

## The Psychological Rationale behind Foreign Language Teaching

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### 〈Abstract〉

Psychologists and linguists have conducted much research into various factors which may affect acquisition of a language. The research, however, has been made mostly on the assumption that children are to learn their mother tongue. Teaching a foreign language to adolescents or adults causes more complicated problems which cannot be fully explained by the theories based on that assumption.

Some psycholinguists have argued that foreign language learning is basically a mechanical process of habit formation and that our environment affects all of us in the same way. Others have suggested that all human beings must possess some internal capacity for language that other animals do not have, for all normal human beings learn their languages successfully. Although either view may have implications for language teaching, it is only the environment that we can manipulate in teaching. Other factors are sometimes proposed to account for individual variation in language learning. It is said that aptitude, motivation, and age are important variables. In addition, personality and cultural background to which the learner belongs may be included in the factors.

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### 외국어 교육에 있어서의 심리학적 논거

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### 〈요 약〉

심리학자나 언어학자가 언어습득에 영향을 끼칠 수 있는 여러가지 요소에 관하여 연구를 거듭해 왔다. 그러나 그 연구는 주로 어린이들이 그들의 모국어를 습득할 경우를 전제로 하고 있다. 성인들에게 외국어를 가르칠 경우에는 상기한 가정에 의거한 이론으로써는 충분히 설명될 수 없는 더 복잡한 문제를 야기하게 된다.

어떤 학자는 외국어 교육은 근본적으로 습관을 형성하는 하나의 기계적인 과정이라고 주장하고 있으며 또 다른 학자는 우리 인간이 언어를 성공적으로 배울 수 있다는 것은 다른 동물이 가지고 있지 않은 선천적인 언어습득 능력이 있기 때문이라고 주장한다. 어느 주장이나 언어교육에 관련된 의미를 가질 수 있지만 실제로 우리가 가르치는데 조정할 수 있는 것은 환경 뿐이다.

외국어를 배우는데, 개인적인 차이를 나타내는 몇가지 요인이 있는데, 그 중에서 중요한 것은 적성, 동

기, 그리고 연령을 들 수 있다. 게다가 개인적인 성격과 그가 속해 있는 문화적 배경이 그 요인에 포함될 수 있다.

### I.

Both psychologists and linguists have conducted much research into various factors which may affect acquisition of a language. The research, however, has been made mostly on the assumption that children are to learn their mother tongue. Teaching a foreign language to adolescents or adults causes more complicated problems which cannot be fully explained by the theories based on that assumption.

In this paper, I intend to discuss from the psychological point of view those problems involved in teaching English as a foreign language to those who have already acquired their native language,

The principal concern of the psychology of language learning is to give an account of the psychological processes that go on when people produce or understand utterances, that is, the investigation of language performance. But one of the ways of investigating this is to try and understand how people acquire such an ability. This is the study of language acquisition. It is important, if we are not to prejudge the issue, to make a distinction between language acquisition and second language learning. The main argument against language acquisition and second language learning having anything in common is that language learning normally takes place after language acquisition is largely complete. In other words, the language teacher is not teaching language as such, but a new manifestation of language. The language learner has already developed considerable communicative competence in his mother tongue and he already knows what he can and cannot do with it, what some at least of its functions are.<sup>1)</sup>

Language acquisition takes place in an infant and the young child at a time when he is acquiring many other skills and much other knowledge about the world. Language learning, that is, learning a second language usually starts at a later stage, when language performance has already become established and when many other physical and mental processes of maturation are complete or nearing completion.<sup>2)</sup>

### II.

According to behaviourists, as Rivers points out, 'Foreign-language learning is basically a mechanical process of habit formation.'<sup>3)</sup> In addition to that, Nelson Brooks states, 'The simple paramount fact about language learning is that it concerns, not problem solving, but the formation and performance of habit.'<sup>4)</sup> They describe that learning a language is like learning to type, to ride a bicycle or to carry out any of the other routines that we characterize as habits. The belief derived from stimulus-response formula assures them that the notion of repetition is extremely important in learning a language. I have no intention at all of denying the principle which has remarkably contributed to teaching English as a foreign language. But I would like to point out that it may be risky sometimes to regard learning a language as a simple mechanical process of habit-formation without conscious use of cognition. Variety of usage in a language is too wide to be formulated certain categories in comparing with the limited number of keys of a typewriter. It is presumed that the habit of typewriting is formed by kinetic sense which can be developed by physical practice, while language learning is more concerned with mental exercises.

