

Pedagogy of English

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1.3 Meaning, Characteristics & Functions of Language

1.3.1 Meaning of Language

Before studying the nature and scope of English language, let's try to understand, '*What Language is?*' Write your response to the question in the following box:

Activity 1

What is Language?

The word 'Language' is derived from the Latin word 'Lingue' which means 'produced with the tongue'. Hence language means a thing which is produced with the tongue. Let's see some of the definitions by linguistic.

Edward Sapir:

"Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols."

Block and Tragers :

"Language is a set of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group communicates."

Otto Jespersen :

"Language is a set of human habits, the purpose of which is to give expression to human thoughts and feelings especially to impart them to others."

Bernard Bloch & George L. Trager:

"A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group operates."

If we analyze all these definitions, we get a comprehensive definition of language, that is;

"Language is a set of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group operates, communicates and express their emotions, feelings and desires."

1.3.2 Characteristics of Language

Language is an inseparable part of human society. Human civilization has been possible only through language (Naeem, 2010). Language is basically human. It is different from animal communication. Let's look at some of the characteristics of language;

a. Language is Learnt

Language is not a born activity as crying and walking. It is not an automatic process. It has to be learnt. Any learner learns the language by imitation and practice.

b. Language is a acquired Behavior

Language is acquired behavior. If a baby or man is shifted to another community or cultural group, he will acquire the language spoken by that cultural community. For example; if an Indian family is settled in United States, the children of the family will acquire the English language with an American accent.

c. Language is a System

Language is a system like a human body, just as body functions through different organs such as brain, heart, lungs. In the same way, language functions through sounds, words and structures.

d. Language is Vocal

The language is primarily observed speech. Speech is a fundamental thing in language learning, reading and writing are secondary. Through speech and modulation of speech, we get a clear picture of English inflexion.

e. Ever changing

No language on earth is static. Every language is undergoing changes in its grammar, vocabulary, structure and phonology with the course of time.

f. Language is for Communication

The main purpose of language is communication. Since it is so, a person's speech must be intelligible to others. For this, he must acquire the right pronunciation and intonation.

g. Language is Arbitrary

Language is arbitrary. There is no relationship between the words of a language and its meaning. The relationship between word and meaning is arbitrary. There is no reason why a language is called as 'Language' in English, 'Bhasha' in Hindi and 'Zaban' in Urdu.

h. Language is Based on Cultural Experiences

Every language is the product of a particular society and culture. 'Good morning', 'Thank you', 'Sorry' and such kinds of words reveal the culture of English people. In each language, there are words that show the specific culture of that community, such as; 'Asslamu alaykum', 'Khuda Hafiz', 'Shaba khair', etc shows the culture of Urdu speaking people.

i. Language is Made of Habits

A person can be said to have learnt a language when he can speak it without any conscious efforts. No language can be learnt without sufficient practice. A language is learnt by use and not by rules. Learning a language is a process of habit formation.

j. Language is Unique

Each language is unique. No two languages are alike. They cannot have the same set of patterns of structures, sounds, grammatical rules or words. The sounds, structures, vocabularies of every language have their own specialty.

1.3.3 Functions of Language

M. A. K. Halliday (1975) explained seven basic functions of language in his book, 'Exploration in the functions of language'. These seven basic functions can be summarized as follows:

a. The Instrumental Function

The word 'instrumental' means serving as an instrument or means. The instrumental function refers to the use of language as an instrument to make the recipient do something. For ex:

Requesting (Please, give me a glass of water. Will you do me a favour?)

Commanding (Open the door Throw away this garbage) etc.

It serves the function of 'I want' the satisfaction of material needs.

b. The Regulatory Function

'To regulate' means to control or to direct by a rule, method or principle. The regulatory function of language refers to the use of language to regulate the behaviour of others.

