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Course : Learning and acquisition

1.Introduction

Language acquisition is one of the most impressive aspects of human development. It is an amazing feat which has attracted the attention of linguists for generations. First language acquisition(FLA) and New language Learning(NLL) have been treated as two distinct phenomena creating controversy due to their variability in terms of age and environment. Oxford(1990,4) distinguishes between NLL and FLA. FLA arises from naturalistic and unconscious language use and in most cases leads to conversational fluency. However, NLL is the conscious knowledge of language that happens through formal instruction but does not necessarily lead to conversational fluency or language. Filmore (1985:311) finds this definition rigid because some elements of language use are at first conscious and then become unconscious or automatic through practice. While Brown(1994,48) argues that both learning and acquisition are necessary for communicative competence; particularly at higher skill levels. For this reason, it can be argued that a learning acquisition continuum is more accurate than a dichotomy in describing how language abilities are developed.

In fact, five prominent areas of difference can be considered between FLA in the pre-school period, and NLL in the classroom. These are seen as: age factor, input, approaches to FLA, classroom methodology, and psychological factors.

2.Difference between FLA and NLL

2.1. Age factor

Most linguists believe children learn languages better than adults do. They argue that childhood is the golden age for creating simultaneous bilinguial children thaks to the plasticity and virginity of the child’s brain to make for superior ability specifically in acquiring the early sets or units of language. Children are previleged with a mental flexibility over the adults in learning languages. This may be due to the native-like accent, Brown(1994) claims that this ability is almost missing after puberty and this may explain the difficulty encountered by some adults in acquiring a native-like accent. Unlike children who acquire the language as it is formed and produced by others, the adults often think of how a construction is formed before using it in conversation. A study cqrried out by Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle on a group of English speakers learning Dutch as beyond their cognitive maturity whereas adolescents learned faster in the early stages of second language development. The study eventually signals that adults and adolescents proved a considerable progress in NLL when they practised the language on daily basis in social, professional and academic interactions.

2.2.Input

The form of the input the children receive at home is unlimited, constant and variable in terms of quality and quantity. The experience formal, semi-formal, colloquial and chatty forms of language. As they begin to speak, they become competent in using the language. As they begin to speak, they become more competent in using the language as new skills through interaction with different strategies of storage. In fact, they have the advantage to acquire the culture simultaneously while acquiring language from birth onward. The children’s linguistic system develops in first language acquisition together with the social system, because the language they receive is contextual and wrapped in a cultural form.

In the classroom, the type of input is limited to teacher’s talk and coursebooks. The abscence of a social semiotic may not prevent students from learning the language, but they do not acquire the culture underlying it. Consequently, they feel alienation in the process of learning a second language. This may not hinder them from achieving satisfactory levels of proficiency in NLL, yet culture awareness would give this language learning strength and permanence.

2.3.Approaches to First Language Acquisition

In FLA, no teaching methodology is apparently used in the pre-school period and children’s acquisition of language is the result of conscious exposure to an unlimited amount of input at home. However, linguists believe there are three main theoretical approaches to FRA: Behaviourism, innatism, and the interactionist position.

2.3.1.Behaviourism: Say what I say

Behaviourists consider that FLA is the result of imitation, practice, habit formation and appropriate feedback. In their first attempt to speak, children imitate the sounds and patterns they hear and receive from parents positive reinforcement for doing so. But children’s imitation is often selective and based on what they are currently learning. This resembles to the psycholinguistic approach built on two axes in learning a language, namely stimulus/response.

2.3.2.Innatism: It is all in your mind

This approach pretends that children are bioligically programmed and are born with an innate special ability to discover for themselves the rules of a language system through the ‘‘ Language Acquisition Device’’ (LAD). Later, it was referred to as ‘‘ Universal Grammar’’ (UG). The role of the environment is to stimulate the LAD as claimed by Chomsky(1981:71).

2.3.3.The Interactionist Position: A little help from my friends

The socio-cultural theory of human mental processing with Piaget takes an intermidiate position between the two previous ideas. This theory emphasises the interrelation between environment and language development. Real language is the language which children have acquired through physical interaction with the environment.

2.4.Classroom Methodology

Teachers adopt different approaches to language teaching in the classroom as a crucial factor in NLL, because it may underpin or undermine it. These approaches are categorised into three as given bellow.

2.4.1.Form-Focused Instruction

Teachers adopt traditional approaches which concentrate on clear grammatical forms in order to attain high levels of language accuracy. The priority, then, is to ‘how to say’.

2.4.2.Learner-Focused Instruction

Teachers focus on meaning rather than form. Teaching techniques highlight the presentation of listening and speaking skills over other skills. The priority, then, is to fluency through ‘what to say’.

2.4.3.Communication-Focused Instruction

Teachers emphasise on communication. They support the presentation of grammar items through discovery learning or ‘cousciousness raising’. They provide clarifications, but these strategies never interfer with the overall focus on meaning and communcation.

2.5.Psychological Fator in FLA and NLL

A lot of psychological factors greatly influence FLA and NLL. Experts state that motivation, attitude, intelligence, aptitude, cognitive style, and personality contribute in the process of someone’s second language acquisition. This dominance varies depending on who the learners are, their age,

how they behave toward the language, their cognitive ability, and also the way they learn.

