

# Learning, Learning About and Learning Through Language

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## Abstract

Many theories have evolved over the years on language and learning. Halliday's (1981) theory on Learning, Learning about and Learning through language is discussed in this paper. For any learning, use of language as well as interaction with others is necessary. Language learning is not a solo process, it has to be developed through social interaction.

The paper elaborates on the three facets of Learning, the distinctions and inter relationship among them. The concept of scaffolding and its help to make learning a language more effective is described. The three facets seem alike, but studying them apart helps to understand their individual contribution to the language development of the child.

**Keywords:** Learning a language, learning about Language, Learning through Language, Theory of Learning, Language Development, Scaffolding

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## 1. Introduction

Importance for researchers in multiple areas like linguistics, psychologists, and academics has been the meaning of language, learning and the inter-relationship between them. The early researchers on learning followed different directions: Various theories have been developed to explain how language is learnt and taught. Some of the important theories are the Behaviorist theory, Mentalist theory (Innatism), Cognitive theory, and Interactionism. These theories are complementary to one other, representing various cases of language learning.

Basically, "the behaviorist theory of stimulus-response learning, particularly as developed in the operant conditioning model of Skinner, considers all learning to be the establishment of habits as a result of reinforcement and reward" (Wilga Rivers, 1968, p.73). In this model, learning a language is through conditioning and social learning; one can learn a language only through observation, imitation, rewards and punishment.

Nativist theory posits that all languages have a common grammar and this is innate in the genes of every child. According to this theory, children have an inherent or genetic ability to learn languages. Noam Chomsky (1976) propounded the concept of "generative linguistics", by which children will render sentences which they have never learned. He coined a theoretical construct called language acquisition device (LAD) in the brain which he said was responsible for the ability to learn a language.

The difference between the nativist theory and learning theory is one of nature versus nurture. Vygotsky (1986) perceives language development as a process which begins through social contact with others and then gradually moves inwards through a series of transitional stages towards the development of inner speech. The interactionist approach is a synthesis of Behaviourist as well as Nativist approaches in describing the evolution and learning of languages by a child. Language is formed through social interaction and it develops out of a

desire to communicate. In other words, the focus of socio-cultural theory is social interaction .

Piaget (1970) developed the principle of “genetic epistemology”, the child's voice is not used for social discourse, as the child cannot yet recognize the opinion of others. Piaget was a psychologist who proposed his Constructivist theory of language acquisition and development. According to the theory of cognitive constructivism, people try to construct meaning, out of their experience and this process is basically learning. This is in distinct contrast to the objectivist assumptions of the behaviourist and cognitivist paradigms. In the cognitivist paradigm, L2 or the second language learning process is deliberate and logically derived thought using a well-planned use of educational strategies. This concept of language learning differs from theory of the behaviourists, who do not perceive learning of a language as a deliberate activity.

Almost all theories on language development focus on genetics, environment or a combination of both; it is popular to refer to this conundrum as nature versus nurture, or a combination of both. Modern researchers admit that language acquisition is partly inborn and partially learned through interaction. The differences are mainly in terms of the relative importance both.

#### **Language Development According to Halliday**

During the mid-sixties, learning how to form correct sentences in a language by the optimal use of words and phrases was considered to be the essence of language learning by a child. Halliday (1979/1980) observed that there were two prevailing views of language acquisition, namely, behaviourist and nativist. The behaviourist school states that learning happens by aping others, whereas nativists believe that it is innate and genetic. Both the theories consider the language as something to be acquired and the child as an acquirer.

Halliday (1980) argued that a child does not learn a language merely by acquisition but by conscious construction. The child focuses more on the meaning conveyed or intended to convey of the word or the sentence, rather than the grammar or the intricacies of syntax. It is not a solo process; others also actively engage in the construction process.

Halliday (2004) theorised that learning takes place through the use of language and language is learnt in social interaction with others. According to him, the interrelationship between language and learning can be viewed through three distinct lenses, namely, learning a language, through language and about language. These three processes are not in isolation, or sequential; as children interact with others socially, all these processes happen concurrently.

He contends that learning a language is not so much a process of acquiring a commodity that is out there but rather a process of construction in interaction with others (Halliday, 2004). This view is similar to that of Vygotsky who greatly influenced the researchers and academics engaged in the field of learning

While Halliday was essentially focussing on linguistics, the point of view of Vygotsky on learning of languages was primarily from the field of psychology. Vygotsky argues that learning and mental development need to be viewed as a social process: it is through the interactions we enter into with other members of our culture, particularly those who are more knowledgeable or proficient, that we make sense of the world and learn new (usually culturally and socially specific) ways of seeing, doing and being (Vygotsky, as cited by Moore, 2011).

