**Master1 Didactics**

**Course: Language Acquisition Theories**

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**Introduction**

Different researchers have suggested different definitions to the concept of learning. Learning was defined by Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary as: 'the activity or process of gaining knowledge or skill by studying, practicing, being taught, or experiencing something'. From the above definition, it seems that learning was associated mainly with these key terms such as: study, gain knowledge or skill, and practice.

Wakefield (1996: 364) describes learning as a relatively permanent change in the behaviour of an individual based on his experiences or discoveries. Here learning is related to a behavioural change that occurs due to one person's experiences. Consequently, we can say that teaching is efficient only when learning occurs.

Learning, according to Wikipedia, is defined as the process of acquiring new, or modifying existing knowledge behaviours, skills, values, or preferences. The ability to learn is possessed by humans, animals, and even some machines. Learning, for human beings, is an ongoing process that starts before birth and continues till death (Wikipedia).

When a teacher of English as a foreign language, wishes to reach certain objectives, he needs to know the most appropriate teaching method (s) to use and this usually depends on his deep understanding of the learners' learning strategies, their learning styles and modes.

<div align="center">**Course 1: Behaviourism**</div>

## 1.1 Definition of Behaviourism

Behaviourism is a learning theory that is concerned mainly with the observable and objective components of behaviour.  Its scope is not limited to humans because it deals with animals as well.  Behaviourists relate learning to an observable and permanent change in behaviour. Surgenor (2010:1) claims that learning results in a change of behaviour and without this change no learning happens.  Behaviourism is based on the experiments performed by Pavlov on the conditioned-reflex, which consist of providing a stimulus to cause response.  Behaviourists believe that learning takes place through habit formation.  They also claim that we are born with a brain as a tabula rasa or blank slate, and the outside stimuli are the sources of all learning.  Behaviourism deals only with the apparent or external environment that shapes behaviour.

## 1.2 Types of Behaviourism:

There are three main types of behaviourism that are:

### 1.2.1 Methodological Behaviourism

According to the proponents of this theory, the aim of psychology should be the apparent behaviour because all that is internal can never be empirically studied.  Accordingly, no reference should be done to the internal information processing or the mental events. Methodological behaviourism shares in its historical foundations, with analytical behaviourism, the influence of positivism which aims at unifying psychology with natural science.  Watson (1930:10) claims that the purpose of psychology is 'to predict, given the stimulus, what reaction will take place; or, given the reaction, state what the situation or stimulus that has caused the reaction'.

### 1.2.2 Psychological Behaviourism

Psychological behaviourism aims to explain human and animal behaviour in terms of external physical stimuli. It stemmed from classical associationism of the British empiricists John Locke and David Hume. Classical associationism maintains that intelligent behaviour is the product of association between perceptual experiences or stimuli on the one hand, and ideas or thoughts on the other. This allows people to acquire knowledge of their environment and shows them how to act. Psychological behaviourism aims at specifying types of associations, understanding how environmental events control behaviour, discovering causal laws which govern the formation of associations, and then, predicting how a certain behaviour will change if the environment changes.

### 1.2.3 Analytical Behaviourism:

It deals with the meaning of mental concepts as the notion of a mental state or condition as a notion of a behavioural-disposition or family of behavioural tendencies. Analytical behaviourism is closely linked to logical positivism (Smith 1986), a philosophical movement which proposes that the meaning of sentences used in science is understood in terms of the experimental conditions or observations that verify their truth. 'Verificationism' is the name by which the positivist doctrine is known because it claims that mental concepts refer to behavioural tendencies and must be translated into behavioural terms.

### 1.3 Foreign Language Learning and Behaviourism

The behaviourists believe that learners learn by receiving the linguistic input from the teacher, followed by positive reinforcement and their role is limited to repeating and imitating. Language development is, consequently described as the acquisition of a set of habits. Errors are known thanks to the predictive value of Contrastive Analysis (Johnson and Helen. 1990) which states that similarities between first language and second language will

help the learners acquire the target language with ease, whereas differences cause them to have difficulty.

Two different theories can be stressed when talking about learning from the point of view of behaviourists. 'Classical Conditioning' related to Pavlov who claims through his experiments that learning is the result of external stimuli. He introduced four main stages in the learning process; acquisition, extinction, generalisation, and discrimination. Acquisition is the starting point of the conditioned response, then Extinction which describes the result after the conditioned response where no reward is offered for a particular behaviour, Generalisation occurs when the response to one stimulus is generalised to similar stimuli, and the last stage Discrimination which occurs when learners are able to discriminate one stimulus from another.

Skinner's theory of operant conditioning (Cherry. 2008) claims that learning results from a change in behaviour. One learns language by expressing an utterance (operant), which is reinforced with a response by another (consequence). Repetition occurs when the imitated behaviour proves to be positive. This imitation leads to repetition and habit formation. According to this theory, language is learned when the learner's repetition of words and combinations of words are praised by the teacher. The Audio-lingual method was developed starting from these assumptions.

