

Reflection on language acquisition theories



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I think of the process of language acquisition (L1) as an imitation of older people who can easily learn (L2) by continuous training and practice. I was exposed to English language simultaneously to my mother tongue which is “Urdu” at a very early stage. A major influence in learning English language was represented by my family, because I had developed language skills earlier at home. As I began going to school the horizon of English language learning expanded because all the subjects were taught in English.

I managed to develop interest and aptitude in learning English. Here, I would add that this entire process of learning L1 and L2 involved both psychological and social factors, which were revealed later when I did my B. Ed. and M. Ed. This was the very first time I ever came across the different theories of SLA and their application in teaching TEFL.

Initially I had inclination towards the theory of Behaviourism. The well-known psychologist B. F. Skinner (1957) is the founder of behaviorist approach. He pointed out that language learning is similar to adopted behaviour. He highlighted the role of environment which influences performance, to the close exclusion of inborn factors. A tiny part of the foreign language acts as a stimulus to the learner’s response (e. g. by repetition).

Watson’s theory (1930) explains that, solely noticeable events, and not mental states, are the substance of science. Once the learner is 100% engaged, the teacher reinforces by praise or approval. Thus, the probability of the behavior is confirmed. However, if the learner does not

respond accordingly, then the behavior is 'punished' and therefore the probability of this behavior to occur is diminished.

In other words, children imitate a bit of language they hear and if they receive positive reinforcement they still imitate and apply that piece of language that then turns into a 'habit' (Williams & Burden, 1997). This fundamentally emphasizes the learning process. Being a language teacher I agreed with the behaviourism theory in context of language learning (L2) because this is how I was taught English language in my school years.

When I joined the field of teaching this theory influenced my pedagogical methods too as I found it quite useful in teaching English to my own students. Quoting an example from my own experience as a language instructor, I observed many students in my class were able to respond well in learning English language when they received appraisals from myself on completion of any language task given in classroom or as a homework. The positive words or any sort of reward from my side worked as a positive stimulus for them and by the end of the day they were able to show steady progress in learning L2.

This was my earlier sole belief and I was much convinced to follow the patterns of behaviourist approach. Moreover, I did not believe in the implementation of psycholinguistics language theories in real life teaching practices. Although, I designed my teaching strategies keeping in mind the psychological and social factors like: age, motivation, aptitude etc. But I never had the detailed understanding of psycholinguists. I came here to study "Applied Linguistics and TESOL" at the University of Portsmouth.

During the course of SLA, the role and study of complexity of brain and different theories in this regard astonished me. The theory of Universal Grammar (1965) by the famous psychologist Noam Chomsky really appealed me. He claimed that language acquisition is an instinctive configuration, or function, of the human brain. He suggested that there are structures of the brain that control the construal and construction of speech. Children do not require any kind of prescribed teaching to learn to speak. One of the factors that Chomsky used to sustain his theory is the optimum learning age.

Between the ages 3 to 10 a child is almost certainly able to learn a language in its totality and grip articulatory.

The child does not need a prompt to instigate language acquisition, it occurs on its own. The parent does not need to elicit the child to speak, if it is around language construction, the child will work to produce that language on its own. It does not matter if a child is corrected, they still grasp the language in the same means and speak the same way. During one stage, a child will make things plural that are already plural. I would add an example of my few students who confused themselves using the irregular forms of verb like "put, cut or throw". They made addition of "ed" when they had to use the past or past participle form of verb: "putted, cutted, throwed".

Similarly, Krashen (1982) with his significant Affective Filter Hypothesis, aids to classify the effects and affective variables on (SLA). He debates that affective variables can act as a psychological block, and avert coherent input to be engrossed. Krashen's Acquisition/Learning proposition also allow us to understand the subject of acquisition and learning when he advocates that learning does not turn into acquisition. It is obvious as he views first

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language acquisition and second language learning as two unlike singularities. Yet, he proposes that acquisition may take place in the teaching space when communication is highlighted through dialogues, role playing and other meaningful interactions.

Being in SLA class, during the past four weeks, in depth study of language theories and the sharing of personal experiences has now definitely changed my outlook on how actually languages are acquired and learnt. As a SLA student and language teacher I can now benefit from the psycholinguist theories in shaping the lessons, teaching techniques and leading my students to improve their cognitive factors.

My reflective diary revolves around the three fundamental speculative perspectives on language learning and acquisition in an effort to deduce how people acquire their first language (L1) and learn their second language (L2). Behaviorist and Innatist theories offer diverse outlook on language learning and acquisition which impacts the acceptance of how an L2 should be taught and learned. It also explains the association between L1 and L2, and elaborates on the similarities and differences between the two.

Furthermore, after going through various hypothetical point of views I came to conclude that there is no one solid linguistic theory which can provide the ultimate explanation of L1 acquisition and L2 learning as there are many interconnected features that stimulate the success of language acquisition or language learning. The implication is that as an EFL teacher I should base my classroom management practices and pedagogical methods on numerous

theories instead of applying a single theory as pupils learn and acquire language differently.

References

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