

Some Psychological Aspects in the Process of Foreign Language Teaching and its Acquisition

外国語教授と習得の過程に於ける心理学的諸相

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Preface :

It goes without saying that the expansive and variegated realms of language teaching and its psychological connections can hardly be covered in a few general remarks however intelligent and scholastic they may be. I dare say that no one could seriously hope even to state, much less solve, all the problems that are brought up to the fore. Therefore, obviously, I can't expatiate to the complete and satisfactory degree on the larger issues that my title suggests. It is my only and sincere hope that I shall be able to share with you some of the peculiar aspects that have caught my eye, and consequently try to transmit to you my private and personal interest concerning Some Psychological Aspects in the Process of Foreign Language Teaching and its Acquisition.

It would be rather useful, however, if I could state my viewpoint by offering you a comprehensive scope of the territory that is the general and fundamental background for my particular interests. Therefore, several aspects in the psychological foundations of foreign language teaching will be the chief concern of this paper exclusive of the role of the distinctive and minute linguistic theory in this field. Perhaps I may exaggerate a little too much but it still seems a rather undeniable fact to me that there has been discouragingly little development and research work

done in this country in the field of foreign language teaching methodology and its psychological phase in the true sense of the word, primarily because of the shortage of highly qualified and studious workers strenuously delving into this field. I also may safely say that the main reason why there has been voiced skepticism in some quarters about the possibility and potentiality of doing research that can make an effective difference in the conduct of foreign language teaching is that the study in this field is often so abstract and vague or also so far away from the realities of the classroom that it would be difficult to apply results in any practical way or that even if the study is closely connected with real-life classroom situation, the variables are often so difficult to manage that one can hardly help hesitating to draw all-round generalization from the results.

It is a very common and frequent phenomenon that language teachers once in a while turn to psychologists for some solutions to specific problems which they encounter in the classrooms or laboratories. Here I don't have any presumptuous intention to offer any such solutions for it is statistically understood that at the present stage of development of psychology large-scale applications to practical situations can be accomplished only by a superficial dealing of psychological subject matter and oversimplified analysis of the nature of the

problems for which psychology is consulted. Perhaps it needs little intelligence to understand that at present a psychologist can suggest general guide lines for observing and understanding human behavior rather than prescriptions for curing various but specific ailments. Even with respect to general principles, however, the teacher is not asked to accept the authority of science but rather is invited to examine critically the ideas expounded thereof and the language teacher has the advantage of insights gained from experience.

Generally speaking, the situation in language theory is not entirely unlike that prevailing in other branches of knowledge, and it seems to me that so many rival formulations are proposed in all branches of science that no single theory is absolutely a transcript of reality. Moreover, as sciences develop, it becomes evident that most of their laws are only approximations. The consistent application on any one of these theories, however, has far-reaching practical consequences, not only for the theory of language teaching, but also for the linguistic descriptions on which the actual texts are based. If the language is regarded as a state, different theories produce different sorts of descriptions in the form of grammars and dictionaries which determine what is taught; if the language is considered as an activity, the theories produce different ideas on language learning which determine how the material is taught. It is therefore to the description of language as a state and to the study of language as an activity that the following chapters of my paper are devoted.

I. An aspect of the nature of language:

First of all it should be noted here that modern theories of language, unlike those of

ancient and medieval times, are more concerned with how language works than with why it exists. The theory will therefore depend on what is observed and how it is observed. I think it is an incontrovertible fact that in each field of knowledge concerned with language, there are various kinds of ways, sometimes contrary ways of observing linguistic facts. Namely, in the field of psychology, theories of language tend to differ according to both the school of psychology and the branch of psychology. For example, for some psychologists, language is a type of symbolism with many functions and for others, it is an artificial instrument of communication. On the other hand, linguists, whose special field is the study of language, insist on an even greater divergence of theories, it may be a system of arbitrary vocal symbols, or it may be a system of hierarchies. Of course, it may be material to some; to others it may be mental. The following may be true, that is, to some it may include only vocal symbols, to others it may also include written symbols. If I may be allowed to deduce some points of similarity between theories in different fields from differences within each field, I may safely maintain that there is some kind of agreement among certain linguists, psychologists and philosophers on the non-material nature of language. It is absolutely necessary to compare the theories according to their main characteristics in order that we may locate these points of difference and similarity on the nature of language. What sort of understanding does a theory or language convey? To what branch of knowledge does the study of language belong? What are its central problems? How should knowledge about them be acquired by experience or reasoning? Should a language

theory be based on a distinction between the physical and the mental? These are, it seems to me, some of the questions which all theories of language must face. By examining each of them, we shall be able to get some idea of the differences between language theories and possible influence of these theories on language-teaching methodology. It is also true that many of the statements that the linguist is likely to analyse will be logically irrelevant, since they have to do with feelings and images. The linguist is interested in the form and meaning of all possible statements in language questions, commands, value judgements which form the bulk of everyday discourse and have to be analysed as meaningful. I think, as an epitome of this chapter, I can say that the concepts of the nature of language may range from the one which regards it as a sequence of sounds to the one which regards language as everything that can be talked about, including the means used to talk about it and psychologically speaking, it is indispensable to form the idea to distinguish between language as a thing (*phenomenon*) and our conception of it (*experience*).

