

Psychological Aspects of Language Acquisition

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A. Acquisition of mother tongue:

1. Universality of acquisition

No child fails in learning naturally his mother tongue except the deaf or the dumb. So universal is the phenomenon all over the world, whatever the language, that one is almost tempted to believe that the ability to speak is innate. It is only apparently so; language is actually acquired. Children without any exposure to language, for instance, those who are brought up by animals or in total isolation, do not have any language.

Acquisition of a language by children is achieved within a relatively short period between the ages of 1 and 3 in spite of the complexity of the task. The result is remarkable for its perfection. Oral language is acquired successfully regardless of the level of general intelligence. When learning is almost complete there is not much difference among illiterates, whatever be their social rank or avocation. Just faulty pronunciation of some words is occasionally noticed due to physiological defects in vocal organs. Some children having psychological problems develop stammering.

The child picks up language simply by listening attentively to the language spoken to him or around him. Parents want their child to understand what they say to him and they use for the purpose a simplified language known as caretaker's speech or baby talk. In the first stage he seems to be interested only

in what is spoken to him. Later he shows interest in the talk going about around him.

2. Understanding precedes expression

The child, before he knows the meaning of words, even before he is able to realize that they could have a meaning, is interested by the sound combination of words. Each word has for him its features, which he is able to recognise; words have life for children. The special relation of the child with words explains his interest for poetry which is sought to be satisfied by lullabies and various sorts of traditional poetical compositions accompanying children plays.

The language heard by the child is stored and remains latent for some time in the brain; it is put to actual use slowly, first for understanding. This starts at about 12 months. The child is then able to recognise a known voice or familiar sounds indicating certain facts concerning him, like the preparation of his food. His hearing system gets every day sharper and sharper. Between 12 – 18 months the child is able to follow simple commands and responds to interdictions. 90% of the comprehension ability is attained at the age of 3. The American psychologist Eric. M. Lenneberg describes the process thus:

“Between the ages of two and three years, language emerges by an interaction of maturation and self-programmed learning. Between the ages of three and the early teens,

the possibility for primary language acquisition continues to be good; the individual appears to be most sensitive to stimuli at this time and to preserve some innate flexibility for the "organisation of brain functions" to carry out the complex integration of sub process necessary for the smooth elaboration of speech and language.

Though parents are aware that the child understands what he is told or what is going about around him, they do not press him to speak except on rare occasions like greeting visitors or thanking them for the present offered, or when the child weeps and the parents are eager to know the reason in order to console him effectively. When pressed to speak, the child remains resolutely silent; the parents impute caprice to him but the truth is otherwise. Speech by its very nature is a spontaneous act which cannot be obtained by external pressure. For the child to speak he should be willing to say something and be able to say it.

3. Process of acquisition

The first exteriorisation of his feeling takes place without speaking. He cries, he smiles, he pushes what is not desired, he gesticulates with anger. He responds to familiar sounds and noises like knocking at the door, sound of the clock, etc. At about one year, first words are uttered, sometimes modified to suit his pronouncing capability. These words do not usually carry the meaning which adults attribute to them. The child speaks to himself a language of his own profusely. When the child wants to communicate with others he starts using the same word for several things. Then single words, with their actual meaning appear. When he attempts sentences, he shortens them according to his cognitive attainment. First two word sentences appear: dog comes, daddy's pen, etc. Then sentences with more words are used.

It would be interesting and useful to investigate further how the acquisition as

described above takes place. It is not mere soaking up a language as one would be tempted to think. Unconsciously and without any deliberate action there is simultaneously storing and organisation of the raw materials. Between the age of 2 and 3 while storing the language, the child has at its command an innate hypothesis forming faculty which enables him to devise unconsciously grammatical rules in respect of the language. In this connection the American psychologist, Jerry.A.Fodor would observe as follows:

It seems likely, on the basis of recent investigations of children's speech, that a child runs through a series of candidate syntaxes, all but the last of which are discarded because they fail to capture(or because they misdescribe) relevant regularities in his corpus.

This explains the discontinuity in learning that is observed. In fact in the process of learning one may notice certain steps apparently backward. The child who initially was saying "did", "told", all of a sudden starts saying "doed", "telled", but reverts after certain time to the correct forms. Learning of a language by the child is not like addition of bricks. Each time there is construction of language by the child with the help of memory and logic, placing reliance on one or the other. Logic, as soon as available to the child, being more economical in terms of effort than memorising, the child starts placing reliance on it. When he discovers that verbs end with "ed" in the preterite, he makes use of the logic. Afterwards when he finds that logic has failed in some cases he takes note of the exceptions and stores them with the help of memory.

