

HOW DO WE LEARN ANOTHER LANGUAGE?

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ABSTRACT

Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used by a social group. It may be either spoken or written. Every human being uses a language to communicate to other members of the society (s)he is a part of. While we acquire our mother tongues (L1), we learn the other language(s). Linguists talk of several approaches to language learning process, more prominent approaches being grammar-translation, direct, audio-lingual and contrastive analysis. Similarly, four of the major skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW) are also involved in language learning process. Our learning an additional language enriches and helps us build a communication rapport with a larger society or social group.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to introduce the basic principles, techniques and methods of learning a second or a foreign language (L2) using modern linguistic principles and methods of linguistic description. We are certain that we can succeed in our effort to learn another language. In the meantime, it would be appropriate here to give a definition of language. A general definition characterizes language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which members of a society interact with one another. We all acquired a language early on in life. There is no human being who does not 'have' a language of his or her own. There exist societies without having a written language, but there is no society which does not have a spoken language.

All languages have some basic characteristic features: a) it is a system; b) it consists of vocal symbols; c) it is symbols; d) these symbols are arbitrary; e) it is used by a social group; and f) it is a means of interaction between members of a social group. Similarly, language in general is inter-translatable, linear, discreet, patterned, creative, meaningful, reflexive, learnable and effable. It boils down to the basic point that a language consists of all the sounds, words and possible

sentences. To learn a language therefore means knowing all the sounds that are used and also not used in that language. Knowledge of a language enables us to combine sounds into words, combine words to form phrases and phrases to form sentences. It also enables us to judge what sentences are appropriate in various situations.

There is a fundamental difference between learning and acquisition of a language. Learning is a deliberate, conscious attempt to master a language. Acquisition, on the other hand, is a less deliberate, subconscious process of mastering a language, and is often associated with the manner in which children acquire their native or first language or L1. The case of optimal issue crops up here. The biological argument says that a child's brain is more 'plastic' and thus is more receptive than the adult's brain. Thus, certain aspects of language acquisition especially in the area of pronunciation are facilitated by this plasticity. The adult's musculature is hardened in some sense or set in place in some manner after puberty and this makes it difficult for the adult to acquire a native-like pronunciation.

There is another argument: the cognitive which says that an adult is superior to a child when it comes to abstract thought. Learning another language involves generalization, discrimination of differences and similarities, abstract categories and mastery of patterns. Since the adults seem to have an edge over children in this, language learning is done better with reason. At the same time, children are generally less inhibited about mimicking sounds than are adults, and this may positively affect their pronunciation. Normally, children do not have negative attitudes towards the second language culture, and they usually have a strong desire to be part of a group or community, which enhances their desire to learn the language. It may not be possible to replicate all the conditions of learning that a child is exposed when we as adults learn another language. There are a variety of language learning environments: natural, classroom or a combination of both.

There also exist approaches to the process of language learning. Linguists vary in their approaches. Some feel the grammar translation method is the best. Some others think the direct method is most effective. Still others accept the audio-lingual method to be very popular. Similarly, the contrastive analysis method is supposed to be the best by some other linguists.

Learning a language depends on a number of variables. Neuroscientists tell us that human language capacity is ingrained in the cerebral cortex which is like a cap over the entire brain. They believe that a child seems to follow some order in his acquisition of speech sounds. For example, vowels are acquired before consonants by age three. Stops (such as /p/, /t/ and /k/ as in *pin*, *ten* and *kit* respectively) are acquired before other consonants. Among the consonants, labials (sounds produced with lips, e.g. /b/ and /p/ as in *put* and *but* respectively) are acquired first, followed by velars (sounds produced with the back of the tongue such as /k/ and /g/ as in *kite* and *gun* respectively), alveolars (/t/, /d/, /s/ and /z/ as in *toy*, *dull*, *sin* and *zoo* respectively) and alveopalatals (/tʃ/ and /dʒ/ as in *charge* and *joy* respectively). Interdentals (/θ/ as in *think*, *moth* etc.) are acquired last.

Four language skills are involved in learning a language: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Invariably, it is felt that somebody who knows a language should be able to speak in that language. In other words, speaking a language is synonymous with the knowledge of that language. For most of us, learning and mastering another language means mastery of speaking in that language. Speaking is the most natural thing to do in our first language. We generally tend to emphasize speaking over reading or writing when we want to learn another language. While speaking in our first language comes to us in a natural, spontaneous manner, speaking in another language past our childhood often requires some conscious, deliberate effort in recognizing, identifying, producing, combining and using the sounds of that language. No real speech in the ordinary sense takes place without sounds for language is often transmitted and received mostly through sounds alone.

