LANGUAGE AND ITS ACQUISITION

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People can communicate and express their feelings better using their native language, as they get exposed to that particular language since birth. Hence, with time they become more and more confident with their First Language. But learning a Second Language is not as easy as learning one's native language. People have to leave behind their known way of communication, their comfort zone, and their old confidence to learn a purely new language, which is actually unknown to him. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is scientific procedure of learning a second language. Several questions may emerge while learning a different language and sooner or later those become "issues". The best way of learning a new language is to get familiar with these questions and ultimately solving the questions to get an answer.

The questions those may arrive while learning can be categorised into seven divisions – 1) Learner Characteristics, 2) Linguistic Factors, 3) Learning Processes, 4) Age and Acquisition, 5) Instructional Variables, 6) Context and most importantly 7) Purpose.

A simple definition of language can be given as a method of communicating and thus, expressing one's feelings with others. One's extent of understanding and methodising a language leads towards efficient ways of teaching that language. Similarly learning cannot be easily defined. A simpler way of defining learning is "acquisition". Teaching can be defined as the guidance to learning.

Even after defining language, learning and teaching efficiently and complexly, there still remain several disagreements. Hence SLA researchers have divided those disagreements in three schools of thoughts based on linguistic and psychological behaviour of the learner.

Structural Linguistics deals with a language as a system of structures. Ferdinand de Saussure is considered as the father of structural linguistics. In 1916 he declared that "parole" and "langue" are different. The other schools of thought were Cognitive Psychology and Generative Linguistics. The scientists of this category focussed on rational ways to approach human behaviour and deeper structures. With time the schools of thoughts gave birth to different other linguistics and leaner psychology.

In 19th century, the classical way of language teaching was "Grammar Translation Method". Most of the classes were taught in mother tongue and the use of Second Language was almost negligible, and teachings were not efficient. But the whole scenario changed in 20th century when "Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)" gained importance and played a major role in teaching. Federico Fellini has truly said, "A different language is a different vision of life."

First Language Acquisition

The majevelous capacity for acquiring competence in one's native language within the first few years of life has been a subject of interest for many centuries .In matter of few decades, some giant strides were taken by several researchers like German philosopher Districh Tiedeman, Francois Giun, etc. to describe the acquisition of particular language. This led to the research of drawing analogies between first and second language acquisition. After all ,all children in a normal environment acquire their native language fluently and naturally without any special instruction. Can we explain the fantastic journey from the first anguished cry at birth to telegraphies at 18 months to adult

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competence in language? The theories of language acquisition attempt to answer it. There

are 3 approaches:

1) Behavioural Approach:

Language is the fundamental part of human behaviour. This approach focuses on

immediately perceptible aspects of linguistic behaviour, the publicly observable

responses and events surrounding them. One of the best attempts were made in B.F

Skinner's classic Verbal Behaviour. His verbal behaviour was an extension of his general

theory of learning by operant conditioning in which an organism emits a response

operant which is maintained b reinforcement.

Challenges:

Naom Chomsky criticised the theory as no one agreed that SKINNER'S model on verbal

behaviour adequately accounts for the capacity to acquire language, for language

development and it's abstract nature. A theory based on conditioning and reinforcement

fails to explain the fact that every sentence you speak or write is novel, never before uttered

or used by anyone. This led to the formation of another theory of mediation which claims

that

the linguistic stimulus elicits a "mediating" response that is self stimulating. But it too

failed to meet the requirements.

2) Nativist Approach:

The term nativist is derived from the fundamental assertion that language acquisition is

innately determined . Innateness hypothesis gained support from various researchers like

Eric, Chomsky, McNeil etc. McNeil described the LAD consisting of 4 linguistic

properties:

a) The ability to distinguish speech sounds from others in environment.

b) The ability to organize linguistic data into various classes that can later be refined.

c) Knowledge that only a certain kind of linguistic system is possible and that other kinds are not.

d) The ability to engage in constant evaluation of the developing linguistic system.

Challenges:

Parallel distributed proceedings (PDF) model, based on the notion that information i process simultaneously at several level of attention. A child's or adult's linguistic performance may be the result of many levels of simultaneous interconnections rather than a serial process of 1 rule being applied.

