

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND LANGUAGE TEACHING IN RELATION TO PSYCHOLINGUISTIC

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ABSTRACT

Languages are not just abstract structured systems, they are as well used in thought and communication and it is the task of psycholinguistics (psychology of language) to discover how knowledge of language is represented in the mind /brain of a fluent speaker and a learner of second language . It is in the light of the above assertion that this paper intends to discuss language acquisition, language learning and the teaching of second language as they relate to psycholinguistics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although, there is no solid evidence to indicate when language may have originated, or why it might have developed in our particular species and how it evolved from its earlier stages, it is believed by linguists that language is species specific and a biologically innate trait of human beings. It is as well believed that language acquisition cannot be accounted for without positing a linguistically specific system of principles and parameters that every healthy child is genetically endowed with a system. Chomsky refers to this as Universal Grammar (UG) or as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) as cited in Akmajian et al, (2003).

Above all, children clearly need to be exposed to linguistic data in order to eventually attain adult competence. Furthermore, language development occurs spontaneously and does not require conscious instruction or reinforcement on the part of adults as claimed by some linguists. In a very short period of time, a child of four to five years is able to develop very complex linguistic systems moving from one word stage to multiword stages on the basis of limited and often fragmentary data.

Linguists share an interest with psychologists in the human properties of language learning and in creativity. Since language appears to share some universal constraints as observed above, we can assume that these constraints exist because of human limitations or predispositions.

Children apparently learn languages in the same way no matter how different the cultures in which they are raised from. Such universal learning is of interest to both psychologists and linguists. Language is also known to be the most creative system as possessed by man alone. As such, psychologists and linguists have a common interest in linguistic phenomena generally. The present paper will discuss language as acquired by man, second language learning and teaching as they are related to psycholinguistics.

2. WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

The question “what is language” is comparable with the question “what is life”? Language is a rule governed system of symbols that allows the users to generate meaning and in the process to define reality, (Tremholm, 1995:82). Within the context of this definition, language exhibits certain important characteristics; it is productive and it affects individual views of the world.

According to (Sapir, 1921) language is a purely human and non instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. (Chomsky, 1957) also defines language as a set of (finite or infinite) sentences. Each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements. Gimson, (1980:4) also sees language as a system of conventional signals used for communication by a whole community. This pattern of convention covers a system of significant sound units (phonemes) the inflection and arrangement of ‘words ‘and the association of meaning with word.

Language development occurs in all children with normal brain function, regardless of race, culture or general intelligence. It can be maintained here that the capacity to acquire language is a capacity of the human species as a whole. Many linguists held a position that all human languages have a similar level of detail and complexity and all languages share general abstract properties Akmajian, et al, (2003).

Despite the fact that different groups of people speak different languages, for example, all human languages can be analyzed as systems consisting of discrete structural units with rules for combining those units in various ways; that is to say, even though, languages differ superficially, they all reflect general properties of a common linguistic system typical of the human species.

It was further observed by Skinner cited in Akimajian, et al (2003) that the behavior of an organism can be accounted for by theories based solely on observing its interaction with the

environment. The child is believed to have been endowed at birth with general learning abilities but not with any language specific knowledge. There is an external reinforcement. A child learns and imitates the adult speakers, he /she is corrected when wrong and rewarded when right.

Though, there were many ideas of how languages come to exist: one idea concerning the origin of human language is that human began to mimic the sounds of nature and use these sounds as referent for the sources of the sound. (Akimajian et al, 2003). This evidence of such mimicking (onomatopoeia) forms a very small portion of the words of any given language. Another speculation is that vocal language gradually evolved from spontaneous cries of pain, pleasure or other emotions. Again, no evidence has been advanced to show how full blown language complete with phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics.

It is believed that, humans and other animals use response cries, but what is left unexplained is “why human developed language?” At present, the most reasonable suggestion about the origin and evolution of human language is that it was intimately linked with the evolution of human brain. Change in the organization and complexity of the brain must also be supposed to have played a crucial role. A Language Acquisition Device reflects the changes in the competence and performance of a child during the acquisition period and thus provides a model of the child’s language learning achievements. The term acquisition is sometimes used to replace learning, though the emphasis is on the natural unconscious way in which a learner can assimilate a second language.

Human language is an intricate system of abstract units, structures and rules, used in a powerful system of communication. One needs to study a second or foreign language to begin to appreciate the enormous complexity of human language at all levels, e.g phonetic phonological, morphological, syntactical, semantic and pragramatic levels.

3. TEACHING AND LEARNING

Learning is relatively permanent change in behavioral tendency and is the result of reinforced practice. (Kimble and Germezy, 1963:133)

Teaching on the other hand, may be seen as “showing or helping, someone to learn how to do a certain thing, giving instructions , guiding in the study of something, providing with knowledge ,causing to know or understood” (Kimble and Germezy, 1963:133).

