

Language, Learning, and Teaching

Definition of Language:

Language is a system of arbitrary, vocal symbols which permit all people in a given culture, or other people who have learned the system of that culture, to communicate or interact. (Finocchario, 1964, p. 8)

Language is a system of arbitrary conventionalized vocal, written, or gestural symbols that enable members of a given community to communicate intelligibly with one another. (Brown, 2002, p. 5)

1. Language is systematic – possibly a generative system.
2. Language is a set of arbitrary symbols.
3. Those symbols are primarily vocal, but may be visual.
4. The symbols have conventionalized meanings to which they refer.
5. Language is used for communication.
6. Language operates in a speech community or culture.
7. Language is essentially human, although possibly not limited to humans.
8. Language is acquired by all people in much the same way – language and language learning both have universal characteristics.

Definition of learning

Learning is acquiring new or modifying existing, knowledge, behaviours, skills, values, attitudes and preferencesThe ability to learn is possessed by human, animals and some machines. Human learning may occur as part of education, personal development, schooling, or training. Both teaching and learning are important in the educational environment. (Bodner, 1986).

1. Learning is acquisition or “getting”.
2. Learning involves active, conscious focus on acting upon events outside or inside the organism.
3. Learning is retention of information or skill.
4. Retention implies storage systems, memory, cognitive organization.
5. Learning is relatively permanent but subject to forgetting.
6. Learning involves some form of practice.
7. Learning is a change in behavior.

Definition of teaching

Brown (2000, p. 7): "Showing or helping someone to learn how to do something, giving instructions, guiding in the study of something, providing with knowledge, causing to know or understand".

Teaching is guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn, setting the conditions for learning.

Schools of Thought in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

1. Behaviourism

- Time Frame: Early 1900s & 1940s & 1950s
- Behaviourists saw learning as behaviour change through habit formation. Language is a subset of learned behaviours, so language learning was seen as being similar to any other kind of learning.
- Behaviourist or connectionist learning theories describe and explain behaviours using an SR-model. A connection is established between a stimulus (S) and the organism's response (R) to the stimulus.

2. Cognitivism

- Time frame: 1960s & 1970s
- Human language cannot be scrutinized simply in terms of observable stimuli and responses.
- SLA process can be understood better by first understanding how the human brain processes and learns new information.
- The rationalist linguist has a formalist view of language: the child is preprogrammed for acquiring language (Language Acquisition Device = LAD) because universal grammar is innate.
- They were interested in both *performance* & *competence* (Chomsky) or what is also known as *Parole* & *Langue* (Ferdinand de Saussure).
- **Performance:** the actual use and realization of language
- **Competence:** a speaker's knowledge of his language that enables him to understand an infinite number of sentences often never heard or produced before (a person's underlying and unobservable language ability).
- **Parole:** the appliance of language, the actual process of speaking.
- **Langue:** the general system of language

Linguist Noam Chomsky made the argument that the human brain contains a limited set of rules for organizing language. In turn, there is an assumption that all languages have a common structural basis. This set of rules is known as *universal grammar (UG)*. UG is a theory of linguistics postulating principles of grammar shared by all languages.

3. Constructivism

- Time frame: 1980s,1990s & early 2000
- Advocates: Jean Piaget & Lev Vygotsky
- All human beings construct their own version of reality.
- This school focuses on “individuals engaged in social practices, ... on collaborate group... .(Spivey, 1997, p. 24).
- Concentrates on topics such as: conversational discourse, sociocultural factors in learning, cooperative group learning, etc.
- Learners are thought to construct internal representations as mental pictures of the target language. These internal representations are thought to develop, in predictable stages, in the direction of the full second language system.

Conclusion

- All three positions are important in creating balanced descriptions of human linguistic behaviour.
- These shifts lead to the emergence of new paradigms of teaching methodology (with each new one breaking from the old but at the same time taking with it some of the positive aspects of the previous paradigms).

