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Languages Acquisition and Languages Learning: When, Where, Why, How?

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the distinction between language acquisition and language learning, focusing on how these concepts are understood by secondary school students and teachers in Kindele Quarter, Kinshasa (Mont-Ngafula). The main objective is to examine when, where, why, and how languages are acquired and learned, as well as to identify common misconceptions surrounding these two processes. A qualitative research design was employed, using a structured questionnaire administered to thirty-five respondents selected from an initial sample of sixty students and teachers. The data were analyzed thematically and presented in descriptive tables.

The findings reveal a widespread confusion between language acquisition and language learning among participants. Most respondents incorrectly associated language acquisition with environmental locations such as home rather than recognizing it as a subconscious cognitive process occurring in the brain. Similarly, language learning was not clearly understood as a conscious and formal process, but was instead linked to informal contexts. The study also highlights limited understanding of key linguistic concepts such as grammar, pragmatics, and the communicative function of language.

The results confirm that insufficient background knowledge in linguistics contributes significantly to these misconceptions. The study concludes that there is a need to strengthen linguistic awareness in both teacher training and classroom practice. It recommends the integration of basic linguistic theory into language education and the promotion of communicative teaching approaches to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

KEYWORDS: language acquisition, language learning, linguistics, cognitive processes, multilingual education

1. INTRODUCTION

Across the world, in every community where people live and interact, communication is primarily achieved through language, which may take oral (spoken) or written forms. However, languages are not uniform; rather, they exist in a wide variety of forms, reflecting cultural, social, and historical diversity. This article focuses on language as a human phenomenon, with particular emphasis on the processes of language acquisition and language learning—specifically addressing the questions of when, where, why, and how these processes occur.

The central problem addressed in this study is that a significant number of individuals, depending on their social categories or educational backgrounds, lack a clear understanding of the distinction between language acquisition and language learning. This issue is frequently observed in everyday interactions involving languages such as English, French, Lingala, and Kikongo. From a linguistic perspective, this confusion is problematic, as it reflects a misunderstanding of the contexts, processes, and outcomes associated with developing language competence.

In many cases, individuals conflate the environments and mechanisms through which languages are acquired (often naturally and unconsciously) with those through which they are learned (typically formally and consciously). This situation raises several important research questions: Why do people confuse the concepts of language acquisition and language learning? Do they fully understand the meanings, functions, and types of languages? Are they aware of the appropriate contexts and stages involved in acquiring versus learning a language?

2.1 Assumptions

This study is based on the following assumptions. First, the confusion between language acquisition and language learning among many individuals may be attributed to a lack of foundational knowledge regarding the processes involved in developing language competence.

Second, it is assumed that many people are insufficiently informed or trained about the conditions under which languages are acquired or learned, particularly with respect to the dimensions of time, place, purpose, and method.

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2.2 Literature Review

Numerous scholars have examined language in general, as well as the specific processes of language acquisition and language learning. Notable contributions include those of Fishman (1975), Nelson (1972), and Saxton (2010), among others. These researchers provide comprehensive analyses and diverse perspectives on how languages are acquired and learned across different contexts worldwide.

While these studies offer valuable theoretical and empirical insights, the present article narrows its focus to a specific sociolinguistic context, namely the city of Kinshasa. Drawing inspiration from the works of the aforementioned scholars, this study aims to explore the evolution and interaction of language acquisition and language learning within this particular setting.

The study of language acquisition and language learning has been widely explored across different theoretical traditions, drawing from linguistics, psychology, and cognitive science. Early foundational works by scholars such as Fishman (1975), Nelson (1972), and Saxton (2010) provide essential insights into the social and developmental dimensions of language. These contributions highlight the role of environment, interaction, and cognitive growth in shaping linguistic competence.

One of the most influential distinctions in the field was proposed by Krashen (1982, 1985), who differentiates between **language acquisition** - a subconscious and natural process - and **language learning**, which is conscious and formal. His theoretical framework includes five major hypotheses, notably the Input Hypothesis and the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which emphasize the importance of meaningful exposure and emotional factors in language development (D'Souza & Padmanabha, 2024). This distinction remains central in contemporary discussions of second language acquisition (SLA).

In contrast, behaviorist perspectives, rooted in the work of Skinner (1957), conceptualize language learning as a process of habit formation through repetition, imitation, and reinforcement. Although this approach has been largely reconsidered in modern linguistics, it still informs certain pedagogical practices, especially in structured language instruction.

