

## Chapter No.II

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### Learning A Language

#### 2.1- Introduction

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A man is a born learner. His learning process starts while he is kicking in his crib and it continues till his death. Learning is a gift of nature to the mankind. The new born baby learns that people around attend to her only when she cries. She learns to crawl, walk, feed herself and talk. The child slowly develops a vocabulary, acquires the intellectual skills, learns to think and behave like an adult in the adolescent years. With the onset of middle and old age, this learning process still continues. An individual learns a lot many things. He learns to use vast funds of knowledge transmitted to him by his ancestors. Smith H.P. says, " Learning is the acquisition of new behaviour or the strengthening or weakening of old behaviour as the result of experience." 1. Most important of all is the fact that with proper stimulation and incentives there are virtually no limits to his ability to learn. Hence a man, primarily a learning animal, is endowed with the limitless ability to learn.

#### 2.2- Learning a Language--

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Ability to speak and write a language is God's special gift to mankind. It is true that learning a language is the most common and natural phenomenon. Still it can not be denied that it is a complex matter. Robert Lado remarks, "Language learning is complex. It ranges from acquisition of simple automatic skill to an understanding of abstract, conceptual and aesthetic meanings all occurring in the same sentence." 2. Learning a language implies learning of the four basic

skills-listening, speaking, reading and writing. Linguists admit the complexity of the learning of a language. There is no unanimity on how the process of language acquisition takes place. They have proposed two different theories to explain the process of language acquisition viz.

1) Behaviourist Theory

2) Cognitive Theory

2.2-1-- Behaviourist Theory--  
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This school of thought, promoted by B.F. Skinner, dominated the study of language acquisition process up to 1960. According to this theory language is a behaviour like other human behaviours.

As it is a behaviour and not a mental process, it is learnt by a process of habit formation. It is therefore needless to mention that it involves behaviour patterns of stimuli and response. So the behaviourists propound that learning is basically a process of conditioning. Language, according to them, is a conditioned verbal behaviour consisting of a complex collection of stimulus-response bonds. This behaviourist theory assumes three basic principals. These are ---

- 1) While going through stimulus response bonds, a student is expected to make an active response to the stimuli.
- 2) He is expected to minimize the possibility of error. and
- 3) He is given a feed-back to confirm the correctness of his response.

These basic tenets clearly emphasize the point that the learning of language is a mechanical process and not a mental process. The learning of a language, therefore, does not involve the study of the language structures. By habit formation a child learns the language. He imitates sounds and patterns which he hears around him. He follows the adult model in this regard. He receives recognition, approval or some other desirable action by the model agencies and his progress in the matter is ensured. The child goes on repeating the sounds and actions so

as to form a habit. These habits are formed and carried out without any conscious use of cognitive process as is done in the bicycle riding.

This school of thought was so dominant that for the last four decades, language teaching as a whole came under its influence. The new language teaching techniques evolved in this period were oriented to the maganistic interpretation of learning.

#### 2.2-2 Cognitive Theory---

After 1960, the behaviourist theory of learning a language was strongly challenged by the cognitive psychologist, the advocate of which was Noam Chomsky. Learning, according to him, is not a conditioned verbal behaviour but it is the acquisition and storage of knowledge. Cognitive psychologists emphasize the mental processes of learning a language. Learning a language is a complex system that enables a learner to generate and understand an infinite number of sentences. Most of the sentences he generates and understands are not encountered by him before. It demands the 'linguistic competence' which is the knowledge of underlying system of rules. It is, therefore, different from the performance which is actually observed. Cognitive theorists state that a learner has to acquire the abstract knowledge of rules to which he is not exposed through concrete examples. In other words this process can not be explained by habit formation.

It is believed that children are born with some innate capacity of learning a language which is called LAD(Language Acquisition Device) Ghosh, Shastri and Das observe "A child adds to his stock of language by gaining an insight into patterns and underlying relationships that exist in language, abstracting some general system of rules and applying it to generate other patterns." 3. A child creates an order in the language data encountered by him, forms his generalizations and sometimes overgeneralizes the rules in the context where they do not apply.

According to Chomsky, child is quite unaware of this process. A child unconsciously formulates his hypothesis about the structure of language checks it and if it can't account for all data, modifies it. In short, according to the recent linguists, process of learning a language is a cognitive process rather than a conditioned behaviour.

