

## **Theories underpinning language acquisition/learning: behaviourism, mentalist and cognitivism**

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### **Abstract**

For decades, language acquisition and language learning have been among issues of the great concern to both linguist and psycholinguistic researchers. Many studies were undertaken in such fields and different theories were developed describing how a language is acquired or learnt. Based on scholars' views, this descriptive paper aims to shade light on three main theories underpinning second language acquisition/learning: Behaviourism, mentalism and cognitivism. Departing from the proponents' views behind each of those three theories, this paper attempts to describe the rationale behind behaviourists, mentalists and cognoitivists; viewpoints to language acquisition/learning. While proponents of the behaviourism theory are of the views that children are born with empty mind (Tabula Rasa) as far as language acquisition and learning is concerned, believing that all is a done by environmental exposure; mentalists come up with the view that children are born with innate ability, programmed to acquire and learn languages. Their controversial understanding on how languages are acquired or learnt, are mediated by the proponents of the cognitive theory taken as a bridge between the two previous theories. According to cognitivists children are born with innate ability to acquire and learn languages, but that innate ability needs environmental exposure to be functional.

**Key words:** Language acquisition/learning, behaviourism, mentalism, cognitive.

## **1. Introduction**

Language is characteristic of human being. It is the method of expressing ideas and emotions in the form of signs and symbols. These signs and symbols are used to send or receive the message. Through the language, thoughts are organised, refined, and expressed. For this reason, language helps in the formation of concepts, analysis of complex ideas, and allows to focus attention on ideas which would otherwise be difficult to understand (Nath, 2010). Before we tackle the points to be discussed, it is important to make a distinction between first and second language. The first language learned by a baby is his or her mother tongue. It is the language, the baby listens to, from his or her birth. The second language on the other hand is learned or acquired. To make this means of communication less complicated, scholars observe all ways the language can be learned, among the means discovered, theories are thought of (Hoque, 2017). In this assignment, two theories i.e. cognitive and behaviourism have been identified and are going to be discussed and clarified. However, before talking about the latter, it is very necessary to understand what is a second language learning/acquisition and second language learning/theory.

### ***1.1 Second language learning/acquisition***

Second language acquisition (SLA) and second language learning (SLL) is learning and acquisition of a second language once the mother tongue or first language acquisition is well-known. It is the systematic study of how people acquire a language other than their mother tongue. Second language acquisition/learning is the process of learning/acquiring other languages in addition to the native language. For instance, a child who speaks Kinyarwanda as the mother tongue can start learning English as second language (Hoque, 2017). Acquisition differs from learning as the former refers to the natural adaptation of language rules through using language for communication. In this case, the language is acquired in informal way wherein learner may pick up the language by being culturally active participant of the society. By being actively involved in the learning environment, the learner is constantly in contact with the target language through normal daily routines.

In second language acquisition, one can claim that it is extremely important to look at the learning environment and investigate if the age factor has any effect. Also, motivation is another significant factor of SLA that needs to be discussed (Prófs, 2013). SLL in the other hand, refers to the formal study of language rules and is a conscious process. The point is highlighted by

Krashen, (1981) stating that, learning is available only as a monitor. The monitor is the source of conscious grammatical knowledge about a language that is learned through formal instruction and that is called upon in the editing of utterances produced through the acquired system. This can be done by attending school in the target language, watching local television, listening to radio or/and reading newspapers in L2(Prófs,2013). For more clarification, when environments promote real language use (communication) are helpful to acquisition, while the formal environment has the capacityof encouraging both acquisition and learning (Krashen, 1981).

### ***1.2 .Second language learning/acquisition theory***

The term theory is one of the key concepts associated with SLA. As learning an additional language is a complex phenomenon, it is necessary to describe the way in which learners adopt their new knowledge, as well as the processes and mechanisms involved. In relation to this, scholars have proposed several theories that explain this learning process. Rivera (2015), states that a theory is a more or less abstract set of claims about the units that are significant within the phenomenon under study, the relationships that exist between them and the processes that bring about change. Thus, a theory aims “not just at description but also at explanation. In other words, a theory is an abstraction that scholars propose in order to explain the process of SLA, which can be reduced in scope, or more detailed and comprehensive (Rivera, 2015).

According to Richards & Rodgers (1986), a learning theory underlying an approach or method, responds to these questions:“1. what are the psycholinguistic and cognitive processes involved in language learning? 2.What are the conditions that need to be met in order for these learning processes to be activated?” Learning theories associated with a method at the level of approach may emphasize either one or both of these dimensions.