4.Effort involved

On account of the apparent ease with which the child acquires a language, one is tempted to think that there is no effort. In reality, it is not so. With some attention one can perceive the amount of effort spent by the

child in uttering the first words, the first sentences and even thereafter in saying certain unusual words. The apparent ease gets explained by the total involvement of the child in the venture. Speaking is vital for him to satisfy all his needs which become more and more varied, including the urge to participate in the family life, to understand it, to be a full partner and play his role. So his whole energy is harnessed. It is accompanied by the pleasure arising out of the success in his new experience of expression. Effort is there, but is not manifest on account of his high motivation. Language learning without effort by the child is nothing but a myth attributable to lack of close observation.

5. Acquisition of more than a language from the start:

A child can pick up more than a language at a time from the beginning, if placed in a multi-lingual environment. Only one condition is required: the child should be normal. It would be helpful to the child if a particular person speaks always the same language. The child being eager to get what he wants, when he has to communicate with persons speaking different languages, he acquires all of them. Between 3 and 4 the child is able to speak to each of his interlocutors the language of the latter. He is even able to serve occasionally as an interpreter. When a word is not known, the child does not use the word of another language, he resorts instead to a periphrasis in the language of the interlocutor. He easily realizes that each language is a separate entity; he is not tempted to mix up languages..

People sometimes wonder whether it is not harmful to expose the child to more than a language. Observations so far made have not indicated any harmful effect except in the case of children having mental defects or linguistic difficulties. Such children should not be subjected to such an effort. If the child is normal the fact of learning simultaneously two languages

entails a better development of mind.

The acquisition of one or more language by the child by mere exposure and need to communicate is a natural operation for the humankind. However through this way he acquires the skills of understanding and expression in the oral language only, which the humankind was satisfied with for millennia. When he goes to school he has to learn the written form of a language already known to him. That takes place according to classroom techniques.

B- Acquisition of a second language

Whilst acquisition of the mother tongue is always a success, acquisition of a second language through teaching in schools has been found to be an immense failure in all countries. The reason is that the second language is being considered as a subject like others, ignoring the natural process of acquisition of language. In natural process, acquisition follows the flow of circumstances in actual life. The learner chooses what is of interest for him, whereas in the process of teaching the choice is not that of the learner but that of the teacher. Exposure to natural language as such is too meagre. Language is rather presented as a set of formal elements to be apprehended outside any communicative context and without real communicative purpose, in the form of model sentences selected with a methodical progression. Excessive reliance is placed on grammatical rules which have no relevance in actual life situation. Language is presented as an artificial construction, something different from the mother tongue. Students are not made to react authentically to real language. So, there is low intake and only fragments of language are learnt.. The focus being on the form of language rather than on its communicative interest, what is learnt cannot be put to use for communication, especially for oral communication.

When language is taught, acquisition of

both oral and written languages is simultaneously attempted which is against the natural course of language acquisition. This complicates the process and usually written language takes the pride of place. The teacher finds it easier to teach. Grown up pupils and adults are more at ease with written language. They are keen on having the written support. Oral language appears to them somewhat evanescent. They feel that they have a better hold on language when it is in its written form. Since they are apprehensive of mistakes, they do not like oral exercises in which mistakes are immediately known to all the classmates. Thus teaching slips easily into traditional school exercises and acquisition of language as such cannot take place. James.J.Jenkins, an American psychologist discards this method in very strong words

Language , essentially , is an auditory product; when one takes away the auditory side of language and is forced to present it in the visual domain, the innate process that makes language acquisition so speedy and impressive performance operates extraordinarily poorly. Language "through the eye" means to demonstrate little power to activate the language-learning mechanisms and to initiate the necessary system-building activities.

So for learning a new language in school one has to pay full attention to the psychological process of such acquisition and the various factors involved which are summarized below:

1) Communication

Language being essentially a tool for communication, learning requires communication. Teachers and pupils should be engaged in communication activities. The teacher is expected to speak only in the target language. He may resort to extra-verbal media if necessary. In this way, the learner is placed from the beginning in a communicative context. Communication involves more than talking to

students, the latter should be actively involved by way of answering or executing orders given. What the teacher says should be of interest to the pupil so as to make him listen to eagerly. Students at the beginning may be allowed to respond in any manner: gestures, single words, faulty language, broken language. Teaching would consist of tasks leading to simulate a situation, to expose the pupil to living language and provoke communication. There is no escape from this way.

The mode of teaching now largely prevalent can help the student to get successfully through a conventional examination. What is learnt has to stand the test of use in real circumstances of life. Looking from that angle one would find that much of the matter in which he succeeded in the examination evaporates thereafter. What remains is the amount of living language he came across accidentally in the "methodical" teaching. In other words the only worthy acquisitions are rather the side effects of the planned teaching.

