

Maria Cristina Consiglio

# ENGLISH FOR CHILDREN

THEORIES, METHODS AND TECHNIQUES



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# Chapter 1

## Language Teaching: Theories and Approaches

### 1. Language teaching: an overview

In the past, linguistics considered language as a homogeneous apparatus, as a rigid substance which could be divided into segments. It ignored the dynamic structure of languages and it neglected the relations between language and physiologic, psychological and social factors. This means that linguistics was concerned with the formal and structural description of language.

In the late 1950s, as a response to this narrowing of focus in linguistics, the new area of research called *applied linguistics* was established. Applied linguistics is said to be concerned with explaining, ameliorating, even solving social problems involving language and language teaching has always been one of its major concerns so that the label “applied linguistics” often overlaps that of “language teaching”<sup>1</sup>.

Initially, applied linguistics borrowed its scientific credentials from theoretical (or traditional) linguistics and in the 1950s it was structuralism that dominated linguistic research. This resulted in an interest in formal or structural similarities and differences between languages, which brought the applied linguist to consider how they could affect second language learning processes. Contrastive analysis, therefore, «became the mainstay of applied linguistics in its infancy»<sup>2</sup> and brought to the development of some teaching methods and techniques, like the audiolingual method and error analysis – a technique involv-

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<sup>1</sup> A. DAVIES and C. ELDER, “General Introduction. Applied Linguistics: Subject to Discipline?”, in A. DAVIES and C. ELDER (eds.), *The Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, Blackwell, Oxford 2006, pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> K. RAJAGOPALAN, “The Philosophy of Applied Linguistics”, in A. DAVIES and C. ELDER, *op. cit.*, p. 401.

ing the analysis of the kind of errors made by language learners in order to devise appropriate remedial measures<sup>3</sup>.

With the diffusion of Noam Chomsky's *Generative Grammar*, all teaching methods and techniques based on behaviouristically oriented structural linguistics were discredited and even rejected, a further confirmation of how, in its early stages, applied linguistics relied on the developments in theoretical linguistics. Yet, Chomsky's theory proved of little help when applied to language teaching, being the conviction that languages are not learnt its central point. Chomsky believed, in fact, that languages «manifest themselves as part of an individual's natural growth»<sup>4</sup>; language acquisition, therefore, is to be seen as a subconscious process of which the individual is not aware, whereas language learning is a conscious process.

The terms *acquisition* and *learning*, in fact, refer to two different processes. The former makes reference to the process through which the first language (or mother tongue) is acquired as a consequence of casual and natural exposure; the latter makes reference to the process through which a second language is acquired in a structured and artificial context. There are, therefore, some major differences between the two processes. Acquisition is contemporary to cognitive development whereas learning is usually introduced at a later phase; the elements acquired are not structured whereas the elements learnt are structured and graded; in the process of acquisition time is unlimited and errors are accepted whereas in the process of learning time is limited and scheduled and errors are corrected; in the acquisition process the learner is highly motivated whereas in the learning process motivation should be induced; in the acquisition process the learner has no previous language competence nor background cultural knowledge whereas in the learning process the learner has previous language competence (that of his/her first language) as well as background cultural knowledge<sup>5</sup>.

It has traditionally been assumed that only children can acquire languages and that the term “acquisition” can only be used with refer-

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402.

<sup>5</sup> S. KRASHEN, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Internet edition 2009, p. 10. [http://www.sdkrashen.com/Principles\\_and\\_Practice/index.html](http://www.sdkrashen.com/Principles_and_Practice/index.html).

ence to the mother tongue. Children can learn their mother language thanks to their innate creative ability, that is they create linguistic structures starting from extra-linguistic abilities<sup>6</sup>. It is extremely difficult to give a precise definition of creativity as its ultimate source in language acquisition is the structure of human mind. It could be intended as the speakers' ability to express an infinite number of thoughts using sentences never heard before, which is possible because they have "internalized" the system of rules of a language and can, therefore, use language creatively. In other words, creativity in language acquisition refers to the process by which learners reconstruct rules starting from the discourses they hear<sup>7</sup>.

