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## **Applied Linguistics to Foreign Language Teaching and Learning**

**Unit 6: Views of Language Acquisition and Learning in Foreign Language Didactics**

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# 1. Views about language acquisition and learning in Foreign Language Didactics

## 1.1 Language learning and acquisition

Psycholinguistics is a field primarily concerned with how human beings acquire and/or learn language. As it grew into a discipline, it led to the development of two distinct areas of study: First and second language acquisition.

### Task 1:

Read what each area of study deals with and think about whether Foreign Language Didactics (FLD) can benefit from the insights of both.

- **First Language Acquisition** investigates how children acquire their first language (L1). It includes the study of speech perception and the role of memory. Looking also at the processes of language use, one of its central expectations is that findings will yield information about cognitive operations and the effects of the environment on how people think and talk. Furthermore, it is interested in the processes that lead youngsters to develop proficiency in their mother tongue and ultimately to become literate, with the expectation that findings will be useful for L1 education.
- **Second Language Acquisition** investigates the processes by which children and adults acquire or learn a language other than their mother tongue and ultimately develop proficiency in this language, with the expectation that findings may be useful in teaching a language other than L1. Though referred to as 'second language acquisition' (known with the acronym SLA), the language to be taught may not be a second but a third or a fourth language for the person learning it.

Note that the disciplinary practices and notions developed in these two areas of study have provided interesting insights about how languages are learned, but they have also naturalised misconceptions about language, language study and teaching.

### Task 2:

Read the following statements and decide if they are true or false.

- First and second language acquisition involve totally different processes and operations.
- People acquire their mother tongue but learn a foreign language.
- Second language acquisition studies provide research findings that are directly relevant to FLD.

### Task 3:

Now answer the following questions:

- Is our mother tongue acquired or learned?
- Do immigrant or minority populations learn the language of the host country or do they acquire it naturally?
- Generally speaking, do people acquire or learn a language which is additional to their mother tongue?
- What is the difference between a 'second' and a 'foreign' language?
- Why do people acquire/learn languages other than their mother tongue (their L1)?
- What does it mean to master a language?

- Who is a 'bilingual' speaker? Is it s/he who has developed all the necessary literacy skills in both languages – someone who uses L1 and L2 equally well?

## 2. Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Research in SLA and the field as a whole is particularly concerned with those acquiring a second (or, more correctly, an additional) language in the target language environment; for example, a Spanish or a Chinese immigrant acquiring English in the U.S., a Pakistani or a Bulgarian acquiring English in the U.K. or a Greek in Greece. Though the hypotheses articulated and the findings of research in the SLA field did not have an overwhelming impact on European FLD, they are worth some careful consideration to the extent that they have offered some insightful new concepts and also because European foreign language teaching professionals are increasingly involved in the programmes for the influx of economic immigrants in member states and for the children of these families in schools.

### 2.1 The theory of 'comprehensible input'

The Input Theory by the American applied linguist Stephen Krashen (1981) has received considerable attention in the SLA literature, but has not had an overwhelming effect on European FLD. Since it rests on the assumption that language is acquired by people understanding messages that are expressed in a way that is slightly beyond their current level of competence, it places particular emphasis on the 'comprehensible input' (language that can be understood) provided to acquirers in the spoken or written medium in formal educational settings or in their social environment. This theory puts forth a series of hypotheses which it investigates.

<b>Table 1: The Input Theory - Five hypotheses.</b>	
1.	Learning and acquisition are two separate processes.
2.	There is a natural order of morpheme acquisition that applies to second language acquisition.
3.	Acquisition is more important than learning since the role of the latter is merely to monitor what one says and writes in the second language.
4.	The most important point in the instructional process is to provide acquirers with comprehensible input.
5.	The so-called 'affective filter' of the acquirer must be clean so that language passes easily through it; in other words, the acquirer must be positively predisposed or motivated so that s/he is open to input.

The comprehensible input theory and related hypotheses have been tested out in language teaching situations using the Natural Approach, referred to in Unit 2, resembling in some ways the Direct Method.

### 2.2 The Acculturation Theory

The American applied linguist, John Schumann (1978), who carried out research with Spanish-speaking populations in the U.S.A, developed his theory placing great emphasis on social issues as his findings provided strong indications that there is a strong link between effective language acquisition and the acquirer's positive attitude to the target language and his/her desire to be acculturated in the social environment which attempts to assimilate him/her.

Two basic factors that play a decisive role in SLA, according to Schumann, who uses discursive concepts developed in Sociolinguistics, and to his Acculturation Theory are acquirers' distance to the target language and culture.

Table 2: Acquirers' distance to the target language and culture.