From a nativist standpoint, Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar argues that humans possess an innate biological capacity for language acquisition, often referred to as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). This perspective explains how children can rapidly acquire complex grammatical structures despite limited input, a phenomenon known as the "poverty of the stimulus".

More recent approaches have shifted toward **usage-based and cognitive models**, which emphasize the role of experience, frequency, and social interaction in language development. Scholars such as Tomasello argue that language emerges from general cognitive processes such as pattern recognition and analogy, rather than from innate grammatical structures. These models highlight that linguistic competence develops through meaningful exposure and repeated use in context.

Additionally, contemporary research increasingly views language acquisition as a **dynamic and complex system**, influenced by multiple interacting factors including social context, input, cognition, and motivation. Usage-based and emergentist perspectives suggest that language learning is not linear but adaptive and context-dependent, shaped by real-life communication and interaction.

Furthermore, sociocultural theory, inspired by Vygotsky, underscores the importance of social interaction and guided learning in language development. Language acquisition is seen as a collaborative process, where learners construct knowledge through interaction with more knowledgeable speakers and within specific cultural contexts.

Despite the diversity of these theoretical perspectives, there is a general consensus that language acquisition and language learning are distinct yet complementary processes. Acquisition is typically associated with informal, natural exposure, while learning is linked to formal instruction and conscious rule formation (Krashen, 1985). Modern research, however, tends to integrate these perspectives, recognizing that both processes interact dynamically in real-world contexts.

Building on these theoretical foundations, the present study focuses specifically on the sociolinguistic context of Kinshasa, examining how these global theories apply to local language practices involving English, French, Lingala, and Kikongo. By doing so, it seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical insights and everyday language use in a multilingual African setting.

3. DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS: LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

This section presents the definitions of the key concepts underlying this study in order to facilitate a clearer understanding of the topic.

3.1 Language

The concept of *language* has been defined in various ways depending on theoretical perspectives and disciplinary orientations. For non-specialists, language is often understood simply as the means of communication used by members of a particular community. However, scholarly definitions provide a more nuanced and multidimensional understanding.

According to Malekani (2024:4), language is interpreted differently across disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, sociology, and sociolinguistics. From a psychological perspective, language is viewed as an instrument of thought. Linguists, on the other hand, define language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication, comprising several subsystems, including phonological, morphological, lexical, semantic, and pragmatic components.

From a sociological standpoint, language is considered a form of social behavior governed by established norms within a given community. Sociolinguists extend this definition by emphasizing the interaction between language and society, describing language as a hybrid system of communicative symbols shaped by social and geographical variations (Malekani, 2024).

Similarly, Ngwaba (2024:5) defines language - whether oral, written, or signed - as a cultural manifestation used in context and constituting a fundamental component of discourse. In the same way, Sangabau (2024:3) conceptualizes language as a linguistic code shared and used by its speakers. Earlier, Wardhaugh (1989, as cited in Ngwaba, 2024) described language more broadly as any system employed by two or more individuals for communication.

Taken together, these definitions highlight the central role of language in human interaction and social life. As noted by Bernard and George (as cited in Malekani, 2024), language serves as a means of expressing ideas and emotions through signs and symbols. Its importance extends beyond

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communication, as it also facilitates interpersonal relationships, the sharing of experiences, and the expression of thoughts and intentions. In this sense, language constitutes an essential component of everyday life (Nsimambote, 2023).

3.2 Acquisition

The term *acquisition* derives from the verb *to acquire*, meaning to obtain or gain (Webster's English Dictionary, 2000). In the context of language development, acquisition refers to a natural and largely subconscious process.

Nelson (1973) defines language acquisition as the unconscious and spontaneous process through which individuals, particularly children, develop their first language (or multiple languages) through exposure, interaction, and meaningful communication rather than through formal instruction or memorization of rules. This process typically results in an intuitive and native-like command of the language.

This definition underscores the fundamental characteristics of language acquisition, notably its subconscious nature and its reliance on immersion in a linguistic environment. Within the scope of this study, the focus is specifically on how languages are acquired in real-life contexts, particularly through natural interaction within a speech community.

3.3 Language Acquisition

Language acquisition refers to the process through which individuals develop the ability to understand and use a language in natural contexts. According to Chomsky (1968, as cited in Nsimambote, 2024), language acquisition is the process of developing competence in a language – whether as a first (native) or second language – primarily through exposure and use rather than through formal instruction. This perspective emphasizes the innate capacity of humans to acquire language in a largely subconscious manner.

