

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 1 January 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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## Language Learning - Second Language Acquisition

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### **Relationship between Theories of Second Language Acquisition and General Linguistic Theories**

The theories of Second Language Acquisition have traditionally been the offspring of general linguistic theory, sometimes supplemented by insights from psychology. Our interest in the language-learning process has significance both for general linguistic theory and language-teaching practice. General linguistic theory may have its own importance, but it is language learning which provides the litmus test for the worth and value of all theories of language.

The linguists as well as the psychologists are interested in discovering what is universal in language and what general laws govern our acquisition of language. The area of discussion is largely the learning of the mother tongue, but the moot point is: if there are

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general language-learning principles involved, then they cannot also be without relevance to foreign-language learning as well.

The basic thing that requires serious and sustained consideration is whether or not language-teaching procedures be based on general theories of language acquisition. These theories, by and large, suggest that the individuals are essentially “the same” in their language-learning capacities; nevertheless, teachers are probably conscious of the diversity of language-learning abilities that their pupils display.

## **General Theories of Language Acquisition**

### **1. Behaviorism**

This is a general language-learning principle which enunciates that there is no difference between the way one learns a language and the way one learns to do anything else. The behaviorists are committed to admitting as evidence only that which they can observe, so that their data are the utterances that the people make and the conditions under which they are made. This may also be viewed as the Stimulus-Response phenomenon, the stimulus, to which the utterance forms a ‘response’, being physically present in the situation.

Reinforcement does also play an important part in the case of behaviorism, particularly with regard to a child when he /she gets approval from his/her parents. Wilkins says about behaviorism that in this case ‘learning is controlled by the conditions under which it takes place’, that ‘as long as individuals are subjected to the same conditions, they will learn in the same way’, that a ‘physical need in the child may be as a result of his utterance, that parental approval ‘acts as a powerful reinforce’, that the ‘notion of repetition is therefore extremely important’, and that it is ‘the making of the response that is the learning process’.

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## **2. Mentalism**

Mentalism, we find, goes against behaviorism almost wholesale, point by point. According to the mentalists, people learn a language, 'not because they are subjected to a similar conditioning process, but because they possess an inborn capacity which permits them to acquire a language as a normal maturational process'. Language, they argue to say, is a very complex form of behavior, and perhaps can hardly be learnt in terms of external stimuli. In the view of these people, a learner has to be adequately exposed to the target language.

## **3. Language Environment**

Language environment is something that the learner hears and sees in the new language. It may include a wide variety of situations as available in or through stories, conversation with friends, watching television, or books. There are two kinds of language environment: **Macro-Environment** and **Micro-Environment**.

## **4. Macro Environment**

When the focus of the learner or speaker is on the form of the language, then the language environment is formal. The formal language environment focuses on a conscious learning of rules and forms. However, when the focus is on the content of communication, then the language environment is natural. The natural language environment seeks to enhance the development of communication skills in both the foreign and host situations. There are three types of communication in which the learner participates: **One way, restricted two ways, and full two ways**.

### ***One –Way Communication***

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The learner listens to or reads the target language, but does not respond. The communication is one way; it is towards the learner, and not from him or her.

### ***Restricted Two-way Communication***

The learner responds orally to someone, but he/she does not completely use the target language.

### ***Full Two-way Communication***

The learner is both a receiver and a sender of messages. Most of the research works emphasize the usefulness of one-way and restricted two-way communication during the early periods of learning process.

## **5. Micro-Environment**

While the macro –environmental factors are the broad, general characteristics of the language environment, micro-environmental factors point to the specific structure of the language the learner hears or sees: e.g., the induction of yes/no questions into the learners' environment. Three micro-environmental factors have been identified from the perspective of their effect on the quality and pace of language acquisition. These are **Saliency, Feedback and Frequency**.

### ***Saliency***

It refers to the ease with which a structure is heard or seen. As for example, people can hear or see the English article the more easily than the past tense ending-ed as in talked. Psychologists have defined saliency by referring to those characteristics which seem to

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make an item visually or by hearing more prominent than others. Such characteristics, besides others, do also include phonetic substance. In the sentence, She does not want anything, does not and want receive greater salience or prominence than she or anything.

