

## ***Second Language (L-2) Learning Theory and Its Application in Speaking Classes***

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### **Abstract**

*This article discusses two main issues related to the theory of learning a second language and its application in speaking classes, mostly from psycholinguistic perspectives. The first part discusses the theory of learning the second language which consists of four main points, namely 1) the theory of language learning in general, 2) the variables that characterize the second language learning process such as neurological aspects, psychological aspects and psycho-pedagogic aspects, 3) affective factors in learning the second language and 4) the role of translation in learning the second language. The second part is about the application of L-2 learning theory in speaking classes based on the writer's own experiences. These include issues such as how to deal with the accuracy vs fluency, how to deal the introvert and extrovert students, how to deal with students' mistakes in speaking, and how to empower the students by giving more freedom and trust and building self-confidence and self-esteem in order that they want to express themselves freely and confidently.*

**Keywords:** L-2 learning theory, speaking, fluency and accuracy, self-esteem.

### **A. Introduction**

The concepts of "learning" and "acquisition" are clearly distinguished in language learning. Learning refers to activities that are carried out consciously and planned while acquisition is an activity that is not planned and spontaneous (Krashen, 1998). Many linguists, especially psycholinguists, have discussed first language acquisition and second language acquisition, including W. Klein with his book

Second Language Acquisition (1986); Dulay, Burt and Krashen in Language Two (1982) and many others. Second language learning theory is not discussed as much when compared to second language acquisition theory. Therefore, this article on theories of second language learning is largely based on Applied Psycholinguistics: An Introduction to the Psychology of Language Learning and Teaching by Renzo Titone and Marcel Danesi

(1985) and several articles in *The Second Language Classroom* (1981), in particular, an essay written by H.D. Brown entitled 'Affective Factors in Second Language Learning'.

First language learning, according to the authors' observations at various seminars on teaching English, is rarely discussed. Most discussions focus on first language acquisition, not first language learning since first language is not learned but acquired. Therefore, according to Titone and Danesi (1985: 83), many claim that learning a second language is the same as acquiring the first language because there are similarities in the following points. First, learning techniques such as imitation, repetition, and practice are involved in these two learning processes. Second, understanding precedes production. Third, listening and speaking precede reading and writing.

According to Titoni and Danesi, this view is influenced by the behavioristic model of language acquisition. Titoni himself in his

essay 'The Holistic Approach to Second Language Education' (Alatis et al., 1981: 73), asserts that first language acquisition and second language learning are very different in five respects. First, the acquisition of the first language takes place spontaneously and unplanned, while learning the second language takes place in a planned manner. Second, the acquisition of a first language is driven by primary needs, namely the need to express opinions, and to communicate with parents. While learning a second language is driven by softer needs such as getting high grades at school. Third, in the acquisition of the first language, students start from zero, while in learning the second language, students already know the first language / mother tongue. This can be beneficial, but it can also be a disadvantage. Fourth, students learning a second language already have the ability to distinguish sounds and language structures, while in acquiring the first language, students do not have this ability. Fifth, students in learning a second language already have a certain

attitude towards foreign cultures which may affect learning process.

## **B. Research Method**

This article will discuss two main issues related to the theory of learning a second language and its application in speaking courses. The first part discusses the theory of learning the second language which consists of four main points, namely 1) the theory of language learning in general, 2) the variables that characterize the second language learning process such as neurological aspects, psychological aspects and psycho-pedagogic aspects, 3) affective factors in learning the second language and 4) the role of translation in learning the second language. The second part is about the application of L-2 learning theory in speaking courses based on the authors' own experience.

