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9603-PSY

**Language
Acquisition &
Creative
Interaction :**

***important concepts in the study
of psycholinguistics***

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music-theatre-language ebooks

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Reference Code :

9603-PSY

Correlating Webpage :

http://www.nachtschimmen.eu/zachar/writer/9603_PSY.htm

Language Acquisition & Creative Interaction:

important concepts in the study of psycholinguistics

Many people don't realise that the study of psycholinguistics is involved primarily with the complex process of language acquisition. Reading on developments within this field have given me the possibility to relate my own experiences with language learning and teaching to the cognitive processes that have taken place both in my own cognitive awareness as well as that of my students. Most importantly, it has been made clear to me that language learning is indeed more than simply the 'teaching' of certain grammatical structures to a passive student, but is a complex, interactive process. Whether it be a child learning his/her mother tongue or an older learner who is attempting to take on a second or third language, more complex processes are involved than simply the memorising of phrases or facts. All language learners are involved with a complex cognitive process over which students and teachers only have partial control. A language student has to work in a most unique way with all the input he/she is given to construct 'meaning', and this involves a remarkable interactive process which combines innate cognitive abilities and an individual method for relating to the world, which for young children results in language being learnt in an incredibly short time period.

As teachers of language, we have to be aware of this contrasting theoretical approaches to language acquisition, although it is hard to avoid being bombarded with an array of different theoretical approaches which attempt to encompass this remarkable and uniquely human talent. These perspectives extend from the more traditional 'behaviouristic' school, epitomised by the work of Skinner in his famous volume Verbal Behaviour, to innatist approaches such as that of Chomsky. The behaviouristic approach involves an attitude to learning, language learning in particular, which is seen to be based on a type of 'Pavlov's dog' principle in which it is considered that human behaviour is taught simply by the encouraging of positive and 'correct' verbal structures and the discouraging of undesirable utterances, entirely related to a context-based situation. The innatist approach, reacting against the behaviourism of Skinner, attempts to take the emphasis off 'context' based learning and place it on 'cognition', where children are considered to be born with a complete apparatus for learning language and in which the context is actually considered 'fragmentary' and therefore less important. Both of these developments have been important influencing factors within the school of psycholinguistics, and the dual approaches will have further significance in this discussion. the importance of these cognitive approaches to language acquisition can be sensed in Miller's definition (1970) which states that "psycholinguistics does not deal with social practices determined arbitrarily either by caprice or intelligent design, but with practices that grow organically out of the biological nature of man and the linguistic capacities of human infants." Despite their relevance to the field, both approaches are now considered extreme points in an argument which is still in its process of development. For my own part, I am inclined to place the emphasis on a position

somewhere between the two extremes. Context is obviously an important element in learning a second language, as has been made clear in the last couple of years through the adopting of Dutch and German as second and third languages respectively. However, the realisation that one doesn't simply learn by continually repeating the 'correct' structure, that some other agenda is taking place beyond the control of the learner, has been made clear to me as well, both by my own apparent improvement in areas that I had never 'consciously' worked on and the clear improvement of my own students through a combination of interaction with context and the gradual acquisition of 'taught' grammatical structures into everyday conversation without apparent practice. Language learning has become a unique and fascinating experience, and in this paper I will be briefly discussing how the teaching process is not one of 'learning', but of 'acquisition' that involves interaction and unconscious creativity on behalf of the student.¹

The acquisition of language, then, is involved not purely with cognitive structures or conformity to a social context, but a dynamic interaction between context and cognition, which acts to mould the linguistic code learnt by the 'student'. For me, the readings have been a confirmation of facts which I had already suspected as a student and teacher of language. In many ways, this has acted to finely-tune the knowledge. Firstly, I was aware that the behaviouristic approach was extremely simplistic in its inability to explain the universal patterns followed by children as they learn language, suggesting the existence of natural cognitively-based language acquisition structures within the subconscious of every human being. Lindfors provide us with a list of reasons to dismiss the behaviouristic approach:

"It is unable to account for (1) the species uniformity of language acquisition, (2) the species specificity of language acquisition, (3) the independence of language development from reinforcement, (4) children's inferring of deep-level structure from an exposure to surface structure, (5) the relatively short period of time, and (6) the early stage in children's lives, during which they acquire so much of a complex linguistic system."

