

Teaching English as a Second Language

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Abstract

English is the universal lingua franca of the world. English is used as the second language in majority of the countries in the world. Though English is the second language, many of the learners do not have enough grasp of the language and lack the ability to use it to suit their purposes with ease. In other words, many learners do not have the spoken and written language fluency required for the spoken and written communication in their day to day activities and professional and academic life. This is because they learn English as a subject rather than as a language. The second language acquisition theories throw light on the nature of the English language and how the language can be acquired effectively by learners. The theories include the acquisition – learning distinction hypothesis, the input hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the affective filter hypothesis and the pleasure hypothesis. Knowledge of these theories will play a great role in helping the English language teachers to guide their learners to acquire the required English language knowledge. This paper throws light on these theories of SLA and also discusses how these theories can be incorporated by the teachers in language classrooms.

Keywords: lingua franca, second language acquisition, the acquisition – learning distinction hypothesis, the input hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the affective filter hypothesis, pleasure hypothesis

Introduction

English is the universal lingua franca of the world. The term ‘lingua franca’ means a bridge language, a common language or a vehicular language. In earlier days, *lingua franca*

meant the language of exchange between traders for commercial purposes. Nowadays, it means the language meant for exchange of ideas and knowledge other important information between individuals belonging to various countries in the world. The universal lingua franca is English. The term 'lingua franca' has its root in the Arabic 'lisan-al-farang' meaning an intermediary language used by speakers of Arabic with travelers from Western Europe. Crystal's definition of 'lingua franca' as "a medium of communication for people who speak different languages" and McArthur's definition of the same as "a language common to, or shared by, many cultures, and communities at any or all social and educational levels, and used as an international tool" describes the actual role of English in this age of globalization. As a result, English is learnt as a second language in many countries throughout the world.

Teaching English as a Second Language

English as a second language is taught in schools and colleges in countries where English is not the native language. The teachers and learners take strenuous efforts to teach and learn English as the second language; but in spite of the efforts taken by the learners to learn the language and the teachers to help learners learn the language, there has been no ground breaking or phenomenal improvement in English. This is because of two reasons. First, English is viewed as a subject rather than as a language in many of the educational institutions. To state in other words, the teaching of English takes place in a rule based manner and not in the context base. Secondly, the problem lies with the methods adopted for teaching English language.

Ineffectiveness of the Current Teaching Trends

Analysis of various teaching methods that primarily focus on teaching language to learners did not impact any real language development among them. The Grammar-Translation method, the first and foremost method used for teaching a language to learners, focused on making them learn grammatical rules through strenuous drills and practices and make use of the learnt rules for translating from first language to the second or foreign languages and vice-versa. The Audio-Lingual method, also referred to as the Army Method or the New Key method, was modeled on the Behaviourist theory and to some extent similar to the Direct Method of language learning. Its underlying philosophy of teaching was that any language can be effectively learnt through repeated reinforcement, through drills and practices, and feedback. Teaching language

using a context is believed to greatly impact language learning of learners and hence methods that focus on both language and content were expected to help learners acquire the required discipline specific academic English language knowledge. Research into methods that focused on teaching both language and content appeared to indicate that Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is an effective method for teaching specific academic language through discipline specific content. Studies show that though Content-Based Instruction appear to teach both language and content to learners, actual focus is on teaching language rather than content and that content is used as an instructional platform to teach the required academic language. Further, effectiveness of instruction itself is questioned when we consider Duff & Anderson's claim that the "mentors are not always effective, successful or available to provide timely mentoring".

A Possible Solution for Learning English as a Second Language Better

First, the teachers and the learners must realize that English is not a subject but is a language. Languages cannot be learnt but only acquired through receiving exposure to meaningful content either in the form of listening or speaking.

