

Demystifying Cloistered Etcetera of SL Acquisition

Dr. LaxmanJogdand [1]

Abstract

Among the myriad of espoused hypothetical convictions, none could withstand cropping importunity of instant access to English proficiency in India. Historical records with authentic certainty unveil the fact that all attempts embellished as methods, approaches, principles, techniques and so on proved to be experiments soon to be replaced by another of its kind. Psychological perspective initiated with the 'school of experimental psychology' founded by Wilhelm Wundt went on being rethought by multitude of psychologists and linguists to follow. English teachers have been being compelled into confusion in the concourse of seemingly conforming conceptual chaos effectuated by unending list of methodologies, otherwise entitled 'theories', 'methods', 'approaches', 'techniques', 'strategies', not to mention alternate innovative practices like 'Community Language Learning', 'Collaborative Learning', 'Content Based Instruction', 'Task Based Language Teaching', 'Neurolinguistic Programming' and so on. Interestingly enough, most of these claim to be the perfectly proportionate inquisitions about nature, structure and behavior of language on one hand and language acquisition on the other hand, despite having failed to achieve the desired outcomes.

The present study meditates on the essentialities of understanding the nature of language and that of the language learning and learners psychology as dealt with by psychologists, linguists and ELT scholars so as to contemplate the possibilities of bifurcating conceptual confusions to the extent of neuropsychology to unveil the basic patterns of functioning of human brain and factors affecting it in relation to language learning projected against and/or as a corollary to language acquisition.

Keywords: Acquisition, Learning, Methods, Approaches, Techniques, strategies, Alternate Innovative Practices, TESL.

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English Language Teaching has been one of the constant concerns for academicians across the globe. It has undergone several methodological shifts since its inception in the non-English speaking countries, especially, Asian and African countries. Theorizing the process of language learning so as to assist the process of teaching in order to yield desired outcomes can be said to have commenced with Wilhelm Wundt, a German psychologist who established a psychological laboratory in Leipzig in 1879.

Psychology has been defined as the "science of conscious experience" [1] and "science of behaviour" [2]. Educational psychology deals with psychology of the learners and thereby attempts to understand learner psyche so as to use it for making learning more effective. It is "any modification brought about in the behaviour of an individual as a result of interaction with the environment constitutes learning" [3]. "Educational psychology is an applied branch of psychology, applies psychological principles to modify human behaviour" [4]. The study of educational psychology generally deals with 'the process of teaching', 'the learner', 'the learning processes' and 'the environment'. According to Crow and Crow, it is "describing and explaining the learning experiences of an individual from birth to the old age" [5]. "Educational psychology derives concepts from experimental work in psychological laboratories and carries out experimentation to test the applicability of such concepts to education and to round out in the study of learning-teaching process in its various ramifications" [6].

Behaviourism asserts that all theories should have observational correlates and there are no philosophical differences between publicly observable processes (actions) and privately observable processes (thinking and feeling). Pavlov's theory of 'classical conditioning' foregrounds the process of habit formation observing that "Conditioned reflex is a reflex produced by a stimulus that originally was incapable of causing this reaction but that has been substituted for the originally adequate stimulus by a process of long association" [7]. 'Repetition accompanied by reward or punishment, so as to cast positive effect on learning by strengthening S-R bond helps in the process of habit formation' and 'contradictory stimuli, if allowed in the learning environment, would hamper the process of habit formation' are the major postulates of the theory of behaviourism.

Thorndike's argument that "classical condition is insufficient to describe the true nature of learning process because behaviour learned by conditioning is mechanical" [8] and that 'there is the association between sense impression, impulse and action' does not refute the claims of Pavlov but support them in the sense that he points towards some interesting but important factors like 'motivation', 'variation', and 'the effect leading to learning' which were not explicitly mentioned by Pavlov. The Stimulus- Response connections according to his theory are influenced by 'rewards' and 'punishments' which act as reinforcement either to repeat or to stamp out the unwanted connection of 'Stimulus' and 'Response'.

