

## UPON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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**Abstract:** The following paper speaks about language acquisition and language learning as well as gives insight to a quite controversial issue: Does one "learn" a language much like any other cognitive endeavour? Or is it "acquired" due to some innate language-specific biological mechanism? It also presents the way in which second and foreign language research and training have been influenced by the findings of a number of theories about second language acquisition and foreign language learning.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Many theorists have acknowledged the vital part played by language in our lives. However, few have approached the capacities of us by means of which we can learn and use a language.

As the dictionary puts it, language acquisition "is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive, produce and use words to understand and communicate", a key process that distinguishes humans from other species. This special and amazing capacity of picking up syntax, phonetics, vocabulary by infants still remains a mystery.

In his *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes considers language as one of two features distinguishing people from "machines" or "beasts" arguing that almost every individual can learn a language [1] Moreover, the great philosopher, like many others in the past, seems to have regarded our acquisition of concepts and knowledge as the main psychological mystery, taking language acquisition to be a relatively trivial matter. Nevertheless, all this changed in the early twentieth century, when linguists, psychologists, and philosophers began to look more closely at the phenomena of language learning and mastery. Thus, a number of theories have been developed so as to explain this innate capacity of children: is a child born 'equipped' in some way with this capacity or does it learn them oh its way? Linguists have made an important distinction between language acquisition and language learning. As seen above, it seems children acquire language through a subconscious process during which they are unaware of grammatical rules, from what appears to be very little input. Language acquisition usually refers to first language acquisition, meaning their native language, when children just get a feeling for what is and what is not correct, after being exposed to some kind of a source of natural communication. The emphasis is on the text of the communication and not on the form.

Language learning, on the other hand, is the result of direct studying of the rules of language; it is a conscious process, learners have knowledge of the new language and can talk about that knowledge;" "knowing about" language' [2]. As opposed to acquisition, learning occurs actively and consciously through explicit instruction and education and it is not communicative. Nevertheless, research has shown, that knowing grammar rules does not necessarily result in good speaking or writing,

It is important to point out, thus, that the difference between first and second language acquisition is anxiety. This emotion is experienced more in adulthood, and is believed to be a main reason for difficulty in second language. On the other hand, when a child first learns his native language he is believed to be anxiety free. This may be one of the main reasons first language learners have more success than second language learners. But, of course, there are many other reasons also. Some to mention are: time exposed to language, chances to use the language, etc

Roughly speaking, the dichotomy language acquisition vs. language learning could be expressed by the following table as Krashen put it:

<b>Acquisition</b>	<b>Learning</b>
implicit, subconscious	explicit, conscious
informal situations	formal situations
uses grammatical 'feel'	uses grammatical rules
depends on attitude	depends on aptitude
stable order of acquisition	simple to complex order of learning

**2. INNATENESS AND LANGUAGE** Some of the major issues at the intersection of philosophy of language and philosophy of mind deal with some basic questions: *How much of language is innate? Is language acquisition a special faculty in the mind? What is the connection between thought and language?* There are several perspectives on the issue of language learning, all being centered on theories and methods of learning. One is the behaviorist perspective; another refers to the hypothesis testing perspective, which understands the child's learning of syntactic rules and meanings by means of postulation and testing of hypotheses, through the use of the general faculty of intelligence; the other candidate for explanation is the innatist perspective, which states that at least some of the syntactic settings are innate based on certain modules of the mind. As a consequence, children's feat in learning a language appears miraculous: how could a child learn so many rules governing linguistic expression given only the exposure to the sentences spoken around them? In response to this question, most 20th century theorists followed Chomsky in holding that language acquisition could not occur unless much of the knowledge were innate or inborn. Moreover, Chomsky and his followers argued that, human children are born knowing the 'Universal Grammar' or 'UG,' a theory describing the most fundamental properties of all natural languages. Learning a particular language thus becomes a relatively simple matter of elaborating upon this previously possessed knowledge [3]. Further on we will focus on the **theories on second language acquisition and foreign language learning** which prove crucial for the teacher of languages as they enables him/her to assess whether they have application in their relevant sphere and make an informed assessment of whether the new techniques will assist a learner's development [4]. Thus, the results of research into second language acquisition and foreign language learning can be an aid to making judgements about these new developments in language learning technology especially when coupled with the teacher's own experience gleaned from the classroom.