### **Learning and Language - Different Relationships**

Learning a language has three facets, namely, learning a language, learning about a language and learning through language. These are inter-connected segments and not water-tight compartments which are individually present. Children learn how to orally convey their thoughts and needs in a specific language through sounds and words. This process is referred to as learning a language. As they do so, they understand concepts and aspects of real world, sometimes even before they actually experience them. (learning through language). And finally, they learn about language, that is, through either explicit or implicit feedback and modelling, they learn how to put together phonemes, morphemes, words, and ultimately phrases together accurately (The Open University, 2022).

Gibbons (2015) describes how these three aspects of children's language development are brought together in a classroom program that integrates curriculum and English language learning. For most English as a second language situations, a physical classroom typically offers the best chance for L2 learners. It provides the correct ambience and setting to focus on the critical facets of L2 which are appropriate for the curriculum

The integration of ESL learning with curriculum content is now broadly accepted as supportive of second language learning (Short 1993). Learning a language is best done by actual usage in different situations. The syllabus is an excellent means to have a clear direction on the learning process. For the English language students, simultaneous learning of the language and the subject matter will enable them to learn the subject matter even as they are learning L2.

### **Learning a language**

Learning is experiential, especially for languages. It is not enough to learn the theories of the language. It is effective only by practice - talking to peers, listening to speakers, watching plays or movies in the language, reading aloud, and trying have meaningful conversations in that language with natives of that language or people who are fluent in it. Say, for example, with a shopkeeper, a gardener, a colleague, a fellow student or teacher. Children learn to write as well as speak a language in their early years. Even if they pick up the nuances of grammar much later, they start using vocabulary and reasonable grammar to communicate as well as comprehend oral as well as written messages and thoughts.

Learning a language is a complex process involving collaboration and social interactions and it requires a close interaction between a teacher and students. By focusing on the ways in which teachers can scaffold language and learning in the content areas, Gibbons (2015) takes a holistic approach which considers the challenges of students learning a new language, while developing subject knowledge in it, and appreciates the difficulties of teachers to meet these needs.

Learning a language is made more effective through scaffolding. Alber (2014) describes scaffolding as breaking up the learning into chunks and providing a tool with each chunk. The term scaffolding was first used by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976). For scaffolding to be effective, the adult must modify his language to make it comprehensible to the student, yet pushing the student to make an effort to learn. This is in alignment with the Comprehensive Input Hypothesis of Krashen (1985) which states that meaningful and motivating input which is just beyond their level of linguistic competence, but just barely comprehensible for the learner to understand - can help learners acquire the language. It is also relevant to recall Krashen's (1985) Compelling Input Hypothesis which states that the input needs to be not just interesting but compelling.

**Learning about language**

Learning about a language involves understanding the patterns, conventions and practices in spelling or pronunciations, the grammar, idioms and so on. It occurs at different levels. At the word level - for example, in English, how plurals end with an s, the letter l comes before e in most words, except if it is after c, the implications and usage of certain suffixes and prefixes such as 'ed', 'less', 'ness', 'able', 'pre', 'post' 'extra' and so on; at the sentence level, the student learns to understand and experiment with idioms and their usage, differences between past, present and future tenses, active and passive voices, etc.; at the next level, the students learn to write a letter for a specific purpose, take part in debates or group discussions, and so on.

Teaching L2 is often a good means for learning about language, as learning L2 involves study of vocabulary, grammar and other features of the language, both in absolute terms as well as in comparison with those of the primary language.

Learning about language is effective and makes sense when the language is actually used in a real-life context. Merely exposing English language students to content classrooms is insufficient. Just because they are placed in an English medium class “cannot be assumed to provide optimal language learning opportunities as a matter of course” (Mohan 2001, p.108).

**Learning through language**

Learning through language involves learning a different subject with the language only as the medium. For example, learning about linguistics, medicine or engineering through English or French. However, the implicit role played by the language in this learning process is understood, but it is not the end, but the means for learning something beyond.

Language is the means for teaching and learning any subject, including a language itself. In that sense, learning is through language. Whether it is a lecture, writing assignment, a presentation, discussion or exploring the internet, it is all through language.

**2. Conclusion**

Although, learning, learning about and learning through language are different parts of the whole perspective, it is necessary to understand that they are connected and mutually dependent. As described by Halliday (1981), the three aspects are all the same from a child's point of view. However, only if we consider them apart will we be able to understand how each aspect contributes to the overall development of a child. Human beings communicate their needs, feelings and conceptual thoughts mainly through language. Children start communicating right from their birth and language learning starts from there. Learning through language means using language as the principal tool for interpreting and constructing real life experiences. Language is an important tool for building up our concept of the world and where we fit into that world or universe.

Learning about language is to consciously know and understand it. Just talking and listening helps a person pick up a language. However, this is just unconscious knowledge of language which is incomplete.

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