Recent studies in first language acquisition have pointed out that children do not use linguistic structures for their own sake, rather they (unconsciously) consider those structures as subordinate to concrete experiences. In addition, the acquisition steps are the same for all children irrespective of their mother tongue, which means that language acquisition is strictly connected with non-linguistic mechanisms. Particularly, children do not learn *the* language but they learn *how to use* language structures in relation to the socio-cultural models of the social community they live in, so that these structures acquire a significant function in communication.

In 1972, the American linguist and anthropologist Dell Hymes introduced the concept of *communicative competence*. Hymes claimed that speaking a language was not simply a matter of using an abstract set of rules, but also involved knowing what to say to whom and how to say it appropriately in a given situation. In other words, the speaker has to know what is grammatically correct and what is not, how to use language according to the participants in the speech event and according to the situation. This involves taking into account the social and cultural setting in which the speech event takes place, the relationship between the interlocutors, the community's norms, values and expectations for that kind of speech event. Hymes's communicative competence has four underlying components: grammatical competence, so-

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<sup>6</sup> G. DE MARTINO, *La didattica delle lingue*, Signum ediz., Padova 1983, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> H. DULAY and M. BURT, "Some Remarks on Creativity in Language Acquisition", in W.C. RITCHIE (ed.), *Second Language Acquisition Research*, Academic Press, New York 1978, p. 67.

ciolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence; that is mastery of the linguistic code, knowledge of appropriate language use, knowledge of how to connect utterances in a text, mastery of those strategies speakers use to enhance the effectiveness of communication and those they use to compensate for breakdowns in communication<sup>8</sup>.

At around the same time, in Britain, Michael Halliday elaborated his *systemic-functional linguistic theory* which was based on the same assumptions as Hymes's communicative competence. According to Halliday, language is a systematic resource for expressing meaning in context, and linguistics is the study of how people exchange meanings through language. This view implies that language exists only in context (and, therefore, must be studied in contexts, such as classrooms, professional settings, courtrooms, and so on) and particular aspects of a given context, like the topic discussed, the interlocutors and the medium, define the meaning expressed and the language used to express those meanings<sup>9</sup>. Language acquisition, therefore, is learning how to express meanings acquiring the functions one can perform with human language. Even if much of Halliday's early work was concerned with how children acquire the functions of their first language, other scholars have applied systemic functional principles to second language acquisition problems such as defining communicative competence<sup>10</sup>. This has changed the nature of linguistic research and brought to the so-called communicative approach which is based on the assumption that the teaching of a language could not be limited to the teaching of grammar, but it should involve the teaching of how to perform real-life activities with and through language<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> B. PALTRIDGE, *Discourse Analysis. An Introduction*, Continuum, London 2006, pp. 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Halliday conceptualizes the context of situation as consisting of three components: field, tenor, and mode. The field refers to the subject matter, or topic, and to the nature of the activity; the tenor refers to the social relationship between the interlocutors in terms of power and status; the mode refers to the way in which language is used and to the organization of the text, whether it is written, spoken, written to be spoken, or spoken to be written. CH. TAYLOR, *Language to Language*, CUP, Cambridge 1998, p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> C.A. CHAPELLE, *Some Notes on Systemic-Functional Linguistics*, 28 Oct. 1998. Available online at: <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~carolc/LING511/sfl.html>.

<sup>11</sup> K. RAJAGOPALAN, *op. cit.*, p. 405.



