

Understanding language learning

KEY IDEAS

- Second language acquisition and learning theories need to account for language learning by learners from diverse life-worlds, learning with diverse needs, interests, motivations and desires in diverse contexts
- Intercultural language teaching and learning focuses on the relationship between language, culture and learning
- Using languages, hence learning languages, is:
 - an intrapersonal and interpersonal process of meaning-making
 - interactional
 - developmental/dynamic
 - interpretive, imaginative and creative

Second language learning

Theories that have been developed to account for second language learning, or acquisition, are closely related to those discussed above as general learning theories.

A behaviourist approach to second language learning focuses on imitation, practice, encouragement and habit formation. Learning a second language necessarily involves comparison with the learner's first language, but the latter is generally perceived as causing 'interference' in the learning of additional one(s). This approach is seen now to offer an insufficient explanation of the complexity of language learning.

The linguist Noam Chomsky (1957) provided a major critique of behaviourism and its view of second language learning as imitation and habit formation. He developed a theory of first language learning that suggests that language learning is an innate capacity – that children are programmed to acquire language thanks to their in-built knowledge of a Universal Grammar. He called this knowledge 'competence', to distinguish it from what might actually be said on a particular occasion.

For Chomsky, this abstract knowledge of language consists of a limited set of rules that enabled an infinite number of sentences to be constructed. While he did not specifically address second language learning, his theory has been applied to it.

With regard to teaching methodology, behaviourism can be linked to grammar/translation methods that tend to focus on the parts of grammatical knowledge with less attention on how these parts might be brought together in communication. The audiovisual and audio-lingual approaches were based on stimulus-response psychology – that is, training students through practising patterns to form ‘habits’.

One of the most influential of the innatist theories (ie theories that argue that language is innate, is that of Stephen Krashen and it is this theory that influenced communicative language teaching (for more information, see Lightblown & Spada, 1999, Chapter 2).

Within cognitive theories of second language acquisition, learning involves building up the knowledge system or architecture which over time and through practice becomes automatically accessible in reception and production. Some theorists within the cognitivist tradition have argued that interaction is essential for language learning to take place, with the modification of input, by teachers for example, to render it comprehensible to the learner (see Long, 1983).

The sociocultural perspective on second language learning, based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), highlights that all learning, including language learning, is based on social interaction (see Lantolf, 2000) with more proficient others, on an interpersonal and intrapersonal plane as described above. Through the concept of the zone of proximal development, it highlights that language learning is developmental. The characteristic of ‘prior knowledge’ is very important. It recognises that new learning is built on prior learning – that is, the ideas and concepts that students bring to learning. Teachers work with these preconceptions in order to facilitate learning.

The characteristic of ‘metacognition’, or awareness about how we learn, is integral to learning. Students need to understand how they learn. They need to continuously reflect on their learning and develop self-awareness of themselves as learners. There is a strong connection between learning and identity: learners need to negotiate constantly who they are, and how they can be/ should be/ would like to be in the language and culture they are learning.

The role of language

The role of language in learning cannot be over-emphasised. Language is the prime resource teachers have and use for mediating learning. When learning languages, then, teachers and students are working with language simultaneously as an object of study and as a medium for learning. In teaching languages, the target language is not simply a new code – new labels for the same concepts; rather, effectively taught, the new language and culture being learned offer the opportunity for learning new concepts and new ways of understanding the world.

While these theories of second language learning provide insights on aspects of second language learning, there is no comprehensive or ‘complete’ theory that can guide the practices of teaching and learning. Nonetheless, this does not mean that ‘anything goes’. Rather, it becomes necessary for teachers to become aware of and understand what they do and why, by examining their own, often tacit, theories about learning in relation to insights from current and best theories, and by considering the implications of these for teaching. Both teachers and students need to develop a rich conception of what language and culture are and do, and how they interrelate to interpret and create meaning.

Questions for reflection

- 1 How do you elicit and use students’ prior knowledge?
- 2 How do you understand ‘metacognition’ and how would you discuss this with your students?
- 3 How does your current stance on languages teaching reflect differing, and perhaps oppositional, aspects of the theories discussed in this section?