2) Repetition

A word, or sentence pattern has necessarily to be met several times for getting memorized. The teacher resorts to repetition and makes it interesting; in that way language is acquired without conscious effort. Learning by heart and reciting several times is an easy and fruitful exercise which everyone can resort to. Instead of providing one short text on each topic, it is preferable to provide several texts on the same topic and long texts from the same book so that the same words are met several times. The learner who has reached the adequate level would be well advised to read the same book or watch the same film again and again, if found interesting

3) Intensity of learning

There are three phases in the process of learning a language, which are:

- i. Early exciting phase

- ii. Middle unrewarding phase
- iii. Final joyful victory phase.

In the early phase the attraction of novelty kindles motivation. The easy exercises like, listening and reading, doing simple drills ect... can be successfully gone through.

In the middle phase complication starts; pupils are asked to write and to speak. They are then prone to commit mistakes not done earlier. If they are allowed to linger in this phase regression takes place. It is therefore imperious to cross quickly the second phase before the interest for language vanishes. For that purpose the minimum of teaching would be 2 sessions per day and one session per day when the learner is able to avail of individual exposure outside in the class room.

4) Maturation

Though the teaching should be intense in the initial stage, one cannot expect immediate result, such is the complexity of the language acquisition process. One has to listen and read a lot before attempting to speak or to write. Short answers and simple exercises are possible and desirable, but for actual speaking and writing one has to wait. Interstitial rest is necessary for the maturation process. Sometimes, language is used by the learner in silent form when he thinks or dreams. But compelling too early to express orally or in writing will prove counter-productive. The learner should not be asked to search his brain for what proves elusive. Understanding would suffice for some time. This may be accompanied by a large amount of preparatory exercises with slow progression and easy enough to be done always with success. So one has to wait till what is sought to be learnt is assimilated perfectly and becomes readily available for natural use. Expression will spring in due course if the intake is looked after. The take off comes all of a sudden on a fine day. One gets the impression that he has crossed the border, that he has jumped into a new world.

5) Continuity in learning

What has been memorized with great effort is susceptible to be forgotten. Some kind of continuous practice is necessary especially as long as the teaching consists mostly of oral language. Interruption in learning a language is disastrous. Therefore, it would be extremely useful for beginners to have language classes or any other form of exposure during the vacation time as well.

Once he has decided to learn, the pupil should do it continuously till he reaches the stage of relative fluency enabling him to keep contact with the language by himself in one form or other. When actual use after learning is not in sight, the easiest way to keep contact with the language is reading. Acquiring reading ability during the period of learning is essential.

Oblivion is variable according to age, the level obtained and the way in which the language was acquired. Children forget more easily than adults. The easier you learn, the quicker you forget. But when studies are resumed, acquisition is found easier. Language units remain hidden in the brain, available for use, quick progress is noticed as compared to fresh beginners. The sooner the resumption, the better the result.

6) Effort feeding success

One of the secrets of nurturing motivation is to make room for success which releases energy and sustains the effort. Since the real intake, which is the amount of input that is absorbed, depends on motivation, the teacher should carefully avoid creating failure complex. Certain teachers have a liking for vicious and trap questions. They are totally to be banned because they reduce motivation. One makes progress in the language when he comes into contact with the level of language that is a little beyond his current level of competence. He apprehends the extra input with the aid of his entire linguistic knowledge and the range of his acquired experience in life. Language

difficulties should be limited in words and sentence patterns. Stumbling through a difficult text does not yield any result. Too many difficulties discourage. The progression should be slow. One should take care to offer a large number of texts with imperceptible increase in difficulty rather than few ones with sharp ascent requiring a lot of explanations. Language learning is not a matter of understanding alone, but it is process of slow impregnation.

7) Tolerance of irregularities

Learning a second language requires openness of mind and tolerance. The rigidity of mind is fatal. Some learners, specially adult learners, are prone to find fault with the language, for not obeying the kind of logic they are accustomed to. Each language has got its own logic which is different from that of the mother tongue and that logic will appear to the learner only when all the rules of the language are sufficiently mastered. Even then, there would always remain exceptions. Those exceptions have got their explanations in the history of the language that are better left to philologists. The learner has to take the language as it is with humility and love, if he wants to progress. Idiomatic forms of expression constitute the charm of each language. Language is essentially a matter of usage. It is to be learnt by patient exposure and practice.

