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PSYCHOLOGY FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

As teachers of English, we tend to ask ourselves often “How can we make our students learn better?” Despite trying every technique in the classroom, there will still be something unsatisfactory. We have been witnessing some kind of change or the other in the language teaching methodology. This paper presents psychological insights by which learners can learn better.

Keywords: psychology, learning, behaviourism, cognitivism, humanism.

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There are four major schools of psychology of learning: 1. Behaviourism 2. Cognitivism 3. Developmental Psychology (e.g. Piaget and Vygotsky’s theories of learning) 4. Affective Psychology (e.g. Carl Rogers) which has inspired several language teaching methodologies like Total Physical Response (TPR), Gattegno’s Silent Way, Curran’s Community Language Learning and Lozonov’s Suggestopedia.

The first school of the psychology of learning is Behaviourism. According to the behaviourist view of language learning, language is learnt only through *use* and *practice*. The more the learner is exposed to the use of language the better the chances of learning it. The second school of the psychology of learning is Cognitivism. Cognition refers to the mental activity through which human beings acquire and process knowledge. The cognitivist view puts the learner at the centre of the learning process. For them, learning depends on perception and insight-formation. They felt that all learning is in the nature of problem-solving: the new experience constitutes the problem, which the learner tries to ‘solve’ on the basis of previous learning. Cognitivist view emphasizes the importance of the learner’s own contribution to the process of learning. The contribution consists in the previous learning, which brings to the task of learning something ‘new’, and which has considerable influence on what is now going to be learnt.

According to Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, children pass through different stages of development. At each stage, they are capable of doing certain tasks and incapable of certain other. Teacher has to plan lessons within the range of learner’s abilities. Before doing so, he should try to understand the learners’ level of cognitive development. Teacher must remember that every learner does not possess the same abilities at the same stage. Learners’ abilities vary from one stage to another. Teacher has to select activities or materials which could be interesting and be reasonably challenging to suit each learner’s developmental level. Learners of lower classes should be introduced first to concrete ideas and objects than to

abstract ones. Teacher should help learners relate the information they are already possessing to the new information, to learn better and faster.

Cognitivist Bruner theorized that environment and experience are crucial factors in development and the instructional process should intervene in accelerating development. Teacher should interact with students and guide them when necessary so that students would progressively build their own knowledge, rather than be 'taught'. New information would be classified and understood based on knowledge already gained. What is learnt must be constantly revisited to provide the basis for new learning. New knowledge gained is based on already existing knowledge. Motives for learning will have to be made clear to the learner. Following principles can be derived from Bruner's theory: 1. Instruction must be concerned with the experiences and contexts that make the learners willing and able to learn (readiness). 2. Instruction must be structured so that it can be easily grasped by the learners (spiral organization). 3. Instruction should be designed to facilitate extrapolation and or fill in the gaps (going beyond the information given).

Cognitivist Vygotsky, in the theory of Social Interactionism, believed that the child learns not only from the environment but also through interaction with it. He based his theory on the social nature of learning. Children are born into a social world and learning occurs through interaction with others. They do not learn anything independently in an environment. Piaget and Bruner have also spoken about the child learning from the environment through discovery. Piaget explained intrapersonal factor of cognitive development. Bruner spoke about the interdependence of learning and development and the need for structuring learning through instructional process. Vygotsky emphasized that children's most important discoveries are guided by skilful tutors. He further states that we cannot wait for the child to discover principles but must present these at the right time when the child will be able to grasp them. The concept of mediation is thus central to Vygotsky's theory of Social Interactionism.

Like behaviourism, cognitivism and social constructivism, humanism is a school of thought in the field of psychology. If behaviourism and cognitivism can be considered the first and second forces within psychology, humanistic psychology can be regarded as the third force. This is both a reaction to the behaviourist and cognitivist viewpoints and also an extension of these viewpoints. Humanist Abraham Maslow observed that the behaviourists were too preoccupied with overt behaviour of individuals and objectivity resulting in overlooking the various forces within the individuals that influence their actions. An understanding of these tensions within individuals, which shape their outward behaviour, is essential in order to know the motives behind the actions of individuals.