## **C. Results and Discussion**

### **Language Learning Theory**

How do people learn a language? According to Roger Bell (1981: 23), this question can be

answered with two possibilities, namely the answer based on the behavioristic model and the answer based on the cognitive model. According to the behavioristic model, people learn a language based on the stimulus-response principle. In its application, people learn language by imitation, repetition, practice / drill, memorization, for the formation of correct habits (habit formation). In contrast, according to the cognitive model, people learn language by understanding data received by the brain through the senses. What matters is the individual's ability to understand and respond to situations and this is a mental process, not a (physical) habit formation process. The principle is that it is better to know and not be able to say it than to say something without understanding it. Of the two models above, which one is correct? According to Titoni and Danesi (1985: 83), the truth lies in between the two learning theories, namely that learning is a complex process that involves behavioral or environmental and cognitive elements at the same time, and both

complement each other. Therefore, Schumann as quoted by Titoni and Danesi, proposes a second language learning model through three parameters, namely 1) initiating parameters, namely affective variables that take the initiative and regulate the learning process 2) cognitive parameters, cognitive activities carried out by students. Students to input data from the target language (input data of the target language). This process includes generalizing, drawing conclusions, making analogies and memorizing 3) linguistic products, namely the results of the first and second, for example word formation, changing sentences from positive to negative, forming interrogative sentences, etc.( Krashen, 1998).

To answer the question of how people learn a language, Titoni and Danesi (1985: 60) not only mention two theories, namely behavioristic and cognitive, but they add a third theory, namely the humanistic theory. According to this theory, learning a language needs to apply an interpersonal approach: trust, freedom, and self-esteem which are the keywords in the humanistic approach. What is important

is the affective aspect in encouraging students to show self-actualization.

### **Several Variables Characterizing Second Language Learning**

#### **1. Neurological Aspects**

The main question here is: do the critical period and lateralization play a role in the process of learning a second language? The answer is yes, but it depends on the age of the student (Titoni and Danesi, 1985: 84- 85). For students who learn a second language during a critical period and their brains are still elastic, then they will be superior in mastering their speech like native speakers, compared to students who have passed puberty because the neurologic aspect is related to maturation of speech muscles. This is not to say that adults cannot master good speech. Adults can, but it takes more time and efforts. Second, students who learn a second language when the lateralization process has not been completed and the brain is still elastic, will master it more easily or without much difficulty when compared to adults. However, this hypothesis has been heavily

criticized.

## 2. Psychological Aspects.

This psychological aspect includes several elements, namely the influence of the first language, age, motivation and learning style. First, the first language that has been mastered by students can facilitate but also hinder/complicate the process of learning a second language. The issue of 'facilitate' and 'interfere' has often been discussed. The second element, age also has an effect. Adults are more concentrated, so they have more ability to memorize especially for the short term. In addition, adults excel at understanding abstract concepts such as complex grammar. The third element, motivation is an influential variable in learning a second language. Two important types of motivation are intrinsic motivation and instrumental motivation. Likewise, attitudes, namely attitudes towards people who speak the language being studied (target language). This is related to intrinsic motivation, namely the desire to know and be accepted in the target culture. The

fourth element related to the psychological aspect is cognitive learning style that leads to the formation of talent (aptitude).

Stern in Titone and Danesi (1985: 89) mentions four characteristics that characterize a good learning style. First, perpetual motor ability, namely the ability to receive and produce sounds with high accuracy. Second, grammatical cognitive ability, namely the ability to recognize grammatical functions and forms of linguistic elements. Third, mnemonic cognitive ability, namely the ability to memorize a number of associations in a short time. Fourth, generalization ability, namely the ability to generalize the structural pattern of existing language data. In the classroom, this can be seen from the ability of students to imitate sounds and produce phonemic differences, and the ability to master the target language easily.

## 3. Psycho-pedagogic Aspects.

According to Titoni and Danesi (1985), knowing the structure of a language means knowing how the language is structured and how

that knowledge can convey meaning through a structural framework as language competence. The main problem associated with learning these structures is how second language linguistic competencies are learned? The trick is to compare it with the L-1 structure. This method developed very rapidly between the 60s and 70s with the main figure Robert Lado. After getting quite a lot of criticism in the 80s this method began to be abandoned and applied linguistics experts and L-2 teachers began to switch from contrastive analysis to error analysis.

