subconscious learning theory, our ability to remember is limited, but our ability to subconsciously train our skills is unlimited. The subconscious mind forgets nothing and can help to speak fluent English in less time. It must be emphasized that this learning theory does not believe that subconscious acquisition is a sustainable method of acquiring language skills. In other words, the proponents of this theory do not think that it can completely replace the traditional teaching method. But that the implementation of this method with traditional language training can lead to numerous advantages.
If we take the patented " **Subconscious training English skills**" model as an example, the main advantage of this method is to enable students to develop the skills to participate in a conversation, training not only pronunciation and vocabulary, but more importantly the brain to strengthen the mental connections we need to create a conversation.

The subconscious training method

To better understand what this method consists of, let us take the "Subconscious training English skills" mentioned above as an example model.
This training method, like all such training models, promotes language acquisition through the simultaneous performance of three activities:

- reading
- listening
- speaking

So, students must have devices from which they **read** a digital text in English, meanwhile **listen** to an audio recording of the same text and **repeat** it aloud using a headset. All this, according to the description of this specific method, allows the brain to subconsciously register language patterns, start thinking in English and speak with more correct pronunciation.
The subconscious training is stress-free to prevent the brain from losing the acquired information. This model eliminates, for example, language translations but develops the ability to think in English and speak effortlessly. Moreover, the acquisition is a self-learning activity that the learner can do whenever he or she wants via a downloadable application on any mobile and smart device.

What are the obstacles of this method?

Rapid acquisition of English using this method requires students to change their mindsets, and this does not excite some experts and teachers.

In fact, this method is **technically easy**, but **psychologically challenging**. Technically it is easy because the only requirement is to perform three actions simultaneously: reading, listening and speaking. This kind of multitasking automatically eliminates conscious control and activates the subconscious part of the mind with unlimited memorization capacity, with no problems of forgetting or cross-translation. When students perform only one or two actions (reading or listening or talking or watching and listening), they use the slow, conscious part of their mind and face the problems mentioned above. So, technically only devices that allow students to perform reading, listening and speaking at the same time are needed, and nowadays we are surrounded by such devices.

Psychologically, on the other hand, it is a challenge because people may have trouble changing their mindsets. Whenever people are asked to change their thoughts or actions, resistance can be expected. Change is meant to bring something different, but as we are creatures of habit we are reluctant to change. Routine becomes automatic and normal, but change pushes us to become aware when we have to accept unfamiliar solutions. In other words, the comfort of the status quo can be more powerful than the mysterious promise of transformation.
This leads many educators and experts to believe that this method will not become popular.
Some even think it is useless. Amorey Gethin, a renowned linguist, questions the usefulness of this method. Gethin argues that teaching English as a foreign language is a global industry. It has had millions of customers for decades and employs thousands of teachers and other workers. However, basic teaching methods are never questioned. Nor is there any discussion about whether people are learning English or any other foreign language better than they did forty or fifty years ago. On the contrary, the industry is getting bigger and bigger. So, according to Gethin, there is no need or market demand for a new method of

language learning. This, however, seems at odds with data from some countries such as Italy, which has a percentage of only 20 percent of graduate students able to speak English at a high level (C1 and C2) after 12 years of learning.

Conclusion

For traditional methods, conscious learning is the only way to learn a language. The results of this status quo are that English proficiency in many countries is quite low and adults are unable to communicate fluently in a foreign language after learning it for many years.
The famous U.S. designer Buckminster Fuller said: "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, you have to build a new model that makes the existing one obsolete." In light of the fact that this method is becoming more and more popular (as there are more and more apps on the market for smart devices that use this training model) and that technological advances bring more and more smart devices into our hands, this method has a chance to become more and more entrenched in our routines. Perhaps, following Buckminster Fuller's thinking, sooner or later this method will become so ingrained that it will make the traditional language learning model obsolete.

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