**Course 2: Cognitivism**

**2.1. Definition of Cognitivism**

Cognitivism is a theory of language learning dealing with human cognition. It views learning as an active mental process that cannot be limited to a stimulus-response and reinforcement. It is a process which requires the existence of a previous knowledge structure in order to process new information for learning. This view deals with human mental processes by stressing the act or process of knowing. Piaget (1936) believes that the aim behind the cognitive theory is to understand how an infant can develop into an individual who has the ability to reason, think, and hypothesise through a number of mechanisms and processes. Cognitivists based their assumptions on the Gestalt theory which is the theory of wholes claiming that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. For them, perceptions or images should be approached as a pattern or a whole rather than the sum of its component parts. Hartley (1998:18) claims that: 'Learning results from inferences, expectations and making connections. Instead of acquiring habits, learners acquire plans and strategies, and prior knowledge is important'.

**2.2 Characteristics of Cognitivism:**

The main characteristics of Cognitivism are

1. It focuses on the mental processes of learning and the way they are stored in the mind.

2. Knowledge must be meaningful and functional.

3. The learner is seen as an active processor of information who is required to relate new information with the knowledge he already has.

**2.3 Foreign Language Learning and Cognitivism:**

According to cognitive theory, learners are to pay attention to what they try to understand or produce. Then, through experience and practice, they become able to use some parts of their knowledge quickly and automatically. O'Malley et al (1999) report that things

we know and use automatically are based on the interaction of knowledge which fits into an existing system and which may restructure this system. This theory claims that foreign language learning is a conscious thinking process which involves the use of many learning strategies and the learner is seen as an 'information-processor', with limitations as to how much new information can be assimilated and retained, and who needs to use different learning strategies to memorize information. Among the most efficient learning strategies advocated by cognitivists we have: repetition, organising new language, summarizing meaning, guessing meaning from context, using imagery for memorization, association, mnemonics, using clues while skimming or scanning in reading comprehension, underlining key words, self-testing, and monitoring. These strategies can be classified into two main categories:

a) Cognitive strategies: the specific methods that people use to solve problems including reasoning and planning. (Wikipedia).

b) Metacognitive strategies: related to a person's knowledge about his own cognitive processes.

c) Social/Affective strategies: thanks to which interaction can take place.

Teachers need to be aware of the cognitive or learning styles of their students before presenting a lesson. These cognitive styles refer to the way the student processes information and they may vary from: field dependence-independence, convergent-divergent, introvert-extrovert. The field dependent learner is one who processes information globally. He is less analytical, not attentive to detail, and sees the perceptual field as a whole. The field independent person on the other hand can easily break the field down into its component parts, he is analytical. A convergent tends to be more active by doing something, but a divergent tends to be more reflective by watching. While an introvert person is a self-

contained and reserved person, an extrovert tends to be an outgoing, outspoken person willing to talk to people.

<div align="center">**Course 3: Humanism**</div>

**3.1 Definition of Humanism**

Humanism rejects the theory which considers people as objects and rational beings. Rather, it deals with the learner as an individual whose interests and goals should be taken into account. This theory encourages the learner to be responsible for his own learning by being intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated.

**3. 2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**:

Maslow is considered to be the father of humanistic psychology. In his hierarchy of needs he divided the human needs into basic needs which come at the lowest level, then psychological needs, and finally self-actualisation or self- fulfilment needs. Maslow's (1987) hierarchy of needs consists of five levels where moving to higher levels in the hierarchy passes through satisfying the needs in the lower level. These needs were summarized as follows:

**1. Level one**

Physiological needs: which comprise the biological needs necessary of human survival such as air, food, drink sleep etc.

**2. Level two**

Safety needs: after satisfying the physiological needs, the needs for safety and security become urgent.  They may be fulfilled by the family or the society to which the individual belongs.

**3. Level three**

Love and belongings' needs: They include the need for interpersonal relationships, so receiving and giving affection and love become very important for the individual.

**4. Level four**

Self-esteem needs: Theses needs involve the desire for self-esteem, independence, dignity, and respect from others.

**5. Level five**

Self-actualization: they refer to self-fulfilment and realizing one's potential. This potential varies from one person to another. One may have the desire to become financially or academically successful. It is the highest level where talents, capacities and abilities are fully used and expressed. Learning can be considered as a form of self-actualization.

