**Lesson06: Language Learning**

**Introduction:**

The human capacity for self-awareness and abstract thought is facilitated by language, if not dependent upon it. The ability to transfer complex

information, to discuss the meaning of events and possible outcomes of alternative actions, to share feelings and ideas – all these are impossible

without language. The origins of language are shrouded in obscurity, but archaeological records suggest that communication with language

emerged about 200,000 years ago. The ability for an individual to model the world for him/herself and to communicate using language was probably

the single most advantageous evolutionary adaptation of the human species.[[1]](#footnote-2)

**Is Language Innate?**

The question of whether some of our linguistic capacities are innate, two views

emerge here. Nativists assert that children are born with some linguistic knowledge, and empiricists instead claim that children acquire language from linguistic

experience.

At one level, it is obvious that experience plays a major role in language acquisition. We all learn the language to which we are exposed, not some

other language from across the globe.

Some evidence in support of the nativist view has come from children with limited linguistic experience. In certain situations in which children are not presented with any consistent linguistic model, they appear to have the capacity to invent some aspects of language. This has been seen in deaf children whose parents did not believe in or teach ASL (Goldin-Meadow, 1982). Despite the

lack of either speech or sign, these deaf children invented a form of gestural language that was similar in some respects to ASL. They could not have acquired this system from their parents, because the children’s facility with sign exceeded that of their parents. Bickerton (1983) presents similar conclusions based on studies of immigrants and their children.

What kinds of linguistic capacities might be inborn? Current thinking centers on the concept of parameters. A parameter is a grammatical feature that can be set to any of several values. For example, the null-subject parameter deals with

whether a language permits constructions that have no subject. This parameter has two values: null subject (the language allows sentences without a subject) or subject (the language requires subjects for sentences to be grammatical). For

example, this sentence **(want more apples )** is not grammatical in English, but it would be in Italian

or Spanish. Thus, Italian is a null-subject language, and English is a subject language.

Parameter-setting theorists (Chomsky, 1981; Hyams, 1986), then, suggest that children are born with the parameters and with the values of the parameters.

What they must learn, from experience, is which value is present in their native language.

A rough analogy is thinking of two restaurants.

Restaurant A provides customer with a small array of choices within a few well-understood categories

(that is, baked potato or fries or rice; French or Italian or ranch dressing).

Restaurant B provides customers with a large number of choices within an equally large number of categories. Most dinnergoers would find Restaurant B informationally overwhelming; in contrast, it would be far easier to learn what choices to make in Restaurant A. The analogy is not perfect: We have acquired the categories in Restaurant A from experience, whereas the language parameters are presumed to be innate. Nonetheless, there is a fundamental similarity. Parametersetting theorists would suggest that without built-in categories (and values), a

child would be lost in a sea of linguistic details and would not be able to acquire a language as well as most children do. Parameter-setting models appear to offer a tidy solution to the question of

how innate processes interact with a child’s language experience. Some scholars believe that the parameter-setting account is too tidy and have pointed out flaws in the model (Bloom, 1990; Valian, 1990). Nonetheless, the approach has

raised some important issues regarding the role of innate linguistic mechanisms in language acquisition.[[2]](#footnote-3)

"Small children learn their language by first determining what the adult means independent of language, and then by working out the relationship between what is meant and what is said" MacNamara (1972). Language acquisition, according to Fernández and Cairns (2010), is one of the most fascinating facets of human development. Children acquire knowledge of the language or languages around them in a relatively brief time, and with little apparent effort. This could not be possible without two crucial ingredients: a biologically based predisposition to acquire language, and experience with language in the environment. All children pass through similar stages of linguistic development as they go from infancy through middle childhood.[[3]](#footnote-4)

In their classrooms, teachers and students together create commu­nities based on shared goals, shared resources and shared patterns and norms for participating as legitimate members of the communities. In their interactions with each other, teachers and students assume particular identities and roles, and together they develop understan­dings of what constitutes not only the substance of what is to be learned, but also the very process of learning itself.

Moreover, considered that the leaning process is viewed as a purely cognitive process achieved through internal mechanisms and innate capacities, yet “learner’s experiences in their socio cultural worlds were not considered significant to the process” ” and any problem in the learning process is always linked to a defi­ciency of the cognitive system.