In 1980, Michael Canale and Merrill Swain<sup>12</sup> have proposed a wider conceptualization of the knowledge and skills a second language learner needs in order to learn the foreign language. Their concept of communicative competence includes linguistic competence, discourse competence, pragmatic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and sociocultural competence. Linguistic competence includes knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, semantics, phonology (the traditional focus of language teaching); discourse competence involves the ability to write long texts and engage in long conversations or interactions; pragmatic competence involves the ability to convey and interpret meanings in conversations even in presence of gaps of knowledge; sociolinguistic competence consists in the ability to use language appropriately in social situations (formal or informal, direct or indirect); sociocultural competence includes awareness of the background knowledge and cultural assumptions which affect meanings<sup>13</sup>.

One of the most influential supporter of the communicative approach has been H.G. Widdowson. He has suggested that language teachers should focus on the communicative *value* of language items rather than just exploring their signification as elements of the language system. In this way students would be allowed to become familiar with the specific communicative functions each item has in a given situation of actual use<sup>14</sup>. The communicative approach has been a real turning point in language teaching theory and practice and is still considered one of the most effective.

In the mid-1980s, a separate sub-discipline – of theoretical linguistics – called second language acquisition (SLA), was established. Its research has moved away from the practical purposes that characterized research in foreign language learning within applied linguistics; it rather addresses theoretical problems related in some way to language

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<sup>12</sup> M. CANALE and M. SWAIN, *Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Language Teaching and Testing*, «Applied Linguistics», 1, 1980, pp. 1-47.

<sup>13</sup> W. LITTLEWOOD, "Second Language Learning", in A. DAVIES and C. ELDER, *op .cit.*, p. 503.

<sup>14</sup> H.G. WIDDOWSON, *Teaching of English as Communication*, «The ELT Journal», 27(1), 1972, p. 16.

learning<sup>15</sup>. Being a theory-oriented discipline, it seems of little use for language teachers in their daily work.

To sum up, modern language teaching considers language no longer as a simple, static fact, but as a set of dynamic processes which come out of the interaction of non linguistic systems with verbal structures and, starting from this assumption, it takes into account every aspect of human behaviour and needs. The aim of teaching a foreign language is to enable students to use linguistic structures in communication, paying attention to the way in which a given language is used by native speakers in real-life situations and to the multifarious relations between the language and the culture it communicates<sup>16</sup>. Language teaching, therefore, does not rely exclusively on the data of (traditional) linguistics, but takes into account all the factors involved in language acquisition and learning, which are verbal categories, contextual abilities, the student's mental processes, the teacher's didactic skills, linguistic contents, and pedagogic instruments. In other words, language teaching goes beyond linguistics, it takes into account psychology, biological and mental processes, the socio-cultural education of the student, the goals of teaching, and the pedagogic and didactic instruments that might be used in order to make learning easier<sup>17</sup>.

## 2. Teaching methodology

There have been three main phases in the history of teaching methods; these phases are not chronologically successive developments which have disappeared after a period of use, rather they are contemporary trends which co-exist in modern teaching.

The first phase is characterized by *syllabus-centred education*. Teachers are concerned with the object of teaching and the discipline contents and their focus is on *what* to teach, that is the structure and the constituents of the discipline to be taught.

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<sup>15</sup> W. LITTLEWOOD, *op. cit.*, p. 502.

<sup>16</sup> G. DE MARTINO, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-55.

The second phase is characterized by *student-centred education*. Teachers are aware of the relevance of *whom* they were teaching and their focus is the learner with his/her psychological assets and liabilities and his/her social background.

The third phase is characterized by *method-centred education*. Teachers are concerned with the way they can help students acquire new skills and new concepts and their focus is on *how* to teach. It is conceived as a synthesis of the methods of the past and the new trends established thanks to experimentation and research in language teaching. It is based on a more comprehensive view of the teaching-learning process centred on the interaction between teacher and student. This teaching method starts from the goals to be achieved and is conceived as the way to these goals; it takes into account the convergence of the three factors at work: the teacher, the student and the object (notions and skills)<sup>18</sup>.