Teaching cannot be defined apart from learning. Therefore, Gage (1964:269) noted that “to satisfy the practical demands of education, theories of teaching learner to learn and setting the conditions for learning so as to yield theories of teaching. It was felt that, if teaching was above a certain minimum level of efficiency, learning would automatically follow. Teaching is the active skill; learning the passive one.

In several approaches, however, acquisition and learning are carefully distinguished: the former is restricted to what takes place in natural learning situation, the latter to what takes place in classrooms when following a structured course with a teacher. At the theoretical level, researchers in first language acquisition have been working with existing new ideas about language and learning process concepts, such as imitation and habit formation have to a large extent been replaced by notions which emphasize the child’s own creativity in constructing his knowledge of the language. The same ideas have stimulated researchers to view second language learning from a similar perspective and to seek out concrete evidence to support this view.

At the practical level, first language researchers have developed new techniques for collecting and analyzing children’s speech. These same techniques together with others have been used in the field of second language learning to gather data and accumulate evidence about the sequences and processes that are involved. It is not surprising that a recurrent theme has been to consider the similarities and differences between first and second language learning, often, our increased knowledge of first language acquisition has served as a ‘backcloth’ for perceiving and understanding new facts about second language learning.

The view of first language acquisition was strongly challenged under the influence of Noam Chomsky’s linguistic theories and cognitive psychology. To him, language is not merely ‘verbal behavior’ underlying the actual behavior that we observed there is a complex system of rules. These enable speakers to create and understand an infinite number of sentences, most of which they have never encountered before.

To Chomsky, the creativity would not be possible if we had to rely on individual bits of learnt behavior. It is only possible because we have internalized the underlying system of rules. The knowledge of these rules according to Chomsky is our linguistic ‘competence’ which is different from the ‘performance’ that we can actually observe. That is to say what a child learns is an abstract knowledge of rules (or competence). They are exposed only to people’s speech (performance). The field of second language learning was dominated by the same ideas as in first language. i.e habit

formation, reinforcement and repetition of behavior. The second language learner already possesses a set of habits; his native language, some of these earlier habits will help the new learning task. A person's mother tongue or first language is distinguished from any further languages that may be acquired e.g (L2, L3 etc). The term "second language" is a non-native language that is widely used for purposes of communication, usually as a medium of education, government or business etc. English for example has foreign language status in Japan but second language status in Nigeria.

In second language, learners attempt to copy what they hear and by regular practice, they establish a set of acceptable habits in the new language. Properties of the first language are thought to exercise an influence on the course of second language learning. The second language learning environment encompasses everything the language learner hears and sees in the new language. This may include a wide variety of situations, such as, exchanges in stories and club conversations with friends, reading street signs and news papers as well as activities in class. Regardless of the learning environment, the learner's goal is mastering of the target language. The learner begins the task of learning a second language from point zero (or close to it) and through the steady accumulation of the mastered entities of the target language, eventually amasses them in quantities sufficient to constitute a particular level of proficiency (Dulay et al, 1982) and (Ellis, 1984). The characterization of language learning entails the successful mastery of steady accumulating structural entities and organizing this knowledge into coherent structures which lead to effective communication in the target language (Rutherford, 1987).

Second language learners appear to accumulate structural entities of the target language but demonstrate difficulty in organizing this knowledge into appropriate coherent structures. This then raises a critical question: what kind of language do second language learners produce in speaking and writing? When writing or speaking the target language, second language learners tend to rely on their native language structures to produce a response. If the structures of the two languages are distinctly different, then, one could expect a relative frequency of errors to occur in L2. Thus indicating an interference of L1 on L2 (Dechert, 1983) and (Ellis, 1997).

This interference cases can be cited as an example in the structure of 'Hausa language,' one of the major languages in Nigeria. There is always the possibility of committing an error of combining both noun and pronoun in Hausa. For example, a Hausa man learning English language finds it difficult to separate noun from pronoun. He combines the two parts of speech together e.g the structure of English "Mary went to school" can be interpreted in Hausa as "Mary ta je makaranta." This can be translated as "Mary she went school" Thus the two structures are not syntactically the same, but semantically one.

Therefore, learners of a second language transfer 'sounds' structures and usages from one language to the target language. A widely used typology distinguishes two kinds of transfer: similarities between the two languages cause 'positive transfer,' it proves acceptable to use the first language habits in the second language setting. For example, the assumption that the subject goes before the verb satisfactorily transfers it from English to French. However, differences between the two languages cause 'negative transfer,' generally known as interference: First language habits cause errors in the second language. Problem of negative transfer are thought to provide a major source of second language difficulty.

The main aim of behaviorist teaching is to form new correct linguistic habits through intensive practice, eliminating interference errors in the process. Imitation alone does not provide a means of identifying the task facing learners who are continually confronted with the need to create and recognize novel utterances that go beyond the limitations of the model sentences they might have practiced. Nor does imitation suffice as an explanation of the way learners behave: Not many of the errors that are theoretically predicted by the differences between first and second language occur in the language of learners.