3) Functional Approach:

Researchers began to see that language was just 1 manifestation of the cognitive and effective ability to build with the world, with others and with the self. The generative rules dealt specifically with the firms of language and not with the deeper function levels of meaning constructed from social interactions.

Issues in Language Acquisition

- Competence and performance

- Comprehension and production

- Nature or Nurture

- Universals

- Input

- Discourse

- Practice and Frequency

- Imitation

- Systematicity and Variability

- Language and thought

AGE AND ACQUISITION

Though it is observed that children are capable of acquiring their first language more easily and fluently, adults are also capable of acquiring second language with enhanced proficiency. But there is a significant difference between learning first language and second language. One has to learn and practice repeatedly while learning second language just like a child when it acquires first language. While learning second language, it is quite pointless to conceptualize the grammar too; it will be like explaining grammar to a child while it is learning first language. But it is also true that as an adult, people like to add a logical or rather a grammatical explanation while learning a language, unlike a child who has no concept of grammatical logic.

The "Critical Period Hypothesis" (CPH) may be defined as the time when a person can acquire the Second Language easily and after which acquiring becomes more and more tougher. Many incorrectly considers the age of 12 and 13 as the perfect time to learn a Second Language.

NEUROBTOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Hemispheric Lateralization and Participation:

Evidently it is observed that, certain functions of human body are set in the left hemisphere of the brain and others in right hemisphere. The ability to comprehend and learn language is allocated in left hemisphere. Patients with enhanced left hemisphere conditions are capable to learn and even produce language. Also patients with damages in left hemisphere are incapable to produce even their first language. Children with such impairments are able to learn their first language all over again using their right hemisphere. Brain plasticity helps a child not only to grasp their first language but also their second language. It also enables to develop what is known as "authentic" pronunciation and accents.

State of emotion and feelings are controlled by right hemisphere of a human brain, thus also helps in second language acquisition. Unless one is fervently attached to the language they are learning, one may find it difficult to master. Adults, particularly, are encouraged to learn second language by enhancement of right hemisphere.

CRITICAL PERIOD HYPOTHESIS

Discussions have concluded that individuals have a biological period in which they can acquire knowledge more easily. Children who were never a subject of a healthy and correct environment during this crucial period may fail to display competence in their first language. Acquiring an authentic accent may also occur in this period.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ACCENT

Arguments of age and acquisition of second language must also include the importance and development of accent. At birth, the development of speech muscles allows the larynx to can control prolonged cries only. These speech muscles gradually develop to control some complex sounds in certain languages, although there is a virtual presence of complete phonemic control in all children before puberty. Acquisition of authentic accent is rare in adults. But even adults can achieve proficiency in accent despite the biological reasons.

Teachers and learners work together to overcome all biological barriers to learn a second language efficiently.

BI-LINGUALISM
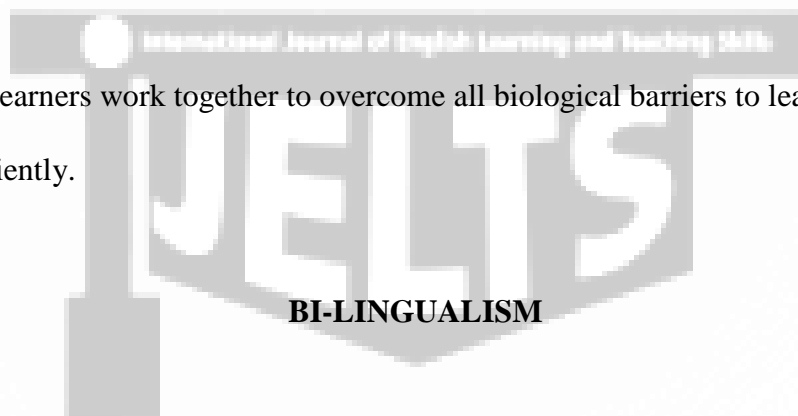
Children learning two languages concurrently usually apply a similar strategy. Adults learning a second language apply a two meaning system unlike children learning both languages who have a one meaning system. Thus children end up speaking both the language at the same time, generally known as code switching.