Similarly, Halliday (1975) defines language acquisition as the process by which individuals gain the ability to comprehend and produce language, whether it is their first or an additional language. This definition highlights the functional and communicative dimensions of language development, stressing the importance of interaction and meaning-making in real-life contexts.

In addition, Nelson (1973) argues that the study of language acquisition not only contributes to theoretical linguistics but also has significant implications for language pedagogy. Understanding how languages are naturally acquired can inform more effective teaching strategies and learning environments.

Overall, these perspectives converge on the idea that language acquisition is a natural, intuitive, and interaction-driven process that leads to the development of communicative competence.

3.3.1 Key Aspects of Language Acquisition

Saxton (2010) identifies several key characteristics of language acquisition, which help to clarify its nature and distinguish it from language learning:

(i) Subconscious and Natural Process: Language acquisition, particularly in the case of a first language, occurs subconsciously and naturally during early childhood. Children acquire language through continuous exposure and interaction with their environment rather than through explicit instruction.

(ii) Exposure-Based Development: Acquisition depends largely on exposure to meaningful linguistic input. Through repeated interaction, learners gradually internalize sounds (phonemes), patterns, and grammatical structures without conscious effort.

(iii) Distinction from Language Learning: Language acquisition is typically intuitive and implicit, whereas language learning is generally conscious and formal. Acquisition emphasizes natural communication, while learning often involves explicit knowledge of rules and structures.

(iv) Developmental Stages: Language acquisition follows a relatively predictable developmental sequence. In children, this progression begins with sound perception, followed by babbling, one-word utterances, two-word combinations, and eventually more complex grammatical constructions.

(v) Inclusion of Multiple Modalities: Language acquisition is not limited to spoken language; it also applies to signed languages. This demonstrates that acquisition is a broader cognitive and social process, independent of the specific modality of communication.

(vi) Lifelong Process: Although the most critical period for language acquisition occurs during childhood, individuals continue to acquire and refine language skills throughout their lives as they encounter new contexts and communicative demands.

3.3.2 What Is Acquired in a Language?

To address this question, it is useful to draw on the perspectives of Nelson (1973) and Halliday (1975). According to these scholars, in order to use language with adult-like competence, children must acquire several interrelated components of linguistic knowledge. These include phonology, lexis, semantics, grammar (syntax), and pragmatics. Each of these domains contributes to the development of overall communicative competence.

a. Phonology: Phonological development refers to the acquisition of the sound system of a language, enabling individuals to perceive and produce speech sounds accurately. Language acquisition begins at birth. Biologically, the inner ear is fully developed at birth, allowing infants to perceive sounds and recognize voices, including that of the mother, from the earliest days of life. This early auditory capacity also enables infants to distinguish between different languages.

In contrast, the vocal tract is not fully developed at birth, which explains why speech production emerges gradually. Through a process often referred to as *vocal play*, children progressively learn to control their articulatory system. This development typically follows several stages:

- **Reflexive sounds** (0–8 weeks): basic biological noises such as crying and coughing.
- **Cooing and laughter** (8–20 weeks): production of vowel-like sounds and early vocalizations.
- **Vocal play** (20–30 weeks): increased experimentation with sounds.
- **Babbling** (approximately 25–50 weeks): includes reduplicated forms (e.g., *mamama*) and variegated forms (e.g., *maba, adu*).
- **Melodic utterances** (36–72 weeks): development of intonation, rhythm, and prosody.

These stages illustrate the gradual mastery of the sound system necessary for intelligible speech.

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b. Lexis: Lexical development concerns the acquisition of vocabulary. This includes learning words that name people, objects, and actions, as well as words used to describe, modify, and express social interactions (e.g., greetings). Vocabulary growth is fundamental to communication, as it provides the building blocks for meaning-making.

c. Semantics: Semantic development refers to the acquisition of meaning in language. During this process, children often exhibit phenomena such as ***overextension*** and ***under extension***.

- **Overextension** occurs when a child uses a word in a broader sense than its conventional meaning. For example, a child might use a single word to refer to all four-legged animals. This reflects the child's attempt to categorize the world based on perceived similarities.
- **Under extension**, by contrast, occurs when a child uses a word in a more restricted sense than adults do, such as using the word *shoe* to refer only to their own shoes.