In other words, in the past, teaching methodology was centred on the structure of language, it ignored the existence of the student, his/her rhythm, ability to learn, and motivations. Nowadays the attention is focused on the student, being the final goal of teaching a foreign language to enable learners to express ideas and concepts in the second language<sup>19</sup>. Students should be enabled to solve everyday-life problems on their own, they should be involved in several different situations where their role is not limited to the repetition of sentences programmed by someone else, but is to gather information and data of a given contextual situation and express their own vision of reality. It follows that one of the main aims of language teaching is to respect the students' times, rhythms and habits in order to make them participate actively in the learning process by interpreting facts, experiences and contextual situations according to their own psychological and mental schemes.

The teacher's role in this process should be to stimulate the students' abilities and eliminate any obstacle which might hinder the expression of biological, psychological and cultural resources students

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<sup>18</sup> R. TITONE, *Introduzione alla metodologia della ricerca nell'insegnamento linguistico*, Minerva Italica, Bergamo 1974, pp. 26-28.

<sup>19</sup> G. DE MARTINO, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

already possess. The teacher should select and arrange the materials to be learnt according to the age of the students, their sex, their intelligence, their personality, their psychological attitudes, their social class, their level of education, the environment, the time at their disposal. Moreover, the teaching process should be creative; the teacher suggests facts or problems, the students observe them, discuss them, compare them, analyse them, and solve them making their own choices according to their bio-psycho-mental process without the teacher giving the “right” solution<sup>20</sup>. It is evident that only a sound knowledge of teaching methodology can help teachers in their role of enablers and support them in their daily activity planning.

### 3. ELT: theories, methods, approaches

Language teaching is a multidisciplinary activity shaped by views of the nature of language, of teaching and learning, both in general and specifically as regards languages, and by the sociocultural settings in which it takes place<sup>21</sup>.

The multiplicity of standpoints from which teaching methods are derived is reflected in the plethora of methods that have been used by teachers all around the world. The history of language teaching, in fact, is characterized by the fact that each time a new method was born it was strictly linked to developments and trends in the scientific field, being a method what links theory and practice. The dominion of behaviourism in the 1930s and 1940s gave rise to the so-called audio-lingual methods; cognitivism in the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to cognitive or deductive methods; the recent importance given to communication and speech has given rise to functional or communicative methods. This means that teaching methodology has always been influenced by psychological, linguistic, communication, and social sciences<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 264-279.

<sup>21</sup> B. ADAMSON, “Fashions in Language Teaching Methodology”, in A. DAVIES and C. ELDER, *op .cit.*, p. 604.

<sup>22</sup> M. DANESI, *Manuale di tecniche per la didattica delle lingue moderne*, Armando ed., Roma 1988, p. 9.

Theories pass through different stages, when they are first introduced they tend to dominate research in their field, but when a new theory is proposed former theories tend to be discredited and even rejected. Methods, instead, despite their dependency on a given theory, do not disappear when new methods are introduced. The possible reason for the persistence of “old” methods lies in the very nature of methods, which are only in part linked to theories. Methods, in fact, can be described in terms of three levels: approach, design, and procedure. The approach refers to the underpinning theory of language and of language learning; the design covers the specification of linguistic content and roles of the teacher, learner, and instructional materials; the procedure refers to the techniques and activities used in the classroom<sup>23</sup>. In addition, each method has a specific goal: inductive and deductive methods derived from structuralism aim at an unconscious control of linguistic mechanisms and at a conscious control of grammar, respectively; functional methods focus the attention on communication and the use of authentic materials which makes learners develop their communicative skills; affective methods centre their efforts on the student<sup>24</sup>. This may be the reason why teachers continue to adopt existing methods even when new methods are introduced.

### 3.1. Behaviourism and inductive methods

*Behaviourism* as a psychological theory was born in the 1920s when John B. Watson and Rosalie Rayner made an experiment on a nine-month-old child named Albert. They were interested in finding support for their conviction that the reaction of children, whenever they heard loud noises, was prompted by fear. Furthermore, Watson believed that this fear was innate or due to an unconditioned response. He felt that following the principles of classical conditioning, he could condition a child to fear another distinctive stimulus which normally would not be feared by a child. Over a period of three months, Albert was frightened by the sound of a hammer on a steel bar in presence of some animals; the result was that the baby was afraid of those animals

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<sup>23</sup> B. ADAMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 605.