### ***Feedback***

It points to the listeners' or readers' response to the teachers' speech or writing. One kind of feedback is correction; another is approval which is also known as positive feedback. Still another kind of feedback consists in expanding or modifying the learners' speech without making them unduly conscious of modification. This is known as expansion correction.

### ***Frequency***

In the language-acquisition procedure frequency refers to the number of times a learner hears or sees a given structure. The typical example in this regard is the recurrence of Wh- questions involving What, Who, Which, Where, Whose and Whence. The count of such questions could be considered as the basis of generally been assumed that the more a learner tries to acquire a structure, the sooner would he/ she learn the language.

Micro-environmental factors have their impact on second language learning only when the learners have reached a certain level in their L2 development, the level at which they are in a position to internalize a given structure, the salience or frequency of the structure may increase the probability that would closely and steadily notice the structure and acquire it.

## **6. Internal Processing**

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Language learning, essentially speaking, occurs or materializes in the mind of the learners, where mental structure or mechanism process and organizes the language to which they are exposed. A systematic study of the discrepancies between the language that the learners produce and the language they hear or read provide the basis from which we can infer the attributes of an otherwise invisible mental structure. Researches in the concerned area suggest that three internal processing factors play a substantial role in second language acquisition: **Filter, organizer and monitor.**

### *Filter*

It is that part of the internal processing system which subconsciously screens incoming language based on what the psychologists call affect. It conditions the learners' native needs, attitudes and emotional states. Filter is the first main hurdle that the incoming language data have to encounter before they are processed further. It determines.

(i) Which target language models will the learners select; (ii) Which part of the language will be attended to first; (iii) How fast can a learner acquire language, and (IV) when should language-acquisition efforts cease.

### *Organizer*

It subconsciously processes data which the filter lets in. It is chiefly concerned with the learners' ability to organize gradually the new language system. Its subconscious functioning is cognitive in nature. The functioning of the organizer may be seen in terms of (i) the systematic progression of changes in the interim or transitional constructions the learners use before a structure is finally acquired; (ii) the errors that systematically occur in the learners' speech, and (iii) the common order in which mature structures are learnt.

An analysis of these aspects of the learners' participation in L2 System reveals different facets of the operation of the inner processing that governs the acquisition of language.

### ***Monitor***

It is that part of the learner's internal system which controls conscious linguistic processing. As and when conscious linguistic processing takes place, the learners may be said to be using the monitor. When a learner performs a drill, it requires conscious attention to linguistic form; when he memorizes a dialogue, conscious processing is inevitably taking place, and monitor is being used.

The degree to which monitor is used or may be used depends on at least (i) the learner's age; (ii) the amount and quality of formal instruction; (iii) the focus on verbal task, and (iv) the personality of the learner.

## **7. Language Processing Mechanism**

Within the some language environment, the learners have mostly the same language-processing mechanism, and yet there are some learners who learn second language better and faster than others. It is, therefore, proper to identify those individual factors that affect a learner in acquiring a language.

### ***Personality***

It signifies an aggregate of traits or characteristics of a particular individual. One has to see or perceive whether an individual is an extrovert or introvert, impulsive or reflective, authoritarian or submissive, intelligent or dull. These and several other similar qualities constitute and reveal an individual's personality. The operation of personality is quite evident and crucial in second language learning. Those who have done research work on

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personality in relation to language learning do also include such aspects as those of the level of self-confidence, ability to emphasize, and the degree of logicity or the power to analyze.

### ***Empathy***

The dictionary meaning of the word “empathy” is so plain and clear, and yet so telling: it is ‘the ability to share someone else’s feelings or experiences’ or ‘the capacity for participating in another’s feelings or ideas. It has been pointed out that one might expect a strong relationship between an individual’s capacity for empathy and his or her L2 performance. It is unlikely, though, that someone’s ‘capacity for participation in another’s feelings or ideas’ would be measured in linguistic manipulation tasks; nevertheless, if empathy is an important factor in L2 learning, then it is likely that empathy would manifest itself in the development of communication skills which enable participation in another’s feelings and ideas for more effectively than linguistic manipulation.