These patterns are natural stages in cognitive and linguistic development and gradually diminish as the child's understanding becomes more refined.

d. Grammar (Syntax): Grammatical development involves acquiring the rules that govern sentence structure. This development typically progresses through several identifiable stages:

- **Holophrastic stage (12–18 months):** At this stage, children produce single-word utterances that function as complete ideas or sentences. For example, *"ball"* may mean "Give me the ball," while *"father"* may refer to the presence of the father. Intonation plays a crucial role in conveying meaning, allowing children to express questions, statements, or commands despite limited vocabulary.
- **Two-word stage (18–24 months):** Children begin combining two words to form simple utterances, such as *"mummy eat"* or *"baby chair."* These constructions are often ambiguous and require contextual interpretation (Majambo, 2024). For instance, *"baby chair"* may indicate possession, a request, or a statement.
- **Telegraphic stage (2–3 years):** At this stage, children produce longer utterances resembling simplified adult sentences. These utterances typically contain content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives) while omitting function words (e.g., articles, prepositions) (Saxton, 2010). Examples include:
    - *Frida likes tea.* (S+V+0)
    - *John looks tired.* (S+V+Adj)
    - *Father sleeps upstairs.* (S+V+ADV)

  Children also exhibit **overgeneralization**, applying regular grammatical rules to irregular forms (e.g., *goed* instead of *went*, *mans* instead of *men*). Such patterns demonstrate that children actively construct grammatical rules rather than merely imitating adult speech.

e. Pragmatics: Pragmatic development involves learning how to use language appropriately in social contexts. It encompasses understanding language functions such as requesting, informing, greeting, and expressing emotions. Unlike other components, pragmatics develops over a longer period and continues into late childhood, often up to around the age of ten.

This aspect of language highlights the social motivation behind language acquisition, as children learn not only how language is structured but also how it is used effectively in real-life interactions.

Overall, these five components—phonology, lexis, semantics, grammar, and pragmatics—collectively illustrate what is acquired during the process of language development. They demonstrate that language acquisition is a complex and multidimensional process involving both cognitive and social dimensions.

3.4 Learning

The concept of *learning* derives from the verb *to learn*, which generally means to study, analyze, and systematically acquire knowledge. In the context of language development, learning typically refers to a **conscious and deliberate process** through which individuals acquire a second or foreign language. This process often takes place in formal educational settings, such as classrooms, and involves explicit instruction, rule-based understanding, and structured practice (Nelson, 1973).

Unlike acquisition, which is largely subconscious and intuitive, learning emphasizes awareness of linguistic forms and rules. Learners actively engage in studying grammatical structures, memorizing vocabulary, and applying learned knowledge in controlled contexts.

3.5 Language Learning

Language learning is commonly defined as the **formal and conscious process** of acquiring a new language through instruction and study. According to Hagen (1972), it involves systematic exposure to vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures, enabling learners to develop the ability to understand and express themselves in both spoken and written forms.

Similarly, Halliday (1975) characterizes language learning as a process that typically occurs in classroom settings and is marked by a focus on the formal and theoretical aspects of language. This includes explicit teaching of linguistic rules and structured exercises designed to reinforce language competence.

Nelson (1973) further defines language learning as the development of communicative ability in a second or foreign language. In this sense, language learning may serve different purposes, including academic specialization, professional communication, or general use in social contexts.

3.5.1 Key Components of Language Learning

According to Nelson (1973), language learning involves four major components, each contributing to the development of overall proficiency:

(i) Vocabulary: This component involves the acquisition and memorization of words and their meanings. A strong vocabulary base is essential for comprehension and expression.

(ii) Grammar: Grammar refers to the rules governing sentence structure and the correct formation of expressions. Learning grammar enables learners to produce accurate and meaningful sentences.

(iii) Language Skills: Language learning develops four core skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills are typically taught through structured instruction and guided practice.

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(iv) Context: Understanding how language is used in real-life situations is crucial. This includes awareness of cultural and social dimensions that influence communication.

3.5.2 Importance of Language Learning

The importance of language learning has been widely emphasized in the literature. Halliday (1975) highlights its significant role in several key areas:

- **Communication**: Language learning enables individuals to interact effectively with speakers of other languages in both personal and professional contexts.
- **Cultural Understanding**: It provides insight into different cultures, fostering intercultural awareness and global connectedness.
- **Cognitive Development**: Learning a new language enhances cognitive abilities such as memory, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

In addition, Teguete and Iaini (2019) emphasize that language learning and language acquisition are distinct processes. While acquisition primarily occurs subconsciously in the brain, learning can take place in a variety of environments, including classrooms, homes, workplaces, and digital platforms such as online courses and language-learning applications.