Here is an instance of my failure in teaching English strictly following audio-lingual method: I still cannot forget the embarrassed look of an American lady when she was greeted by my students uttering "How do you do, *sir*?" immediately after she had been introduced to my class. It was resulted from the mechanical repetition without cognitive process. It is needless to say that they know she was a lady but they just mechanically responded as they used to do to me. Repetition succeeded in making them form a habit but they apparently made a mistake by addressing her as '*sir*' instead of saying '*ma'am*.' Mistakes of this kind could be made very often if students are required to repeat mechanically without cognition. Having formed a habit of greeting to a man, a learner should have a choice of shifting it to a woman, whenever it may be necessary, which should not be done mechanically but more or less consciously. In other words, he has to choose one of the usages which are already known to him when he wishes to respond to a stimulus. As repetition increases, the interval of time for choosing the correct usage can be shortened to some extent. When he does not have an adequate usage in his stock for a particular case, which is actually more likely to happen, he has to construct his own by accumulating pieces of knowledge which he has acquired. This is not to say that the grammatical system is given as innate knowledge but that he has an innate means of processing information and forming internal structures, and that, when these capacities are applied to the speech he hears, he succeeds in constructing a grammar of his native language.<sup>5)</sup> To make his own utterances understood he has to follow certain rules of language. Therefore he needs to know some rules of language, which, in my opinion, should be provided with repetition and production of language.

Whether in classroom or laboratory, behaviourist teaching relies more on analogy than on rules for teaching the structure of language. Teaching which encourages the learner to construct sentences according to a previously learned set of rules is thought to hinder the instinctive production of language. The behaviourist likes to use the term 'analogy' when a child builds a new sentence from a similar one he has acquired. It seems to me that he, in fact, uses rules to make the new one even if he does not realize it. Then, why should it be wrong if he is provided with some rules of grammatical structure?

To a learner who has already acquired the first language, a new word of the second language naturally comes through the meaning of the first language and he can hardly visualize it without the meaning. As a matter of fact, he takes it for granted that he constructs a sentence with several words translated directly from the first language. In language laboratory, recorded tapes can provide learners with a sequence of stimulus-response-reinforcement. Even there I think it is necessary to account for meanings of sentences if they seem to be too difficult to follow. Otherwise, the learner will learn nothing but a series of peculiar sounds. Without meaning, he can hardly be expected to obtain any achievement in learning a foreign language. In this sense, I agree to what the mentalist insists: "The learning of a foreign language should therefore be a meaningful activity throughout."<sup>6)</sup>

The main argument in favour of assuming that language learning and language acquisition are different processes is that the language learner is a different sort of person from the infant; that there has been some qualitative change in his physiology and psychology at some point in his maturation process; and that these changes in some way inhibit him from using the same learning strategies that he used

as an infant, or make available to him same whole new range of strategies which he did not possess before. These notions are all included within what has been called 'the critical period' for language acquisition.

Lenneberg summarizes what is meant by the critical period: Language cannot begin to develop until a certain level of physical maturation and growth has been attained. 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 organization of brain functions to carry out the complex integration of sub-processes necessary for the smooth elaboration of speech and language. After puberty, the ability for self-organization and adjustment to the physiological demands of verbal behaviour quickly declines. The brain behaves as if it had become set in its ways and primary, basic language skills not acquired by that time, except for articulation, usually remain deficient for life.<sup>7)</sup>

### III.

Learning a native language by a child is quite natural behaviour and the reason he desires to learn it is obvious; that is to say, he is more motivated than in any other situation. Because it is the only way that his physical and emotional needs can be satisfied. In other words, he has the strongest possible motive for learning the language. We can think of a similar situation where learning a foreign language takes place with such a powerful motivation. If you are living alone in a foreign country where only the target language is spoken, you can find no other

means but to express your-self in the language to carry out what you desire. But as a language teacher, you cannot expect such an ideal situation in which a learner is fully motivated. What we are more concerned with, in general, are those learners who wish to learn a foreign language in their native country.