### ***Age***

The belief that children are better at language acquisition than adults is supported by scientists. Children who acquire second language in natural environment learn better than adults. Adults may do better on this regard initially, but in the long run children do always surpass them. Children under ten experience enough natural communication in the target language and do always succeed in attaining native-like proficiency, while those over fifteen find it difficult to be able to do so. Various concerned studies confirm this very view, saying that children may not learn second language faster than adults, but they do learn better.



A number of suggestions have been made regarding the nature and causes of child-adult difference in respect of second language acquisition. However, no single suggestion is adequate for explaining the difference between the child and the adult in learning the second language. The first suggestion involved in this connection is *biological*: whether or not the child and adult brains are fundamentally different, and whether or not the differences, if any, do really operate.

In his book, *Biological Foundations of Language*, E.H.Lenneberg says that the development of specialization of functions on the left and right sides of the brain begins in childhood and is completed by puberty. Puberty marks the time when automatic acquisition from mere exposures to a given language seems to disappear. This is so because, after puberty, the left and right hemispheres of the brain develop specialized functions, and the organizer ceases to build up a new language system subconsciously. That is why, Lenneberg says that the transfer of language functions from one part of the brain to another is related to the plasticity that is required for learning a language naturally and completely. However, in his book, *The Language and Thought of the Child*, J. Piaget maintains that in spite of all child-adult differences in respect of language-learning operation, the adults' cognitive superiority should eventually place them better than children in language-learning process.

### ***Interference and Transfer***

The first language has often been considered to be the cause of major problems in the course of learning a second language. However, of late L1 (First language) is not usually looked upon as an annoying interference in a learner's efforts to acquire L2 (second language). According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, the automatic transfer of L1 structure to L2 performance leads to positive results when the two structures are the same. Negative transfer results in error, while positive transfer results in correct

construction. Such negative or positive results are due to the influence of L1 habits on L2 production. For example:

**Aage Chalo** - Forward go, instead of Go Forward.

**Mera naam A hai** - My name is A. This is an example of correct transfer.

Interference refers to a distinct linguistic phenomenon. Psychological interference refers to the influence of old habits on the new ones that are being learned. Sociolinguistic inference takes, us to language interactions, to linguistic borrowings and shifts that occur when different language communities are in contact. The behaviorists who first defined transfer say that, technically speaking, transfer is a process involving an automatic, uncontrolled and subconscious use of learned linguistic behavior in the attempt to produce new response.

### ***Interlanguage***

It is not infrequently that the term *interlanguage* is used to suggest the intermediate stages observable in the learners' language between the native and the target language. The assumption is that there are psychological structures latent in the brain, which is activated when one attempts to learn a second language. It is this stimulus that produces interlanguage, a language system different from that of L1 and of L2.

Moreover, five aspects of interlanguage performance are also mentioned. These are (i) language transfer, (ii) transfer of training, (iii) strategies of learning, (iv) strategies of communication, and (v) overgeneralization of target language materials. This is referred to as Interlanguage Approximate System. This is spoken of at times also Approximate Syllabus. This term has the advantage of implying or pointing to the developmental nature of language learning. The learners' system keeps on being modified as new

elements are incorporated into the learning process. This developing system of language learning becomes evident in terms of the learners' errors.

### ***Errors***

The errors committed by L2 learners are important for a proper understanding of the process of second language acquisition and also for planning courses. A Contrastive study of contact languages may be fragmentary and, so, inadequate, and our attention is thus necessarily drawn to those sources of error which are independent of L2. The factors responsible for or causing these errors are (i) learning strategy, (ii) teaching technique, (iii) folklore in L2, (iv) period over which L2 has been used by the speech community, and (v) the learners' sociolinguistic situation. There seems to be a system in the learners' error, and this system does have its own significance.