^[1]Professor & Head, Department of English, Mahatma Gandhi Mahavidyalaya, Ahmedpur Dist- Latur, Email: jogdand.laxman@gmail.com

The critical reception of Thorndike's theory of S-R connections leading to process of habit formation as discussed by Pavlov saying that "Thorndike was wrong in thinking that reward and punishment influence S-R connections" [9] because "S-R connections are made only by law of exercise or prepetition" [10] and that they involve "factors of frequency and recency" [11] too do not wholly refute earlier propositions but maintain them with slight alterations because of mistaken understanding of unexplained or left-out ideas. Watson's experiment on an eleven months old boy, who enjoyed playing with white rats like other children but was afraid of loud metallic noise, leads only to conclude that Pavlov was right in stating that 'contradictory stimuli should not be allowed in the learning environment' because when both (rat and noise) were presented to the boy for a few times, he started fearing the white rats too, which in turn, strengthens the 'Law of Association'.

Edwin R Guthrie's 'Simultaneous Conditioning', a theory built around experiments in neuropsychology, though differs from that of Watson in emphasizing contiguity in conditioning as "contiguous conditioning is the most basic form of learning and all other types of learning can be interpreted in terms of simultaneous conditioning" [12] forms multiple analogies with Watson. Guthrie's observations that "the organism responds to various stimuli by contraction of muscles and secretion of glands" [13] which he calls 'movements' comprising an 'act' and which for him is "a series of movements associated together by the contiguity of time" [14] is no different from Watson's 'Law of Frequency and Recency'.

Guthrie's laws which overtly appear to be contradicting earlier experiments by various psychologists, actually, can be seen as nothing but confusions created by use of language that leads to same goal, but by a different road. 'The Law of Remote or Delayed Conditioning' that speaks about conditioning of delayed reflexes asserting that "the conditioned stimulus precedes the unconditioned stimulus" [15], the 'Law of Repetition and Practice' which claims that here is no need of repetition and "one pairing of simple stimulus and simple response brings about pairing and repetition is essential in case of complex stimuli" [16], and the 'Law of Motive' with its claim of 'maintaining stimuli' are only the further details pertaining to conditioning which in itself is so complex a process that eliciting desired outcomes through application of detailed theoretical enterprise leads only to a lengthened process of experimentation. 'The Law of Extinction' of Guthrie however, says that "once a stimulus and response are paired, they remain attached forever and hence, extinction does not take place" [17] but the 'Law of Forgetting' maintains that "forgetting occurs as a result of interference of new learning with the old learning due to inhibition of old connections by new connections" [18] leading to conclude that these are but the complimentary ideas to those proposed earlier.

Skinner's 'Operant Conditioning' finds its base in the radical argument against the experimental psychology that "behaviour in learning situation is not always passive reflex type" [19] but in many situations "behaviour of the learner is emitted rather than elicited and learner actively participates

in many learning situation" [20]. Skinner's belief in the nature of human beings and society as "controlled by a haphazard assessment of rewards and punishments and 'being capriciously, rather than rationally and consistently administered" [21], leads to rethink the notion of learning proposed by Guthrie as contradictory to that of Watson.

Skinner too however, underwent radical criticism at the hands of American Linguist, Noam Chomsky, who condemned Skinner's theory of Stimulus-Response bond because, according to him, it provides no explanation for behaviour in any sense. Chomsky's criticism of Skinner rests on larger understanding of complexities of functioning of human brain which, with its infinite abilities could not be limited merely to the 'observable stimuli'. Therefore, Chomsky (1971) says that theoretical enterprise of behaviorism restricted to observable stimuli is "monumental triviality and intellectual bankruptcy". [22]

The Gestalt school of psychology originated in Germany believes that the world is perceived by us in terms of patterns, shapes, forms and configurations. Kohler's *The Mentality of Apes* (1923), and *Gestalt Psychology* (1929), Koffka's *Growth of the Mind* (1924), and *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (1935), and Wertheimer's *Productive Thinking* (1945) perpetuating the ideas of insight can be seen as the observable response to the observable stimulus and bears multiple resemblances with behaviourist school of psychology.