There are four stages in learning L-2 according to Titoni. First, the initial stage where students get acquainted with sounds and learn to imitate and repeat the sounds. Second, the production stage, where students can produce sounds spontaneously and more easily. Third, the stage of speech production by using mental processes. Fourth, the last stage is characterized by the production of sounds, structures and expressions spontaneously like native speakers.

### **Affective Factors in Learning a Second Language**

Brown (1981: 114-123) mentions several factors that play a role in learning a second language. The four factors are egocentric factor, transactional factor, motivation and attitude. The egocentric factor refers to the concepts of personality such as self-esteem and self-confidence. The results showed that there was a positive correlation between high self-esteem and success rates. Transactional factors refer to the process of communication with other people. Several transactional factors that are closely related to B-2 learning are imitation, modeling, identification, empathy, extroversion, and style of communication. Empathy is defined as 'seeing oneself through the eyes of others'. Communication demands a high level of empathy. One must understand the affective and cognitive states of others. Extroverted people will be more successful in mastering oral communication competence because they are good at getting along. The motivational factor refers to the drive

for someone to learn L-2. There are two main types of motivation mentioned by Brown, namely instrumental motivation and intrinsic motivation which have been described previously. Attitude factors refer to a person's decision to accept or reject something, in this case, the culture of the group whose language is being studied. Gardner and Lambert's research shows that a positive attitude towards accepting the culture of the group whose language is being studied will have a positive outcome in learning a second language.

### **The Role of Translation in the L-2 Learning Process**

If we relate the role of L-1 in the learning process of L-2, then the problem of translation needs to be discussed. This is felt at an early stage, when students tend to think in linguistic categories that come from their L-1 to understand (decode) and code the target language. In other words, students translate silently in an attempt to understand and produce the target language. The fundamental question is whether it is possible to

think directly in the target language without going through translation. Although experimental evidence suggests that it is possible, mental translation is often applied in practice, especially for adults because translation is related to mental processes. So, according to Titoni and Danesi (1985: 100), translation is unavoidable in learning L-2 as a strategy of 'decoding and encoding' in the early and advanced stages. First, translation is used when there is a structure or concept that is difficult to explain. Second, at an advanced stage, translation is needed to measure the ability to transfer from one language to another. According to Titoni and Danesi, there are three levels of translation, namely free translation, literal translation, and the lowest is word-to-word translation. This method of learning L-2 by translating is known as the oldest method since Roman times and although criticized by many experts, it is still used by language teachers until now.

### **The Application of L-2 Learning Theory in Speaking Classes**

Speaking (speaking skills) is one of the courses in the English language and literature department whose credit weights are quite large ranging from 10 to 14 credits and are usually distributed from semester one to semester four. This course aims to train students to speak English as a L-2 or foreign language fluently and accurately. So, the level of student progress is assessed from fluency and accuracy. Accuracy refers to appropriate speech, grammar, word choice, and style. To achieve a high level of fluency and accuracy like native speakers in this speaking classes, lecturers need to consider and apply some concepts of L-2 learning theory as described below.

#### A. Comprehension

First, Production of Sounds; understanding precedes the production of sound. In practice, if the teacher starts this class by introducing a dialogue as a model, when the teacher reads the dialogue, students are asked not to look at the text. They just listen. It is important for students to practice concentration

and improve their ability to understand spoken language. After the teacher reads the dialogue, the teacher immediately asks the students about the contents of the dialogue to check whether the students understand it. The questions asked revolve around the people involved in the dialogue, where the dialogue takes place, the relationship between the people in the dialogue, and what they talk about. In short, it is about the context.