Social distance:	Psychological distance:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If they feel that the target language and culture is more/less prestigious, or dominant/subordinate over their own.</li> <li>• If their living conditions allow them to be integrated in a society or they live in a type of ghetto.</li> <li>• If they are living or intend to live in the target culture for a long time.</li> <li>• If there is social congruence between the source and target language and culture.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If they feel that they have or haven't control over the new environment and a say in their process of integration.</li> <li>• If their initial experience was to undergo a 'culture shock'.</li> <li>• If they feel that no matter what type of attempts they make they are unable to understand or convey their meanings in the target language.</li> <li>• If they feel that the meanings that they convey are undervalued.</li> </ul>

While the reasoning behind the Acculturation Theory is of some concern to FLD, a concept that was developed further therein and has been of great interest in foreign language teaching is that of **fossilisation** –a phenomenon which occurs when language development stops and errors of accuracy and appropriateness persist, no matter how much the language is practiced or used. This is a phenomenon that occurs to many second language or foreign speakers who may feel that all they need is to get their point across and that greater proficiency will cause an acculturation or assimilation that they do not desire to have.

**Task 4:**

First of all think about why understanding the phenomenon of fossilisation and reasons for its occurrence may result in successful efforts to prevent it –if this is the goal in a language teaching/learning situation. Secondly, think about why the above social and psychological distance factors are worthy of consideration in foreign language teaching and learning situations.

**Task 5:**

Think about why SLA developed as a field more in the U.S.A. than in Europe, where England has played a leading role in disciplining FLD, and why the Input Theory was not as highly influential in FLD. Take into consideration issues in language politics.

### 3. The role of output in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

European FLD countered Input Theory and placed greater emphasis on **output** as will be seen below when reviewing a variety of other theories developing in the area of psychology of learning. In applied linguistics, a direct attack on Krashen's input hypothesis was articulated by Merrill Swain (1985), who argued that there are totally different skills involved in understanding and producing language –skills that need to be developed in their own right. One does not learn to speak simply because s/he understands spoken language or to write because s/he can read. In discussing her 'output hypothesis', Swain put forth the following basic claims:

- learners learn to speak by speaking.

- learners need to be pushed to use alternative means of expression when communication breaks down.
- use of the foreign language offers learners the chance to try out new forms and expressions.
- by being pushed in performance, learners' attention is shifted from meaning to form.

**Task 6:**

Having read the output hypothesis claims, start thinking about their implications for language teaching and learning. At the end of this Unit, return to them and decide which of the hypotheses discussed is associated with which of the following learning theories.

## 4. Psychology and language learning theories in FLD

Theories about how language is learned (which, as already briefly mentioned in an earlier Unit, have informed different approaches and methods of foreign language teaching) have developed in the broader field of Psychology and specifically in the areas of Cognitive and Social Psychology. Their concerns include studies which attempt to answer questions regarding how people learn and/or how they develop knowledge. The psychological theories that have had the most decisive impact in FLD are Behaviourist, Cognitivist, Humanist, and Interactionist learning theories.

### 4.1 Behaviourism and ELT

The name most associated with Behaviourist Psychology is B.F. Skinner (1957), though the fathers of behaviourist theory about how learning takes place are Ivan Pavlov, a Russian, and another American, John Watson. The theory's main principles are in the Table 3:

Table 3: The basic principles of Behaviourism.

Principle	Description
<b>Conditioning</b>	Learning is seen as a process of developing connections between events; connections between a stimulus and a response. This process is called conditioning.
<b>Habit formation</b>	An individual responds to a stimulus by behaving in a particular way. If the behaviour is reinforced (i.e. rewards or punishment) then the likelihood of that behaviour occurring on a subsequent occasion will be increased or decreased. As the behaviour is reinforced, habits are formed.
<b>Importance of the environment</b>	Learning is a result of environmental rather than genetic factors. The child is born as a clean slate and the environment writes its messages on this clean slate.

**Task 7:**

Behaviourist learning theory is at the basis of the **Audiolingual** (AL) and the **Audiovisual** (AV) approaches to foreign language teaching and learning, which were introduced in the previous Unit. Look at some of their main principles listed below, go back to the relevant extracts from textbooks, and then try to answer the questions that follow.

Table 4: Main principles of Behaviourist approaches to foreign language teaching.

Principle	Description
<b>Primacy of speech</b>	AL considers speech as primary partly because it is the first medium that the child masters. Skills are taught in a specific order: Listening and speaking then reading/writing
<b>Stimulus-response-reinforcement</b>	Learners are taught the language in small, sequential steps (structures and then sentence patterns). A small part of the language is presented as a stimulus, to which the learner responds by repeating or by substituting. This is followed by reinforcement by the teacher. By repeating the learner develops habits. Learning a language is seen as acquiring a set of appropriate mechanical habits and errors are frowned upon because they lead to the development of “bad” habits. The role of the teacher is to develop in learners good language habits.
<b>Inductive learning</b>	Because learning is a question of habit formation rather than problem solving, any type of explanation is consistently avoided. It is a last resort and always occurs in the final stage, when the language item has been well practiced and the appropriate habit acquired.