Later half of twentieth century in the world of language teaching, especially, English language teaching has been marked by emergence of techniques, methods and approaches. The terminology itself is very confusing as the terms are often used to connote different ideas. Among various attempts to define these terms, commonly cited one is that of Anthony which attempts to distinguish an approach from the method and technique from a method and an approach. "An approach is a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language teaching and learning. It is axiomatic and describes the nature of the subject matter to be taught" [23]. Method on the other hand is "an overall plan for the orderly representation of language material, no part of which contradicts, and all of which is based upon, the selected approach. It is procedural" [24]. And the "Technique is implementational - that which actually takes place in the classroom. It is a particular trick stratagem or contrivance used to accomplish immediate objective". [25]

Most commonly discussed among the methods of teaching English is Grammar-Translation Method though most of the scholars unanimously agree that GTM is a worthless and outdated method of teaching English in the modern context. Its claims that "Classical languages with their intricate system of grammar are capable of training human faculties including memory" [26] and "Learning these languages is part of a truly liberal education" [27] are totally insignificant and absurd in the present world. GTM which "primarily aimed at the ability to read full texts rather than to communicate orally in everyday situations" [28] underwent severe criticism though it is based on truthful understandings like "Translation best interprets and assimilates the foreign phraseology and the structure of a foreign language is best learnt when compared and contrasted with that of the mother tongue". [29]

Direct Method of Teaching English, according to F. Frank, believes that "language could be best taught by using it actively in the classroom rather than using analytical procedures that focus on explanation of grammar rules" [30] and "The proficient user of (L1) possesses language sense which surpasses the grammars and the dictionaries of the language and that this sense rests on direct associations between experience and expressions" [31]. It believes that memory depends on repetition as well as on attention and interest and coordination of texts, dictionaries and grammar to make learning effective.

The 'New Method' of Dr. Michael West, unlike 'The Bilingual Method' of Dodson, which is an attempt to reach an understanding between GTM and DM, with the conviction that ability to read is more important for Indian students than the ability to speak or to write believes that "A man needs two kinds of languages: a language of emotions and a language of fact, knowledge and arguments" [32] wherein English becomes the language of science and technology leading us to conclude that "The average child in India needed English mainly as the language of knowledge which was best achieved by becoming a proficient reader". [33]

The Audio-lingual Method emerged from the language teaching programmes devised in America during World War II for training army personnel which stringently aimed at gaining ability to communicate orally in everyday life "advocated aural training first, then pronunciation training, followed by speaking reading and writing" [34]. It was based on law of association claiming that "The human behaviours depend on stimulus, response and reinforcement and analogy provides better foundation for language learning than analysis because it involves the process of generalization and discrimination". [35]

'Eclecticism', which gained wider popularity consequential to failure of 'Methods' is the combination of all that is found to be the best in each of the method and believes that "the meanings that the words of a language have for the native speaker can be learned only in a linguistic and cultural context" [36]. It believes that learning a foreign language is basically the process of habit formation which is affected by reinforcement. "Language skills are learned more effectively if the items to be learned in target language are presented in spoken form before they are seen in written form" [37]. Using target language is the best way to learn it, but mother tongue need not be discarded as a rule.

Significance of the structures and not of the words is presupposed in 'Structural Approach'. Being strongly influenced by the behaviouristic theory of Skinner, it believes in habit formation wherein 'reinforcement' or 'reward' is a key element as it encourages repetition leading to habit formation. Primacy of the speech, learner's involvement, heavy drills, emphasis on listening and speaking, correlating teaching of grammar and composition, teaching graded (frequently used) structures and vocabulary, teaching the structures orally before introducing them for writing, using substitution tables, presenting structures in the specified situations etc are considered important in SA.