PERFORMACE AND COMPETENCE

Acquiring linguistic competence in second language may appear difficult for an adult. Though adults can exhibit a consciousness of grammaticality in the second language, they fail to verbalize rules and prototypes even in their native language.

A child can comprehend its first language but may not produce expected performance. Similarly an adult who can profoundly comprehend second language, may not exhibit a performance with equal proficiency.

COMPREHENSION AND PRODUCTION

Comprehension and production are aspects of performance and competence. Language comprehension impact on language production is so pervasive that understanding comprehension is essential to understand production. To produce and comprehend words and sentences, adults use their knowledge of language structure and grammar including the previous discourse, their cognitive abilities' like memory, attention and motor control. Experimental data collected using tools of cognitive psychology shows the need to integrate language comprehension with language production.

Nature or nurture

Noam Chomsky, an American linguist proposed, human have the innate ability to comprehend language. This hypothetical module of the human mind posited to account for children's innate predisposition for language acquisition is known as Language Acquisition Device. But it is not a collection of brain cells or neuro chemical signals. In an adult, the cognitive or affective variables intervene to hinder the functionality of LAD.

LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

Another issue that is most common in both first and second language acquisition is

the relationship between language and thought. One can see that language helps to shape thinking and vice versa. The second language learner is clearly asked to do the tremendous task to establish, in their mind, a completely new concept of meaning, distinguishing thoughts and concepts of a foreign language are not quite similar, if not completely different, from the first language. The teachers and learners too, of second language need to be extremely aware of cultural thought paradigms that may interfere, if not more, like the linguistic mode.

IMITATION

Children are good deep-structure imitators, but adults can exhibit much better imitating in surface structure, by rote mechanisms, if they are explicitly directed to do so. Sometimes their ability imitate may become a distracting factor. Adults learning a second language might do well to attend consciously to truth value and to be less aware of imitation as they communicate. Second language learners must not become too concerned with form lest they lose sight of the function and purpose of any language they are learning.

FREQUENCY AND PRACTICE

Language classes are generally focused on rote practice. Cognitive psychologists agree that the frequency of stimuli and the number of hours expended practicing a form is highly important in learning. In case of second language acquisition, it appears that contextualized, suitable, valid communication seems to be the pre-eminent practice the second language learner could employ.

TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE

Total Physical Response is a method used extensively in language teaching developed by James Asher, a professor of psychology. It is based on the coordination of language and physical movement. In TPR, instructors give commands to students in the target language with body movements, and students respond with whole-body actions. The method is an example of the comprehension approach to language teaching. The listening and responding serves two purposes: It is a means of quickly recognizing meaning in the language being learned, and a means of passively learning the structure of the language itself. Grammar is not taught explicitly but can be learned from the language input.

THE NATURAL APPROACH

The Natural Approach was aimed at basic interpersonal communication competency, that is, everyday language situations—conversations, shopping, listening to news. The initial task of the instructor was to provide comprehensible input, spoken language that is understandable to the learner. Learners did not need to necessarily need response to anything until they felt ready. The teacher was the source of the learner's input. Teacher may command various class activities like skits, games, and group work.

CONCLUSION

As discussed, approaching a second language while learning and teaching can be similar to a certain level. Also teaching method must be different for younger children, say

children aged 2-5 years, than for older children, say children of 10-12 years. Learning is most efficient when teaching is not only mechanical but also audio-visual. Acquiring a foreign accent is important but should not be someone's principle aim while learning a language. Hence, we can conclude that "The Younger, the better" is only a myth.

SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS

Culture is the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively. It is collective identity of a person. Culture is the characteristics of a group of people living in a place or a country or a continent their ideas, skills, art, behaviour, customs and norms and values. If there exists a society, there exists a culture and every culture has its own language. To learn a language is to learn the culture of the native speakers of that particular language. Without accepting the attributes and values of the culture, one cannot learn their language.

Second Culture Acquisition

Learning a language and thus the culture is not easy. Even in one culture there exists confusion and contradiction. And thus everyone in a particular culture has his own reality or perspective. He sees the rest of the world through the filter of his own perception. Even before the values are comprehended and stored in memory, it is filter, thus leading the person

to accept different cultures with different mentality. Thus learning a second language is learning and accepting a second culture. This second culture may appear conservative or liberal depending on our perspective.

