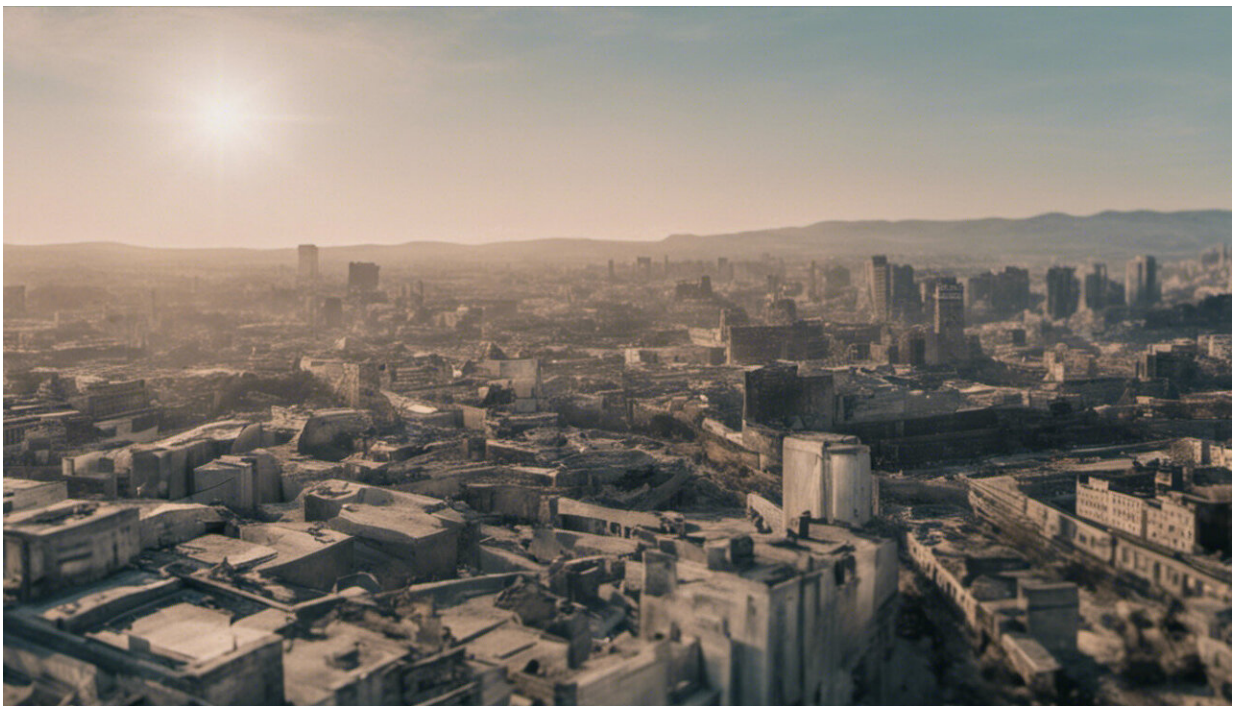


# Languages are both acquired and learned, so conscious and unconscious effort is needed when picking up a new one

August 3 2023, by Boris Vazquez-Calvo

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Two concepts—acquisition and learning—play key roles in the study of language. Although there are people who use the two terms interchangeably, in reality they embody two different processes in the development of communicative competence.

Language acquisition is an intuitive and subconscious process, similar to that of children when they develop their mother tongue. [Acquiring a language happens naturally](#), it does not require conscious effort or formal instruction; it is something incidental and often unconscious. A child will begin to speak by being exposed to the [language](#) and by interacting with its environment, without the need for grammar lessons.

Language learning, by contrast, is a conscious process that involves studying rules and structures. When grammatical rules are explained to us in a language class, this is a formal context. In the classroom, the acquisition of communication skills occurs through explicit instruction and methodical study, and that conscious effort is what we call learning.

## **Rules and usage**

Talking about the rules and structures of a language not only implies knowing the grammatical and spelling rules, but also understanding [how that language is used in social contexts](#).

For example, to show affection in a personal letter, we can say goodbye with "sending you hugs and kisses," but not with "I would like to provide you with a hug." If we want to make sure that we receive a package at our correct address, in that case, in the email we write to the courier service, we can say "I would like to provide you with my address."

Understanding which words tend to appear together and the level of formality they carry (known as "register") is part of knowing a language. We access this knowledge of language usage through (unconscious) acquisition or (conscious) learning, albeit in different ways.

## **Parallel processes**

The acquisition and learning of a language are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they interact in our daily lives in significant ways. During childhood, [acquisition is the predominant process](#). Children absorb their mother tongue (or mother tongues) and linguistic and cultural norms and conventions when interacting with their environment.

As we get older, formal learning becomes more prominent (at school, due to our cognitive abilities, etc.). The passage of time and the gradual increased importance of formal learning do not mean that we stop acquiring language. For example, let us imagine that [we are immersed in a new linguistic environment](#)—that we move to another country where they speak a [foreign language](#). In that case, we can acquire aspects of the language naturally, although perhaps at a slower rate than in childhood.

## Degrees of effort

Language acquisition and [language learning](#) influence our communicative competence in different ways. Acquisition allows us to use language intuitively, with less attention to grammatical rules. That is why [native speakers](#) use their [mother tongue](#) with no apparent effort.

On the other hand, learning offers a deep understanding of the language's structure, making it possible to comprehend and use more complex forms. While we are learning languages, we pay close attention to what we think or say; that is, we apply the [monitor hypothesis](#).

This hypothesis suggests that, when we learn a language, we are initially attentive to what we say and how we say it, both when we get it right and when we get it wrong. We supervise our linguistic production according to the rules and structures of the language that we know. With time and practice, we assimilate these rules and structures, and this allows us to speak more spontaneously and without having to think about every word or rule. As we have to monitor and supervise less, we gain fluency

because our brain is already familiar with the correct forms of the language that we have been learning.

## Combining both approaches

By understanding acquisition and learning, we can improve our performance as learners. Immersing ourselves in an environment where the language we want to learn is used can foster acquisition, as can classes that encourage more communicative ways of learning which replicate situations that could arise in real contexts. Nevertheless, a grammatical explanation will help us to learn the rules of the language. The key is to combine the two approaches.

For example, in the past, in order to have a language immersion experience, we had to travel to a country where the language was spoken. Now, thanks to the internet, we can access materials in different formats and we can interact in the language we are learning more easily.

A noteworthy experience is that, in some educational institutions, [telecollaboration programs](#) are undertaken. In those, students in different classrooms and countries interact with each other thanks to technology.

Another example occurs in [communities of gamers](#) who, thanks to continued use of the language in [online games](#) and other activities, show above-average language skills.

## Competent and rich

As we have seen, linguistic competence and communicative competence move between contexts of acquisition and contexts of learning.

Understanding these concepts can help us to become better language learners, because this is an arduous process and every step along the way

is important.

The result is worth it: every new word or phrase we learn brings us closer to other cultures and enriches our lives.

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