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Aldemaro Romero Jr.

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Regional

How people learn English as second language

English has long been considered the language of choice for non-native speakers learning a second tongue. Its use in commerce has helped cement its place among languages. How learning English occurs, however, is very complicated and is influenced by a multitude of factors. Someone who studies the learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) is Seran Aktuna.

Born in Nicosia, in the Turkish sector of the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, Aktuna received her bachelor's degree in language studies at the University of Essex, England, her master's degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages at the University of Pennsylvania and her doctorate in educational linguistics, also at the University of Pennsylvania. Today she is a professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Not being a native speaker of English, she said, gave her a particular advantage in understanding the process of learning a new language.

"When I was teaching English, I was aware of the processes that my students were going through," she said. "I was able to identify with their problems and perhaps develop strategies that may work for them. I also knew about the theories of learning and teaching in the professional and also in a personal sense."

She said that she sees more demand for teachers of ESL. "It seems that the language has taken on a life of its own. Its non-native users are adopting the language and you see examples of many governments spending a lot of money toward efforts to teach English to their citizens, thinking that it would give them an economic advantage in a globalized world," she said.

Aktuna and other researchers have found that the ability to learn English is influenced by many different factors, with age being probably the most important. "If learners of a language start studying at a later age, they already have a language, a linguistic system, that can help with a second language



Photo by Alp Aktuna

Professor Seran Aktuna

acquisition," she explained. "But it can also interfere as in the cases of accents, and sometimes just carrying grammatical use from the mother tongue to the language that you were learning." Even children of parents who use languages at home other than English – but who themselves are raised in English-speaking countries – go through a different learning process.

"It's probably in terms of the input," she said. "Because they are receiving input in Spanish, Chinese or Japanese at home, and when they come to school it

is a different set of rules and pronunciation patterns and so on, and they have to deal with both. There is also a lot of peer pressure on children to be exactly like their classmates, so they may have this psychological barrier in terms of their efforts in acquiring their home language." However, Aktuna dismisses the idea that children raised in bilingual environments should only be spoken to in one single language.

"That's definitely not right," she said. "It used to be the perception. There are still professionals who do

believe in that, although there is empirical evidence that shows that hearing several languages is not a detriment to the cognitive and linguistic development of a child. Think of countries like India, where communities are very linguistically diverse. If linguistic diversity created confusion, you would have all these Indian children completely confused and they are not. So, it is not that bilingualism or multilingualism creates confusion. It is just the perception."

She agrees that the sooner you try to

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learn a language, the better. "Certainly with the accents, having an early start is an advantage because when your vocal organs in your throat are plastic you can modify them to produce all kinds of sounds," she said. "But as we get older, like anything else in our body, they tend to harden."

Some people think that English has become so popular because it has a relatively simple grammar, but Aktuna disagrees. "I am not sure as a linguist that the language is easier in structure when compared to others," she said. "But certainly given the socioeconomic factors pushing people toward the study of the language, and the fact that English has become the language of international trade, most areas of the Internet, banking, aviation and so on, there is a lot more input out there that facilitates its acquisition as opposed to perhaps Turkish, Bulgarian, Japanese and so on. English does have a lot of exceptions to the rules that make life quite difficult for learners."

For parents who want to raise children who are proficient in more than one language, Aktuna has very simple advice. "Start early and make sure the children are in an environment where there is a multiplicity of languages," she said. "If they are targeting a particular language, make sure that they are immersed in a playground or perhaps school, kindergarten, pre-school, where they can actually use the language. Children tend to pick up languages very effortlessly, so it is really a waste not to make good use of this time and the ability that they have while they are young."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.