**Behaviourism: the second language view.** "Behave is what organisms do" [5], and behaviourism is to promote the study of behaviour, a doctrine fully illustrated in the influential expression of B. F. Skinner.; it is also called the learning perspective, a philosophy of psychology. *Verbal Behaviour* is the publication that referred to the relation between language and behaviour, strongly criticised by Noam Chomsky. According to behaviourists, all learning takes place through the same underlying process, habit formation, claiming that language is a set of habit that can be acquired by means of conditioning. Learners receive linguistic input from speakers in their environment and positive reinforcement for their correct repetitions and imitations. As a result habits are formed. The behaviourist theory is opposed to the innate theory. Nevertheless, a more important gain of the behaviourism than the explanation of language acquisition was the interaction between language and overt behaviour, considering that humans could construct linguistic stimuli that could acquire control over their behaviour in the same as those external stimuli could.

**Cognitive theory: a new psychological approach.** In the second half of the twentieth century, behaviourism was eclipsed as a result of the cognitive revolution. Cognitive psychologists [6] tend to see second language acquisition as a conscious and reasoned thinking process, involving the deliberate use of learning strategies. This explanation of language learning is in a deep contrast with the behaviourist approach of language learning. The cognitive theory believes in the building up of knowledge systems that can eventually be called on automatically for speaking and understanding. But first learners have to pay attention to any aspect of the language which they are trying to understand or produce. Gradually, through experience and practice learners become able to use certain parts of their knowledge so quickly and automatically that they are not even aware that they are doing it. The cognitive theory acknowledges the role of mistakes, and it also underlines the importance of meaningful drills considered relevant to the role of mistakes in the association of mentalism with notionalism.

Stephen Krashen's **creative construction theory** relies on five hypotheses. These hypotheses were created to give reason for errors made in the second language acquisition process [7]. Krashen is a believer of the innatist beliefs in first language acquisition, so this theory is built upon from this view. Actually, we speak or write the language in order to learn it. Acquisition takes place internally as the learner hears and reads the language that they wish to understand. As mentioned above, the five central hypotheses that constitute his monitor model are:

a) *The acquisition-learning hypothesis*

There are two ways for adult second language learners to approach learning a second, language: they may "acquire" it or they may "learn" it. We, acquire generally in meaningful interaction using the language whereas learning "takes place in a more formal environment" sf Krashen believes that acquisition is the more important process. It is only acquired language that is available for natural, fluent communication.

b) *The monitor hypothesis*

Krashen believed that writing is more conducive to monitor use than is speaking as with writing, the attention is much more on form rather than content. He maintains that knowing the rules only helps the speaker polish what he has acquired via real communication, that the focus of language teaching should therefore be communication, not rule learning. He has specified three conditions necessary for monitor use: sufficient time, focus on form, and knowing the rules. Krashen says that it does little good to correct or monitor errors if the child is not at a certain cognitive level in the first place.

c) *The natural order hypothesis*

We acquire rules of a language in a predictable sequence.

Contrary to intuition, the rules which are easiest to state are not necessarily the first to be acquired. Krashen asserts that the natural order is independent of the order in which the rules have been taught.

d) *The input hypothesis*

We acquire language in only one way - by receiving comprehensible input that is by understanding messages. If the input contains forms and structures just above the learner's current level of competence in the language, both comprehension and acquisition will occur.

Comprehensible input is a necessary but not the only condition for acquisition.

e) *The affective filter hypothesis*

The "affective filter" is an imaginary barrier that prevents learners from using input which is available in the environment. "Affect" refers to such things as motives, needs, attitudes, and emotional states. If a second language learner is filled with anxiety when studying a second language, he will not be able to comprehend the information at hand. Furthermore,

an unconscious filter will block information when the learner is stricken with anxiety, and the filter will be down if the student is calm and anxiety-free [8].