However, the boundary between acquisition and learning is not always rigid. Acquisition may also occur in classroom contexts when teaching methods emphasize meaningful communication, such as dialogue, role-play, and interactive activities. In this regard, Halliday (1975) underscores the importance of **imitation and repetition** in both acquisition and learning processes. These mechanisms help learners internalize linguistic patterns and develop communicative competence through practice and interaction.

4. LANGUAGE ACQUISITION VS LANGUAGE LEARNING: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The distinction between language acquisition and language learning has been a central concern in linguistic and educational research. Although the two processes are closely related and sometimes overlap, they differ significantly in terms of their nature, context, processes, and outcomes. Understanding these differences is essential for clarifying how individuals develop linguistic competence.

Language acquisition is generally described as a **subconscious, natural, and intuitive process** through which individuals internalize a language, typically in early childhood. It occurs through exposure, interaction, and meaningful communication in real-life contexts (Chomsky, 1968, as cited in Nsimambote, 2024; Halliday, 1975). In contrast, language learning is a **conscious and deliberate process**, often taking place in formal settings such as classrooms, where learners are explicitly taught grammatical rules, vocabulary, and language structures (Nelson, 1973; Hagen, 1972).

One of the fundamental differences lies in the **level of awareness** involved. Acquisition occurs without conscious effort; learners are not necessarily aware that they are learning the language. On the other hand, learning requires intentional effort, including studying rules, memorizing forms, and practicing specific language skills.

Another important distinction concerns the **context in which each process occurs**. Acquisition typically takes place in natural environments such as the home or community, where the language is used for authentic communication. Learning, by contrast, is commonly associated with formal educational environments, although it may also occur through structured self-study or digital platforms.

The **role of input and interaction** also differs between the two processes. In acquisition, exposure to meaningful and comprehensible input is essential, as learners gradually internalize linguistic patterns through interaction. In learning, input is often structured and sequenced, with emphasis on explanation, correction, and controlled practice.

In terms of **outcomes**, acquisition usually leads to a more intuitive and fluent command of the language, often resembling native-like proficiency. Learning, however, may result in explicit knowledge about the language, which does not always translate into spontaneous and natural communication.

Despite these differences, it is important to note that acquisition and learning are not mutually exclusive. As argued by Halliday (1975) and further supported by Teguete and Iaini (2019), both processes can complement each other. For example, classroom environments that emphasize communication, interaction, and meaningful use of language can facilitate acquisition-like processes. Similarly, explicit learning can support and reinforce acquired knowledge.

The following table summarizes the main differences between language acquisition and language learning:

Aspect	Language Acquisition	Language Learning
Nature	Subconscious, natural	Conscious, deliberate
Context	Informal (home, community)	Formal (classroom, instruction)
Process	Exposure and interaction	Study, rules, and practice
Focus	Meaning and communication	Form and accuracy
Awareness	Implicit	Explicit
Outcome	Fluent, intuitive competence	Analytical, rule-based knowledge
Typical Age	Early childhood (mainly)	Any age

Indeed, while language acquisition and language learning differ in several fundamental ways, they should be viewed as **complementary rather than opposing processes**. A comprehensive understanding of language development requires integrating both perspectives, especially in multilingual contexts such as Kinshasa, where individuals are often exposed to multiple languages through both natural interaction and formal education.

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5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **qualitative research design** in order to explore and better understand how individuals perceive and differentiate between language acquisition and language learning. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth analysis of participants' views, experiences, and interpretations regarding the subject under investigation.

5.1 Research Site and Population

The study was conducted in selected secondary schools located in Kindele Quarter, within the Mont-Ngafula municipality in Kinshasa. The target population consisted of both **students and teachers**, as these two groups are directly involved in language use and language education.

A total of **sixty (60) participants** were initially selected for the study, including **thirty (30) students** and **thirty (30) teachers**. These participants were expected to respond to the research instrument.

5.2 Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a **survey questionnaire** composed of eight (8) structured questions. The questionnaire included mainly **multiple-choice questions**, designed to ensure clarity and facilitate responses from participants.

The questionnaire was administered over a period of two months, from **August to September 2025**, to both students and teachers.

5.3 Response Rate and Data Collection Challenges

Although sixty participants were initially targeted, only **thirty-five (35) respondents** returned completed questionnaires. This represents a relatively low response rate.

