

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 11 : 8 August 2011
ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

An Overview to Informal Language Learning

Taher Bahrani

=====
Abstract

The present paper tries to provide a broad overview of informal language learning and its application based on some approaches to second language learning. Accordingly, it considers informal language learning in relation to some psychologically oriented approaches such as behaviorism and innate-ism. Moreover, it discusses the interactionist approach to second language learning in relation to informal language learning as a socially oriented approach to second language teaching. Accordingly, informal language learning cannot be based on behaviorism because it requires language learners to do some repetition and drills even in informal setting similar to some of the formal language classrooms which does not support theories underlying informal language learning. On the contrary, interactionist approach can support informal language learning because the focus is rather on the meaning of the language than on the form.

Key words: informal learning, Behaviorism, Innate-ism, Interactionist

1. Introduction

Informal learning compared to formal learning was first introduced and popularized by Knowles in his pioneering work *Informal Adult Education* (1950). In focusing on the notion of informal education, Knowles pointed to the informal environment in many adult learning situations, the flexibility of the process of learning, and the use of experience. According to Coombs and Ahmad (1974), the definition of informal education is widely accepted in the field of language

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

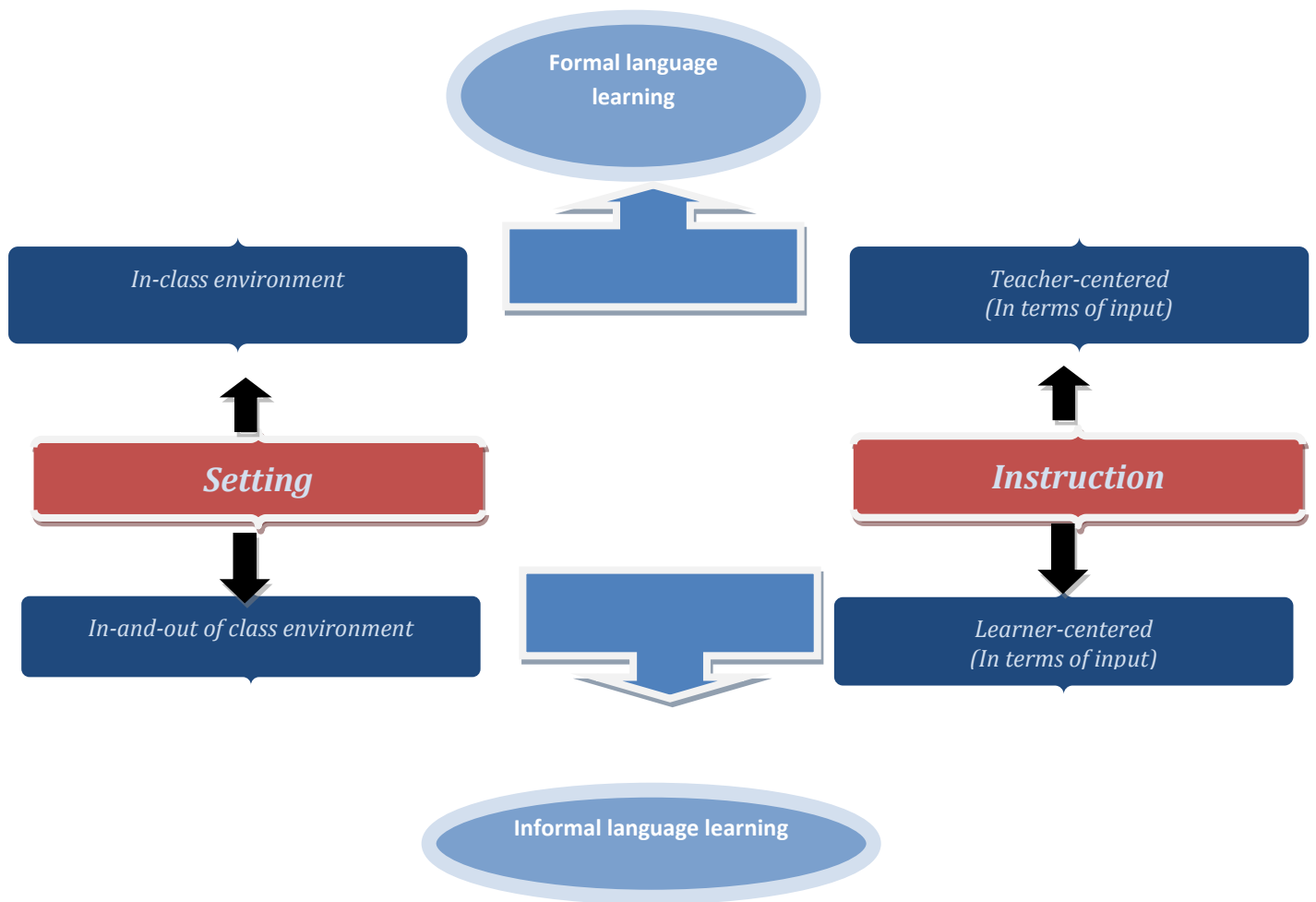
11 : 8 August 2011

Taher Bahrani

An Overview to Informal Language Learning

learning as the process of developing people in knowledge and skills in a highly uninstitutionalised and unstructured setting.