Furthermore, the Humanistic view claims that any teacher's aim should be targeted towards the optimum growth of each learner.  Ridgeway 1969: 14 summarises this view saying:

> My philosophy of education is concerned with the whole child, his physical, mental and spiritual growth; his feelings, attitudes and relationships; his character and personality. I am concerned with him as an individual having certain innate tendencies, potentialities and traits, and also with him as a member of society having certain rights and privileges, duties and responsibilities.
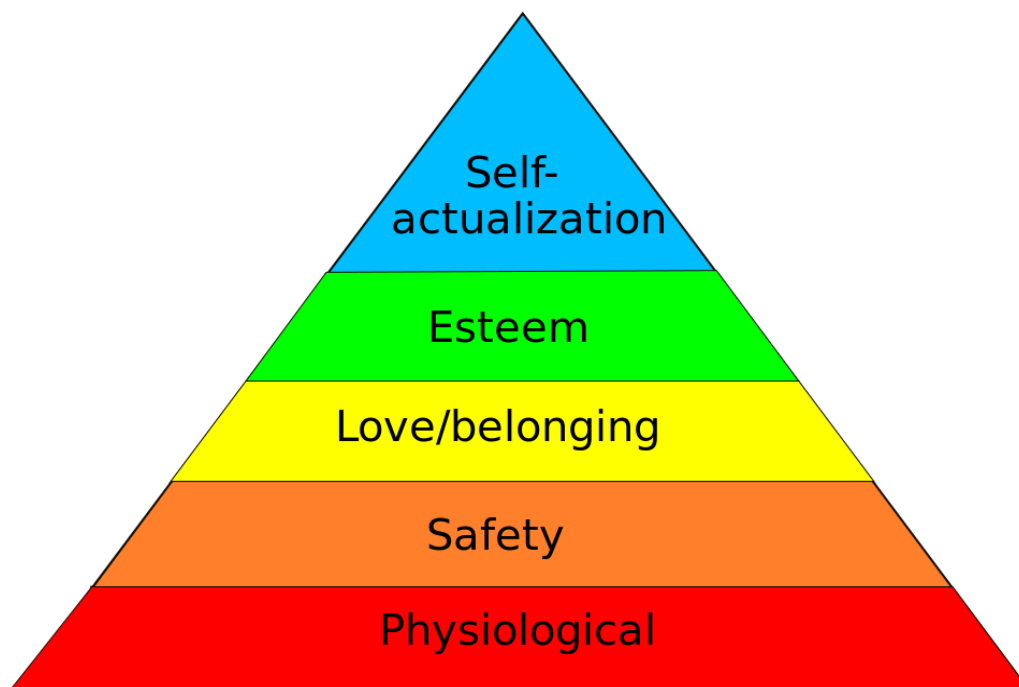


Maslow's pyramid of the hierarchy of needs

# Course 4 Constructivism

## 4.1 Definition of Constructivism:

Constructivism is a leaning theory based on considering learning as the construction of new ideas or concepts based upon the learner's current and past knowledge and experiences. Reflection on that knowledge and these experiences constitute the bases for learning to occur. In other words, the individual has a concrete experience on which he makes reflections, and the new knowledge is constructed as a result of these reflections. Consequently, constructivists believe that the learner learns best when he is actively engaged by deriving meaning from his surrounding environment and discovering principles by himself. As for the teacher, he is considered as a facilitator the role of whom is to help the learner select and transform information, construct hypotheses and make decisions by creating the proper environment where the learner constructs meaning at his own pace.

## 4.2 Principles of Constructivism

The main principles around which the constructive view is built are:

1- learning is the result of assimialtaion of new and accodmodation of tgheis knowledge to previous knowledge

2- Motivation is an essential component in learning to keep the learner actively engaged in the learning process in order to construct meaning.

3- The construction of meaning happens in the mind and the learner uses sensory input to construct meaning.

4- Learning is a social activity closely linked to other people in our surrounding, and consequently classroom interaction should be an integral part of learning.

5- Learning depends on the context where it occurs and the learner is engaged with the world to extract meaning from his experiences.

Two schools of thought emerged with constructivism: one is Social Constructivism and the second is Cognitive Constructivism.

## 4.3 Social Constructivism

Based on the theory of Vygotsky, it claims that understanding culture and context are very important for constructing meaning. He introduced one key term which the: 'Zone of Proximal Development' as:

> The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.
>
> (Vygotsky, 1978: 86).

This means that at a certain level, the learner needs guidance and assistance from the teacher to perform a specific task and this level is called the zone of proximal development. Scaffolding is a related term which refers to the activities provided by the teacher to help the student in the zone of proximal development.

## 4.4 Cognitive Constructivism

It emphasizes research and spontaneity in classroom activities that are challenging the learners. Here Bloom's Taxonomy was suggested as comprising three components: cognitive, affective and psychomotor. Cognitive is related to mental skills: affective is the growth of emotional areas or attitudes and psychomotor has to do with manual or physical skills. Bloom (1956) explains these domains as follows:

### 4.4.1 The Cognitive Domain

It includes five major categories, starting from the simplest behaviour to the most complex, where the mastery of one domain is necessary before moving to the next. These categories are:

1. Knowledge: It involves recall of data such as knowing the safety rules or quoting prices from memory to a customer. Key words related to this category are: define, describe, identify, know, recall, recognize.