- What is the view of language that underlies the AL/AV approaches?
- Is the main objective of the language teaching process the development of knowledge about the target language?
- What are the primary goals to be achieved through pattern practice?
- What is the role of L1 in the AL/AV classroom?

## 4.2 Cognitivism and ELT

Frequently, mentalist (or, otherwise, rationalist) views about language, language acquisition and knowledge come in sharp contrast with views developed in cognitive studies, despite the fact that they are both concerned with the mental faculties of humans.

### Task 8:

The mentalist movement in Linguistics found expression in views expressed by Noam Chomsky (1957, 1966) about the **innate** capacity that human beings have to learn language. Resort to your knowledge and think about where the concept about the individual’s inherent ability to learn and his/her natural quest for knowledge originated.

### Task 9:

The mentalists’ stress on one’s innate capacity to learn comes in conflict with empirical views, which are an important part of cognitive studies, cognitive psychology in particular. Read the statement below and decide why.

Cognitivist views often stress the importance of the social environment or individuals’ experiences and present knowledge and learning not as the accumulation of facts, nor as the development of skills, but as a body of ideas that we come to have through socialization and education, as an awareness people develop about what something is, how it operates and to what effect. Learning occurs as a life-long process.<sup>1</sup> From the moment we are born, maintained Jean Piaget (1952) –well

<sup>1</sup> A term which has become popular and popularised recently, because of its persistent appearance in various European documents about the future of education in the European Union is “Life-long learning”. It becomes obvious here that this is not at all a new concept. It is a view about learning which has been articulated in European documents as the goal of all professional and social activity, which means that European education

known cognitive psychologist of the 50s and 60s– we are actively involved in the process of learning. We come to know things as a direct result of our experiences but we make sense of those experiences at different stages of our lives. Our mind is constantly seeking a balance between what is already known and experienced and what is currently being learned and experienced.

**Task 10:**

Cognitive learning theory is at the basis of the Cognitive Approach, but has also dominated mainstream language teaching practices in general – first and foreign language teaching. Look at some of its main principles listed below and then try to answer the questions that follow.

Table 5: Main principles of Cognitivist approaches to foreign language teaching.

Principle	Description
<b>Understanding how language works</b>	It is of utmost importance to understand how language works to convey or create meaning(s) in speech and writing – whether meaning is understood as autonomous or socially situated. When the language learner knows about the language (form, meaning [and use]), s/he will be able to use it meaningfully.
<b>Learning is both inductive and deductive</b>	By working with language, coming into contact with texts and exercising with particular elements of language to be taught and learnt (i.e., experiencing them), the learner comes to understand how it works and may be asked to articulate that understanding or simply to exhibit the knowledge acquired by putting it into practice. However, since knowledge is linguistically mediated and is frequently passed on by others, the learning process requires the transmission of knowledge about how the language operates; therefore, rules of language use and/or usage are explained, before or after language practice.
<b>Sequential learning</b>	Since learning is often considered to be a linear process, teaching is usually organised so as to move from easy to difficult; i.e., from that which is linguistically and cognitively easier to understand, to that which is considered harder. Spiral learning processes, however, are not excluded in which case the organization of knowledge to be transmitted is based on other factors.

- What do you think is the role of learners’ errors in this approach?
- Why do you think that the results of contrastive analysis are useful in this approach?
- What role does the learner’s previous knowledge –linguistic, cultural, social– play in this approach?
- What is the role of L1 in the classroom?

**4.3 Humanism and ELT**

Humanist psychology emphasises the importance of the inner world of individuals, of their thoughts but especially of their feelings and emotions. These are aspects of the learning process which are considered of immense importance in human learning which, in order to be effective, must involve all our cognitive faculties (right and left hemisphere brain operations) and the person as a whole – mind, body and soul. If learning is to be effective, according to humanist theories, it must involve all five senses of the learner: sight, touch, hearing, smell, even taste. Furthermore, as Carl Rogers, one of the fathers of humanist psychology argued, significant learning will take place only when the subject

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of all levels and in any subject area should foster appropriate attitudes and equip learners with the skills they need to continue learning outside the formal educational context. One overall aim of education should be to help learners learn how to learn.

matter is perceived to be of personal relevance to learners and it involves their active participation. Promoting a type of experiential learning, Rogers and other humanists rightfully claim that learning which involves feelings as well as cognition is more likely to be lasting and pervasive.