#### B. Building Habit Formation in the Early Levels

Second, for the elementary level (Speaking I and Speaking II), it is recommended that more behavioristic learning models be applied. Meanwhile, the cognitive learning model is mostly applied at the intermediate and advanced levels. This is the trick. In introducing a dialogue, the teacher is recommended to drill students with techniques such as imitation, repetition with a clear meaning (meaningful) to form correct habits, especially in terms of speech. For intermediate and advanced levels,



teachers are recommended to apply learning with a cognitive model that emphasizes mental processes, namely the individual's ability to understand and be creative in forming and constructing new sentence patterns and the ability to solve problems with different sentence patterns.

#### Dealing with Accuracy and Fluency

Third, the age factor has a big influence in the effort to master L-2. In speaking classes, teachers don't need to be too idealistic and expect their students to speak English as L-2 or a foreign language with perfect accents like native speakers. This is not possible because the students who take this speaking course are over 18 years old; Thus, the lateralization process has been completed and the vocal cords are no longer elastic. Therefore, the target in speech mastery is "native-like" and "understandable". With the development of a communicative approach to language teaching, many people say that in mastering L-2, what is important is 'fluent and

understandable'. However, teachers of speaking in the English language department should not be trapped with this general opinion and sacrifice the principle of accuracy. Preferably, at the initial stage, fluency is prioritized, but the higher the level, fluency and accuracy should be given balanced. Once we sacrifice accuracy, it is difficult to change since it has been frozen. I still believe in habit formation. This is different from those who study English in English courses for a short term and are prepared to become guides, etc. (Hussein, 2017; Harmer, 2004)

#### Dealing with Extrovert and Introvert Students.

Fourth, teachers need to know their students individually and group them according to extroverts and introverts because affective factors play a very important role in improving oral communication skills. An extrovert person will progress faster because he is actively talking with friends or with the teacher and is willing to take the initiative to make a presentation in

front of the class like a role-play. On the other hand, introverts don't dare to try because they are shy. For this type of personality, the teacher should not force him to come forward in front of the class because this can be fatal: he feels cornered and discouraged. During pair up and practice, he/she should choose a friend who is suitable/close to him so that he can open up and want to talk, especially for pair practice interviews about personal matters, for example, family, likes and interests.

#### Dealing with Student's mistakes

Giving feedback on the student performance in speaking or presentation should be done with care, based on humanistic approach. Too much correction is counterproductive; but not correcting student mistakes at all is counterproductive as well.

#### Making the Students Empowered

In speaking classes at intermediate and advanced levels, lecturers should apply a humanistic approach. First, give students

freedom and trust in class. Give students the freedom to speak without being afraid. Give each individual the opportunity to present in class. Students will feel proud that he/she is trusted and empowered. Second, build a sense of dignity and self-esteem in the students' mind. As an illustration, if a student makes mistakes in class, don't embarrass him or her. Instead, make a motivating comment and inspire him/her. This is important because everyone wants to be regarded as worthy. Everyone has the dignity. This does not mean that lecturers cannot correct student errors. In principle, it can be done. In practice, comments begin by pointing out positive things, then followed by negative things without embarrassing the student.

#### D. Conclusion

As a conclusion from this description of the L-2 learning theory, there are three things that need to be emphasized here again. First, learning L-2 is a different process from acquiring L-1. However, the behavioristic learning

model and the cognitive model will remain the basic principles when we ask: how do people learn a language. Second, there are three important variables that influence L-2 learning, namely neurological aspects, psychological aspects and psycho-pedagogic aspects. In addition, there are affective factors that also influence in learning L-2. Translation can still be used in learning L-2 even though it gets a lot of criticism. Third, there are four concepts from L-2 learning theory that can be applied by teachers in the speaking class, namely the sequence of understanding and production, the sequence of behavioristic and cognitive learning models, the influence of age factors and the influence of affective factors, namely introverts and extroverts. A teacher who is successful in teaching speaking skills is the one who incorporates the above concepts in speaking class and he/she himself/herself is an extrovert type.

Finally, giving feedback on the student performance in speaking/presentation should be

handled with care, based on humanistic approach. Finally, a good teacher tells the students and demonstrate, but a great teacher inspires.

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