2. Comprehension: It is the ability to understand the meaning and its interpretation. This means the ability to state a problem in one's own words. Example, explaining in ones' own words the steps for performing a difficult task. Key words: comprehend, convert, estimate, give examples, interprets, translate.

3. Application: Using a concept in a new situation; applying what was learned in the classroom into novel situations in the work place. Example: Using law of statistics to evaluate and analyse students' results in a test. Key words: apply, demonstrate, discover, produce, and solve.

4. Analysis: It includes the separation of material or concepts into component parts to understand its organizational structure. Key words: break down, analyse, separate, illustrate, and infer.

5. Synthesis: This step consists of building a structure or pattern from various elements. Parts are put together to form a whole. The aim is to create a new meaning - a new structure. Example: integrating training from several sources to solve a given problem. Key words: rearrange, reconstruct, revise, and summarize.

6-Evaluation: In this last category, judgments are made about the value of ideas or materials. Example: select the most efficient solution. Key words: Appraise, conclude, compare.

**4.4.2 The Affective Domain**

It is the manner in which we deal with things emotionally. This includes feelings, attitudes, motivation and enthusiasm. This domain, like the previous one, consists of five categories listed in order:

1-Receiving: it is the awareness and willingness to hear with selected attention.

2-Responding: in this category, there is active participation of the learner. He reacts to a particular phenomenon; willingness to respond or satisfaction in responding (motivation).

3-Valuing: this category is concerned with the value or worth a person attaches to a certain object or behaviour. It is based on the internalization a set of specific values. Clues to these values are often identifiable because they are expressed in the learner's overt behaviour.

4-Organization: the values are organized into priorities. This happens by contrasting different values resolving conflicts between them, if any, and creating a unique value System. To reach this, there should be emphasis on comparing, relating and synthesizing values.

5-Internalizing: it is the step of characterization. Values are internalized. The behaviour becomes pervasive, consistent predictable and characteristic of the learner.

### 4.4.3 Psychomotor Domain:

This domain includes the use of motor skills, coordination and physical movements. To be satisfactorily developed, these skills require practice and are measured in terms of speed, precision, and techniques in execution. It consists of seven categories:

1. Perception: It is the ability to use one's sensory cues to guide motor activity.

2- Set: it means the readiness to act in a given situation. This set includes mental, physical, and emotional elements. , a person's response to different situations is predetermined by these elements.

3-Guided Response: this category is concerned with the early stages in learning a complex skill. It is guided because it includes imitation, trial and error. Practising achieves adequate performance.

4- Mechanism: it is the intermediate stage in learning complex skill. The responses learned previously have become habitual. Consequently, the movements can be performed with more confidence and proficiency.

5-Complex Overt Response: the skilful performance of motor acts is reached. Proficiency is characterized by a quick, accurate and highly coordinated performance.

6-Adaptation: the well-developed skills enable the individual to modify movement patterns to fit any new requirements.

7-Origination: creativity based upon highly developed skills is emphasized. The individual creates new movement patterns to fit a particular situation or problem.

**4.5 Foreign Language Learning and the Constructive View**

The constructive theory is based on the belief that the learner constructs internal representations of the language being learnt. In other terms, to acquire a foreign language, the learner needs to read or hear samples of the target language which causes acquisition to occur internally. The Creative Construction theory was modelled by Krashen and had the most influence on second language teaching practice. In this respect, Krashen (1982), proposed five central hypotheses:

**1. The Acquisition/ Learning Hypothesis**

Which suggests that there are two ways for adults to learn: they may learn or acquire a second language. Acquisition of a language is realised through an unconscious process where the learner is not aware of the rules of form, while learning is a conscious process where he pays attention to form and it usually takes place in the formal setting that is the language classroom.

**2. The Monitor Hypothesis**

The monitor use requires three conditions: sufficient time, focus on form, and knowing the rule. The student's learned system acts as a monitor to what he is writing or speaking. The learned system checks what is being produced, verbally or nonverbally.

**3. The Natural Order Hypothesis**

The acquisition of the rules of a language follows a natural order. The acquisition of grammatical rules follows a natural predictable order from easier to more complex.

**4. The Input Hypothesis**

Language acquisition occurs when the learner understands the message or receives comprehensive input. Comprehension and acquisition will take place only if the content and form of the input are beyond the current level of competence of the learner.(I, I+1)

**5. The Affective Filter Hypothesis**

The affective filter is a kind of cognitive barrier preventing the learner from using the input available in the environment. Input is often screened out and made unavailable for acquisition whenever a learner is angry, anxious or bored. When the learner is relaxed and motivated the affective filter will be low.

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