<sup>24</sup> M. DANESI, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-33.

even when the noise was not made. This theory was based on the idea of conditioning and on the conviction that it is possible to study only what is objectively observable and measurable. The experiment was performed on three steps: stimulus, response and reinforcement<sup>25</sup>.

The American psychologist B.F. Skinner applied behaviourism to language acquisition. According to him, verbal behaviour followed the same scheme as any other human behaviour and, therefore, was an observable phenomenon. Language acquisition was seen as a process of *stimulus* and *response*, or better as a series of responses to external stimuli. In order to fix what is learnt, *reinforcement* is of utmost importance. Also the acquisition of meaning is seen as a mechanic act, a conditioned response to external stimuli. In the process of learning a foreign language, learners are already conditioned by the habits deriving from their knowledge of the first language which functions as a barrier to the new learning. The teacher should try to bypass interference phenomena and resistance by re-conditioning the learner through a continuous practice of the second language elements<sup>26</sup>.

The methods derived from behaviourism are called *inductive* because they tend to teach foreign languages without using grammar and translation but following the same psychological strategies used to learn the mother tongue. These methods are: the direct method; the contrastive method; the audio-lingual method<sup>27</sup>.

The *direct method* was born at the end of the 19th century. It proposes the learning of a second language based on the processes of first language acquisition; it considers language as a communicative instrument and makes use of demonstrative-descriptive techniques and iconic materials like pictures and posters and refuses the use of translation<sup>28</sup>. The direct method is based on the assumption that total immersion in the second language is the best way to rapid progress in communication. The teacher's role is to supply contextual support

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<sup>25</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org>.

<sup>26</sup> W. COLOSIMO, *Lingua straniera e comunicazione. Problemi di glottodidattica*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1978, pp. 20-22.

<sup>27</sup> M. DANESI, *op. cit.*, p.18.

<sup>28</sup> G. MAZZOTTA, "Il contributo della glottodidattica all'insegnamento-apprendimento delle lingue", in C. FERRANDES and V. MARRONE (eds.), *Le Lingue straniere nella scuola e nell'università: problemi e prospettive*, Edizioni del Sud, Bari 1985, p. 103.

avoiding the use of the learners' mother tongue as far as possible, as a way to create a natural environment; listening and speaking activities precede reading and writing activities; grammar is taught inductively through concrete examples useful in oral communication<sup>29</sup>; each lesson starts with the listening and the imitation of linguistic patterns so that the learner will be able to form habits in the foreign language; words are taught using pictures, objects and mimic as stimulus; the lesson ends with questions asked by the teacher in order to repeat the linguistic materials introduced; exercises are made up of pattern drills<sup>30</sup>.

One of the best-known direct methods is the *audio-oral mechanical method*, also known as intensive. It was first used during the training programme of the American Army during the second World War. This method is based on American structuralism as well as on behaviourism. The central idea is that the teacher should appeal to imitation and memorization applied to linguistic structures and patterns; the materials to be used are arranged on a hierarchical ladder from the simplest to the most complex, focusing the attention on orality<sup>31</sup>.

The methods described above are based on the assumption that languages can be taught mechanically, as a simple formation of habits without any contribution of intelligence or creativity and on the conviction that the free, multiform, spontaneous, unlimited nature of language can be brought to school, a limited and artificial institution. In addition, direct methods avoid any form of interlingual translation. If this approach is possible, and useful, when teaching small children, older students are unlikely to forget their mother tongue and even when they are told to substitute compositions for translations they think of their composition in their first language, actually a translation process. Moreover, sometimes translations are necessary to fix in the students' minds the grammar rules and structures they need to produce a speech or a written text in a foreign language<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> B. ADAMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 607.