Several challenges were encountered during data collection. Some participants showed limited motivation and interest in the study, which led to delays in returning the questionnaires. Others considered the activity unnecessary or not worth their time, resulting in non-response. These constraints may have influenced the quantity of data collected and are therefore acknowledged as a limitation of the study.

5.4 Structure of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to address key aspects related to language acquisition and language learning. Each question targeted a specific dimension of the research problem:

1. The **first question** aimed to identify participants' understanding of where language acquisition takes place.
2. The **second question** focused on determining when language learning begins.
3. The **third question** explored the reasons why languages are learned.
4. The **fourth question** addressed knowledge of the components of linguistic competence required for speaking.
5. The **fifth question** examined whether participants perceive language acquisition as a conscious or subconscious process.
6. The **sixth question** investigated whether language learning is viewed as conscious or subconscious.
7. The **seventh question** sought to understand participants' views on the role of grammar in language.
8. The **eighth question** aimed to determine participants' understanding of the contexts or settings in which language is used.

5.5 Data Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed qualitatively. Responses were examined, compared, and interpreted in order to identify patterns, common misunderstandings, and differences in perception between students and teachers regarding language acquisition and language learning.

6. DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND FINDINGS

The data collected through the questionnaire administered to both students and teachers were carefully analyzed and interpreted. The findings are presented below according to each question, with corresponding tables and explanations.

Table 1: Place Where Language Acquisition Takes Place

Alternatives	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
In the church	1	2.85%
At home	34	97.15%
In the brain	0	0%
Total	**35**	**100%**

The results in Table 1 indicate that the vast majority of respondents (34 out of 35, or 97.15%) believe that language acquisition takes place at home. Only one respondent (2.85%) selected the option "in the church," while none of the participants identified the brain as the locus of language acquisition.

These findings suggest a significant misunderstanding among respondents. While the home environment plays an important role in providing exposure to language, language acquisition fundamentally occurs in the brain as a cognitive process. The absence of correct responses highlights a lack of awareness of the underlying mechanisms of language acquisition.

Table 2: Where Does Language Learning Start?

Alternatives	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
In a formal setting	6	17.1%
At home	14	40.1%
In the family	15	42.8%
Total	**35**	**100%**

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As shown in Table 2, only 6 respondents (17.1%) correctly indicated that language learning typically begins in a formal setting. The majority of participants selected incorrect answers, with 15 respondents (42.8%) choosing "in the family" and 14 respondents (40.1%) choosing "at home." These results further confirm the confusion between language acquisition and language learning. Many respondents associate learning with informal environments, whereas language learning is generally characterized by structured instruction in formal educational contexts.

Table 3: Reasons for Learning a Language

Alternatives	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
To read texts	20	57.14%
For communication	13	37.14%
To play games	2	5.72%
Total	**35**	**100%**

The data presented in Table 3 show that a majority of respondents (20 out of 35, or 57.14%) believe that the primary reason for learning a language is to read texts. Meanwhile, 13 respondents (37.14%) correctly identified communication as the main purpose of language learning, while a small minority (2 respondents, or 5.72%) selected "to play games."

These findings indicate a limited understanding of the fundamental function of language. Although reading is an important skill, language is primarily a tool for communication. The fact that fewer respondents recognized communication as the core purpose suggests a need for greater emphasis on communicative competence in language education.

Table 4: what is the area of linguistic competence which helps you speak language as adults do?

a. Semantics b. phonology c. lexis d. grammar e. pragmatics

Alternatives	Number of respondents	Percentage
Semantics	0	O%
Phonology	5	14,2%
Lexis	10	28,5%
Grammar	20	57,14%
Pragmatics	0	0%
Total	35	100%

As indicated in Table 4, more than half of the respondents (20, or 57.14%) identified grammar as the key area of linguistic competence for speaking like adults. Additionally, 10 respondents (28.5%) selected lexis, and 5 respondents (14.2%) chose phonology, while none selected semantics or pragmatics.

These results reveal a partial understanding of linguistic competence. While grammar, vocabulary (lexis), and phonology are indeed important, effective language use also depends on semantics and pragmatics. The absence of responses for these areas suggests that respondents are not fully aware of the multidimensional nature of language proficiency.

Table 5: Is the language acquisition conscious or subconscious?

Alternatives	Number of respondents	Percentage
Conscious	35	100%
Subconscious	00	00%
Total	**35**	**100%**

Table 5 clearly shows that all respondents (35, or 100%) believe that language acquisition is a conscious process. None selected the correct option, which is subconscious.