In the same line and based on informal education, informal learning was also defined as the lifelong process of learning by which every individual acquires and accumulates the required knowledge, skills, attitudes, and insights from exposure to the environment at home or at work (Rogers, 2004). This sort of unconscious learning mainly occurs through reading newspapers and books or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974). Accordingly, informal learning is mostly unorganized, unsystematic and even unintentional at times. Moreover, the notions of formal and informal language learning were also introduced and studied in the same way by some other researchers (Marsick and Watkins, 1990; Lightbown and Spada, 2001; Rogers, 2004).



The above graph shows the comparison between formal and informal language learning in relation to setting and instruction:

In the same line, research in second language learning in relation to informal language learning has always been a challenge and has faced many aspects in psychological and social disciplines. Early second language learning research was psychologically oriented focusing on habit formation through repetition and drills, but later on it gradually became socially oriented which provoked interaction with native speakers or more advance language learners in real world communication.

As a result, the focus of psychological research on second language acquisition was mainly on morphology, syntax, and acquisition order (Dankin, 1973; Krashen, 1981; Brown, 1973; Larsen-Freeman, 1975). On the contrary, socially oriented research was based on discourse analysis, text analysis, and more importantly the social factors such as interaction with native speakers or advanced language learners that impact language learning (Fairclough, 1992; Matthiessen, 1990; Tannen, 1991).

In the following sections some of the physiologically and socially oriented approaches are discussed in relation to informal language learning to find out which one would best fit into informal language learning.

2. Psychologically oriented approaches

This part deals with considering some of the psychologically oriented approaches to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) such as behaviorism and innate-ism in relation to informal language learning setting and their contributions to language learning based on informal language learning:

2.1. Behaviorism and Informal Language Learning

Behaviorism can be considered as the most outstanding psychologically oriented approach to second language teaching. According to Mangubhai (2004), behaviorism can be traced back to the studies on classical conditioning by Russian psychologist Pavlov followed by Skinner (1957). The behaviorists basically claim that learning including language learning is a habit formation and the environment, formal or informal, is an essential and determinant factor in learning. Moreover, learning is realized by being stimulated, responding to stimulation and receiving feedback to responses (Ellis, 1999).

According to the behaviorist approach, understanding of second language learning studies is based on the assumption that children learn their first language by imitation and reinforcement thus forming a habit of language use (Lightbown and Spada, 2001). According to Skinner (1957), learners are first exposed to linguistic input from other speakers in their environment and then form meaningful associations between the language, objects, and events around them and the repetition of those associations over and over by experiences in the form of reinforcements and corrective feedback, they turn into linguistic habits.

However, although the behaviorists have worked well in explicit teaching and computer-assisted instruction (e.g. learning through repetitions, drills and practice) in some English classes, they would not be suitable for learning the language informally. Based on the informal language learning, language learners are not supposed to learn the language through having exposure to language input in informal language setting which is made for language learning requiring them to be involved in repetition and drills in away similar to class or lab. Accordingly, behaviorism may best suit formal language learning.

2.2. Innate-ism and Informal Language Learning

Another psychologically oriented approach is that of the innatists. Based on the cognitive perspective and in contrast to the behaviorist approach, innatists such as Chomsky (1965) and Lenneberg (1967) argued that language learning is more than mechanical imitation and feedback processes for particular stimuli. On the contrary to the behaviorism, it has been observed that cognitive characteristics of the human brain have a role on language learning processes, and the behaviorist approach cannot explain the complexity of language learning through habit formation (Chomsky, 1981).

The main feature of innate-ism is related to first language acquisition during the critical period of a child's language development. Chomsky (1965 and 1981) referred to the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), by which he refers to the innate capacity of an able child to learn language in his or her environment through exposure to sufficient language input. This language input can be provided by the parents, other children or audio/visual media, for example, through watching different cartoons.

LAD was proposed in contrast to the data-nurturing environment which was proposed by the behaviorist. Chomsky argued for the presence of a skill which gifted humans with inherited knowledge of 'Universal Grammar' (UG) to acquire a language (Chomsky, 1981).

Accordingly, language learners can improve their language proficiency in informal environment through exposure to authentic language. This can occur without having to follow the mechanical stimulus and response of the behaviorism which does not support informal language learning.

3. Socially oriented approaches

In recent years, socially oriented approaches to language teaching/learning have mainly considered language learning as the outcome of linguistic interactions with native or more proficient speakers of the target language in informal language learning setting.

3.1. Interactionists and Informal Language Learning

Social interactionists see the language learner in his or her environment as a perceiver, actor, follower, and learner (Long, 1983; Hatch, 1978; Pica, 1994). In contrast to behaviorist approaches, the relations between the learner and the social environment in this approach are not limited to imitation and reinforcement, but are more dynamic, fluid and innovative. Learning the language is contextual, open to a wide range of perception and the teacher in formal setting or

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 8 August 2011

Taher Bahrani

An Overview to Informal Language Learning

the native speaker or more proficient speaker in informal setting cooperate with the language learner to maintain a meaningful communication.