<sup>30</sup> M. DANESI, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>31</sup> G. MAZZOTTA, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105.

<sup>32</sup> F. LANZISERA, *Metodi nello studio delle lingue straniere*, in «Annali del corso di Lingue e Letterature Straniere», vol. II, ed. Alfredo Cressati, Bari 1954, pp. 9-16.

In the 1950s and 1960s *contrastive methods* were born. They were based, in part, on inductive and behaviouristic operations, like direct methods, in part, on contrastive analysis techniques aiming to identify those structural and lexical areas of the first language which might interfere in the second language learning. The assumption of contrastive methods is the conviction that the knowledge of the first language determines the way in which the second language is learnt. A contrastive analysis of the two languages allows the teacher to classify inter-linguistic interference phenomena by a systematic confrontation of the structures and lexis of the two languages, in order to foresee, explain, correct and eliminate every possible inter-linguistic error. These methods are also based on the belief that all difficulties a student faces in a second language learning process are due to interference phenomena and do not take into account psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic factors which can affect second language learning<sup>33</sup>.

Another widespread method in the 1950s and 1960s was the *audiolingual method* that considered learning as being brought about by positive reinforcement of correct utterances. Lessons based on this methods are taught in the second language, the use of the first language is limited to some grammatical explanations or in case of need; they are based on proceedings deriving from psychological behaviourism and structural linguistics such as imitation, repetition and drills; the teacher should follow the programme presented by structural linguistics, from minimum units (phonemes) to the most complex structures; the teaching of each structure follows a model the student has to imitate without any reflection so that s/he can form new sentences by analogy with the model; the teacher makes also use of visual and audio devices<sup>34</sup>. Being based on structuralism, that was concerned with compiling descriptive rather than prescriptive grammars, the audiolingual method focuses on oral skills: learners are drilled to produce correct responses – the emphasis is on habit formation – organized into structures commonly used to realize speech acts in real-life conversation. The learners' attention is drawn to differences between their mother tongue and the second language so as to minimize errors,

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<sup>33</sup> B. ADAMSON, *op. cit.* p. 607.

<sup>34</sup> M. DANESI, *op. cit.*, p. 21.



which are not tolerated<sup>35</sup>. Nowadays, the audiolingual method is out of fashion because it focuses only on the creation of automatisms in the student and neglects those cognitive operations necessary to the learning process; moreover students often find the lessons boring and this is the greatest obstacle to the learning process<sup>36</sup>.

### 3.2. Cognitivism and deductive methods

In the 1960s a new psychological theory called *cognitivism* replaced behaviourism as the dominant paradigm. It considered mental activities no longer as habits but as information processing activities; opening the “black box” of the human mind was seen as the only possibility to understand how people learn and to explore mental processes such as thinking, memory, knowing, and problem-solving. Contrary to behaviourists, cognitivists believe that people are not “programmed animals” that merely respond to environmental stimuli, they are rational beings, who learn through active participation and whose actions are a consequence of thinking. Cognitivists observe changes in behaviour only as indication of what is occurring in the learner’s head<sup>37</sup>. Cognitivism uses the metaphor of the mind as a computer: information comes in, is being processed, and leads to certain outcomes. For them, knowledge is structured as a web of concepts related to one another; any addition or deletion of concepts causes a modification in the knowledge system already acquired.

The most outstanding cognitivist scholar is Noam Chomsky who completely rejected Skinner’s behaviouristic view of language acquisition asserting that language cannot be a habit, rather it is a species-specific cognitive process and is determined by an innate ability of human beings. The ability of young children to say things they have never heard before, that is their ability to use language creatively, suggests that they are endowed with a potential knowledge of the general principles regulating the structure of language. Human ability to acquire language is, therefore, innate, which has brought to the hy-

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<sup>35</sup> B. ADAMSON, *op. cit.*, pp. 607-8.