Today many linguists question the behaviourist interpretation and hold the view that language learning is not a mechanical process. But most language teaching methods based on behaviourist assumptions produce results which reveal that behaviourist approach contains a substance. But as Ghosh, Shastri and Das state, "..... the methods can be refined by allowing for the fact that human beings use language creatively and rationally hence language teaching must be creative and must allow the learner to form rational insights and use them intelligently." 4.

### 2.3-- Learning A Second Language-- -----

Learning a second language is much more different and complex than learning the first language. The first language learning is comparatively simpler because the learner is constantly exposed to his first language at his home and in the society at large. Being badly in the communicative need and having a strong desire to express himself to gratify his essential needs, the learner picks up the highly complex code. As he has plenty of models around to imitate, the learner quickly learns the first language. Hence Ronald Wardhough aptly maintains, "Languages are not taught, they are learnt for they are too complicated to be taught." 5.

According to the behaviourist theory, in the learning of the first language the child imitates the language sounds he has heard around. He establishes sound situation relationship to confirm a correct sound in the appropriate situation. But this behaviourism can't be applied to the learning of the second language. The learner is not exposed to

the ample language data and has no opportunity to practice it again and again to get the language habits confirmed. In short, second language learning can't be explained in terms of habit formation due to the limited language exposure. In the Indian context, in case of English, the teacher is the only source of exposure and there are no other models to imitate. Hence Ronald Wardhaugh rightly says, "Learning a second lang. means acquiring a system of rules. But as very little is known about the rules, even less is known about how such rule systems are acquired." 6.

Learning a second language is not an unconscious activity. Rather it is a deliberate activity, a special accomplishment. Reasons of this are obvious. These are--

1) The child after learning his mother tongue has a means of communication and does not feel any urgency to learn the second language to make himself intelligible in the community.

2) Secondly its exposure is restricted as the class room is the only place where the second language is taught and heard and teacher is the only model to imitate.

3) Thirdly as stated by William Littlewood, "Language development depends upon the concepts a child forms about the world." 7. In the case of a second language learner, he has already formed the concepts about the world while learning his mother tongue. Hence, while learning the second language he has to develop an awareness for the new concepts and their relationship with the second language.

Thus, learning a second language is much more complex activity than that of the first language. It is certainly not a mere formation of automatic habits. The above mentioned reasons clearly demonstrate that the learner has to take special efforts to learn the second language. The learner's task becomes much more difficult because while learning the second language there is an interference of the patterns which are already established while learning the first language. The learner has to

overcome this interference consciously. Hence it must be remembered of that the learning of the second language, being influenced by a number factors elaborated below, can not be picked up automatically and unconsciously. It is a deliberate activity and hence it can be rightly called as a special accomplishment.

#### 2.4-- Factors Influencing the Learning of the Second Language--

As mentioned in the above paragraph, the learning of the Second language is much more complex than that of the First Language. The learning of the mothertongue is the most natural process as the learner learns it at home and in the society rather unconsciously. But the learning of the Second Language is marked by the limited exposure. There are many factors which affect the learning of the Second Language. Those are briefly reviewed below--

##### 2.4-1 Motivation

Intrest in learning on the part of the learner is called motivation. As learning a second language is a deliberate, purposeful activity, it is closely interwoven with motivation. S.K. Mangal says, "motivation, in its psychological sense, is concerned with the inculcation and stimulation of the learner's interest in the learning activities. .... It is a force which energizes a man to act and make constant efforts to satisfy his basic motives." 8.

While learning the first language the learner has strong motivation to communicate himself and make himself acceptable in the community. The motivation to learn the first language arises from the need to make himself acceptable in the society and fetch his cemand. s.

It is not so in the case of second language. A learner is not badly in need of the second language for the communicative purpose. Naturally, the success of second language acquisition depends upon the

position is achieved, to learn to communicate in the other language becomes less urgent. In case of English immediate motivation is provided by scholastic objectives rather than the second ones.

#### 2.4-2-- Age ---

It is often seen that the children in an immigrant family learn the language of their new community with native or near native proficiency. Whereas the adults remain foreigners in speaking the language of the new community. Linguists argue that up to a certain age brain has flexibility and language learning takes place more easily and naturally. As advocated by Chomsky, child's innate capacity of language acquisition comes to an end by puberty. That is why up to puberty children can acquire more than one language easily. Spolsky states, "Beyond puberty there is more difficulty much regular degree of variation in the speed and level of acquisition."<sup>10</sup>

Recently this theory has been criticized vehemently as there is no significant evidence that puberty is accompanied by the changes in brain and these changes are so crucial in language learning. Then why do children show more proficiency in learning the second language? In this respect William Littlewood argues that children have more favourable learning conditions. A child is likely to have got exposed to the similar kind of language. A child does not have any psychological barriers like negative attitudes towards other speech communities. An adult has a tendency of analysing and applying conscious thoughts to the learning experience and this handicaps the natural process of learning the language. Moreover a child attaches himself more easily to the group of the children of another language community. Finally the language can be effectively learnt when it is used

learner's willingness, efforts and motivation.