This result highlights a fundamental misconception about language acquisition. In reality, language acquisition occurs subconsciously, particularly in natural settings, without explicit awareness of rules. The uniformity of incorrect responses underscores a significant gap in respondents' theoretical understanding of language processes.

Table 6: Is the language learning subconscious or conscious?

Alternatives	Number of respondents	Percentage
Subconscious	35	100%
Conscious	00	00%
Total	**35**	**100%**

As shown in Table 6, all respondents (35 out of 35, or 100%) indicated that language learning is a subconscious process, while none selected the option "conscious," which is the correct answer.

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These results reveal a clear misunderstanding of the distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Unlike acquisition, which occurs subconsciously, language learning is typically a conscious process involving deliberate attention to rules and structures, often in formal educational settings. The fact that all respondents answered incorrectly further highlights a lack of foundational knowledge regarding key concepts in language studies.

Table 7: why is grammar among the key components of language learning?

a. For learning sounds b. For learning rules
b. c. For learning proverbs d. To develop the four skills

Alternatives	Number of respondents	Percentage
For learning sounds	20	57,14%
For learning rules	1	2,85%
For learning proverbs	13	37,14%
For develop the four skills	1	2,85%
Total	**35**	**100%**

The results in Table 7 indicate that most respondents (20, or 57.14%) incorrectly associate grammar with learning sounds. Another 13 respondents (37.14%) linked grammar to proverbs, while only 1 respondent (2.85%) correctly identified grammar as related to rules. One respondent (2.85%) selected the development of the four skills.

These findings demonstrate a strong misunderstanding of the role of grammar in language learning. Grammar primarily involves the system of rules governing sentence structure and meaning. The low number of correct responses suggests that respondents lack a clear conceptualization of grammatical competence.

Table 8: As your teeth are in your mouth, where are all the languages that you speak?

a. In the belly b. In the mouth c. In the brain d. In the heart

Alternatives	Number of respondent	Percentage
In the belly	15	42,86%
In the mouth	20	57,14%
In the brain	0	0%
In the heart	0	0%
Total	**35**	**100%**

According to Table 8, 20 respondents (57.14%) believe that languages are located in the mouth, while 15 respondents (42.86%) think they are in the belly. None of the respondents selected the brain, which is the correct answer.

These results further confirm the widespread misunderstanding of the nature of language. Language is a cognitive function processed in the brain, not a physical entity located in the mouth or other parts of the body. The absence of correct responses emphasizes the need for better instruction on the cognitive aspects of language use.

7. INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Overall, the analysis of these questions confirms a **consistent pattern of misunderstanding and conceptual confusion** among respondents regarding key linguistic concepts. Participants were unable to correctly distinguish between conscious and subconscious processes, nor could they accurately identify the role of grammar or the cognitive location of language.

These results strongly reinforce the initial assumption of this study: that many individuals lack sufficient theoretical background in linguistics, leading to confusion between language acquisition and language learning, as well as related linguistic concepts.

8. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal a consistent pattern of misunderstanding among respondents regarding key concepts related to language acquisition and language learning. This section interprets these results in relation to the theoretical framework and previous literature presented earlier, particularly the works of Chomsky (1968), Halliday (1975), Nelson (1973), and Saxton (2010).

First, the results show that the majority of respondents incorrectly identified the place where language acquisition occurs, associating it mainly with the home environment rather than the human brain. This misunderstanding suggests a lack of awareness of the cognitive nature of language acquisition. Theoretically, Chomsky (1968, as cited in Nsimambote, 2024) emphasizes that language acquisition is an innate mental process governed by internal cognitive mechanisms. Similarly, Halliday (1975) and Saxton (2010) highlight that acquisition is subconscious and biologically rooted. The inability of respondents to identify the brain as the locus of acquisition indicates that linguistic knowledge is largely perceived in a concrete and environmental way rather than as a mental process.

Secondly, the findings reveal confusion regarding the distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Respondents were unable to correctly identify language learning as a conscious and formal process. Instead, many associated it with informal environments such as home or family. This contradicts Nelson's (1973) and Hagen's (1972) definitions, which clearly describe language learning as a structured, rule-based, and conscious process typically occurring in formal educational settings. The persistence of this confusion suggests that learners and even teachers may not have been sufficiently exposed to fundamental linguistic theories during their training.

