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METACOGNITIVE APPROACHES TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

The Metacognitive skill is thinking about those techniques that one can apply to remember the words. Beyond the technique one's mind can think of developing further techniques to make memorizing easier.

Meta is a prefix from Greek meaning beyond or behind. "Cognition" refers to the mental result of perception, learning, and reasoning. The whole term means what lies behind the ways of thinking that result in perception and reasoning. It is like thinking of the ways of thinking. To clarify the definition regards for example the mnemonics which is a method or system to improve the memory. To memorize words this system has been developed applying some techniques by using some words or short poems for example to remember other words. The process of reasoning while creating those words is a cognitive skill that depends on logical reasoning and learning thereafter.

Cognitive as well as Metacognitive skills could be developed in early childhood. It results in the ability of understanding and analyzing one's own learning methods. Developing those metacognitive skills is an ongoing process. If learners are not used to it and you ask them for example to "monitor and assess their own progress in learning" they won't be able to do so unless trained to think beyond the thinking they do to learn or acquire.

English has been referred to as the Global Language with a strong emphasis on the fact that English language is linked to technology hence to development of nations and modernization. English takes a primary position in the education system at the risk of marginalizing local language and other College subjects.

The impact of globalization has propelled the teaching of English with greater urgency and has major implications for the language teaching contexts in which English is prioritized above other immediate educational concerns and over the promotion of bi / multi lingualism.

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The Metacognitive skill is thinking about those techniques one can apply to remember the words not just applying them. Beyond the technique your mind can think of developing further techniques to make memorizing easier.

Cognitive as well as Metacognitive skills could be developed in early childhood. It results in the ability of understanding and analyzing one's own learning methods. Developing those metacognitive skills is an ongoing process. If learners are not used to it and you ask them for example to "monitor and assess their own progress in learning" they won't be able to do so unless trained to think beyond the thinking they do to learn or acquire.

If you are an English language learner for eg – taking a certain Course, when asking you about the impact of visual auditory tools on your learning process and which is more effective for you, you might not be able to answer that, because your cognitive skills allows you to learn, reason and perceive what the usual and auditory (Video / Voice) tools offer you. Metacognition enables understanding, analysis, and control of one's Cognitive processes. It is also known as active learning.

Today, it is difficult to think of success in any career in India without adequate proficiency in English.

Where English is not the medium of instruction at any university, it is necessary to adopt special methods to secure an adequate knowledge of English as a second language.

On the whole, it may not be out of place to say that English is no longer just our window on the world, or the link language, or any other tool of restricted use as it was in the past. It has now become the language of our daily life, and there is hardly a domain where English is not used.

In India, English is taught along with other languages. One has, after all, only limited time and energy to invest in learning these languages and it is difficult to decide upon the priorities what kind of language and to what extent should it be learnt? Will the learner have the freedom to choose from the available languages and standards, and the

teachers be there to facilitate this choice? In a multilingual and multidialectal context, as in India, these questions are no longer only academic; they concern the teacher on a day-to-day basis.

In a seminal work, Le Page (1968), and Le Page and Taouret-Keller (1979) have argued that, to learners, different languages available for learning in a community may not be unrelated and unnecessary. The learners gradually come to know that they are expected to learn and use these languages. Le Page argues that the community with which the learners may identify themselves may vary with time, age, education, job, habits, lifestyles and the cultural values the learner may have.

There are plenty of instances to show that a multilingual setting may or may not be an asset, but it is certainly no liability. Multilingualism can be turned into a asset for the language learner. Concepts and expressions in one language can be exploited for learning those in another. ELT in India can utilize multilingualism as a resource. Apart from being used through translation, which has not lost its relevance, the Indian language(s) known by the learner can also be utilized for creating concepts and for enhancing the choice and the motivation of the learner. Here is a positive role for ELT in a multilingual setting.

This allows for greater learner autonomy and the learner's control of his/her own learning. It permits varying levels of learning among a group of learners and makes language learning an individual activity. This would contribute to high learner motivation and make learning relevant to individual needs and perceptions.

Ordinarily speaking, 'thought' and 'language' are considered to be exclusively human faculties, like flying for birds and swimming for aquatic creature. Chomsky (1988), claims that some animals can be taught a few words and can have a vocabulary of some sort (Elliot 1981: 17-23). But it is very different from any human being's proficiency in language. He says:

....the language faculty does appear to be a unique human possession.

More basic questions that await an answer are – what do we mean by ‘language’ and ‘thought’? is there a difference between them and if there is, what is the nature of this difference? What are the similarities, how are they related and yet not related? What is language? Can there be thought without language and language without thought?