The Lexical Approach published by Michael Lewis in 1993 "refers to one derived from the belief that the building blocks of language learning and communication are not grammar,

functions, notions, or some other unit of planning and teaching but lexis, that is, words and word combinations" [38]. The lexical approach holds that only a minority of spoken sentences are entirely novel creations and word combinations functioning as chunks of memorized patterns form a major part of the speech. Fluency depends on separate stock of words and on having rapid access to a stock of lexical chunks, rather than on a set of generative grammar rules, Speakers need both a prefabricated, automated element to draw on as well as creative, generative ones.

The Communicative Approach to the language teaching gives importance to the function of the language rather than to its structure. As language is meant for communication, it deals with the 'theory of theory' and considers functional aspect of language as more important than the theories of language learning. Began in late sixties of twentieth century, the communicative approach partly follows and partly deviates from the then popular method of language teaching called 'Situational Language Teaching' which derives from Structural Approach - also referred to as 'Oral Approach'/'Aural-Oral Approach'. Its foundation partly lies in the linguistic theories proposed by famous American linguist Noam Chomsky who criticized structural theories saying that they are not able to account for the fundamental characteristics of language viz. creativity and uniqueness. Although it is true that Christopher Cadlin and Henry Widowson are the Chief proponents of communicative approach, its basis lies with the works of functional linguists John Firth, M.A.K. Halliday, Dell Hymes, John Gumperz, and William Labov.

Its focus on communication promoting activities, teaching useful language to strengthen learning process, carrying out meaningful tasks to promote learning, and viewing language in terms of its function can be called a deviation from other theories only because it looks at the language in terms of its function and thus, allows to think of seven basic function of language as stated by Brumfit, namely, 'instructional function'(using language to get the things), 'regulatory function'(using language to control behaviour of others) 'interactional function'(using language to interact with others), 'personal function'(using language to express personal feelings and meanings), 'heuristic function'(using language to learn and to discover) 'imaginative function'(using language to create the world of the imagination), 'representational function'(using language to communicate information). [39]

Humanistic Approach is yet another perspective of learning, whose basis is not theories of language or theories about language learning but concern for human beings (sharing and caring) and is developed not by language experts but by psychologists like Charles A. Curran, Caleb Gattegno, Dr. Georgi Lozanov and James Asher. Based on theoretical assumption like "teacher can damage the self-image of the learner" [40] "active participation of an adult learner would not allow damage of his dignity" [41], "qualities - independence, autonomy and responsibility should be nurtured through learning" [42], "learning can be made easy and joyful by making atmosphere free from negative suggestions" [43], and "A little fun in class goes a long way in learning" [44], humanistic approach strongly believes that

“the ideal world should consist of autonomous, creative and emotionally secure people and education should and can assist in the creation of such a world”. [45]

Feelings (personal, emotional and aesthetic appreciation), social relations (friendship and cooperation), intellect (knowledge, reason and understanding), and self-actualisation (full realization of one's deepest true qualities) are important characteristics of humanistic approach wherein whatever gives unpleasant feeling and forbids aesthetic enjoyment, whatever discourages or reduces friendship and cooperation, whatever interferes with the free exercise of the mind and conformity (as it leads to enslavement) are strongly rejected and can be seen as factors forming parallels as well as paradoxes with theories of language learning proposed by the school of psychology especially, the principle of reinforcement as held extremely essential by Skinner in his ‘operant conditioning’.

Community Language Learning (CLL) developed by Charles A Curran, a Roman Catholic priest and the professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago represents the theory of counselling learning where the teacher is regarded as the counsellor and the learner as the client in the language classroom. CLL is done in small or large groups referred to as ‘community’ with a view to consider learners’ personal feelings and attitudes which are thought as extremely important. “CLL techniques also belong to a larger set of foreign language teaching practices called as Humanistic Techniques” [46] and to bilingual education programme. CLL is humanistic in practice but it also considers some basic assumptions about the nature of language and the nature of language learning like -The foreign language learners’ tasks are “to apprehend the sound system, assign fundamental meanings and to construct a basic grammar of the foreign language” [47], “communication is exchange which is incomplete without a feedback reaction from the destine of the message” [48], “Language is people; language is persons in contact; language is persons in response” [49] and Learning is holistic because true human learning is both cognitive and affective.

Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) shares several common principles and assumptions with ‘communicative language teaching’ and is also referred to as the part of communicative approach or one of the “current communicative approaches” [50]. The use of ‘tasks’ forms the core unit of planning and instruction in the TBLT class. In its proposition, process is important than the product, “language learning is believed to depend on immersing students not merely in ‘comprehensible input’ but in ‘tasks’ that require them to negotiate meaning and engage in the naturalistic and meaningful communication” [51]. “Tasks are activities which have meaning as their primary focus. Success in tasks is evaluated in terms of achievement of an outcome, and tasks generally bear some resemblance to real-life language use. So task-based instruction takes a fairly strong view of communicative language teaching” [52]. Theoretically it believes that,

Language is primarily a means of making meaning; Multiple, lexical units are central in language use and language learning; conversation is the central focus of language acquisition; Tasks provide input and output needed for

language acquisition; Learning difficulty can be negotiated and fine-tuned for particular pedagogical purposes [53].

Cooperative Language Learning (CLL), also called Collaborative Learning makes maximum use of cooperative activities like pairs and groups making it “a group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his/her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others” [54]. Originated with the criticism of traditional teacher-centered, competition fostering educational system, CLL seeks to “raise the development of all students, help to build positive relationship between students, give students experiences needed for healthy social, psychological, and cognitive development, and to replace the competitive organizational structure of most classrooms and schools with a team based, high performance organizational structure”. [55]

Theoretically CLL believes that “All normal children growing up in a normal environment learn to talk. Communication is the primary purpose of language” [56], “human beings spend a large part of their lives in conversation and for most of their conversation is among their most significant and engrossing activities” [57], “conversation operates according to certain agreed upon set of cooperative rules or maxims” (Grice in Richards and Rodgers) [58]. Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals. “Within cooperative situations, individuals seek outcomes beneficial to themselves and all other group members”. [59]

Competency-Based Learning, also called Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) is a learner-centered approach that believes in mastering individual skills found more difficult by an individual learner. It is “defining educational goals in terms of precise measurable descriptions of the knowledge, skills, and behaviours students should possess at the end of a course of study” [60]. Although it has been “the state-of-the-art approach to adult ESL so that any refugee in the United States who wished to receive federal assistance had to attend a competency-based program” [61], CBLT views language as functional and interactional and connected to social context. It considers the functional aspect of the language and predicts certain facts about nature of language and that of language learning such as –“language skills that people need, can be fairly accurately predicted or determined, language form can be inferred from language function, and language can be functionally analyzed into appropriate parts and subparts and these can be taught incrementally”. [62]

An approach to language teaching organized around the content or information rather than around a linguistic syllabus wherein “content or information in the language being learned with little or no direct or explicit effort to teach the language itself separately from the content being taught” [63] is referred to as Content Based Instruction (CBI). Considering three basic assumptions namely, language is text-and-discourse based (a study of textual and discourse structures of written texts), language draws on integrated skills (language is combination of multiple skills and grammar is component of other skills), and language is

purposeful (the purpose of language may be academic, vocational, social or recreational), unlike the traditional system of teaching language skills by the language teacher, CBI believes that 'every teacher is a language teacher' and emphasizes the need for collaboration between subject matter teachers and the language teachers.

Multiple Intelligences (MI) is a learner centered philosophy that believes in multiple dimensions of human intelligence and their acknowledgement in education discarding the traditional belief that intelligence is a single inborn capacity. Howard Gardner, the proponent of MI rejects the traditional IQ tests because they measure only logic and language and states that brain has other equally important types of intelligences but they differ in strength and combinations and these can be enhanced by training and practice. "Pedagogy is most successful when these learner differences are acknowledged, analysed for particular groups of learners and accommodated in teaching" [64]. Stating eight native intelligences namely, Linguistic, Logical/Mathematical, Spatial, Musical, Bodily/Kinesthetic, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, Naturalist [65] Gardener contributes a lot to the cognitive science which later becomes the framework for school education with theoretical beliefs like - Language encompasses all aspects of communication, other intelligences enrich the tapestry of communication, there exists a cluster of mental abilities that are separate but equal and that share the pinnacle at the top of hierarchy called intelligence. [66]