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Furthermore, the results related to the purpose of language learning indicate a limited understanding of language as a communicative tool. A significant number of respondents viewed language learning primarily as a means to read texts rather than to communicate. This contradicts Halliday's (1975) functional view of language, which emphasizes communication as the primary function of language. Such a misconception may be influenced by traditional pedagogical practices that prioritize reading and grammatical analysis over communicative competence.

In addition, the responses concerning grammar reveal a misunderstanding of its role in language learning. Most respondents incorrectly associated grammar with sounds or proverbs, rather than recognizing it as a system of rules governing sentence structure. This is inconsistent with standard linguistic definitions, which view grammar as a structural framework for organizing meaningful sentences. Saxton (2010) and Nelson (1973) emphasize that grammatical competence is essential for language development, yet the findings suggest that this concept is poorly understood among participants.

Finally, the responses concerning the location of language in the human system demonstrate a lack of scientific understanding of language as a mental phenomenon. The belief that language is located in the mouth or stomach reflects non-linguistic and intuitive reasoning rather than academic knowledge. In contrast, modern linguistics strongly supports the view that language is a cognitive system located in the brain and processed mentally.

Overall, these findings confirm the initial assumption of the study: that many individuals confuse language acquisition with language learning due to insufficient background knowledge in linguistics. This confusion is not only conceptual but also pedagogical, suggesting gaps in how language is taught and understood in the studied context.

In the specific context of Kinshasa, these misunderstandings may be attributed to teaching approaches that emphasize memorization and grammatical rules rather than conceptual understanding and communicative competence. As a result, learners develop partial or distorted views of language processes, which affects their ability to distinguish between natural acquisition and formal learning.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates a clear need for improved linguistic awareness and pedagogical reform. Greater emphasis should be placed on the theoretical foundations of language development in both teacher training and classroom practice in order to bridge the gap between linguistic theory and learner understanding.

9. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how students and teachers in selected secondary schools in Kindele Quarter (Kinshasa/Mont-Ngafula) understand the concepts of language acquisition and language learning, particularly in relation to when, where, why, and how languages are developed.

The findings reveal a persistent and systematic confusion between these two fundamental linguistic concepts. Most respondents were unable to correctly identify language acquisition as a subconscious cognitive process occurring in the brain, instead associating it with physical or environmental locations such as the home. Similarly, language learning was not accurately understood as a conscious and formal process, but rather confused with informal and everyday language exposure.

The study also demonstrated that respondents had limited understanding of key linguistic components such as grammar, pragmatics, and the communicative function of language. In many cases, language was reduced to reading activities or misunderstood as a physical entity located in parts of the body such as the mouth or stomach. These misconceptions highlight a significant gap between linguistic theory and learners' and teachers' conceptual understanding.

Overall, the study confirms the initial assumption that insufficient theoretical background in linguistics contributes to confusion between language acquisition and language learning. This gap has implications for both language teaching and learning, particularly in multilingual contexts such as Kinshasa, where learners are exposed to several languages in both formal and informal environments.

9.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Strengthening linguistic training for teachers:** Teacher training programs should place greater emphasis on foundational concepts in linguistics, particularly language acquisition and language learning theories. This would help educators develop a clearer conceptual framework, which can then be transmitted to learners more effectively.
2. **Integrating linguistic theory into classroom practice:** Language teaching should not focus solely on grammar and memorization. Instead, it should incorporate basic theoretical explanations of how language is acquired and learned, in order to help students develop a deeper understanding of language processes.
3. **Promoting communicative teaching approaches:** Schools should encourage teaching methods that prioritize communication, interaction, and real-life language use. Such approaches help bridge the gap between formal learning and natural acquisition, making language learning more meaningful and effective.
4. **Raising awareness among learners:** Learners should be made aware that language is a mental and cognitive system processed in the brain, not merely a set of sounds or written forms. This awareness can help correct misconceptions and improve language learning outcomes.
5. **Revising curriculum content:** Educational authorities should consider revising language curricula to include introductory modules on linguistics, especially concepts related to acquisition, learning, and language development.
6. **Encouraging further research:** More studies should be conducted in different educational contexts within the DRC to better understand how linguistic misconceptions affect language teaching and learning. Comparative studies could also be useful in identifying regional or institutional differences.

Finally, addressing the gap between linguistic theory and classroom practice is essential for improving language education. A better understanding of how languages are acquired and learned will not only enhance teaching effectiveness but also contribute to more competent and confident language users in multilingual societies.

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