Children whose home activities reflect the dominant practices of school are likely to have more opportunities for success since they only need to build on and extend what they have learned at home. On the other hand, children whose home practices differ from those of their school are likely to have more difficulty since they will need to add additional repertoires of learning practices to those they already know.

described Heath (1983)’s comparative study between Trackton’s rural black community and Roadville’s white one and an urban middle-class black and white families. The results show that the socialization of each sample differs from the other one. In fact, Trackton’s children tend to exaggerate when telling stories whereas Roadville’s ones were asked to stick to fact and not lie. It was also noticed that children from both rural communities had dif­ficulty in succeeding academically than the urban ones whose home

practice is closer to that of school that is to say that the social back­ground paves the way to the learning process. [[4]](#footnote-5)

**Psycholinguistics Approach and the Four Language Skills:**

Psycholinguistics theories have explained the mental processes that occur in human brain during a person produces and perceives a language.

Language perception includes the activity of listening and reading, while the language production includes the activity of speaking and writing. The four activities are called as the four of language skills. Following will be described some benefits of psycholinguistics theories in language learning and teaching as explained by Demirezen (2004).

**Psycholinguistics Approach and Listening Skill:**

Psycholinguistics researchers have indicated that in teaching listening, the intrinsic and extrinsic difficulties should be overcome in order to reach to

a highly qualified listening activity. Intrinsic difficulty refers to the speed of the speech, number of unknown words, and prior knowledge about topic. Extrinsic difficulty refers to students’ interest, motivation, purpose of listening activity, and noise in the environment. Psycholinguistics knowledge will help teacher to reduce the intrinsic and extrinsic difficulties. Teacher can prepare a listening text with topic that is familiar for students, consisting of 100 words, and including 10 new vocabulary items. Teacher also minds about the reading speed and the noise of environment. Moreover, teacher can increase students’ interest and motivation by designing an interesting and comfortable class.[[5]](#footnote-6)

**Psycholinguistics Approach and Reading Skill:**

Psycholinguistics approach resorts to text-based approach as a case of bottom-up processing so as to emphasize the comprehension activity and topdawn processing to stress the fact that comprehension rests primarily on students’ knowledge base. Bottom-up processing happens when someone tries to understand language by looking at individual meanings or grammatical characteristics of the most basic units of the text and moves from these to trying to understand the whole text. Top-down processing of language happens when someone uses background information to predict the meaning of language they are going to read to. Rather than relying first on the actual words, they develop expectations about what they will read, and confirm or reject these as they read. This theory emphasizes that the understanding the meaning of a text essentially rests on the prior knowledge of students. Psycholinguistics helps learners to reduce the intrinsic difficulties in reading activity by arousing the interest of the students onto the reading text. Teachers need to provide authentic and contextual reading material because if students are not properly exposed to authentic materials they may

fail in seeing their relevance to the real world.

**Psycholinguistics Approach and Writing Skill:**

Psycholinguistics helps in understanding the students’ mistakes in writing. It has a clear contribution on spelling mistakes since in English words are not spelled as they sound. There is a hardship on this case because storing of the spelling of words and retrieve them on demand is very difficult.

Psycholinguistics approach indicates that there are mistakes in writing caused by agraphia, which must be treated properly. Psycholinguistics helps to find interesting topic to write. It serves to decrease the level of the difficulties in writing. It helps to specify the writing levels and writing types. It pins down the mechanic mistakes on punctuation and suggests certain cures for them.

**Psycholinguistics Approach and Speaking Skill:**

Psycholinguistic approach has a workable control over the field of teaching speaking as a skill. It has specified several difficulties on speaking such as students’ oriented difficulty.

Psycholinguistics also explains that personality, like introvert and extrovert students, affects students’ performance in language learning. Speaking defects like voice disorders, stuttering, and disarticulation are also psychological in origin caused by personality factor.

There are also some traumatic disorders such as aphasia and autism caused by localized in damage. It is recommend therapies and counseling practices for such difficulties. Thus, the investigations of psycholinguistic approach have

provided solutions for almost each type of language learning difficulty. With the knowledge, teachers can apply the appropriate techniques to teach speaking skills by considering the condition of the learner and find interesting topics to be discussed in speaking class. [[6]](#footnote-7)

1. RALPH FASOLD AND JEFF CONNOR-LINTON: **An Introduction to Language and Linguistics** Cambridge University Press 2006, p01 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. DAVID W. CARROLL : Psychology of Language, University of Wisconsin---Superior , FIFTH EDITION , p43,44 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Fernández, Eva M. and Helen Smith Cairns. (2011). Fundamentals of Linguistics. A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. 1. Hall, J. K. (2002). Teaching and Researching Language and Culture. Pearson Education, Longman [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. SAKALE SANA and CHIBI MOUNIR : **Psycholinguistics** , Academic Year: 2020 / 2021, p51-53 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Iyabode O. Nwabueze et all : **COURSE TITLE: PSYCHOLINGUITICS**, National Open University of Nigeria, FACULTY OF ARTS , 2020,P23 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)