II. An aspect of language learning and its psychological process :

Dorothea McCarthy writes in *Manual of Child Psychology*, page 501: "There is a tremendous psychological gap which has to be bridged between the mere utterance of the phonetic form of a word and the symbolic or representational use of that word in an appropriate situation." As can be well understood from the sentence above, language learning and psychological process pertinent to its acquisition is still partly conjectural. If its major propositions and outlines are confirmed, it will bring greater understand-

ing and system into language teaching and will make possible various kinds of experiments intended to identify more effective approaches to learning and improve present ones. If we are trying to construct a theory of speech perception or verbal learning, we might hope to be able to solve all our problems at the level of phonetics or at the level of words and syllables. These experiments with sentences, however, show distinctly that the problems are far more complicated than that, and that any complete theories of speech perception and verbal learning will have to cope with the syntactic and semantic rules. Of course the language user ought to know these rules, since he can within limits that are of considerable psychological interest, follow them in generality and understand grammatical utterances. I think it is quite common that one would like to define a rule as an explicit statement, couched in some formal or informal notation, that specifies the appropriate actions to take under certain well-defined circumstances. Perhaps, I may not go too far to say at this point that this rule must be called a habit. But I don't dare to say that most of the problems concerning linguistic habits will be solved by the simple and direct stimulus and response analysis with which psychologists have done their investigations, for the magnitude of the variety of stimulus-response associations in describing linguistic habits is much more greater than in the other fields. It is true that people are capable of dealing with linguistic events that are completely new to them, but the important point here is that syntactic and semantic habits must have productivity which distinguishes our linguistic rules from our other, simpler habits. When this ability has been encountered in simpler situations, psychologists have

frequently dealt with it in terms of stimulus and response generalization. As language involves both neural and muscular tissues, and it has psychological, interpersonal, and cultural aspects that are indispensable to its acquisition and use, the single paramount fact about language learning is that it concerns, not problem solving, but the formation and performance of habits. There is also a good reason to believe that the kind of productive generalization habit that goes on when we use language is of a completely different order of complexity. At this stage, I would like to emphasize that productivity is a pervasive characteristic of language and that syntactic habits must have a productive character, because the supply of different sentences, unlike the supply of words is unlimited. I also can conclude that semantic habits must also be productive because somehow we are able to combine the meanings to obtain an understanding of the meaning of the sentence, and we are able to do this for sentences that are completely new to us and that express ideas we have never heard or thought of before. When we start describing linguistic habits, we almost at once find ourselves in a chaos, which is brought forth by their details. And the details included in the intersection of language and psychology are not likely to submit so easily; we are forced to grapple with them one at a time. Let's now examine the psychological work on learning and retention and perception to assess its contribution to the understanding of language acquisition.

III. An aspect of language conditioning habits:

I think it would be quite relevant to discuss language conditioning habits in this chapter. As is quite well known, one type of learning

known as classical conditioning, has been investigated extensively in an animal laboratory, and our reference to its data is sure to pay off, so let's turn to an examination of its relevance to the habitual aspects of language. It is almost needless to say that classical conditioning procedures endeavor to establish reliable links between environmental events (stimuli) and activities of the organism (responses) in such a way that a particular activity will come under the control of a particular stimulus. As you know, for instance, by use of classical conditioning procedures, a dog can be made to salivate to the sound of a bell, which is accomplished by sounding the bell and immediately following it by the presentation of food. And it is proved that after frequent repetitions of this sequence the dog will salivate to the sound even in the absence of food, and when this response has been achieved, the animal is said to have been conditioned. That this principle and experiment has widely been utilized in the field of the audio-visual language learning instruments is a well-known fact. Presumably it is very useful for us to attempt to utilize these insights in discussing associative processes in language learning. As for the associations involved in language, I think it is understandable and consistent to deploy this chapter by classifying them into two categories, namely, extralanguage associations and intralanguage associations. All links that have to be made specifically between environmental stimuli and linguistic units fall in the first category. The intralanguage category refers mostly to the integration of smaller language units into larger ones. And the establishment of a word as an integrated whole is a result of linkage of its component sounds.