However, socially oriented approaches also emphasize the interaction with the native speakers to boost language learning. What the interactionists have not focused on is that this socially oriented interaction with native speakers just exists in target language countries or ESL context. In other words, EFL contexts lack this social interaction. In this regard, some other authentic sources of language input may be available to use. However, getting into this discussion is out of the scope of the present paper.

3.2. *Constructivist and Informal Language Learning*

Another socially oriented approach to language learning is Constructivism. The Constructivist approach asserts that learning is an active, creative, and socially interactive process in which language learners construct new ideas based upon their current and past knowledge (Cook, 1996). According to the constructivist approach, successful language learning is therefore achieved through exposure to and interaction with language in authentic contexts. Typically a learner in a constructivist-inspired program would be required to perform tasks and solve problems involving listening, reading, writing and speaking in the foreign language to ensure a high level of interaction both in formal and informal language learning settings.

The Constructivist philosophy is closely tied to communicative teaching approaches and indeed is the force behind many initiatives in interactive computer assisted language learning to be used in both formal and informal language learning settings. Informal language learning can be based on the constructivist approach because it emphasizes exposure to language. However, it should be emphasized that some of the computer assisted language learning programs are designed based on behaviorist approach which are not suitable for informal language learning.

Conclusion

The present paper aimed at considering the behaviorism and innatism as two psychologically oriented approaches to SLA in relation to informal language learning and interactionist and constructivist approaches to language learning shown in the following table:

The relationship between informal language learning and some language learning theories

Theories of language learning	Behaviorism	Innatism	Interactionists	Constructivists
Informal language learning	Not suitable: because require repetition and drills even in informal setting	Suitable: because language can be learnt through exposure in informal setting	Suitable: because the focus is primary on the meaning which supports informal learning	Suitable: because the focus is on exposure. It can be supported based on learner autonomy

Accordingly, informal language learning cannot be based on behaviorism because it requires repetition even in informal setting. On the contrary, informal language learning emphasizes that language learning in informal setting should be unstructured. Moreover, it happens incidentally. In other words, language learners are not supposed to be instructed in informal setting similar to that of the formal setting.

The interactionist and constructivist approaches are two socially oriented approaches to SLA which were considered. It was found out that language learners can learn or improve their language in social interaction with other people while the focus is not on the form of the language in informal setting. It can be concluded that socially oriented approaches work best in informal language learning.

References

- Brown, H. D. (1973). Affective variables in second language acquisition. *Language Learning*, vol. 23, pp. 231-44.
- Chomsky, N. (1959). Review of Verbal Behavior by B. F. Skinner. *Language Sciences*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 26-58.
- Chomsky, N. (1965), *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Cook, V. (1996). *Second language learning and language teaching*. Arnold, London.
- Coombs, P. H., & Ahmed, M. (1974). *Attacking rural poverty: How non-formal education can help*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- Dakin, J. (1973). *The language laboratory and modern language teaching*, longman.
- Ellis, R. (1999). *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and Social Change*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Hatch, E. (1978). *Discourse analysis and second language acquisition*. Second Language Acquisition, ed. Hatch, Newbury House, Rowley, Mass.
- Knowles, M. S. (1950). *Informal adult education*. New York: Association Press.
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Pergamon, Oxford.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (1975). The acquisition of grammatical morphemes by adult ESL students. *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 9, pp. 409-30.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 8 August 2011

Taher Bahrani

An Overview to Informal Language Learning

- Lenneberg, E. (1967). *Biological Foundations of Language*. Wiley and Sons, New York.
- Lightbown, P.M., & Spada, N. (2001). *How Languages are Learned*, Second edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Long, M. (1983). Native speaker/non-native speaker conversation and the negotiation of comprehensible input. *Applied Linguistics*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 126-41.
- Mangubhai, F. (2004). *Principles of Second Language Learning*, vol. LIN8001, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba.
- Marsick, V. J., & Watkins, K. E. (2001). Informal and incidental learning. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, vol. 89, p. 25-34.
- Matthiessen, C.M.I.M. (1990). *Lexicogrammatical cartography: English systems*, University of Sydney, Sydney.
- Pica, T. (1994). Research on negotiation: What does it reveal about second language acquisition?' *Language learning*, vol. 44, pp. 493-527.
- Rogers, A. (2004). Looking again at non-formal and informal education - towards a new paradigm, *the encyclopaedia of informal education*, www.infed.org/biblio/non_formal_paradigm.htm. Retrieved June 04, 2004.
- Skinner, B.F. (1957), *Verbal Behavior*, Appleton Century Crofts, New York.
- Tannen, D. (1991), *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk Among Friends*, Ablex, Norwood, NJ.

Taher Bahrani
 Department of English,
 Mahshahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Mahshahr, Iran
taherbahrani@yahoo.com