Motivation is of two types

- 1) Instrumental motivation and
- 2) Integrative motivation

Instrumental motivation is that force which motivates the learner to learn and use the language for educational requirements, to read in it and to get better position in his language community.

Integrative motivation motivates a learner to seek membership of the community speaking another language. In a socio-psychological theory a distinction is made between an individual membership group i.e. a group to which he desires to attain a membership. When the learner is placed in the second language learning situation, he may choose the speakers of his own language or the speakers of the second language as his reference group. Integrative motivation is related to this choice of second language group. Wallace, Lambert and their colleagues undertook a study to affirm the importance of integrative motivation on the degree of proficiency in second language learning. Their study concludes, "A person learns a language better when he wants to be a member of group speaking that language."<sup>9</sup>. The integrative motivation is a crucial factor that determines how well the learner learns the second language.

Motivation determines how much energy the learner will devote on learning. It is a complex phenomenon which includes many components like individual drive, need for achievement and success, curiosity and desire for new experiences etc. All these factors affect any type of learning situation. Psychologists have proved that practice without willingness gives poor results.

Motivation is an infinitely complex thing which is very difficult to measure. Still it is certain that the urge to communicate facilitates the process of learning. In the case of the first language, motives are compelling as to be a member of community. Once this vital



in actual situations. An adult learner feels hesitant to use the language which he hasn't completely mastered. A child does not have this type of hesitation in his mind. A child exercises the new language boldly which facilitates the learning of the second language.

Though the theory of changes in the brain affecting the language learning capacity is denied by some theorists, it must be admitted that a child learns the second language quite easily and effectively. So the introduction of the second language at the early age proves beneficial for the effective learning.

#### 2.4-3-- Language Aptitude---

Language aptitude is a crucial factor that accounts for the variation in the level of achievement in foreign language acquisition. All are not identical in their capacity of acquiring second language. Each individual possesses a permanent and stable ability to learn the language. This language aptitude is more prominent in case of second language learning.

Paul Pimsleur defines language aptitude in terms of three factors--

- "1) Verbal intelligence -- A knowledge of words and ability to reason analytically in using verbal behaviour.
- 2) Motivation -- An expression of interest in studying a modern foreign language.
- 3) Auditory ability -- An ability to receive and process information through the ear." 11.

Language aptitude is difficult to measure. Still, in some degree, Carroll and Pimsleur have successfully measured language aptitude. They have successfully isolated the abilities which can be predictive of the success in learning. As per their research " Language aptitude can be measured to some degree learners ability to remember foreign language material, his ability to handle phonetic aspects of the foreign language

mastery, and his ability to make grammatical analysis of sentences...."12  
Though in their research the correlation in language learning and measured  
language aptitude has found to be considerably low, it is a factor that  
can account for individual variation in language learning, particularly  
the second language learning.

#### 2.4-4-- First Language Interference-- -----

When a child learns his first language, his state of mind is quite clean. After acquiring the first language he gets forms, meanings and their associations imprinted on his mind and the first language becomes almost reflex action. Whenever he needs to communicate, unconsciously he turns to his mother tongue as that is the only language he knows.

While learning the second language, the situation is rather different one. A child has already acquired a system of communication. If he wants to produce sounds and systems of another language, he has to check the habits of his mother tongue. Moreover, the child is accustomed to the sounds and patterns of his first language while learning another language, he has to distinguish between the sound of his first language and the other language he wants to learn. Very often he intends to replace the sounds of the second language by similar sounds of his mother tongue. Similarly patterns of the first language interfere with the patterns of the second language. This is why speaking of the second language becomes more difficult.

The Pull of the mother tongue works bothways. There is interference and facilitation as well. When the units and structures of the first language are similar to that of the second language, the process of the second language learning is facilitated because from, 'known to unknown' is the human tendency of learning. A child just transfers the units and structures of native language to the units and

structures of the language to be learnt. But in this case it is only a transference and not learning. When there is no similarity between the units and structures of both the languages, the first language units create interference in the units and structures of the second language. A child has to form new concepts, units and structures. In this case knowledge of the first language units distorts the learning of the second language units.