By the time a grown-up learner comes to learn a new language his vocal organs have been fixed in the way that is appropriate to his native tongue. He possibly encounters new sounds which are not in his mother tongue. So, he tends to assimilate them articulating them closely to those, he thinks, which sound identical in his own language. Strictly speaking, however, there is no exactly identical sound between two different languages. This makes it much harder for him to produce the new sounds and to follow the new language. They may have various reasons for learning-to pass an examination, to use in their job, to use on holiday in the country, as a change from watching television, because the educational system requires it, because they want to know more of the culture and values of the foreign language group, because they wish to make contact with the speakers of the language, because they hope to live in the country concerned, and so on. Out of this diversity a distinction has been made between two different types of motivation: 'instrumental', as represented by the first five reasons, 'integrative', as represented by the last three. The instrumentally motivated learner requires the language as a means to some other end, whereas for the integrative learner the language and all that it brings by way of culture is an end in itself.<sup>8)</sup>

Various researches have been carried out to see which reasons and which attitudes correlate with successful language learning and therefore constitute 'good motivation'. All the most recent research agrees that it is the integrat

ively motivated learners who are the most successful.<sup>9)</sup> As a teacher of English with some years of experience, I cannot help referring to personality of a learner, which is also one of the leading factors to be considered in teaching a foreign language. Not only in an English class, but also in any other class, there are some students who respond more positively to your teaching and some others less positively, I should say, negatively. It may be related more or less to the extent of motivation they have. But more often it can be regarded as exposure of learner's personality. Those who are positive in learning naturally take part in the class with enthusiasm and are not afraid of making mistakes, while those who are negative are timid and usually too self-conscious to participate in the class.

With varying degrees of conviction many explanations are offered for the lack of success of a poor learner. Perhaps he is not 'gifted for languages', or whereas he has a visual memory, the method of teaching is purely oral. Possibly his 'musical ear' is poor so that he cannot reproduce the sounds of the foreign language. Alternatively, he may be better suited to learning 'analytically', while the teacher eschews any analysis of what is being taught. His failure to use the spoken language with any ease may be put down to the inhibiting effect of an introverted personality. With a hint of disapproval we may hear that he is not 'well motivated', the suggestion being that his achievement is well short of his potential. The older he is the more likely it is that his age will be put forward as the explanation of his failure to learn.<sup>10)</sup>

As grow-ups are generally more self-conscious than children in learning, this is of particular concern in case your students belong to the former group. It is undeniable that self-consciousness inhibits them from learning a foreign language. It probably causes them

to be hesitant in repetition and imitation which is assumed to be an inevitable part of language learning. They may incline their ears to what others repeat and how others respond but if there is no active responding, there would be consequently no reinforcement and no repetition.

Once they are exposed to speaking with a native speaker, their personality affects the rate of learning decisively. The positive learners take advantage of the opportunity, whereas the negative ones are likely to retire into themselves, unless they are highly encouraged. If they are unable to overcome the self-consciousness in the beginning, they would be left far behind the positive ones in learning. For this reason, a teacher should pay more attention to the learner who reveals negative response. In this respect, I fully subscribe to the principle of behaviourism, since language learning cannot take place without active responding.

In teaching a foreign language in an advanced class, it is strongly recommended to use the target language as much as possible. When a new word appears, a teacher should describe it briefly in the language instead of explaining it in his native language. Or he may ask one of his students to describe the word if it is presumably understood in his own language. By this way, the learner can have an opportunity to express himself and becomes confident of his speaking ability, which encourages him most of all. Conducting a class, sense of hearing should be applied more than any other senses. It was found more effective through my experiences to have learners listen to tapes or to an informant leaving their textbooks closed when a new chapter was introduced. Otherwise, sense of hearing operates far less than that of sight. If you allow them to open the books while listening to tape, they are in fact reading with eyes

following the books, not listening at all. Listening should be stressed more for those who have acquired reading ability to some extent. Once they can hear what is told, they can possibly manage to speak it. On the contrary, if they cannot understand what is told, they will never be able to answer it. This is why listening is so strongly emphasized.

Another factor in learning a foreign language I would like to point out is that the cultural background of the target language must be taught especially when the learner belongs to an entirely different culture. Lack of knowledge about the culture often makes him misunderstand, which may lead to what is called 'cultural shock'. It is, therefore, strongly suggested that language teaching should cover the cultural background concerned. Without understanding its culture he can hardly be expected to fully master the language.

#### 7.

Psychologists and linguists have attempted to formulate general theories of language learning and language acquisition. Some of them have argued that foreign language learning is basically a mechanical process of habit formation and that our environment affects all of us in the same way. Others have suggested that all humans must possess some internal capacity for language that other animals do not have, because all normal human beings learn their languages successfully. Although either view may have implications for language teaching, it is only the environment that we can manipulate in teaching. Other factors are sometimes proposed to account for individual variation in language learning. It is said that aptitude, motivation and age are important variables. In addition, personality and cultural background to which

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