8) Selection

The speed of acquisition is not the same in respect of all words, sentence patterns and phrases. Some of them, one has been in need of, are apprehended at first appearance and even stored. But words not at all related to one's experience, past and present, are hard to store. Even if stored by way of special effort, they get out of mind soon. Some words are stored for their musical value, even if the meaning is not well known. Even when a large portion of a language is stored, there is for

each one of us a preference vis-à-vis some words and patterns, which surface readily for the purpose of expression. Others are not at our command, even though encountered several times; but for the purpose of understanding they are familiar. So, each one of us has got an active and a passive vocabulary, the latter being of course larger.

9) Trial and error

From the data available to him, the learner formulates hypotheses regarding the rules of the language. That operation forms part of the strategy of learning. Elaboration of rules by way of generalisation of a pattern, recourse to analogy, shaping the corresponding verb, substantive, adjective, adverb, when one of them is known is something that everyone is tempted to do. In that process the learner unavoidably commits mistakes in pronunciation, in the form of the words or in respect of grammar on account of the ignorance of irregularities and exceptions in the language. These mistakes are manifestations of the learning activity. They are normal and unavoidable in the process of learning. At no cost the teacher should allow the classmates to laugh at a mistake. Of course no mockery by the teacher himself. If mockery is resorted to, nothing can be obtained thereafter from the pupil who would remain decidedly silent.

There is an understandable apprehension in the mind of the teacher that defective forms may become habits and would then become hard to eradicate. So, teachers react violently to mistakes. But that is not a good strategy. Censuring of mistakes in one way or other will only cause inhibition and no positive results. On the other side, initially defective forms do not necessarily become habits, if some precautionary measures are taken. The pupil is to be made aware that his expression has not reached perfection in form, that it is provisional. If he remains alert enough to apprehend the correct pronunciation and

the important distinctive features of the target language, his expression will become more and more correct. Mistakes will diminish in course of time. If the pupil does not have such an attitude he will not make much progress in language, punishment notwithstanding.

10) Interference of the acquired language.

The second language used to be taught formerly through the mother tongue or another language already known. This created several difficulties which have been perceived long back. Educators have even gone to the extent of saying that one has to forget one's language to acquire another. There is some truth in this sally. On account of the natural laziness of the mind, one has some repugnance to search for another way of expression when he has already got one. The old form is the first to appear in the mind at least till such period as the second language is not mastered enough. At any rate, one has to take stock of the fact that the known language acts as a screen. We have to study how such knowledge operates in order to evolve a strategy. The learner is tempted to resort to a large extent to words and sentence patterns of his mother tongue. By a close comparison of both the languages it is possible to predict the areas of learning difficulty. One can take also clues from the mistake usually committed by learners and evolve elaborate corresponding corrective exercises.

Advantages and difficulties arising out of a language known would depend on differences between the two languages in respect of script, sounds and sentence patterns. When the script is different it has to be learnt; but mistakes in pronunciation are less. For a second language learner, who usually had already a good intellectual development, learning a new alphabet is quite an easy task. On the contrary if the script is the same, the learner will be tempted to read the target language in the same way as his mother tongue. In such a case it is imperative

to start reading only after a long exposure to oral language. Otherwise words met for the first time in written form and not heard earlier sufficiently will be pronounced as in the mother tongue.

C- The age to start the study of a second language

1) Psycho-physiological factors

The general perception is that children learn more easily a second language than adults. Before assessing to what extent age affect results let us have a peep on the findings of science regarding the way age operates in the acquisition of language. Brain maturation studies show that during the first years of life the process is very rapid. Maturation is achieved to 60% when the child starts speaking and then slows down progressively. The most favourable period appears to be between 2 and 5. During that period, there is an interaction of maturation and self-programmed learning. At the age of 5, the brain is sufficiently developed to tag general principles with rules of exceptions. Passage from coordination to subordination takes place. The child moves progressively from juxtaposed utterances to organized, coherent and cohesive speech. At the age of 8, the child is able to cope up abstractly with the language and to acquire quickly without difficulty the concepts and corresponding vocabulary. As regards the exact process, Kenji.Hakuta, an American psychologist would observe thus:

One should not be fooled, however, by the developmental order in which their characterizations of language emerge, from communication to meaning and grammar. It would be rash to conclude that there is a progression with grammar developing out meaning and communication. Grammar, meaning, and communication are distinct levels of language and cannot be interchanged. Each has its own course of development, and it is still unclear how they are related to each other

At the age of 12 the mind is shaped for formal operations and the essential of mental and linguistic structures is constituted. The brain is now programmed. There is no more docile assimilation of the first years of life, when brain was plastic and receptive to all language units and when units of different languages could be deposited at the same time. This capacity slows down with age, because the brain is turned progressively towards other purposes. Speech units of the mother tongue are well anchored and appear to stand in the way of units of other language. Acquisition of a second language is no longer instinctive; it becomes intellectual. Acquisition of written language becomes easier, there is some handicap in picking up oral language.