That a particular response becomes attached not only to the stimuli nominated by the

experimenter or teacher but also to others present in the situation accounts for the observation that it is usually easier to recall a person's name if one encounters him in surroundings and clothes similar to those that were present when the name was first learned. Therefore it is often true that a student who is studying something in one situation, such as a language laboratory, may find it almost impossible to reproduce it easily in the other situations. And also we sometimes observe that students have greater difficulty in speaking a foreign language in the contexts removed from those in which they learned it than in similar ones. Accordingly the following digest can reasonably be formed that when one is learning something, of course including languages, in the learning process, the new material becomes connected to many of the cues in the situation. I think this point should be fully understood by the teacher teaching a foreign language in order to make the situation faithfully reproduced to make recall easier. It would be rather wise of me to say that we hardly use any language in any systematic order but we do so in answer to the accidental needs that arise. We had better not fix the object in the language teaching method in order to provide for flexibility and independence of language habits from specific contextual stimuli. The second category is the intralanguage associative process. The gist of this process is that the integration of sounds into words and words into higher-order units is achieved only through repeated experience in close contiguity, of the elements that make up the unit. In other words, in short, the intralanguage associative process is an intuitive process materialized by repeated experience. If I may be allowed to cite few examples to make my view clearer, when

English speakers (native) speak "Go ahead," "Go to bed," they don't need any psychological strain as they have heard and used these units over and over many times. Thus the speaker can construct grammatical utterances faster than if he had to make them from the beginning on the level of words. From this point of view, the formation of intralanguage association is essential to a full mastery of language. When one uses Japanese equivalent "iku", the association between the two words will become so tenacious that the Japanese word will occupy the student's mind whenever he uses the English equivalent and it thus inhibits the smooth transition of the words which is indispensable for a fluent speech. Thus far I have voiced the importance of the external features of learning condition when we learn something and retain its memory, but the important thing which we must not forget is that man is a very flexible being and therefore is not always at the mercy of external stimuli, therefore, it is quite possible that the learner enhances his retention of learned material in various ways not entirely dependent on external conditions.

IV. An aspect of language and stimulus-response :

It is my firm belief that when we deal with psychological side of language teaching, we can hardly avoid this Stimulus-Response Theory in its process. It is often stated that language is not a substance but a process, and of course everybody knows it in practice but its theory all but defies formulation. In order to develop such a theory I want to take into account the play of phenomena upon the senses. It is a long time since psychologists, and certain linguists as well, began to consider language as a verbal response to external stim-

ulus. Language is regarded as an immediate animal-like reactions to what is perceived. It is as if language were a long series of conditioned reflexes. It seems to me that a large number of linguists and language teachers have regarded language in this way and made up language teaching methods from this point of view. The contextual theory which was developed by Ogden and Richards differs from the traditional stimulus-response theory in that it teaches the language as a constant variation in the stimulus to fit a corresponding variation in the language response, thus leading the listener to abstract the patterns of language by seeing the relation between each element of the situation and the corresponding element of the response. According to this theory, the stimulus of experience comes to us in repeated contexts. These may be physical events which reach our minds through our senses; or they may be events in the mind itself—memories, associations of idea. According to Drs. Goldstein and Buysens, language may be considered as only partly a matter of stimulus-response. It is partly concrete activity; partly abstract activity. The concrete perceives and reacts to situations in an animal-like way, through verbal responses to immediately perceived cues and associations, in an automatic type of speech behavior. Dr. Goldstein regards abstract and concrete behavior as only two extreme poles, with fine gradations between them; similarly he makes no clear-cut distinction between conscious and unconscious verbal responses.

I think it is necessary to find out whether the dividing of speech into like phonemes and words is done in the mind of the speaker, or only in the mind of the linguist. Along this line scholars of linguistic psychology have conducted the experiments to obtain from

speakers and listeners certain responses which correspond to the theories. But this sort of experiment is more difficult than it seems, for each speaker and listener brings to the language his own special responses according to his peculiar nervous system and his own unique combination of memories and experiences in the use of the language. Though man is a self-regulating being, as I have stated before, it is also undeniable that man is to a great extent, influenced by the external and internal variables both linguistically and psychologically. In voluntary control of speech, the speech organs must receive instruction from higher centers in the brain as to what sounds to produce. If a particular sound of a foreign language is not represented in the brain, such instruction is obviously not possible. This analysis may explain why training in sound discrimination can be more beneficial in the initial stages of language learning than training in speech production. The amazing thing about language acquisition is that out of a collection of random, unorganized, and often ungrammatical linguistic utterances the child manages to form a well-structured system of rules. The reason may be that the acquisition of language depends not only on exposure to environmental stimulation but also on specific innate propensities of the organism. These ideas were developed for first language learning by children, but similar process of inference probably goes on in second language learning by adults, namely in foreign language learning.