Reading is found to an effective source for acquiring any language and reading in English will help learners to acquire the English language required for both speaking and writing. Reading is not a novel but an age old concept with its origin dating back to before the invention of printing press. It began with cavemen's drawings, continued with the discovery of papyrus and flourished after the invention of the printing press.

Reading served as the primary form of leisure time activity long before the advent of television, computer and cinema. In those days, people had a passion for reading as they had realized books were their windows to outside world and indulged in it a lot as it both expanded their knowledge and enhanced their understanding of their society in particular and of the world at large. In addition, the underlying motive of education those days was gaining mastery in chosen disciplines and complete knowledge of the world around by learners through experience, exposure and clear understanding of various concepts; and reading books and materials on specific disciplines and meaningful interaction with experts and masters of chosen disciplines were considered the surest way to achieve this end.

As a result, reading was given primary importance and both adults and youth alike considered it a great pride to possessing books and reading them. But with numerous advancements in science and technology and along with the possibility of getting access to the needed knowledge at the tap of a finger, the passion for reading and the need for it have been greatly reduced. But now, the habit of reading has deteriorated and people, irrespective of their age, consider it a boring and a time consuming chore.

In reality, reading can never be done away with as it is the part and parcel of our everyday life. People are expected to read something or the other ranging from name boards, restaurant menus, pamphlets and manuals to academic texts, research articles and subject related books.

Though it is believed that scientific innovations and technical improvements have reduced the need for reading, they, in fact, have increased the opportunities for more reading. In tune with the development of science and technology, the method or way of reading has changed. For example, there are e-libraries instead of just libraries and people have the benefit of reading a book or a newspaper on their mobiles or laptops instead of carrying a book or a bunch of papers around. Today learners neither need to go in search of books and materials nor do they have to waste their time searching for a book on a particular topic among a wide collection of books. Similarly, they also need not wait for a longer period of time to get a book published in some other part of the world to reach them, for internet has made it possible for learners to update themselves in a matter of few seconds. But, the main concern here is learners of this generation do not only prefer or enjoy reading but also do not realize the importance of it. As a result, much research is done on reading as to enlighten both learners and teachers of the current generation about the importance of reading.

Theories of Second Language Acquisition

Knowing about the theories of second language acquisition will help the teachers and the learners to redefine their methods of learning English as second language. The theories of second language acquisition include the Acquisition - Learning Hypothesis, the Comprehension

Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Affective Filter Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis and the Reading Hypothesis.

The Acquisition – Learning Hypothesis

It is the first and foremost of the SLA theories and it postulates that acquisition and learning are two different and independent ways of gaining knowledge of a language. Acquisition is a subconscious process and learning is a conscious process. Acquisition is referred to as incidental learning, implicit knowledge and natural method of learning while learning is referred to as explicit learning and intentional learning. Language, both oral and written, can be acquired by reading meaningful and comprehensible texts and this indicates that by receiving comprehensible input through reading in L1 and L2, which is English, learners can acquire the language.

The Comprehension Hypothesis

It is the most frequently tested of the five SLA theories and it lays down the condition to be met for effective language acquisition to take place, by postulating that acquisition will happen only when learners receive comprehensible input in the form of either reading or listening. Acquisition of English as second language through reading is possible only when learners comprehend texts they read. In other words, learners will acquire language only by reading texts that are comprehensible and easy to understand. Acquisition of language and knowledge will occur only when learners comprehend the texts they read. Acquisition of language includes knowledge of grammar which is responsible for error free output production, in other words, speaking and writing.

The Natural Order Hypothesis

The hypothesis postulates that acquisition of grammatical structures takes place in a predictable order. Learners acquire certain structures very early and some structures very late. This order of acquisition is not exactly the same but is similar among learners. This is an indication that the order of acquisition is determined by the difficulty level of the learners and the order of acquisition and the order of difficulty is more or less the same.

English as second language too have a natural order of grammatical structures acquisition. This order is similar among learners of English as second language where as it is different from that of the learners from whom English is the first language.