2) Motivation

Motivation plays a big place in any work or learning. It is indispensable for acquisition of a second language. The word "motivation" is quite commonly used, but its nature is only confusedly perceived. Motivation arises out of need or interest, it is sustained by external factors and is easily subject to variations. In its manifestation, it is the will to learn..

Among pre-school children the exposure to language would be only through activities, and the motivation would depend on the interest those activities generate. It may become equal to that for the mother tongue.

Among school children, there is no personal desire to learn a second language. But the desire to please parents and to be acknowledged by the teacher as a successful pupil is present. At the same time there is also more docility to class-room activity and spontaneous enthusiasm for learning. The novelty of the sounds and of exotic words pleases. But school children get easily bored; their attention lasts only for a short span, so, variety in the exposure to language is necessary. It is essential to nurture motivation till the learner experiences a permanent appeal for the language.

If the content of the text to be studied is familiar to pupil with something new, it will kindle his interest. It is therefore necessary to link language lessons with the personal experience of the learner instead of selecting authoritatively the series of topics to be covered. If both the content and the language are alien to him, the pupil gets discouraged. Good results can be obtained by selecting topics from class room experience and from among what the pupils have already learnt in other subjects. Language lessons would then act as a repetition of a lesson in another subject. Pupils will realise that the second language is another manner of expression but not altogether a new subject to be learnt for itself.

Among higher school children and adults, motivation is necessarily present, otherwise they will not undertake the study of a new language. They are ready to deploy a sustained effort because they have some goal in mind; they are also able to concentrate on language study for a long stretch of time.

3) Assessment of results

a- Learning by picking up a language

This relates to oral language only. The observations so far made by research scholars reveal that children reach a ceiling lower than the adults and that such a ceiling is reached faster. Almost all children succeed in learning the language they are exposed to, whereas some adults do not. Subjects in their 20s resemble the adolescent group more closely than the subjects in their 30s and 40s. The capacity to learn declines with old age.

The younger the age of learning the quicker the acquisition fades away, if there is no continuity. If the practice of language is continued up to the intellectual period of 12 and beyond, the result is more durable. Even otherwise speech units acquired in the young age are easy to recover at a later stage. There is also greater facility in reproducing sounds

specific to the targeted language

b. Language taught in class room

Teaching a language through classroom methods usually includes both its written and oral aspects. Such a teaching is possible only after two years of schooling when pupils have learnt to some extent reading and writing in the mother tongue. It has been found that children who have not mastered well reading and writing in the mother tongue, make little progress in the second language. Even among those who make a good start, many reach soon the ceiling. They can acquire ability in simple conversations, but they cannot get the skill in understanding texts in second language dealing with serious matters nor do they become able to write.

In most of the countries it has been found that teen-agers above 12 and even young adults were better learners than those below 13. They make faster progress. This is quite natural because when written language is attempted to be learnt along with oral language the nature of the matter to be learnt changes considerably. Malleability of mind of the younger children which helps them store quickly in their brain speech units of oral language is not of much avail when what assumes importance is written language for the acquisition of which mental development plays a bigger role.

As far as adult professionals are concerned, recent experiences have shown that those adults having already a good command of their mother tongue acquire as working knowledge of the second language for general purposes, the ability to read and understand the technical literature of their profession, all just within a period of intensive

coaching of six months. The best among them, upon continuing to peruse technical literature in the second language, acquire even the ability of writing thesis in their subject in that language.

In conclusion young age is physiologically more favourable for acquiring the oral language, it does not prove to be an asset for the acquisition of written language for which maturity of mind of those aged 13 and plus is an advantage. It has also been found that one can acquire or improve any skill in the second language at any age if he is talented and motivated. But late starters have sometimes difficulty to get the exact pronunciation. If learning is started early and is not continued, what is learnt fades away. It would be wise to start the study of a language when the need thereof is felt.

It is essential to bear in mind that language learning is not conditioned only by age. There are several other factors whose combination could override age. They are the competence of teachers, the knowledge of the language by the parents, the time allotted for teaching, the aptitude of the pupils, the skills sought after. These are formidable factors which can overshadow the age factor. Therefore, it would be wise not to start teaching a second language when the required conditions are not favourable. Study of a second language made compulsory on a mass scale at a low age would require a large number of competent teachers, which is difficult get. Results will prove definitely better if started later with competent teachers.

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