Grammar Acquisition through memorable input

Even after years of scientific study into language acquisition, there is still no accepted standard method to teach an infinite number of unique sentences from a finite number of models. The first tentative steps towards this goal are daunting. Comprehensible input, that which at only one level higher than their own level of understanding, is the crucial variable in Krashen's model of language learning. While some other researchers may disagree on issues such as grammatical training, practice, and intuitive v. cognitive learning, all agree input is the main factor.

Learners process, repeat, store, and compare language input, which gives them an evolving "interlanguage competence." Perception of disharmony between native and learner language leads to hypothesis building and questioning behaviors, both shown to be significant factors in language acquisition. Selinker's interlanguage hypothesis states that language is learned one step at a time, and that each stage of language proficiency has a fledgling grammar by which it is organized. Thus, development of language privileges production before polishing, and basic utterances are followed by more complex, sophisticated usage. The internalization of language input leads to a sense of correctness that approaches rules-based behavior, yet is creative, innovative, and exploratory. If a native speaker uses an unfamiliar word or grammar form and expects a response from the learner, he must actively formulate a hypothesis as to what the item means. When this is proven correct, a tentative definition forms, with contextual data. In this way, the rules that one percieves through naturally occuring language data are more important and helpful to language acquisition than the ones that are written in the grammar book, because they are connected with reality.

Royal Skousen is a BYU Linguistics professor whose analogical modeling of language theory can account for natural language behavior that is not explained by traditional grammars. The Finnish language has some seldom-used verb tenses that can only be predicted through association with other verbs. In his premier study, Skousen shows that the native speaker's natural perception of language correctness, or "grammar" operates without conscious attendance to rule structures, but uses system of comparison and analogy. All of the perceived input goes into the passive mind, and analogy-driven inferences about grammar structures are generated through the linguistic intelligence.

Because of this phenomenon, children and foreigners invent creative ways of saying things because of similarities with other words. A Russian teacher of mine called the excuse-makers in his class "balonists" because they worked with "baloney." After we drew a picture together, a young friend later referred to me as Jon the Artist; in his mind, I was analogously linked to John the Baptist. The analogical model can be programmed into a computer to process language data and will accurately predict language behavior that is assumed to be rule-based.

Whatever other processes may be at work in language memory, heavily used neuron linkages in the mind represent things that we recall and act upon most readily and naturally, hence the expression "thoughts make the person." Dr. Barry Gordon, head of the memory-disorders clinic at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, explains that conscious effort can "will things into long term memory simply by rehearsing them," though the mind usually memorizes things automatically through unconscious review (Cowley and Underwood 1998, p. 50). Emotionally significant or sensational things readily make associations with previous important experiences. In the process of review,

the pathways between interconnected neurons in the brain, or “memory traces,” become more trafficked and easily “followed” to their conclusions or to other related thoughts (p. 51). Some highly sensational or relevant experiences draw heavier memory traces than others due to the presence of adrenaline. Gordon says that mnemonic techniques work because they "inspire us to pay attention, to repeat what's worth remembering, and to link what we're trying to remember to things we already know" (p. 51). One way to remember something that seems tedious and mundane, such as the case structure of a language, could be to link it with a musical, exciting, multi-sensory, and familiar experience that engaged another portion of the mind.

Repetition of prepositional phrases sets up a mental corpus of analogous instances of cases in which inflectional endings are properly used, to which the learner will turn when he attempts to fill a new obligatory context. This can be stated according to Skousen as “storing exemplars (of case) in a multivariate contextual space and then using these examples to predict behavior for specific given contexts” (p. 216). This system of analogy and prediction inadequately represents TL grammar, making some variables stronger than they are in native speech.

The Ktomu song teaches usage of case structures through repetition, representation, and analogy, and supports a curriculum which also teaches case structures in a formal manner, for metalinguistic understanding. The most effective learning finds an association with realia, context, music, gesture, and emotion. When a student sings the Ktomu song, he or she is involved in creating something, doing something interesting, and the memorization of grammatical forms follows without conscious effort.