While accepting a second culture, an individual experiences different stages of emotions. First, one feels euphoric and exhilarated. But when the same person gets to know the culture more exceedingly, one feels totally unfamiliar and distant with the new culture and normally finds solace by grumbling about the fact how unwelcoming and uncomfortable the culture is. This phase is commonly known as "culture stress". Gradually this phase gets replaced with feelings of affirmation.

Teachers can take into consideration the stage at which a particular learner is, to efficiently impart knowledge about a particular language and culture.

STEREOTYPING

Stereotypes are over generalization of a culture and its values that makes us bias to our own perspective to see the world. It makes us judge people of other culture just because their values and norms differ from that of our own. And again judge them by their origin, the language they speak and the behaviour they show. Stereotypes make us characterise a group of individuals simply based on their cultural membership.

Stereotypes sometimes lead us to profoundly perceive the negative aspects of a culture that generally builds a barrier between a person and the culture. It causes a person to exhibit a particular type of attitude towards a culture or language.

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Stereotypes and oversimplification makes an individual to sketch a wrong idea about a person belonging to another culture. It forces people to prejudge and misjudge a person from a different culture.

SOCIAL DISTANCE

Social distance is a fictitious distance between two cultures. When this distance increases, a person's wistfulness to learn the culture, and thus learn the language, decreases. Cultures also differ as this distance increases. American culture and Canadian culture are similar in various ways and hence the social distance between them is less. British doctor and writer, William Acton, devised a method to measure this social distance by measuring the perceived social distance, since this distance is developed base on the learner's perception. Based on this measurement and several proficiency tests, it was observed that a good learner maintains a distance with both the target and the native culture, whereas a bad learner will feel too close or far from either of the cultures.

DOMINANCE

It is important to determine whether the target group or the learner group is politically, culturally and economically dominant or not. In an ideal situation for second language learning, neither group should be dominant or subordinate. This develops a negative attitude towards the target group.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Some learners find it extremely beneficial to learn a language while residing in the culture to which the language belongs, while others feel alien in a foreign culture. A teacher must determine the delicacy of a student's emotion before familiarizing deeply with the second language. Generally a positive impact is caused if cultural awareness is incorporated in the teachings.

The most productive way of combining second language and second culture learning is widely observer among students who acquire second language while studying in the foreign institution. They were then able to relate with the culture personally and can learn the language better. Also they brought with them their native culture.

LANGUAGE, THOUGHT AND CULTURE

Cognitive development and linguistic development occurs in an individual simultaneously. Apart from one's perception and pre-existing ideas, presentation of certain facts also shapes one's ideas.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

As discussed previously, words and presentation shapes ideas. World of advertisement is a very rich example of how presentation of certain words controls one's ideas. Not only words, a structure of a sentence can also affect the different shades of meaning. One can be persuaded to change one's perception with an emotional speech or a

well written verse, if the word and ideas are presented correctly.

THE WHORFIAN HYPOTHESIS

The Whorfian Hypothesis defines how someone's language determines one's conception of the world. The linguistic system of a language is not only a tool to voice ideas but also a shaper of perception, one's mental activity. Every natural second language allows us to speak in it as well as to make remark on every phenomenon happening on this earth.

THE CONCLUSION

On the basis of the results gained from the research in the field of language acquisition and principle of its learning, it got cleared that learning and acquisition depends on various factors like age factor, socio-cultural factor, biological factors, human nature and capability, etc. To explain the journey from the first cry at birth to the telegraphies at 18 months to adult competence in language, several theories and approaches came up like behavioural approach, Nativist approach and functional approach. All these have their own respective pros and cons and met several challenges and criticisms from the researches around the world. Several issues came on the way of language acquisition like competence and performance, imitation, language and thought, etc. But despite all these, we can all lead to one conclusion that learning languages at a proper age, with regular practice, focusing much on the learning than the accent and adapting the native culture from where the respective language originates , one can easily and efficiently acquire any possible language of this world thus helping us to shape our perception and views towards it.

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