Processoriented theories build on learning processes, such as habit formation, induction, inferencing, hypothesis testing, and generalization. Condition-oriented theories emphasize the nature of the human and physical context in which language learning takes place (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).Several theories of SLA have been proposed in order to explain aspects of the language acquisition process. In this sense, the main objective of any SLA theory is to try to account for and explain language acquisition by learners with a variety of characteristics in diverse contexts. To that end, many theories have arisen under different perspectives (Rivera,

2015). In this paper, three main theories are described. These are behaviourism, mentalist and cognitive theories.

## **2. Behaviourism Theory**

The behaviourist theory, was founded by J.B. Watson, as a theory of native language learning, advanced in part, as a reaction to traditional grammar. The supporters of this theory are Leonard Bloomfield, O.N. Mowrer, B.F. Skinner, and A.W. Staats (Demirezen, 1998). Behaviourism is a psychologist theory of learning, promoted by Skinner (1904-1990) in his book “Verbal Behavior” published in 1957 (Assaiqeli, 2013) and stands for behaviour that can be observed and measured. Therefore, behaviourism is close to Bloomfieldian structuralism, as both theories focus on parole, performance, and on the visible observable aspects of language (Assaiqeli, 2013, Demirezen, 1998). Children imitate the sounds and patterns which they hear around them and receive positive reinforcement that could take the form of praise or just successful communication.

Later, the Behaviorist theory was developed during the 1940s and the 1970s, especially in North America. This theory visualizes learning under the concepts of imitation, practice, reinforcement and habit formation (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, Assaiqeli, 2013, Demirezen, 1998, Rivers, 1968) and was advanced in America as a new approach to psychology in the early decades of the 20th-century by making a particular emphasis on the importance of verbal behaviour, and received a considerable trust from the educational world of 1950s. Between 1950s and 1960s, in the behaviourist view, language learning is seen as the formation of habits, based on the notions of stimulus and response. The response people give to stimuli in their environment will be reinforced if desired outcome is obtained. Behaviourists claimed that learners learn by undergoing training and practice through a series of stimulus and response chains and operant conditioning. The environment provides the stimulus and the learner provides the response. The major principle of the behaviourist theory rests on the analyses of human behaviour in observable stimulus-response interaction and the association between them (Demirezen, 1998).

Encouraged by their environment, children continue to imitate and practise sounds and patterns until they form habits of exact language use (Lightbown and Spada 1999). The behaviourism theory views that learning is changing the behaviour of students, from being able to produce oral

or written product, the task of the teacher being to control the stimulus and the learning environment in order to change the desired destination approaching. As a matter of fact, this is very significant of Pavlov's experiment which indicates that stimulus response work together. According to this category, the babies obtain native language habits via varied babblings which resemble the appropriate words repeated by a person or object near him. The reward gained thanks to the babblings, reinforces further articulations of the same sort into grouping of syllables and words in a similar situation (Demirezen, 1998). In this case, behaviourism theory is certainly different from other theories that can be seen in everyday classroom learning

According to Hoque (2017), when learning a second language, we already have a set of well-established responses in our mother tongue. The L2 learning process therefore involves replacing those habits by a set of new ones. The complication is that the old L1 habits interfere with this process, either helping or inhibiting it. If the structures in the L2 are similar to those of the L1, learning will take place easily. If, however, structures are realized differently in the L1 and the L2, then learning will be Second Language Acquisition difficult. From a teaching point of view, the implications of this approach were twofold. First, language learning would take place by imitating and repeating the same structures time after time (it was strongly believed that practice makes perfect). Second, teachers need to focus their teaching on areas of L1 and L2 differences. Researchers also embarked on the task of comparing pairs of languages in order to pinpoint areas of differences. This was termed Contrastive Analysis (Hoque, 2017).

Behaviourists state that, theories of habit formation were theories of learning in general. A habit was formed when a particular stimulus became regularly linked with a particular response. These theories were applied to language learning. In L1 acquisition, children were said to master their mother tongue by imitating utterances produced by adults and having their efforts at using language either rewarded or corrected. It was also believed that SLA could proceed in a similar way. Imitation and reinforcement were the means by which the learner identifies the stimulus-response association that constitutes the habits of the L2. L2 learning was most successful when the task was broken into a number of stimulus-response links, which could be systematically practiced and mastered once at a time. Criticisms: The creativity of language- children do not learn and reproduce a large set of sentences, but they create new sentences that they have never

learned before. This is only possible because they internalize rules rather than strings of words (Hoque, 2017).