The humanist movement of the modern era, a cultural product of individualist social structures, claiming coherence and construing the human subject as a unified whole, has come to an end in a postmodernist era that has emphasised human beings' multiple subjectivities. However, the search for a unified self is still a dominant social pursuit and humanist concepts – especially those associated with the work of another humanist psychologist Jerome Bruner, i.e., discovery-learning – are still important pursuits in general and foreign language education. However, the specific so-called humanistic methods that developed for foreign language teaching and learning, already mentioned in the previous Unit, met with little success in Europe. That is:

- The Silent Way, where the learner remains silent most of the times and the teacher motivates the learner into progressively greater production
- Community language learning, where a parallel is made between teaching and psychotherapeutic counselling, attention given to translation from L1 and syllabus development occurs as teaching progresses.
- Total physical response, where a strong link is made between physical actions and learning
- Suggestopedia, where music therapy plays a central role in the learning process and where the teacher has an authority role.

The central principles of Suggestopedia in particular have stimulated work by others involved in FLD. In Greece, the person who has worked with suggestopedic ELT methodology and produced relevant publications is Anastasia Papaconstantinou (1991), who has expanded on its basic ideas and promoted the concepts of humanism in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language.

**Task 11:**

Beyond the particular methods referred to above, a humanistic approach to language teaching and learning means, according to J.T. Roberts (1998: 158), “language teaching respecting the integrity of learners, allowing for personal growth and responsibility, taking psychological and affective factors into account, and representing ‘whole person learning’.” Much earlier, Gertrude Moskowitz (1978) had published a book promoting ‘humanistic’ language teaching and learning in the foreign language class. Look at its basic characteristics, as listed below, and think about whether they can be of service to foreign language teaching situations in a formal educational setting in Greece.

<b>Table 6: Main characteristics of Humanistic teaching.</b>	
	• Facilitating achievement to learners' full potential.
	• Recognizing the importance of learners' feelings for the learning process and outcome.
	• Recognizing the importance of establishing positive relationships with all members of the class.
	• Striving for learners' affective and cognitive growth.
	• Recognizing the importance of discovering things about oneself during the learning process and developing a growing self-esteem.

In some of the humanist approaches as well as the Natural Approach mentioned in the previous Unit, the teacher's discourse is supposed to be accommodating to learners and therefore have all the characteristics of what we know as ‘teacher talk’. Intentionally sounding like adults who care about their children improving their linguistic competence, language teachers should provide input to

learners with what is often called caretaker talk –a feature of teaching which is discouraged by many other approaches to foreign language teaching and learning.

**Task 12:**

Here are some features of caretaker talk:

- A slower rate of speech, high pitched voice, carefully pronounced words and exaggerated intonation.
- Shorter simpler sentence patterns and frequent repetitions and paraphrase.
- Topics of discussion are limited to the learner’s immediate environment (the here and now).
- Error correction is limited to correction of meaning including errors in vocabulary choice (like when children are acquiring their mother tongue and adults repeat the content of their utterances but with grammatically correct sentences).

Now, think about which approaches might discourage this type of talk by the FL teacher.

**4.4 Interactionism and ELT**

Those in favour of the interactionist movement in psychology –the movement in which proposed group therapy as an antidote to individual support therapy and psychoanalysis– argued that people learn (language or anything else) by carrying out their own personal experiments, constructing hypotheses and actively seeking to confirm or disconfirm them. Learners are actively involved in constructing their own personal understanding of things and this understanding will be different for different people. Learners make sense of the world within a social context, through social interaction.

In FLD, Dick Allwright (1984) and Michael Long (1983) were supporters of the interactionist approach, claiming that it is in the interaction process that the process of language acquisition/learning occurs. It is through the use of language and through what is a negotiation of meaning process (see Ellis 1997) that learning of language in particular is successful. Whether it is L1 or any additional language, interactionists claim, learners acquire it by interacting, negotiating and conveying meanings purposefully in social situations.

**Task 13:**

Look at some important features of the interactionist approach to language teaching and think about their feasibility in Greek classroom settings. Come back to these features when you have completed Unit 8 and see how relevant they are to the Communicative Approach.

<b>Table 7: Main principles of Interactionist approaches to FL teaching.</b>	
	• The teacher must try to create a classroom atmosphere which is conducive to real communication.
	• Real communication involves learners who have a say in what is to be learnt (and how), during classroom interaction to which they have the right to make basic contributions.
	• In order for interactional modifications to occur in the classroom there must be a two-way flow of information where both the teacher and the learner have unknown information to exchange.
	• It is important to use activities that involve an information gap and have an obvious communicative purpose so that learners feel the need to communicate.
	• In order for learners to feel motivated to communicate they must be involved and interested in what is being talked about, in the activities being carried out. Furthermore, they should be given opportunities to initiate class activities.
	• Teachers must utilise contributions made by the learners. This will create in learners a feeling

**Table 7: Main principles of Interactionist approaches to FL teaching.**

that their personality and what they have to say is accepted.

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