Learners do not acquire the correct grammatical structures immediately. They take their own time and during the acquisition process, learners make mistakes while using those structures and in course of time, they start using the grammatically correct sentences. This is a subconscious and an automatic process which the learners themselves are not aware of them happening. For instance almost all learners in the process of acquiring English negation, irrespective of whether English is their first or second language, will commit the error of placing the negative marker outside the sentence and often at its beginning.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

It shows how various affective filters influence the acquisition of English as a second language. The affective filters include (i) Motivation, (ii) Self-confidence and (iii) Anxiety. Learners who have a high level of motivation and self confidence tend to succeed in acquiring a language whereas learners with high anxiety levels fail to acquire it. Based on the nature of these affective filters, motivation and self - confidence can be categorized as positive affective filters while anxiety can be brought under negative affective filters. The Affective Filter hypothesis postulates that when negative affective filters are high, acquisition will be low and when these filters are, low, acquisition will be high. From this, it can be inferred that when positive affective filters are high, acquisition will also be high and when these affective filters are low, acquisition will also be low. In other words, the process of second language acquisition is either facilitated or impeded by the nature and the strength of the affective filters These affective filters are attitudinal in nature and their actual impact can be verified only in situations where there is availability of ample comprehensible input to learners.

The affective filter hypothesis postulates that language acquisition will be high when the affective filters are low. The affective filters are barriers to effective language acquisition and its use. The factors such as stress, anxiety and fear affect learners' ability to acquire language. Language can be acquired only when the mind is relaxed and when the learners are motivated, interested and eager to receive input. These affective filters create a mental block which

prevents the input from entering the mind. For example, the fear of tests while reading for exams will not improve or facilitate acquisition because the learners' focus will be on rote memorizing the facts or information rather than meaningfully experiencing the language. Moreover, tests themselves create a sense of anxiety in learners which again will greatly hamper the reading process itself. In the same way, complex texts create a sort of stress and anxiety among learners because of their inability to understand them. It may develop a sense of dislike towards particular texts and when compelled to read them for a period of time may develop hatred towards reading itself. When these affective filters removed far away from learners, they will acquire language easily.

The Monitor Hypothesis

It postulates that there are three conditions to be met for effective use of monitor. Monitor is the knowledge of grammar gained through explicit learning. The three conditions include (i) Focus on form (ii) Time to apply the rules and (iii) Know the rule. The hypothesis holds that it is difficult to satisfy the three conditions while writing and speaking indicating that the role of monitor is very limited during output production. Monitor helps in editing the output rather than its production. Implicit grammar knowledge rather than monitor, that is, explicit knowledge of grammar is responsible for producing output; it develops a "feel for correctness" which actually makes speaking and writing possible, fluent and accurate. In fact, this hypothesis subtly limits the role of monitor by showing that actually the "feel for correctness" plays an important role even in editing the output.

The Reading Hypothesis

It postulates that reading leads to acquisition of all measures of language competence including content, vocabulary, spelling, syntax, fluency and writing style. The habit of reading greatly improves learners' reading writing skills. Reading improves writing and more reading leads to better writing. It makes learners autonomous language acquirers and hence, it needs to be introduced in the early stages of the learners and it promotes literacy and language development in addition to developing an interest and a love for more reading which in turn paves way for more language development. The amount of time spent on reading influences learners' vocabulary growth, comprehension, fluency and knowledge.

Conclusion

The analysis of the theories of SLA indicates that English as a language can only be acquired cannot be learnt. There is a difference in learning a language and learning about a language. The methods and practices involved in teaching and learning English as second language lead to learning about a language rather than knowing a language. Learning about language provides information about how a language works whereas knowing the language involves using the language for communicative purposes. English language can be effectively used by learners if they acquire it by receiving comprehensible input in the form of reading. The language classrooms can be both successful and enjoyable if reading is incorporated into the syllabus and classroom activities.

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