It is clear that language learning and its development, for the behaviourists, is a matter of conditioning by means of imitation, practice, reinforcement, and habituation, which constitute the paces of language acquisition. Apparently, behaviourism has its shortcomings in explaining how a language is acquired or learnt, but it cannot be denied that learning process is for the most part a behaviouristic processing, a verbal behaviour. In language teaching area, behaviourism establishes the basic background of exercises, either oral or written in viewing language as stimulus and response. In addition, it gives a great deal of insight into the recognition of the use of controlled observation to discover the laws of behaviour. In a word behaviourist theory aims at discovering behavioural justifications for designing language teaching in certain ways, being a hub of many language teaching and learning theories (Demirezen, 2017).

Behaviourism gave birth to a stimulus-response (S-R) theory which understands language as a set of structures and acquisition as a matter of habit formation. Ignoring any internal mechanisms, it takes into account the linguistic environment and the stimuli it produces. Learning is an observable behaviour which is automatically acquired by means of stimulus and response in the form of mechanical repetition. Thus, to acquire a language is to acquire automatic linguistic habits. Behaviourism undermined the role of mental processes and viewed learning as the ability to inductively discover patterns of rule-governed behaviour from the examples provided to the learner by his or her environment and consider that Stimulus - Response to offer little promises as explanations of SLA, except for perhaps pronunciation and the rote-memorization of formulae. This view of language learning gave birth to research on contrastive analysis, especially error analysis having as the main focus the interference of first language on the target language. It also gave birth to interlanguage studies, as the simple comparison between first and second language did not explain neither describe the language produced by SL learners (Menezes, 2013).

The repetition of patterns takes a fundamental role in the acquisition of structures. It is expected that learners would learn these sentence patterns by heart through classroom activities based on mimicry and memorization. One of the most important accounts within this theory is the one proposed by Skinner in 1957. From his point of view, language was learnt through verbal

operant conditions that are controlled by the situation, which includes the social context, the individual's past history and the complex stimuli in the actual situation. One type of operant is the 'mand' (equivalent to a command) that is reinforced by someone carrying it out. Another is the 'tact' (equivalent to a declarative) which is reinforced by social approval (Cook, 2008b). However, Chomsky (1959) argues that Skinner does not acknowledge the internal structure of the learner or how they process input information. In that regard, the behaviourism theory fails to explain why children still make mistakes in the first stages of acquisition of the language even though they have been receiving the correct input. Therefore, the behaviourism theory does not explain the mental processes involved in language learning, distancing itself, for instance, from the sociocultural perspective which accounts both: the external stimuli and the internal mental structure.

An additional concept related to this theory is the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). According to this concept, learners of a second language would start the acquisition process using the habits formed in their L1 and, eventually, these habits would interfere with the new ones needed for the L2. However, it is assumed that learners may be reluctant to transfer or apply their previous knowledge to the L2. This use of L1 properties in the L2 should be a process of identifying similarities, thus making connections between the two languages, rather than a process of mere transference (Myles, 2002).

One of the most representative teaching methods related to the behaviourist theory is the Audio-lingual Method. This methodology was very popular in the 1960s and 1970s, and it is based on the premise of learning through habit-formation. Thus, the classroom activity takes the following procedure: students listen to an audio which contains particular structures and patterns that they must repeat in order to drill grammatical points, such as verb forms and sentence structures. Therefore, students are first taught to listen and speak, and then to read and write based on the assumption that this is the natural sequence in first language acquisition. In this teaching style, students are not expected to draw their own conclusions and take the initiative. Furthermore, the responsibility lies on the teacher who is in charge of the learning process as a source of knowledge (Rivera, 2015).

To sum up, one can assert that according to behaviourists a child is born with *tabula rasa* and *much* importance is attributed to one's environment. Accordingly, children acquire their first

language stimulated by what they hear in their immediate proximity. As they respond by attempting to make the sounds of what they hear through several stages, they are encouraged by the reinforcement in the form of the attention they receive from parents, siblings and the near relatives. Behaviourism sees learning as a process of conditioning, of habit formation, with complex skills being developed through ‘shaping’, that is breaking the behaviour down into parts to be taught one at a time and gradually building up to the composite skill.