Humanism includes several strands of thought rather than a unified and coherent set of ideas and theories. It draws upon both Asian and European philosophies. Central to the philosophy is the essential nature of a human being. In contrast to other approaches, the humanistic approach tries to understand mental states through subjective experience rather than objective experimental study. The key assumptions of humanistic psychology are: 1. The significance of conscious awareness 2. The human capacity for personal agency 3. Each person is a whole. Humanism emphasizes the role of human emotions, thoughts and feelings, which shape human learning. Many humanists feel any attempt at understanding human learning without taking the learner's inner world into consideration is an unbalanced view of learning. Humanistic Association founded by George Kelly, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow tried to provide the human angle, which focuses on the development of the whole person rather than looking at particular aspects such as the development and use of cognitive skills. Humanistic psychology should be understood in terms of an orientation to the study of mental states and not a school of psychology. The experimental approach is advocated for reflecting upon one's own thoughts and behaviour. Experiential learning is based on what one experiences or does for oneself rather than receiving information from others. Personal choice and exercise help us in taking responsibility for our own growth. Awareness of the multifacetedness of our existence, the physical, the emotional, the intellectual and the social helps us in evolving into better human beings.

According to humanist Erik Erikson, education should take into account feelings and emotions of a person. In other words, education should involve the whole person. Another humanist Maslow's seven level

hierarchy of needs is very useful to us in gaining insights into learner's behaviour: Self-actualization need, Aesthetic needs, Needs to know and understand, Esteem needs, Belongingness and love needs, Safety needs and Physiological needs. According to him, learner's interest to know about new things or learn will not develop until their other basic needs have been met. Carl Rogers' educational philosophy is based on certain key humanistic principles. He believed that human beings have a potential for learning and a natural desire to learn. It is the responsibility of educators to create conditions for facilitating learning among learners. Learners should initiate the learning process and take active part in the learning process to have significant learning. This is possible only when the learners perceive that the learning environment is free from threat. Teachers should create an atmosphere of warmth and trust wherein learners can freely experiment, take risks without worrying about ridicule and punishment from the teacher. He emphasized the need for helping learners learn how to learn because of the need to constantly update one's knowledge in the present day knowledge society in which we are living. Along with the mastering of subject matter, learners should be taught how to discover resources, formulate hypothesis, and test them. In other words, teachers should focus on the process of learning in addition to the product. The relationship between the teacher and the learner is similar to that of between counsellor and client in psychological therapy. Teacher responds to the needs of the pupil as a whole person. This is the philosophy on which Charles A. Curran based his Community Language Learning technique.

Teaching methods such as the Silent Way, Community Language Learning and Suggestopedia are based on humanistic psychology. They focus on the emotions and feelings associated with learning and language learning, and aim at promoting confidence and anxiety-free and enjoyable learning environments. In these methods learner is taken as whole person. Although Caleb Gattegno's Silent Way did not stem directly from the Cognitive Approach, it shares certain principles with it. For example, one of the basic principles of the Silent Way is that 'Teaching should be subordinated to learning'. In the Community Language Learning, pupils share their real life experiences with the teacher acting as a counsellor. Pupil tells the teacher what he wishes to convey in the first language. Teacher translates it for him with the other pupils overhearing the teacher's translation. Pupil's learning through this technique is stress-free and anxiety-free. Humanistic techniques in language learning seek to provide comfort zone for pupils during the learning process. Lozanov's Suggestopedia makes use of comfortable classroom furniture and soft music in the background to help learners achieve a receptive state of mind for learning. The Audio-Lingual Method is based on Behavioural psychology. Teaching methods such as Desuggestopedia, Total Physical Response, Content-based, Task-based, and Participatory Approaches, Learning Strategy Training, Co-operative Learning, and Multiple Intelligences are illustrative of an affective-humanistic approach, an approach in which there is respect for student's feelings.

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