**Task based language learning** also known as **task-based language teaching** or **task-based instruction** focuses on the use of authentic language and on requiring learners to do meaningful tasks using the target language. Such tasks can include visiting a doctor, conducting an interview, or calling customer service for help. It is the task outcome that is assessed rather than the accuracy of language forms. This method is especially popular for developing fluency and learner confidence. There has been an argument that rather than pure role learning or out of context practice, language has to be acquired as the result of some deeper experience than the concentration on the grammatical point.

**Humanistic approaches.** Humanism concentrates upon the development of the learner's self-concept. If the learner feels good about him or herself then that is a positive start. Learning is not an end in itself; It is the means to progress towards the pinnacle of self-development. Consequently, another perspective which has gained increasing ground in language teaching is that of the learner as a "whole person". In other words, language teaching is not just about teaching language, it is also about helping learners to develop themselves as people. And here we come to the most striking difference between behaviourism and humanism. Behaviourism is about rewards from others. Humanism is about rewarding yourself.

These beliefs have led to a number of teaching methodologies and techniques which have stressed the humanistic aspects of learning. The humanistic approach emphasizes the "natural desire" of everyone to learn. It follows from this, they maintain, that learners need to be empowered and to have control over the learning process and therefore, the teacher relinquishes a great deal of authority and becomes a facilitator. The experience of the learners is what counts and their development of their personality and the encouragement of positive feelings are seen to be as important as their learning of language namely: *interactive activities* [9], *community language learning* (CLL) theory based on the educational movement of counselling learning, *suggestopedia*, a methodology developed by Lozanov [10] in which learners must be comfortably relaxed with baroque music and comfortable chairs, *The Silent Way* theory of language teaching in which the teacher gives a limited amount of input, modelling the language to be learned once only and then indicating what students should do through pointing and other silent means; *Total Physical Response*, a method according to which finds favour in Krashen's view of roughly-tuned input. The teacher gives learners instructions and they simply have to carry out the teacher's commands. Thus, they learn a language through actions, through a physical response rather than through drills.

### **3. FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

The theory of foreign language learning has many things in common with theories of second language acquisition. Certain theories have had a profound effect upon the practice of foreign language teaching.

Behaviourism was adopted for some time by language teaching methodologists and the result was the audio-lingual method. This method made constant drilling of the student followed by positive or negative reinforcement a major focus of classroom activity.

Later on, Chomsky argued against the theory that language is a form of behaviour. He maintained that most of the language acquisition is the learning of the system. More recent investigation of how people become language users has centred on the distinction between acquisition and learning. [11].

Krashen characterised the former as a subconscious process which results in the knowledge of a language, whereas the latter results only in knowing about the language

[12]. Krashen saw successful acquisition as being very bound up with the nature of the language input which the students received. This input should contain language that the students already "know" as well as language that they have not previously seen. So, he suggests that students can acquire language on their own provided that they get a great deal of comprehensible input (roughly-tuned). In other words, whereas language which is acquired is part of the language store we use when we want to communicate, the only use for consciously learned language is to check that acquired language just as we are about to use it.

Roughly speaking, learners may benefit from Krashen's theory in several ways. By using the monitor hypothesis, this will ensure that the child will make errors, however trying to learn the new language. Errors are looked upon as stepping stones, and are considered healthy. To endlessly monitor the child means to push the anxiety button and this leads to the moment when the child stops taking chances. In what the input hypothesis is concerned, teachers should provide comprehensible input to the classroom that is the information be at or just above a learner's comprehension level to be sure comprehension takes place. Lastly, the child would benefit from the affective filter hypothesis in the fact that teachers provide an environment which is free from ridicule and word correction. The teacher should focus more on interaction versus error correction. This will ensure that the child will not be afraid to make mistakes, making the affective filter go up in the learning process. So, consciously learned language is only available in highly restricted circumstances, as a monitor. Learning does not directly help acquisition.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

So, more recent methodological implications of approaches stress the need for acquisition (rather than conscious learning) and communicative activities in the teaching-learning process. The involvement of the learners through task-based activities and the acquisition of language through comprehensible input would be more effective than the conscious learning of language items; that is why, teachers constantly need to identify the features of language that will best meet the instruction process and which will be acquired without explicit focus if learners have adequate exposure to the language.

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