### **3. Mentalist Theory**

The mentalist theory also known as innatist theory of language learning, was developed in America by Noam Chomsky, first and later by the neuropsychologist Eric H. Lenneberg. According to Demirezen (1989) the theory came up as a reaction against the Behaviouristic language learning theory, and contradicted its precedent at almost every point of basic structure. Wilkins (1972) claims that the major principle of mentalistic language acquisition theory is that everybody learns 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 Maturation Process. This innate ability is what many scholars have termed language Acquisition Device (LAD), and according to Demirezen (1989), LAD is what counts for language acquisition wherein environment has got no importance for the learning process at all. As cited in Shormani (2014), linguists like White (2003); Cook (2003) and Shormani (2012) ascertain that such a predisposition is biologically endowed and genetically “instilled” in our brain innately in the form of Universal Grammar (UG) which is “a set of principles, conditions and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages not merely by accident but by necessity”. Hence, in Chomsky’s views, what one does in acquisition is internalizing the linguistic system of the language spoken around us provided that we are exposed to sufficient and efficient input of such a language. With reference to the innate ability, Chomsky (1957, 1965) stresses rather active contribution of the child, and minimized the importance of imitation and reinforcement.

As many scholars perceive, in his famous article ‘Review of *Verbal Behaviour*’ (1959), Chomsky criticizes the behaviourists on the grounds of novelty and creativity of child language

use that a child never heard before and proposed a completely different view of language acquisition. His mentalist account of FLA was a challenge to existing behaviourist view of acquisition, and initiated a debate whether language exists in mind before experience, something which has led to an explanation of human-specific language learning faculty.

Preston (1994) asserts that in 1950s, Chomsky attacked the behaviourist theory claiming its failure to meet the creativity of language and to account for the innate qualifications of human mind. The author argues that studying animal behaviours can tell nothing about the nature of how human mind behave, and proposes that the child's capacity of acquiring his mother tongue is mainly derived from his innate universal grammar.

Shormani (2012) asserts that in the mentalist theoretical framework of language learning, there are many things emphasized like the fact that only human beings are capable of acquiring language. Accordingly, the human mind is pre-equipped with a faculty for language learning, Language Acquisition Device (LAD), and input is needed but only to “trigger” the operation of the LAD. Furthermore, Chomsky (1987) adds that there are too complex linguistic structures that cannot be learned so quickly from the environment around children.

The first one is ‘wh-questions’ and their formation. The second includes ‘pieces of language involving ambiguity’. The former, for instance, includes such wh-questions as *what are you talking about?* Where such constructions involve several syntactic complicated operations like subject-verb inversion, wh-movement, among others. The latter involves structures like *Ali requested Alia to leave* where there are two possible interpretations. The first is *It is Ali who leaves* and the second is *It is Alia who leaves*.

In few words, mentalists assert that human behaviour, especially language acquisition is determined not by habit formation and the environment but by the mind and thought processes. Hence, according to Torikul (2013), the experience of language input is only necessary to activate the LAD and this is why the mentalist or innatist theory of language acquisition emphasizes the learner’s innate mental capacity for acquiring a language rather than learning and/or acquiring through imitation and habit formation advanced by behaviourists.

#### **4. Cognitive theory**

Cognitive theory is one of language theories that involve the way in which people think and acquire knowledge and skills. According to Kobir (2018), cognitivism emerged as a reaction to behaviourism whereby cognitivists opposed to behaviourists because they felt that behaviourists ignored the role of thinking in learning. Cognitivists believed that human beings have the capacity for developing logical thinking. Acquiring knowledge is a cognitive process which involves automatic processing and controlled learning. The Cognitive theory emphasizes the fact that the learner brings an innate mental capacity to the learning task. The learner also brings perceptions of relationships between what s/he knows and what he/she needs to know. Learner strategies are used for learning the rules of a language and how to use the language for different audiences and purposes (Garza, 2013).

Cognitive theory was advanced by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) and focusses on exploring the relationship between the stages of cognitive development and language skills. In fact, from the initial period of language learning up to eighteen months, the period of development called by Piaget “sensory motor intelligence”, children construct a mental picture of world of object that have independent existence. At the end of this period, children develop a sense of object durability and will begin to search for the objects that they have seen hidden (Clark, 2009).