It is generally agreed that thought is different from language. We can transfer thought from one language to another. We can use any language to express any thought. The question of Characterizing thought is considered to be a part of the realm of psychology and ontology (Banerjee 1988). Hence, we will here confine ourselves to language and language learning. The word ‘language’ is variously used as the system of expression of one’s thoughts, system of verbal behavior which differs from group to group, and a system of comprehending and collecting concepts to be stored in memory. In other words, language is defined as a medium of comprehension and communication, besides being a group specific entity such as English, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, etc.

‘The term “language” as used in ordinary discourse’, Chomsky argues, ‘involves obscure socio-political and normative factors. It is doubtful if we can give a coherent account of how the term is actually used. This is not a problem for the ordinary use of language. Its conditions require only that usage be sufficiently clear for ordinary purposes. But in pursuing a serious inquiry into language, we require some conceptual precision....’ (Chomsky 1988: 37).

Many sociologists consider language to be a form of social behaviour. Language, according to them, has relevance only in a social context. It can neither be learnt nor used outside a social context. Change in any aspect of this context results in a change in structure and use of language by individuals. So the best way of looking at language may be to look at it as a social phenomenon.

There are three currently popular views of language, namely: Cognitive, Behavioural and Social. All of these views also have implications for the theory of language learning. It will help us

understand the dynamics of language learning and the mechanics of good pedagogy.

Language learning takes place through a process of habit formation, good habits are reinforced by repetition and reward. Making patterns of vocabulary and sentence structure are part of the habit system, should be the main goal of language teaching.

Chomsky says that the actual language performance of the speaker or hearer is a complex matter that involves many factors... performance, that is what the speaker-hearer actually does, is based not only on knowledge of the language, but on many other factors as well- factors such as memory restrictions, inattention, distraction, non-linguistic knowledge, beliefs and so on (Chomsky 1968:3)

People acquire a second language only if they obtain comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input in. when the filter is down and appropriate comprehensible input is present (and comprehended), acquisition is inevitable. It is, in fact, unavoidable and cannot be prevented – the language ‘mental organ’ will function just as automatically as any other organ...In other words, comprehensible input is the essential ingredient for second language acquisition. All other factors thought to encourage second- language acquisition work only when they contribute to comprehensible input.

Students motivation to learn a language is thought to be determined both by his attitudes and by the type of orientation one has toward learning that language. The orientation is instrumental in form if, for example, the purpose of language learning reflects the more utilitarian values of linguistic achievement, such as getting ahead in one’s occupation, and (the orientation) is integrative if, for example, the student is oriented to learn more about the other cultural community, as if he desired to become a potential member of the other group.

Nida (1956) and Spolsky (1969), feel that the learner’s attitude to a language affects the nature and intensity of his motivation to learn and

be a cultural factor. In a typical language learning situation there are a number of people whose attitudes to each other can be significant: the learner, the teacher, the learner's peers, parents, and speakers of the language. Each relationship might well be shown to be a factor controlling the learner's motivation to acquire language, thus, may vary from community to community and individual to individual. An individual verbal item is likely to resemble that of any other(s) only to the extent of the individual's motivation.

The individual creates the system for his verbal behavior to resemble those of others to the extent that 'he is still able to adapt his behaviour'. Creating a system of verbal behaviours is generally seen as a cognitive ability. The ability is said to be the highest in childhood.

We cannot say, as even today, we know relatively little about 'language' or language acquisition/ learning', or about the mind/brain which is assumed to have a vital role in this process. About the mind or brain, as Chomsky admits (1986: 39), we know very little. We know little also about the mental processes involved in learning a language. So Plato's question---- how it is that any child can know more than there is evidence for it to know (Chomsky, 1986: xxv---xxix)----- remains. There is need for fuller investigation with adequate data before questions of this kind can be answered. Experts in the field are not sure whether the use of a word like 'learn' s appropriate in the situation. They feel that the words 'acquire/acquisition' should be used as in first language acquisition. Krashen (1985), Klein (1988), Flynn and) Neil (1988), Aitchison (1988) and any others use 'acquisition' even for the second language.

In the dictionary sense of the word, it may be all right to Say that people 'acquire' the first language L1 and 'learn' the second language L2. After all, the circumstances and results of learning these languages are often quite different for many people. There is a considerable body of literature on the differences between first language and second language acquisition. These differences are presumably owing to different circumstances and achievements in acquisition/learning. While

everybody has abundant exposure to the language to be learnt in the context of first language acquisition (FLA), it is not always so with the second language. Neither does everyone get to learn the second language in 'natural' circumstances like one's first language. People often learn it through instruction.

Attempting to distinguish between the first language acquisition and second language learning, Krashen says:

There are two independent ways to developing ability in second languages. Acquisition is a subconscious process identical in all important ways to the process children utilize. In acquiring their first language, while learning is a 'conscious' process that results in knowing about language (1985: 1).

