

Theories of Language Learning : A General Overview**Dr. Kavita**

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**ABSTRACT**

God is the universal father and he bestowed man with a special gift called language. We cannot imagine a society without Language. It is the basis for human progress. Without language progress of civilization is not possible. The theories of language learning debate the exact functions of language yet its role as a tool in conceptual thinking is undesirable. This paper tried to explore the significance of these theories in influencing language learning.

Introduction

The theories of language learning have drawn great attention as researches in the field of applied linguistics. The study of language became more scientific through the experiments of the psychologists. The knowledge of these researches sensitized the teaching-learning process. The study of these theories provided a broader perspective for learning. Language learning in general and second language learning in particular is related to these theories.

- **Behavioural Theory of Language Learning**

J.B. Watson pioneered the behavioral school. The behavioral school psychology applied to language learning was derived from experiments first carried out by Pavlov on dogs and B.F. Skinner on rats. Pavlov's theory was that of 'classical conditioning' and Skinner's theory was that of 'operant conditioning'. They found out that animals respond to certain stimulus and humans can apply this same

conditioned response theory to the acquisition of language. In his book, *Verbal Behavior*, Skinner suggested that language learning is a form of behavior in much the same way as a rat pressing a bar or a dog salivating at the sound of a bell. Behaviorist theory is the habit formation theory of language learning, reminding us the learning of structural grammar, a language learning concerns us by not problem solving but the information and performance of habits.

S.R. Theory of Language Learning

The S-R theory leads the child to learn a language. The principle of association and exposure supported by good motivation can develop good language learning habits through correction and reinforcement. E.L. Thorndike proposed the following 'laws of language learning'.

- **Law of Readiness**

For learning any language, first of all, the child should have a desire to learn and an interest to use it. It is only then that language learning becomes easy. If the student is well aware of the utility of the language and its use in day-to-day life, he will definitely show readiness to learn the language.

- **Law of Exercise**

Language learning is without doubt a process of forming language habits. Once the components of language are introduced, it is very necessary that they have to be repeated in meaningful ways. Repeated language drills and review of language items will help the student to get better comprehension of the language learnt.

- **Law of Effect**

The learning experience provided to the student should be effective and interesting. This helps form language habits. If the learning experience is pleasant, the learning will be good and concrete.

But if the learning experience is unpleasant, the learning will always be complex and uninteresting. Behavioral psychologists believe that language learning is a mechanical process of habit formation. If the learner is exposed more to the use of language, he picks up language quickly.

- **Cognitive Theory of Language Learning**

Cognitive psychology lays stress on meaningful learning and stresses on the higher mental processes in learning perception, imagination and thinking. Here learning treats every situation as a meaningful whole not in parts. The cognitive approach emphasizes the intelligence of the learner-verbal comprehension, word fluency, memory, perception and reasoning (VWMPR suggested by Thurstone).

Learning according to cognitive school is related to the intellect of a child. So, in language learning the learning of words, spelling, pronunciation, etc. is related to the intellect of a child. They reasoned that language learning takes place because of inference, reflection and creation. It means to say that first the learner simply perceives the concept, and then he tries to bring it to the level of abstraction, so that finally production takes place. This theory can also be referred to as the LSRW skills and their teaching and learning by distinguishing them into the levels of receptive and productive skills.

Learning in cognitive psychology is a process of discovery, perception, practice and internalization of learning material or knowledge. For example, while the teacher is giving listening practice, he is concerned with the sensory and articulator description of the sound. But at the next level, he should let the students use their conceptual knowledge to get more access to inference, reflection and creative learning. This is entirely a cognitive process.

Cognitive psychologists believe in learning through problem solving approach. They also believe that the learning of language rules,

makes using the language more effective and efficient even in an unknown new situation.

- **Psycholinguists Theory of Language Learning**

After the above theories, a new theory called psycholinguists theory of language learning emerged in the twentieth century.

Psycholinguists believe in two theories of language learning. One is the empirical or behavioral approach, which says that language is learnt by nurture, and hence is a result of experiences. According to this, language is a part of stimulus response theory. It is also a conditioned behavior as a child learns the language by imitation and analogy. According to this concept, language learning is a mechanical process wherein repetition, reinforcement, memory and motivation are significant. The other school of thought is rationalistic and mentalistic in approach and argues that language comes by nature and it is an inborn process. Children learn language by applying it to the situation. This learning is analytic, generative and creative. Language learning is a direct outcome of exposure to and result of nature. Psycholinguists stress the importance of genetic characters. They opine that human beings are highest in the scale of evolution and only they can learn a language, which other animals cannot do. Language learning is an inevitable process and every child will learn at least one language. Children have an inbuilt language acquisition device and system that determines language learning. Language, in fact, is a process of biological growth and maturation.

Conclusion

From what have been discussed above we could find that these theories have strengths and limits. They all have their unique contribution of language learning. Therefore, to make second language learning more effective these theories should be complement to each other and provide an integrated approach to second language learners.

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