The main alternative to the behaviorist approach sees as central, the role of cognitive factors in language learning. In this view, learners are credited with using their cognitive abilities in a creative way to workout hypotheses about the structure of the second language. They construct rules, try them out, and alter them if they prove to be inadequate. Language learning in this account proceeds in a series of transitional stages, as learners acquire more knowledge of the second language.

4. HOW DOES PSYCHOLINGUISTICS RELATE TO LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

Psycholinguistics: is the study of language and brain in relation to psychology .It is a recent branch of linguistics developed in the sixties. It is the study of interrelationships of psychology and linguistic behaviors (Shabitha, 2013). Psycholinguistics uses linguistic concepts to describe psychological processes connected with the acquisition and use of language (Shabitha, 2013).

Psycholinguistics as a field of study did not emerge until 1960s (Treiman et al, 2003). According to them, this was motivated by Chomsky's work in linguistics especially by his claim that the special properties of language require special mechanisms to handle it.

As a distinct area of interest, psycholinguistics developed in the early sixties, as pointed above and in its early form, covered acoustic phonology and language pathology. But nowadays, it has been influenced deeply by the development of generative theory and its most important area of investigation has been language acquisition (Sebitha, 2013).

Psycholinguistics has raised and has also partly answered questions such as how do children acquire their mother tongue? How do they grow up linguistically and learn to handle the register and stylistic varieties of their mother tongue effectively? How much of the linguistic system that they ultimately command? Are they born with and how much do they discover on the basis of their exposure to that system?

Psychology in its early form covered the psychological implications of an extremely broad area, from acoustic phonetics to language pathology. Nowadays, certain areas of language and linguistic theory tend to be concentrated on psycholinguistics. Much of psycholinguistics has been influenced by generative theory and the so-called mentalist theory. The most important area is the investigation of the acquisition of language by children as partly discussed above. In this respect, there have been many studies of both theoretical and descriptive study that arise due to the fact that until recently hardly anything was known about the actual facts of language acquisition in children. Particularly about the order in which grammatical structure were acquired. Even elementary questions as to when and how the child develops its ability to ask a question syntactically, or when it learns the inflectional system of its language remained unanswered.

The theoretical questions have focused on the issue of how we can account for the phenomena of language development in children at all. As observed above that normal children must have mastered most of the structured of their language by of four to five. The generative approach argued against the earlier behaviorist assumptions that it was possible to explain language development largely in terms of imitation and selective reinforcement are not enough, that they also acquire it by natural exposure. Children learn first not items but systems. Every normal child comes to develop this abstract knowledge of his mother tongue, even of a foreign language, to some extent for himself, that is to say that the child's brain contains certain innate characteristics which 'pre-structure' it in the direction of language learning. In order for these innate features to develop into adult competence the child must be exposed to human language.

The bonds between psychology and linguistics become stronger by the extent to which language is influenced by and itself influences such things as memory, Motivation, attention, recall and perception. Psycholinguistics has therefore attempted general theories of language acquisition and language use. Some argue that learning is entirely the product of experience and that our environment affects all of us in the same way. Others have suggested that everybody has an innate language learning mechanism which determines learning or acquisition of language identically for each of us. The two schools are known as 'empiricist' (behaviorist) and rationalist (mentalist) schools.

During the learning of second language, errors are inevitable (first language habits interfere with learning of second language,) though, this can be strictly avoided. If there are similarities between the two languages, the language learner will acquire the target structures easily. But if there are differences, acquisition will be more difficult. This approach is known as the 'Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis.' According to the hypothesis, the differences between languages can be used to reveal and predict all errors and the data obtained can be used in second language teaching for promoting a better learning environment. The well known application in the field of second language teaching is the audio lingual method. This theory sees the language learner with no built-in knowledge.

Error analysis plays a central role in this stage. Errors are likely to emerge when a learner makes the wrong deductions about the nature of the second language, such as assuming that a pattern is general when in fact, they are specific. The errors provide positive evidence about the nature of the learning process, as the learner gradually works out what the second language system is. Some errors are due to the influence of the mother tongue as contrastive analysis claims some come from external influences such as inadequate teaching methods or materials. Some influences arise out of the need to make one self understood by whatever means possible eg replacing words by gestures.

On the other hand, there is also a great deal of educational failure and lack of achievement on the language learning field which also requires explanation. It is therefore important to study the factors that govern success or failure in this field such as the soundness of teaching methods, the attitudes and motivation of the learner, the availability of time, adequacy of resources and the opportunity to learn.

5. CONCLUSION

Language learning is part of the mental, emotional and physical dimension of an individual in the context of society. Psychological factors play a significant role in learner's success in acquiring and using a second language. Every individual has unique character trait that enables him to function in different ways. The learning of second language requires both the acquisition of knowledge about rules and the formation of the habits described by these rules.

Psycholinguistics believes that individual differences are inherent in language and a learner can predict success or failure in him or her language learning. Language teaching procedures can be improved by application of psychological knowledge concerning the learning of language habits. It is stressed that situational meaning must be incorporated into language rules where it is applicable, that the corresponding language habits must be made contingent upon these situational meanings.

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