As stated by (Prófs, 2013), the cognitive approach is a new theory of Second Language Acquisition and might not be so popular yet to apply inside the classroom. However, it is important for teachers to understand this theory and apply it properly as a guide, to help their students towards successful second language acquisition. As a matter of fact, an increasing development of Cognitivist theories has been developed since the 1990s (Myles,2002), in which, Cognitivism claims that, language learning is not completely different from other activities that comprise the process of learning, hence, it is the result of the creation of networks and associations that take place in the human brain.

The outcome of cognitive development is thinking, while according to Bruner, 1957), the intelligent mind produces from experience generic coding systems that permit one to go beyond the data to new and possibly fruitful predictions. In other words, cognitive thinking is therefore

concerned with the mental changes in a person's mind and these changes are as a result of the cognitive processes.

The processes involved in learning are drawn by Wilburg (2010) as observing, categorizing, forming generalizations, decision making and problem solving which allows the learners to make sense of the information provided. Further, this theory deals with the nature of knowledge itself and how humans come progressively to acquire, construct and use it. Cognitive theories facilitate the improvement and growth of children. According to the cognitive theorist all aspects that are learnt by an individual are as a result of what learners have constructed or discovered, developed by their own mental and not through observable behaviour.

Wilburg (2010) emphasizes that children /learners come to school with knowledge, skills and related experiences to the learning situations and this make them actively involved in their learning process. Cognitivist approaches in education theory and second language acquisition theories emphasize the importance of thought processes in learning. Learning, including language learning, and it is seen as a process involving memory, thinking, reflection, abstraction, and metacognition. Important in cognitive language learning processes is that input is first transformed to intake and then may be transferred from the short-term memory to long-term memory. Learners' possibilities to make their own hypotheses about language and individual learner strategies are seen to be essential in cognitivist approaches (Ally, 2004; Myles, 2002; Petersen, 2014).

Cognitive psychologists sought to discover underlying motivations and deeper structures of human behaviour by using a rational approach (Hoque, 2017). These scholars employed the tools of logic, reason, extrapolation, and inference in order to derive explanations for human behaviour. The psychologists emphasized that, meaning, understanding, and knowing were significant data for psychological study. Language acquisition is innately determined, that means we are born with a Second Language Acquisition Device. According to the same author, Chomsky believes that natural languages are governed by highly abstract and complex rules that not immediately evident in actual utterances (surface structure).

If the child were totally reliant on the data available in the input, he would not be able to acquire these rules. Therefore, the child must possess a set of innate principles which guide language processing. These principles comprise Universal Grammar, the linguistic features and processes

which are common to all natural languages and all language learners. The child's linguistic development is not a process of developing fewer and fewer incorrect structures. Rather, the child's language at any stage is systematic in that a child is constantly forming hypotheses on the basis of the input received and then testing those hypotheses (Hoque, 2017).

As the child's language develops, those hypotheses get continually revised, reshaped, or sometimes abandoned.

In few words, the cognitive theory of language learning is a kind of bridge theory between behaviorism and mentalism. Cognitivists believe that children are born with an innate ability to acquire or learn a language, but they also uphold that this ability can only be developed through interaction with the environment. They assert that children's biological, psychological, sociological and other environmental factors have to interact for the children to acquire language.

## **5. Conclusion**

While proponents of behaviourism believe in the power of environment asserting that infants are born with empty head as language acquisition/learning is concerned, mentalists oppose the idea asserting that an infant is born with language acquisition device, hence programmed to acquire or learn a language regardless the environmental influence. On the other hand, cognitivists came in and act as mediators between the two previous theories. Cognitivists are of the view that children are born with innate capacity to acquire and learn languages, but do not also neglect the role of the environment in which a child is exposed.

According to cognitivism supporters, the environment is also needed to make the innate language ability more operational. Cognitive and behaviourism theories differ in the way that, behaviourism theory stresses the behaviour that can be observed. It also highlight the role of environment, explained by the formation of reaction response. The learning outcome in this regards, is the emergence of the desired behaviour. In this theory, it is believed that human behaviour is controlled by rewards and reinforcement from the environment. So, students' behaviour is a reaction to the environment and the behaviour is the result of learning. Cognitive theory on the contrary, is concerned with the way people think and acquire language. The theory is interested in the effect of how thoughts process, occurring in the mind. The Cognitive theory emphasizes the fact that the learner brings an innate mental capacity to the learning task. The

learner also brings perceptions of relationships between what he knows and what he/she needs to know. Cognitive approaches in second language acquisition theories highlight the role of thought processes in learning: Language learning is seen as a process involving memory, thinking, reflection, abstraction and metacognition.

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