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# UNIT 2 WHO ARE THE LEARNERS OF LANGUAGE?

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## Structure

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Objectives
- 2.3 The Central Role of Language in Human Society
  - 2.3.1 Socialisation : The Learning of Language and Culture
- 2.4 Different Contexts and Settings for Human Learning
  - 2.4.1 The Versatility of the Human Learner : The Crucial Role of Learning in Development
  - 2.4.2 The Learner's Role in Learning : Personal but not Fixed Characteristics
- 2.5 Different Types of Learners
  - 2.5.1 The Effect of Learning Contexts on Learners
  - 2.5.2 Personal Qualities of Learners
- 2.6 Learner Factors in Second Language Acquisition
  - 2.6.1 Age
  - 2.6.2 Sex
  - 2.6.3 Intelligence
  - 2.6.4 Aptitude
  - 2.6.5 Cognitive Style
  - 2.6.6 Personality
  - 2.6.7 Attitude
- 2.7 Motivation
  - 2.7.1 What is Motivation?
  - 2.7.2 Types of Motivation
  - 2.7.3 Review of Research on Motivation
  - 2.7.4 Is Motivation the Cause or Result of Success?
- 2.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9 Key Words
- 2.10 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 2.11 Suggested Readings

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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This unit deals with **learners of language**. Before we enter into a serious discussion of the teaching of languages, we need to try and understand some things about learners: their capabilities and motives and expectations. When we think of education and instruction and especially of designing syllabuses and training teachers, we have an image of learners, especially children in our minds. This image tends to present them as passive **receivers** of whatever we provide as **inputs** through lessons and courses. Psychologists have conducted hundreds of experiments (using both humans and animals as 'subjects') and have discovered or formulated various general 'laws' of learning. Curriculum specialists have tried to apply these laws or principles to 'design' an effective curriculum – one that is likely to be successful and efficient. The most important consideration in the success of a curriculum is of course whether the learners (or pupils) have learnt all or most of whatever they were **supposed to learn**.

As we will see later in this unit, a great deal of learning takes place even without any planned and deliberate teaching. This learning includes not only purely physical activity like walking or swimming or riding a bicycle, but also matters which involve the 'mind'.

The learning of the first language without much obvious evidence of 'teaching', by nearly every young child in every human community, is perhaps the best example of this.

The knowledge that societies have accumulated and which various adults (specialists) have mastered needs to be passed on to the young. Children are not born with this knowledge. Most of it has to be passed on through the process of education in which this knowledge is packaged in the form of school 'subjects'. And most school subjects have to be **taught** by teachers in the formal school, at least to begin with, and usually for many years. **Language**, especially the mother tongue, is a striking exception to this general rule. As already mentioned, children learn to speak their mother tongue (at least) long before they enter formal school. Also, many persons who have dropped out of school, and even those who have never been to school at all, are quite fluent users of the language (sometimes languages) of their particular communities. Of course such people may not be able to read and write (i.e. handle the **written** form of the language); but they have mastered most of the complex grammar, an extended vocabulary, and important aspects of organization, and even style of the language they speak.

The principle that emerges from these facts is that the **learning of the languages commonly spoken in the community** in which individuals live is a **much wider process** than what is prescribed and taught in school or college. Since there is no clearly identifiable agency 'outside' the school that is doing any 'teaching' of language, we must conclude that human learners of language have some **special capacity to learn language**.

Beginning with this first unit, we will try to understand something about this powerful capacity to learn language that seems to be a part of human nature. We will focus on learners of language – their abilities, their styles of learning, their sources of motivation, etc. We should be able to use these ideas in the 'language syllabus design and language teaching methodology' we want to formulate. Language instruction can be made highly effective if we are able to tap the rich resource represented by the human learner's tremendous capacity to learn language, and build on it.

This unit has the question 'Who are learners of language?' as its title. We are not interested here in factual information of the type that goes into individual bio-data sheets or survey reports – boys/girls, urban/rural, English medium/Regional language medium, monolingual/bilingual and so on. Such characteristics are of course important, especially when we are planning instruction for particular target groups. Here we are more interested in the capabilities and resources that language learners in general have. We shall begin by reviewing the role of language in human affairs and go on to look at the learning resources that members of the human society have.