V. An aspect viewed by Dr. Robert Lado:

Now at this stage, I think it is extremely useful for the clarification of my view concerning learning a foreign language in terms of its psychological process to cite the

opinion of Dr. Robert Lado in his *Language Testing—The construction and use of foreign language tests*. p. 13. He says, "we observed that the complex process of communication through language as we know it is made possible by the system of habits which operates largely without our awareness. These habits are deeply set in the nervous system of the individual and in his muscular, intellectual, and emotional processes. To change any part of this system of habits is a major undertaking. To set up a parallel system in learning a foreign language is an equally formidable task. When a speaker says something to a listener he puts together some cultural sequence of meanings through linguistic meanings and on to the sentences, phrases, words, morphemes, and phonemes. He does this mostly without thought, and a listener of the same languages facing each other in a similar diagram when the listener hears an utterance in a foreign language he is learning, his set of native language habits cannot be eliminated at will, and he hears units of sound, words, phrases, and sentences that are those of his own language; that is, he distorts what he hears to fit the rapid-fire perceptions that he habitually hears. Similarly when he attempts to speak in the foreign language he thinks of the general meaning, the general thread of what he wants to say, but the encoding into language units down to words and phonemes he handles the only way he has ever been able to handle them: through the habits of his native language. The result, of course, is that he transfers the entire sound system of his native language to the foreign language both for speaking and for listening. That is, he transfers the phonemes, their distribution, the patterns of syllables, of words, the patterns of sentences, the meanings. When his atten-

tion is called to what in the foreign language constitutes an error, he has no easy way to understand the error; he is not aware of what he has done, and he may not even perceive it. Although we have made considerable progress in the linguistic understanding of problems in learning a foreign language, we know very little of the psychology (emotional, memory, process, order) of learning. Teaching methods have been largely the collected practice and teaching habits of particular teachers who reacted to the memory of their own experience in learning, the example of their own teachers, and the fashion which seemed prevalent or attractive at a particular moment in the history of language teaching. It would be interesting and profitable to analyze the psychology of language learning, regardless of whether or not its author ever consciously worked out the psychology of language learning underlying his views. In the grammar-translation method, for example, the assumption is that the student learns by memorizing rules of correct grammar and by translating from language to the other. This learning assumption is woefully incomplete; that is, it says nothing specifically about how the student learns anything in particular."

Conclusion :

As can easily be detected from the title of my paper which deals with various aspects which are to be seen in the *process of foreign language teaching and its acquisition*, there can't be any definite conclusion to it. But for just appearance' sake, I think it would be relevant and consistent to conclude my paper by again emphasizing psychological significance in language acquisition in a summary form. Accordingly I would like to pay attention to the few selected essential points in teaching

those who have first been exposed to foreign language learning. In the first place, it is vitally necessary to make them fully realize that when we look back upon our babyhood we mastered the sound system of our mother tongue at its early stage and then by discriminating significant sounds, a series of significant sounds came to be uttered by us quite as unconsciously as walking and sleeping. In the second place, the language teacher should be willing to accept the fact that foreign language learning generally may not be entirely matters of mutual good-will on the part of students and teachers, and most school-imparted skills, school-based second language learning may require difficult cognitive and emotional adjustments, which may be beyond limits of some personalities. Particularly school-based bilingualism through, for instance, the intensive-direct method, requires that relatively mature organism should return briefly to childish ways of talking, of thinking, of groping for words, of admitting helplessness. According to the theory of Dr. Brown and Dr. Bellugi there are three stages at this point, that is, (1) imitation and reduction (2) imitation with expansion (3) induction of the latent structure. It is a well-known fact that learner's personality consolidates as he passes the great adolescent watershed, and thereafter it becomes increasingly difficult for him to imitate perfectly sounds that are strange to his mother tongue, although this particular difficulty is due primarily to psychological rigidity, emotional and intellectual rigidities also develop during these years and not everyone can succeed in overcoming them. Last but not least, I would like to say that language is mainly a matter of interrelated habits; if it were not, it could not be used as it is, and a habit is not formed by one or two performances but by many.

Therefore the more often we perform a given act in a given arrangement, the more likely we are to repeat the act in the same arrangement. Linguistically, the more often an incorrect form is used, the more ingrained it becomes, even though the user knows it to be undesirable. One of the most vital points in foreign language learning is, needless to say, to obtain the maximum amount of repetition with the minimum of mistakes. Therefore the correct form must accordingly be uttered more often than the incorrect form: for the more often the incorrect form is uttered, the more it becomes an incorrigible habit. And it may well be maintained that fluence and independence of its use, however, are entirely dependent upon the language teacher's ingenuity in handling correctly the matters of frequency and variety of repetition.

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