Neurolinguistic programming, a set of training techniques developed in 1970s by John Gridler, a psychologist and Richard Bandler, a student of linguistics is an attempt to discover 'how successful learners achieved their successes'. It "is a collection of techniques, patterns, and strategies for assisting effective communication, personal growth and change, and learning based on a series of underlying assumptions about how the mind works and how people act and interact" [67]. NLP is a set of general communication techniques analogous to humanistic approach to language teaching.

Based on "Language Learning Strategy Theory" NLP practices modeling exceptional people with a firm belief that there is connection between neurological process (neuro), language (linguistic), and behavioural patterns learned through experience (programming) which can be changed to achieve specific goals in life wherein the 'neuro' part is concerned with how we experience the world through our five senses and represent it in our mind through our neurological process, the 'linguistic' part is concerned with the way language we use shapes as well as reflects our experience of the world and the 'programming' part is concerned with training ourselves to think, speak, and act in new and positive ways in order to release our potential and reach those heights of achievements which we previously only dreamt of. [68]

Drawing from the theoretical framework of Humanistic Approach and Constructivist School of Language Learning with the beliefs that psycho-linguistically, language is a vehicle for internal interaction for egocentric speech, for thinking, "language use is always in a social context, and this applies to both oral and written language, to both first and second language" [69] "We use language to think: in order to

discover what we know, we sometimes write, perhaps talk to a friend, or mutter to ourselves silently" [70], the Whole Language, with its initial concern for reading and writing in native languages is against the 'decoding approach' (teaching especially, reading and writing by separating the components of the language into grammar, vocabulary, phrases and phonetics) and argues that the language should be taught as a whole because "If language isn't kept whole, it isn't language anymore". [71]

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) are innovative, flexible, useful, self-directed techniques and individual efforts deliberately tried by the language learners to enhance their own learning to acquire a second language. LLS are defined in different ways as – "the techniques or devices that learners use to acquire second language knowledge" [72], "steps taken by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage & retrieval of information" [73], and plans and/or actions that learners take to enhance the process of language learning". [74]

Considering communication as the primary function of language and inadequacy of traditional theories of language acquisition, theory of The Natural Approach developed by Tracy Terrell and Stephan Krashen (1983) published as The Natural Approach considers that "the natural approach is similar to other Communicative approaches being developed today" [75]. Proposed in five hypotheses namely – The Acquisition / Learning Hypothesis, The Monitor Hypothesis, The natural order hypothesis, The Input Hypothesis and The Affective filter Hypothesis 'The Natural Approach' takes a radical stand against the theories, methods and approaches specifically designed for second language learning.

Hypothetical presumptions presenting post-method postulates precisely follow the principles of Humanistic Approach to teaching in general and language teaching in particular. Essential theoretical premise attempting to unveil the nature of pedagogy, being shifted from nature of language and language learning to function of language and finally to psychology of the learners, ultimately proves the fact that language acquisition is a complex process and includes multiple factors contributing to it. Nonetheless, each of the aforementioned innovations contributes to the domain of language learning and allows the teachers to build certain mental framework so as to decide their teaching strategies. The complex nature of language and language teaching involves various aspects and interestingly enough, they are not universal in themselves. The issues of the learners differ as the social, political, environmental and psychological conditions differ.

Although Chomsky rejected the notion of behavioural science, the concept of conditioning remains central to the process of learning. The Natural Approach peeps deep into the brain with an intention to unearth the actual process of acquisition only to prove that behavioural science is significant development in the process of nature of learning though it could not account for everything involved in the process. Besides, considering the fact that learner's psychology is an extremely important factor in all the educational attempts, the whole enterprise of English language teaching needs to be understood in terms of nature of learning, nature of language, function of language and the psychology of the learners.

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