It seems now reasonably well-established, that there is a special component of the human brain (call it 'the language faculty'), that is specifically dedicate to language. The subsystem of the brain (or the mind, from the abstract perspective), has an initial state which is genetically determined, lie all other components of the body: the kidney, the circulatory system and so on. . . . The language faculty 'grows' from the initial state through childhood, reaching a relatively steady state at some stage of maturation. This is the process of language acquisition, sometimes misleadingly called 'language learning'. The process seems to bear little resemblance to what is called 'learning'.

Age seems to be important factor in second language acquisition. Many people have wondered whether there is a 'critical period' for language learning, before and after which, as Chomsky (1988) says, it may not be possible to acquire another language with Aitchison further argues that if there were a cut-off point, no language acquisition could take place after adolescence. But this is not found to be true. Hence, the same universal principles

govern both first and second language acquisition, although 'there will be interference, differences in processing capacities. . . . , general decreasing plasticity, and a failure to keep acquisition abilities active, rather than to any type of language ability shutdown

It has also been found that cognitive processes of learning as by rule-formation, facilitate older learners to acquire language faster than by the natural process of unconscious acquisition.

In its basic substance, the hypothesis is difficult to challenge. It is a widely attested fact, that all children learn/acquire all languages not entirely at the same time. They seem to grade the language and then go in an order, which need not necessarily be from easy to difficult, or from less difficult to more difficult. But there does seem to be a natural order. Similar phenomena have been found with regard to phonology, morphology and syntax. In the course of learning/acquiring a language, children follow a natural order which is yet to be well understood.

Krashen observes, 'comprehensible input', 'is necessary for acquisition, but it is not sufficient.' the acquirer needs to be 'open to the input'. He must be positively inclined to make the best of the available input and acquire the language. In other words, his 'affective filter', to quote Krashen, should be 'lowered'.

Learning, particularly the learning of a language, is an emotional experience, and the feelings that the learning process evokes, will have a crucial bearing on the feelings for the task is vital for the success of the task.

Attitude and motivation in second language learning
It is extremely important to have a positive attitude and motivation for success, especially in second language acquisition. We will look at them in some details now. According to Hutchinson and Waters,

'the importance of the emotional factor is easily seen if we consider the relationship between the cognitive and affective aspects of the learner. The cognitive theory tells us that learners will learn, when they actively think about what they are learning. But this cognitive factor presupposes the affective factor of motivation. Before learners can actively think about something, they must want to think about it. The emotions reaction to the learning experience is the essential foundation for the initiation of the cognitive process.

What we really need to be concerned is about the cognitive. Some learners are abstract thinkers, while some learn more towards concreteness. Putting it in another way, some need a personal touch to learning, while others prefer and can cope with an impress orientation in processing information. some need a holistic picture of things, while others are more analytic and see things as component parts. Some can see themselves only separate and individual identity. And while some learners have better interpersonal skill and are socially sensitive, others are more into themselves and are less skilled in social relationships.

Research, related to what makes for effective language learning, has shown that there are certain distinct characteristics associated with what we might term a good language learner. Good language learners have a positive approach to learning the language. They actively look out for opportunities for using the target language in meaningful situations. They are not inhibited about using the language whatever their current proficiency. Good language learner in other words, do mind taking risks, or making mistakes and learn through trial and error. They also have certain well develop study techniques, e.g. preparing and maintaining vocabulary lists, and they constantly monitor their own errors. They are self-learners.

Nevertheless, once we realize that learners come to us with different motives and needs, and ultimately what we might call abilities and levels of proficiency in the language, consequent to their differing attitudes to learning a language and learning styles; and once we become aware that learning takes place in interaction and through

interaction, we will have to accommodate these ideas in the form of a different orientation to teaching- teaching geared towards training the learners to become partners in managing learning.

We will start with what is considered one of the best ways to teach a language if it is to be learnt well. We all know that individual practice and a qualitatively and quantitatively high degree of interaction in the classroom is conducive for the learning of a second language. For one, language is a skill rather than a content subject, and for another, the process of language learning is interaction.

An interactive classroom is the answer for a mixed group of learners. We cannot get rid of mixed ability learners, wave a wand and make them all equal ability learners or keep hoping for learners at the same level of proficiency. This would be totally unnatural and nearly impossible even in the most ideal of situations.

To get back to learner-centered teaching, the teacher in a learner-centered pedagogy is an explorer. Teaching then becomes enquiry-oriented where she/he observes, monitors and describes for herself/himself what is happening to the learners, analyses why things are happening as they are, and in this constant sensitivity to and questioning of her/his teaching, improves teaching.

The cycle of action, reflection and improved action makes teaching a highly challenging and interesting activity and keeps the teacher professionally alive.

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