

# Cognitivism

reinforcement accounts for how a human baby learns a language. An internal stimulus such as hunger prompts crying as a response, and this crying is reinforced by the milk that is subsequently made available to the baby. Our performance as language users is largely the result of such positive (or negative) reinforcement.

*Behaviourism*, which was after all a psychological theory, was adapted for some time by the language teaching profession, particularly in America, and the result was the *audio-lingual method* still used in many parts of the world. This method used consistent and unending drilling of the students followed by positive or negative reinforcement. Of course the approach wasn't quite as crude as that, but the stimulus-response-reinforcement model formed the basis of the methodology. The language 'habit' was formed by this constant repetition and the reinforcement of the teacher. Mistakes were immediately criticised, and correct utterances were immediately praised.

#### 4.1.2 Cognitivism

The term *cognitivism* is often used loosely to describe methods in which students are asked to think rather than simply repeat. It stems to a large extent from Noam Chomsky's reaction to Skinner's book and is based on his theory of competence and performance that we have already discussed (in 2.2).

In 1959 Chomsky published a strong attack upon Skinner's *Verbal Behaviour* which has become rightly famous. In his review of the book he explained his rejection of the behaviourist model of language acquisition (how a baby learns a language) on the basis of his model of competence and performance.

The strength of the attack can largely be produced by the asking of questions: if all language is learnt behaviour, how is it that young children can say things they have never said before? How is it possible that adults all through their lives say

things they have never said before? How is it possible that a new sentence in the mouth of a four-year-old is the result of conditioning?

Language is not a form of behaviour, Chomsky maintained. On the contrary, it is an intricate rule-based system and a large part of language acquisition is the learning of this system. There are (see 2.2) a finite number of grammatical rules in the system and with a knowledge of these an infinite number of sentences can be performed in the language. It is competence that a child gradually acquires, and it is this language competence (of knowledge of the grammar rules) that allows the child to be creative as a language user (e.g. experimenting and saying things that he has not said before). We looked at a simple example of what the concept of competence and performance involved in 2.2.

Language teaching has never adopted a methodology based on Chomsky's work: after all Chomsky never intended that his theory should have anything to do with adult language learning and has repeatedly made this clear. Nevertheless the idea that students should be allowed to create their own sentences based on an understanding of a rule is widely accepted in many classrooms. This idea is clearly in opposition to the audio-lingual method since we are talking about letting the students, on their own, 'have a go' at the language.

Recently a distinction has been drawn between *acquiring* a language and *learning* a language, most notably by the American writer Krashen.<sup>5</sup> He characterises the former as a subconscious process which results in the knowledge of a language whereas the latter, learning, is a conscious process which results only in 'knowing about' the language. Acquiring a language is more successful and longer lasting than learning.

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Acquisition and  
Learning

What is the...