### ***Influence of L1***

It is believed that Second Language Acquisition is strongly influenced by the learners' L1. The most obvious evidence in this regard is the accent of the speaker. The L1 utterance does also affect other aspects or levels, including syntax and morphology. It is believed as well that the role of L1 in second language acquisition is a negative one, i.e., L1 gets in the way of or interferes with the learning of L2 in such a way that the features of L1 are transferred to L2.

Really speaking, learning L2 means overcoming the effect of L1 and steadily replacing those features of L1 that intrude into L2 with the characteristic features of L2.

According to the behaviorist learning theory, old habits stand in the way of acquiring new habits. The grammatical apparatus programmed into the mind for the first language interferes with the smooth acquisition of the second. The notion of interference has its

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own centrality in the behaviorist account of L2. Interference results in proactive inhibitions, and in order to be able to develop new linguistic habits, the learner has to overcome these inhibitions.

## **8. Theories of Second Language Acquisition**

There are several theories relating, in particular, to second language acquisition, and these theories do have their own importance in the field of research. In fact, they reflect a variety of perspectives with regard to second language acquisition. These theories are (i) the Acculturation Model (closely associated with the Nativization model); (ii) Accommodation theory; (iii) Discourse theory; (iv) Monitor theory; (v) the Variable Competence Model, (vi) the Universal Hypothesis, and (vii) the Neurofunction theory.

These theories are briefly described below to help understand the real aim of these theories as well the role of the second language acquisition research:

- (a) Second Language Acquisition research may be described as a search for an appropriate level of description of the learners' system of rules. The main goal is description, i.e., characterization of the linguistic categories which constitute the learners' interlanguage at any point of development.
- (b) It seeks what really motivates the learner to learn and what causes him to stop learning.
- (c) A reference is made to two types of Second Language Acquisition--- Assembly Mechanism and Power Mechanism. The difference is important because some theories focus on how, while others on why. It is only a comprehensive theory that would explain both Assembly Mechanism and Power Mechanism.
- (d) Two approaches to the theory of building are mentioned: (i) Theory then Research and (ii) Research then Theory.

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### ***The theory-then-research***

The theory-then-research approach involves four stages:

- (i) developing an explicit theory;
- (ii) describing a testable prediction from the theory;
- (iii) conducting research to test prediction; and
- (iv) testing the new prediction if the first prediction is confirmed.

### ***The research-then-theory***

The research-then-theory approach has **four** stages:

- (i) selecting a phenomenon for investigation;
- (ii) measuring its characteristics;
- (iii) Collecting data to look for systematic patterns, and
- (iv) Formalizing significant patterns as results.

## **9. Discourse Analysis**

One has to look at discourse in order to be able to study how language learning evolves out of the strategies used to carry on conversation. The type of conversation depends on who the learner is: Child or Adult.

<b>Discourse (L2)</b>	
<b>Child learner</b>	<b>Adult learner</b>
Prolonged discourse is difficult	the need of the learner here and now, i.e., to be able to make a request

Discourse analysis considers the teachers' as well as the learners' contribution. It describes not just the function of separate or isolated utterances but also the utterances combined for larger discourse units. A three-phase discourse consists of exchanges between the teacher and the student in the course of which the former initiates and supplies the feedback, while the latter responds. For example:

Teacher: Is the clock there on the wall?

Student: Yes.

Teacher: Good, the clock is there on the wall.

## **10. Classroom Interaction**

It is both pertinent and useful to consider the kinds of classroom interaction. The three basic kinds of pedagogic goals are:

- (i) Core goal: It points to the explicit pedagogic purpose of the classroom.
- (ii) Framework goal: It focuses on the organization requirements of the lesson.
- (iii) Social goal: It involves the use of language for more than personal purposes.

Second Language acquisition follows a route in syntactical development. Native speakers adjust their speech in order to negotiate meaning with non- native speakers. The conversation strategy influences the pace and route of second language acquisition in a number of ways. Conversation, articulate conversation, is at the very centre of second language acquisition.

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