For learning to speak another language, it is suggested that one should imitate the pronunciation of each utterance. In case of doubt, one should ask the speaker to correct the pronunciation and accept any correction with appreciation. Similarly, minimal pairs are one of the most useful modes but they are hard to get for all the sounds and their combinations in the target language. Some minimal pairs from English are given below as illustrations: *mill-fill*, *mill-meal*, *pill-pull*, *fill-fit*, *beak-bike*, *sip-ship* etc.

These and many such pairs can be drilled by the learner in order to get a flair for the target language. Learning another language also involves, apart from speaking, knowing its writing system. One needs to learn the script of the target language. It includes the alphabet, direction, straight line, shape and size of letters in the handwritten form, hand movements, subscript and superscript, capital letters, small/lower case letters, joining letters, styles of handwriting: printing, simple cursive and full cursive, italics, ornamental writing etc.

Similarly, one more important thing a learner needs to know is the spelling. Many societies don't tolerate variation in spelling. Discrepancy exists between letter(s) and the sound(s). A group of two or more letters can be used to represent a single segment, e.g. *think* and *ship*. Or a single letter can represent a cluster of two or more segments, e.g. *saxophone* and *exile*. The same letter can represent different segments in different words, e.g. *on*, *bone* and *one*. The same segment can be represented by different letters in different words, e.g. /u:/ in *rude*, *loop*, *soup*, *new*, *sue*, *to*, *two*. The syntax represents a speaker's knowledge of the structure of phrases and sentences in his/her native language. A normal sentence always carries some meaning. The meaning of a sentence generally depends on the words that constitute that sentence. However, there are very interesting exceptions and processes that come to play in giving the meaning of a sentence. To a great extent the meaning of a sentence depends on the meaning of the words in that sentence. Some drills are recommended to generate more sentences from a given basic sentence type:

- a) Substitution drill helps one to generate a large number of sentences using the same pattern. In the sentence '*This is a book*,' the word '*book*' may be substituted by a number suitable nouns such as *cat*, *mat*, *house*, *lake*, *boy*, *table*, *photo* etc.
- b) Differential Drill helps one to make changes in a familiar pattern to derive similar sentence types. In the sentence '*The boy runs*,' one can derive the plural of the subject '*boy*' making the sentence '*The boys run*.' Similarly, from the sentence '*The boy walks*' may be derived '*The boy walked*.'

- c) Transformation Drill helps one to transform one type of a sentence to another: from statement to negation, from statement to exclamation, from statement to interrogation, and vice versa, etc.
- d) Expansion Drill helps the learner to expand the sentences by inserting appropriate qualifiers/words to a noun or a verb in a sentence. For example '*This is a book*' can be expanded to '*This is a Sanskrit book*' or '*This is a Sanskrit grammar book*,' and so on.
- e) Question-Answer Drill: The question-answer drill is the most commonly used form of learning another language. Through question-answer drills we develop a natural tool to elicit information, and through this process we learn a lot of new words and expressions. The beginning conversations in any language revolve around asking questions and getting answers.
- f) Replacement Drill helps the learner to replace one thing by another. E.g. a singular noun is replaced by a plural noun as in '*The boy runs*' becomes '*The boys run*' or a noun is replaced by a pronoun as in '*The boy chops the tree*' becomes '*He chops the tree*' or '*The boy chops it*.'
- g) Deletion Drills help one to go on deleting through which one can also generate new sentences. For example, the answer to the question '*Where did you go?*' can be '*(I went) To Town.*' or '*What are you doing?*' can fetch a reply '*(I am) shopping.*'
- h) Rearrangement Drills help one to generate a lot of new sentences through rearranging the words. For example: '*She fell down.-Down she fell!*', '*This pen is hers.-This is her pen*', '*My mother is the vice-principal.*' – '*The vice-principal is my mother.*'

CONCLUSION

We have dealt with some aspects of learning another language which is a complex exercise. One good thing is that before one goes in to learn another language, one is already equipped with one's mother tongue which stands one in good stead. There are, however, some points which

make the learning difficult. For example, there are huge discrepancies relating to spelling rules, punctuation, pronunciation etc. Each of these however can be tackled by an L2 learner in an effective way by following in some simple steps. There is no denying the fact that learning another language is always an asset.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Arun Behera is an Assistant Professor of English in Sri Sathya Sai University, Bangalore. He has over 22 years of experience in various capacities such as HoD, Principal, Senate member, Board of Studies member, IGNOU coordinator, NSS Program Officer etc. Dr Behera has published five books, edited Expression, reviewed A Little Book of Language and published 50 articles. He is in the review panel of IJEE and IJEL and editorial board of IJSSE and IJEE. He has been conferred Bharat Excellence Award and his bio-note has appeared in Asia Pacific Who's Who, Asia's Who's Who and Famous India's Who's Who.