Instruction or teaching can be regarded as a type of communicative behaviour intended to cause the addressee to do something. It also includes advising and suggesting. For ex:

1. You should take some rest. (Advising)
2. You must not take things that don't belong to you. (Control through warning)
3. If you steal again I will smack you. (Control through threat)
4. You will make Mummy very unhappy if you steal again. (Control through emotional appeal)
5. Parking is not allowed. (Control through rule)

c. The Interaction Function

'To interact' means to 'to act one upon other or to talk with each other.' The interactional function of language refers to the use of language in the interaction between 'self and others'. It is a 'me and you' function. It is the contact-oriented function. It includes greetings (Good Morning, Happy Diwali, Happy Eid, Congratulation), sympathy (I share your sorrow, Keep patience, Allah will help you), gratitude (Thanks a lot, Thank you for your guidance, we are grateful for your contribution), compliments (Your dress is very good. How beautiful she is!), hostility (Go to hell, Get out of here), etc.

d. The Personal Function

The word 'personal' means private or of a particular person. The personal function of language refers to the use of language to express personal feelings and meanings. It aims at a direct expression of the speaker's attitude towards what he is speaking about. For ex: A poem, a speech, expression of love and sorrow, etc. Thus this function refers to the use of language either to express the speaker's feeling or to evoke feelings on the part of the auditor.

e. The Heuristic Function

The term 'heuristic' is a theory in education based on the idea that a learner should discover things himself. The heuristic function of language refers to language as a means of investigating reality, a way of learning about things that are using language to learn and to discover. It is the use of language for inquiry or questioning.

f. The Imaginative Function

'To imagine' means to form a picture of something in the mind, think of the probability of things. The imaginative function of language refers to language used to create a world of the

imagination. It is the use of language for its own sake to give pleasure imaginatively and aesthetically. For example:

*"If I was an apple and grew on a tree
I think I'd drop down on a nice boy like me;
I wouldn't stay there, giving nobody joy,
I'd fall down at once and say, Eat me, my boy!"*

- Anonymous

g. The Representational Function

'To represent' means to depict, to show, to describe or to present in words. The representational function of language refers to language used to communicate information. It is the use of language to convey a message which has specific reference to the processes, persons, objects, qualities, states and relations of the real world around us. For ex: books, newspapers, magazines, novels, use of language in mass media, etc.

1.4 Principles of Language Learning

Children can learn any language as easily as walking, running, playing, etc. People generally assume that those who study in English medium schools are good at English and those who study in government schools are poor in English. Language learning has little to do with the medium of school. It rather depends on teachers' application of principles of language learning. Let us see what the principles of language learning.

a. Habit Formation

Language learning is a habit formation process. It is a process during which various language habits are formed. Therefore, listening, speaking, reading and writing habits are to be formed consciously and unconsciously.

b. Practice and Drill

Language learning is a habit-forming process. For this purpose sufficient practice and drill is needed.

c. Oral Approach

A child learns to speak his mother tongue before reading or writing it. This principle should be adopted in learning and teaching a second or a foreign language.

d. Natural Order of Learning

Listening-Speaking-Reading-Writing (LSRW) is the natural order of learning a language. In this order, a child learns his or her mother tongue without any formal instruction. So this natural order of learning should be considered while teaching English.

e. Multi-Skill Approach

All the four language skills are to be given their due importance when learning or teaching them. No skill should be overemphasized or neglected.

f. Selection and Gradation

One should proceed from simple to difficult in language learning; therefore, vocabulary and structures of language should be selected and graded as per their frequency, teachability and difficulty level.

g. Situational Approach

The English language should be taught in situations which is the natural way in which a child learns his mother tongue.

h. Exposure

A child learns his mother tongue because he is exposed to it. While learning a foreign language like English, exposure to it helps in learning it.

i. Imitation

The child learns his mother tongue by imitation. The English teacher must provide a good model of speech before the learners. Audio-visual aids should be used.

j. Motivation

Motivation plays an important role in learning a language. Thus, learners should be motivated.

k. Accuracy

The English teacher should insist on accuracy in all aspects of language learning. So learners follow their teachers and consider them as a role model.

l. Purpose

Purpose of language learning should be decided in the beginning. So it becomes a simple affair to design a course suitable for the purpose.