<sup>36</sup> M. DANESI, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22

<sup>37</sup> See <http://www.learning-theories.com/cognitivism.html>.

pothesis of the existence of a sort of mechanism (called *Language Acquisition Device* or LAD) functioning like a computer program, able to analyse and process linguistic data and discover underlying regularities that allow children to produce new utterances<sup>38</sup>. The LAD is linked to what Chomsky has called *competence*, that is a speaker's knowledge of his/her language as manifest in his/her ability to recognize, understand, and produce an infinite number of grammatically correct utterances, most of which s/he may have never heard or seen before, to be distinguished from what he has called *performance*, that is the creative use of such utterances in an actual event, which may include grammatical mistakes and non-linguistic features, like hesitations, accompanying the use of language<sup>39</sup>.

There are three related hypothesis which develop a conception of language learning as occurring through innate mechanisms: the creative construction hypothesis, the Universal Grammar hypothesis, and the cognitive skill-learning hypothesis.

The *creative construction hypothesis*, formulated by Heidi Dulay and Marina Burt in the 1970s<sup>40</sup>, seeks to explain how the learner is actively and creatively involved in developing his/her competence. Dulay and Burt suggest that learners make use of processes leading to the creation of new forms and structures using the same processes they use in the acquisition of their first language. This implies that second language learners are endowed with innate mechanisms for processing language and creating their own internal grammar, that is their transitional competence known as interlanguage<sup>41</sup>. The hypothesis is based on the conception of the Language Acquisition Device facilitating the process of creative construction in the mind of the learner and on the predictability of the order in which the second language grammatical features are acquired.

The *Universal Grammar hypothesis* is associated with Chomsky's linguistic theory of Universal Grammar. Chomsky claimed that there

<sup>38</sup> W. COLOSIMO, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-4.

<sup>39</sup> G. FREDDI, *Psicolinguistica, Sociolinguistica, Glottodidattica. La formazione di base dell'insegnante di lingue e di lettere*, UTET, Torino 1999, pp. 20-21.

<sup>40</sup> H. DULAY and M. BURT, *Natural Sequences in Child Language Acquisition*, «Language Learning», 24, 1974, pp. 37-53.

<sup>41</sup> W. LITTLEWOOD, *op. cit.*, pp. 515-16.

is a set of principles that govern all languages and are stored in the human brain. He also suggested that the underlying structures of language, that he called deep grammar, are innate in all human beings and stable whereas the grammar as it manifests itself in the many different languages spoken in the world, that he called surface grammar, changes over time. In Chomsky's opinion, these principles help explain how the child learns more about the language than s/he could have learnt from the input alone<sup>42</sup>. Yet, this hypothesis has proved to be irrelevant or useless when brought to the classroom and research in this field has been inconclusive.

The creative construction hypothesis and the Universal Grammar hypothesis are specific to language learning, but some scholars believe that language is to be seen as only one of the possible skills an individual can learn during his/her lifetime and, therefore, general principles of cognitive psychology must account also for language learning. This idea, known as *cognitive skill-learning hypothesis*, is based on the assumption that communicating through language is a complex skill in which overt performance is based on a hierarchy of cognitive plans. In other words, when, for instance, a speaker has to make a request, s/he first chooses between direct and indirect request, then chooses the way to formulate the request and then selects a grammatical plan to fill with specific lexical items. Higher-levels plans are conscious (i.e. controlled processing) while lower-level plans are subconsciously realized (i.e. automatic processing). Yet, at the early stages of learning a foreign language, even lower-level selections are conscious and learning consists in moving these lower-level plans into the domain of automatic processing<sup>43</sup>.

The application of cognitivism to language teaching has given birth to the so-called *deductive* methods, based on the conviction that any learning act derives from the juxtaposition of new elements coming from outside and interior pre-competences. The best-known deductive methods are the grammar-translation method and the cognitive method.

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<sup>42</sup> CH. TAYLOR, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> W. LITTLEWOOD, *op. cit.*, p. 517.