

ACQUIRING NEW LANGUAGES

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1. INTRODUCTION

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- What is language?
- What is language acquisition?
- What are the theories of language acquisition?
- Policy and language
- What are the challenges in a language classroom?
- Are there benefits of acquiring a new language(s)

2. What is language?

- Language is essentially a human activity for the purpose of communication and is inextricably bound up with culture. (*Language and culture*)
- The Bullock Report (1975: 47) refers to language as one of the ways we represent the world to ourselves i.e. the objects, people and events that make up our environment.
- Language is a vital component of the learning process

What is language? (cont.)

- Judith Greene(1986: 17) says that, conventionally, language is defined as having two main functions:
 1. external communication with other people
 2. the internal representation of our own thoughts
- Edith Garvie (1976) agrees that language is essentially a human activity for the purpose of communication with oneself (thought) and others.

What is language? (cont.)

- It may be oral (heard or spoken) or graphic (read or written), consisting of sounds, symbols, words and groups of words with rules governing the pattern thereof.
- It is affected by the ability and the state of the user, the *purpose* to which it is put and the *situation* in which it is used.

What is language? (cont.)

- Brown (1987: 4) gives the following general definition which is based on the consolidation of many other definitions. Language
 - a) is systematic and generative
 - b) is a set of arbitrary symbols
 - c) consists of symbols which are primarily vocabulary, but may be visual
 - d) consists of symbols which have conventionalised meanings to which they refer
 - e) is used for communication
 - f) operates in speech communities or cultures
 - g) is essentially human
 - h) has universal characteristics and is acquired by all people in much the same way

3. WHAT IS LANGUAGE ACQUISITION?

- The process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language, as well as to produce and use words and sentences to communicate.
- Language acquisition is two folded:
 1. Native language/ mother tongue
 2. Second language

4. THEORIES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

- There are some basic theories advanced to describe how language is learnt and taught. These are:
 1. The behaviourist theory
 2. Mentalists theory
 3. Cognitive theory
 4. Interactionism theory
- Behaviourist and Mentalist theories are mainly applicable to the acquisition of native languages.
- Cognitive and Interactionism theories account for foreign language acquisition.

THEORIES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION(cont.)

- Yet, these 4 fundamental theories of language acquisition cannot be totally divorced from each other, for “ ...native language competence serves as a foil against which to set second language learning.” (Stem 1983:30)
- Note: these theories very much complementary to each other, serving different types of learners or representing various cases of learning.
- Second language learning is strongly tied up with first language acquisition.

5. BEHAVIORIST THEORY

- Basically a psychological theory, founded by JB Watson.
- Is actually a theory of native language learning: **Language identity & culture**
- Supporters are e.g. Bloomfield, Skinner
- Behaviourism was advanced in America as a new approach to psychology in the early decades of 20th century by making a particular emphasis on the importance of verbal behaviour.
- Received a considerable trust from the educational world of 1950s

BEHAVIORIST THEORY (cont.)

- The behaviourist theory believes that:
- “infants learn oral language from other human role models through a process involving imitation, rewards and practice. Human role models in an infant’s **environment** provide the stimuli and rewards,” (Cooter & Reutzel, 2004).
- When a child attempts oral language or imitates the sounds or speech patterns they are usually praised and give affection for their efforts.
- Thus, praise and affection becomes the rewards.
- Informal learning.

6. LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- Home and formal learning institutions
- From known to unknown- formalization

Challenges: See Factors

Diminish value: Home language – FAL

Lost registers- generalization

Dominance of idiolects & regional dialects

Code switching

Code mixing

7. POLICY AND LANGUAGE

- The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) highlights the following:
 1. Official languages > Sign language and Mandarin
 2. Redress, Equitable usage of languages
 3. Multilingualism
 4. Development of language policies in different sectors, e.g. Government Departments, Institutions of higher learning, schools, etc. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (2011)
- *Implementation, monitoring & evaluation ???*

8. FACTORS AFFECTING LANGUAGE LEARNING

- **Motivation:** an individual's preparedness and desire.
- **Attitude:** an individual's beliefs and opinion. Gardner (1985: 10) says that the acquisition of a second language is a long and arduous task so any concept of motivation must include an attitudinal foundation that sustains the motivation.
- **Personality:** There is no strong evidence of a consistent relationship between personality variables and achievement in second language learning, but at least two researchers, Krashen (1981) and Rivers (1964) have suggested that personality variables could influence attitude and motivational characteristics (Gardner 1985:25).

FACTORS AFFECTING LANGUAGE LEARNING (Cont.)

- **Climate of the classroom** e.g. realistic expectations for each individual learner, mutual respect between teacher and student, warmth of feeling, a democratic atmosphere with co-operation rather than competition, experience of success and freedom both of choice and from anxiety.
- **Teacher factor:** Quality of conversation
- **Time:** Strict adherence to school time table allocations may mean some children have insufficient time to understand a learning task.

FACTORS AFFECTING LANGUAGE LEARNING (Cont.)

- **Opportunity for learning:** An important factor in second language learning is the opportunity the learner has to use the second language, whether in the classroom or within the second language community itself.
- **Age:** No age restriction

9. CONCLUSION

- The rate of social influence on language learning is not satisfactorily explained.
- To what extent and rate does the social surrounding promote language learning?
- Language without real communication is as useless as Saint Valentine's day without lovers or Children's day without children.
- Incorporation of language module in specialization streams.

THE END

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING

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