In psychological terms this phenomenon is called transfer. A child has a tendency of transferring speech habits of one language to the other one. When the first language habits help the learning of the second language it is a positive transfer. And when both the first and the second languages are different from each other, the learner has to overcome the pull of the mothertongue. It is a negative interference. Robert Lado says, "second language is perceived through the habit channels of the native tongue"<sup>13</sup>. Particularly in case of pronunciation the pull of the mothertongue is so prominent that it is almost impossible to get over it.

#### 2.4-5-- Language Experience --

It is rightly said, "language is learnt only through use, through practice. The more one exposes the learner to the use of language the better he learns it."<sup>14</sup>. No language can be learnt only in theory & in isolation from the actual situation. Speaking and listening to the language at a normal conversational speed is called language experience. Language learning becomes possible only through language experience and it must be practised in actual situation.

In case of the first language a child has the sufficient language experience at home, school and around him. While learning the second language, the learner is not in a situation that he is constantly exposed to the language experience in that particular foreign

language. Also he is not in a situation that complies the necessary production of second language. For the better and faster learning of the second language, proper exposure to the language and its use in the actual situation are of utmost importance.

#### 2.4-6-- Teacher -- -----

The teacher who teaches a foreign language should have more enthusiasm and dynamism because it is he who can inspire students to acquire second language skills. Emma Birkmaier rightly says, 'Teacher is a model, guide, coach and motivator in getting his students to attain competence in a modern language.' 15. Unless the teacher succeeds in winning the hearts and minds of his students, the students will not take any interest in learning the language. Hence the place of the teacher in learning the second language can hardly be overestimated.

In case the language like English in a country like India, classroom is the first and probably the only place of exposure to the language and the teacher is the only source of exposure. He is the provider of immediate motivation by making the classroom activities more pleasant, interesting and challenging. A competent teacher can exploit the natural processes of learning with the use of proper tools and techniques and facilitate the process of learning.

The role of the teacher in the process of learning depends upon this competence. An incompetent teacher without proper orientation in teaching the language, mars the process of learning instead of facilitating it. He must have a clear idea about the objectives of teaching that particular language. For example, in the case of English, he must know whether he has to teach it as a literary language or merely as a library language. He must know

the place of English in the school curriculum and he should apply the teaching methods accordingly. Now-a-days, in India, English is introduced from the structural point of view. But very often teachers stick to the age-old grammar-translation method instead of adopting new structural methods. In turn they deteriorate the standard of learning English.

It is true that in the process of learning, the focus must be shifted from the teacher to the student. A learner must be at the central position still the importance of the teacher can't be denied. Ronald Wordhouse rightly maintains, ".....classroom is regarded as a place in which teacher is regarded as a centre of interest, a place in which everything flows from the teacher who knows what is to be taught and exactly how he is going to teach it, in which the learner is merely the endpoint of some kind of process." 16.

Thus the above analysis shows that so many factors go to influence the learning of the second language. Amongst these factors the role of the teacher can hardly be exaggerated. They have to take extra efforts to create love for language by removing the unfounded fears about the foreign language. The trained and sincere teacher alone can accept this challenge. He can provide the necessary incentive & motivation to enable the students to acquire the correct knowledge of the language. In spite of the facilities provided by the school & the laborious persistence of the trained teachers in language the majority of the students do not perform satisfactorily in English in particular.

To have a situation in which only a small percentage of students have acquired the right level of linguistic ability and the vast majority have not is to live with the situation academically indefensible and

socially unjust Prof. S.V. Shastri states, " In the context of the present numerical expansion of education the family and homebackground have become crucial to all learning. " 17.

The educational activity is held as a joint activity of the teacher, the taught and the parents. The parents in particular are a strong source of inspiration for their child. Parents are infact a model for the children. Parents, consciously or unconsciously, with their instinct to teach or no instinct to teach atall, adopt certain methods of speaking to very young children and help them to learn the important things first. Their enthusiasm or apathy, education or ignorance and their attitudes have a bearing on the learning of the children. Besides, the structural, educational and occupational background of the family and the background of the family relationships have a role to play in the student's learning activity. A good and a healthy family is a place which provides necessary comfort, strength and inspiration to do something for one's development. Such a family background is an asset in the process of learning. Keeping this view in mind, in the following pages an attempt has been made to assess the impact of the family background on the learning of English.

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