2.5.1Motivation

Richards (1985, p. 185) believes that motivation is important as it determines a person’s desire to do something. Learners who want to learn are likely to achieve more than those who do not. A study by Gardner and Lambert (1972) defines *motivation* in terms of ‘ the learner's overall goal or orientation’, and *attitude* as ‘the persistence shown by the learner in striving for a goal’ (Ellis 1985, p. 117; Patsy Lightbown at.al, 2000, p. 56). They distinguish two types of motivation:

a) *Integrative motivation*: a learner studies a language because he is interested in the people and culture of the target language or in order to communicate with people of another culture who speak it.

b) *Instrumental motivation*: a learner’s goals for learning the second language are functional and useful, for example they need the language to get a better job, to pass tests, to enable him to read foreign news paper, etc.

Motivation can be also be intrinsic and extrinsic. “Intrinsically motivated activities are ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself. Intrinsically motivated behaviors are aimed at bringing about certain internally rewarding consequences, namely, feelings of competence and self-determination” (Edward Deci, 1975, as cited in Brown, 1994, p. 155). Extrinsically motivated behaviors expect a reward, for example money, a praise or positive feedback. Maslow (1970) and other researchers claim that intrinsic motivation leads to greater success in learning a foreign language, especially in a long run (Brown 1994).

Attitude

Attitude is sets of beliefs about factors as the target language and its culture, or their own culture and, in case of classroom learning, of their teachers, and the learning task they are given. Language attitudes are those which speakers of different languages have toward other’s languages or to their

own language. Expression of positive or negative feelings toward a language may reflect impression of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degrees of important, social status, etc (Richards, 1985, p. 155). Gardner and Lambert have investigated a number of different attitudes, which were classified by Stern (1983, p. 376-7) into three types:

1) attitudes towards the community and people who speak L2,

2) attitudes towards learning and language concerned,

3) attitudes towards languages and language learning in general.

Some personality characteristics and general interest in foreign languages can influence learners in a positive or negative way. It is also important how they feel about learning a particular language in a particular course and from a particular teacher. So learners who have positive attitudes learn more, but also those who learn well acquire positive attitudes.

Intelligence

intelligence is general ability to master academic skills. It is measured in terms of linguistic and logical mathematical abilities. Success correlates with high IQ (intelligence quotient) tests scores. Learners with high IQ achieve better results on language tests. It is proved that intelligence can predict the rate and success of FLA in the formal language classroom (Genesee, 1976). Gardner (1983) introduced a theory of Multiple Intelligences. He described

eight types of intelligence:

1. linguistic (sensitivity to spoken and written language, the capacity to use the

language to accomplish certain goals);

2. logical-mathematical (ability to detect patterns, reason deductively and think

logically);

3. spatial (ability to recognize and use the patterns of wide space and more

confined areas);

4. musical (capacity to recognize and create musical pitches and rhythmic patterns);

5. bodily-kinesthetic (ability to use mental abilities to coordinate bodily movements);

6. interpersonal (capacity to understand intentions, motivations and desires of

other people);

7. intrapersonal (ability to understand oneself, to develop a sense of selfidentity)

8. naturalistic (ability to understand the natural world).

Aptitude

Aptitude refers to specific ability a learner shows for learning a second language (Ellis, 1986, p. 293). Richards (1985, p. 154) explains that aptitude is natural ability to learn a language. Further he adds that language aptitude is thought to be a combination of various abilities, such as the ability to identify sound pattern in a new language, the ability to recognize the different of grammatical functions of words in sentences, etc. Students need aptitude - some specific abilities, which are responsible for learning languages. It is ‘a general language processing capability’ and an ‘ability to use language in a decontextualized way.’

Learning styles

Keefe (1979, as cited in Ellis 1994, p. 499) described learning styles as “the characteristic cognitive, affective, and physiological behaviors that serve relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment.” Learning style is also called cognitive style. It is the particular way in which a learner tries to learn something. learners may want explanations for grammatical rules (*audio learners*), some may feel writing down words and

sentences help them to remember (*kinesthetic learners*). And others may find they remember things better if they are associated with picture (*visual learners*) (Richards: 1985, p. 45). Ellis (1986, p. 299) mentions that learning style or strategy accounts for how learners accumulate new L2 rules and how they automate existing ones.

Personality

Personality has been described as a set of features that characterize an individual. It has been stated that this concept is difficult to define and measure because of its complicated nature.

Personality traits are based onthe belief that learners bring to the classroom not only their cognitive abilities but also affective states which influence the way they acquire a language. personality factors are: introversion/extroversion, selfesteem, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety and empathy (Ellis, 1986, pp. 119-121; Patsy Lightbown, 2000, p. 54). personality factors are: introversion/extroversion, selfesteem, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety and empathy (Ellis, 1986, pp. 119-121; Patsy Lightbown, 2000, p. 54).

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is self-confidence is important in any activity. People develop their sense of self-esteem as a result of the information they receive about themselves from others. It expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which an individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy.” Many studies show a positive relationship between high self-esteem and academic achievement (Brodkey & Shore, 1976; Gardner & Lambert, 1972).