(Lindfors, 1987, pg. 104)

As a result of these inadequacies in the behaviourist view, another view of language acquisition gained ground, known as the "innatist" approach, generally recognized as being fathered by Chomsky. Through the readings, it has been made clear that one must be cautious before putting too much emphasis on 'structure' at the cost of context. Although a child may be born with certain cognitive abilities which allow him/her to learn language, the learning is only possible if the child can interact with context; although even Chomsky recognised that language acquisition was involved in fishing these universal structures from 'fragmentary' context-based interactions. The behaviouristic approach as well as Chomsky's extreme innatist approach fall short when the learning process is examined closely. Language learning is never simply repetition or imitation of 'correct' language utterances or even the 'fishing out' of the correct language structures from the sound world surrounding the child. The process is in every sense of

¹ This approach to language teaching has also implications for the acquisition of other cultural elements. Through teaching and learning music and dance, I have been surprised to notice interesting comparisons between the acquisition of both these areas and language acquisition. Dance and music seems to be 'acquired' by students even without their conscious knowledge: by emerging themselves in the context, cognitive processes are stimulated and the student acquires the structures as a natural part of his/her cognitive make-up. This is certainly food for thought.

the word an 'interactive' one, in which the child attempts to find meaning in the sounds and events that occur in his/her environment. Lindfors informs us that the observation of children learning language in natural settings suggests that language learning is a process of "active figuring-out" of how language works. Slobin, quoted in Lindfors (1987) questions also the structuralist approach adopted by Chomsky:

"It seems to me that the child is born not with a set of linguistic categories but with some sort of process mechanism—a set of procedures and inference rules, if you will—that he uses to process linguistic data. These mechanisms are such that, applying them to the input data, the child ends up with something which is a member of the class of human language. The linguistic universals, then, are the *result* of an innate cognitive competence rather than the *content* of such a competence."

(Slobin, 1966, quoted in Lindfors, 1987, pg. 107)

This definition provides us with a clear image of a 'creative' approach to language acquisition, which can be related to the Lindfors' own views in this regard. Her work has demonstrated to me how important the child is in constructing his/her own language system. According to her, some developmental psychologists, considering children's language development from the larger perspective of overall cognitive development, have "located children's ability to figure out language within a larger, more general ability to 'make sense' of things, and above all make sense of what people do, which of course includes what people say." (Donaldson, 1979, quoted in Lindfors, 1987, pg. 107). The language learning process, therefore, is not purely verbal, but is involved with action, events, emotions and sounds before words come onto the scene. It is very much involved with a growing cognitive awareness of things and beings, and is therefore involved with more simply than an 'interaction' with words, but an 'interaction' with the world and a growing awareness of the child's place in that world: "the child learning language is actively engaged in a social world of language in use." (Lindfors, 1987, Ch. 5). Children learning language are in a creative dynamic situation in which they have to learn to construct the world by providing it with labels, as well as finding ways to perform certain functions. The readings have succeeded in demonstrating to me the fascinating nature of this discussion, as well as its extreme complexity.

I am sure, both through my own experience in language learning and language teaching, that the study of psycholinguistics will have an impact on my approach to second language teaching. Although we seem primarily involved with the child learning a mother-tongue, I have been able to notice comparisons with my own experience as teacher and student. This will certainly increase my awareness in relation to the cognitive processes that go on within the minds of all language students. We are all in an 'active' way trying to find ways to understand the world, and as language is one of the primary ways for us to express this understanding, the learning of language will always play an important role. We can only hope that research will continue in this fascinating field.

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