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## 2.2 OBJECTIVES

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Our aim in this unit is to give you insights about:

- the central role of language in human society;
- the role of the learner's environment in the learning process;
- the role of different contexts and settings for human learning;
- different types of language learners and their personal attributes affecting language acquisition;
- the attributes of learners can be exploited for designing the curriculum as well as evolving certain teaching strategies.

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## 2.3 THE CENTRAL ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN HUMAN SOCIETY

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The use of language as the primary means of communication is one of the defining characteristics of the human species. Many animal species also use signs of various types to communicate or convey information (see unit 5 of this course). But these sign systems are very simple and inflexible. They are very far removed from the **complexity** and **versatility** and **creativity** that goes with human or natural languages. The primary position of language

(especially speech) in the life of mankind is highlighted by the expression 'talking animal' that is sometimes used to describe humans.

This central role of communication through natural language in human social life is made possible by the fact that all human individuals are able to handle or operate the language (or languages) of their societies. This is so obvious that we simply take it for granted. But it is useful to note that there is an important principle here. Nearly everyone in any society is a competent and effective language user. This applies to all normal human beings. Only that tiny proportion of the population of any country with major physiological handicaps (brain damage, mental retardation, deafness and dumbness) remain unable to use language. The learning of the mother tongue or first language (L1) is a slow and long drawn-out process. It is difficult to say when a person has fully mastered his/her L1 and so has finished learning it. Further, many people learn more than one language. This is especially true of multilingual societies like ours; and with modern communication breaking down national/linguistic boundaries, learning foreign languages is also becoming increasingly common. These additional languages too are learned slowly (even if there is a crash course) and like the L1, complete mastery is never attained. Thus it is possible to say that for practical purposes, everyone is a language learner.

### 2.3.1 Socialisation : The Learning of Language and Culture

The growth and development of the human child into an adolescent and later an adult involves two parallel and interlinked processes. One is physiological growth or maturation. This is supported mainly by nutrition and exercise (the ingredients of good health) and protection from physical harm. The second and more complex process is the psychological growth of the individual. This is an important aspect of social development: the process whereby the helpless infant gradually becomes an independent and actively participating member of his/her community. A functioning member of human society is an individual who is able to interact and communicate effectively with others – both directly with individuals, and more indirectly with the community in general. This is made possible by the use of language. Thus one major requirement that must be met as the child grows is the learning of the L1. A member of society is also a **person** – an individual with a unique combination of characteristics that make up his/her personality. Among these characteristics are personality traits, interests, abilities and talents. (Remember that we often refer to a small baby as 'it' even when we know whether it is a boy or a girl. This is because we have not yet begun to 'see' this child as a person).

The long and slow process of psychological and social development of the child is called **socialization**. Man is often described as a social animal. One very obvious reason for this is that human beings usually live together in families and wider communities. But this is not always true. Remember here that in the folklore of most communities there are important characters who are wanderers and hermits and outcastes. These are individuals who do not have any link with or claim to belong to a particular community. And we find such people in modern societies too. The more important and interesting aspect of man's social nature is related to how it is formed. An individual's personality and behaviour patterns are determined to a large extent by the **culture** in which his/her early socialization took place. The human infant is born with the **potential** for developing in a vast number of different ways. The culture into which s/he is born functions as an environment which provides the **opportunity and support** for learning various things associated with being a person and member of society. At the same time it restricts what is learnt by the child. Thus the language the child is exposed to in the home and neighbourhood becomes the L1, and the culture of that particular community is what the child learns and accepts as his/her own. Thus the language and culture of the community in which socialization takes place, influences the social nature and identity of the individual in important ways. A child has very little choice in these matters. It is only after we have become socialized and learnt how to live in society (how to operate the system, in other words) that we can begin to rebel or become reformers.

A remarkable feature of the process of learning the L1 is that it occurs quite naturally and is managed with a high level of effectiveness. This strikes us as truly amazing when we note that this learning of language takes place without any conscious planning and effort going into teaching" it. Various persons around the child – both adults and other children – help and support this L1 acquisition process, but there is no systematic teaching. We can state another principle now. Every child learns to speak his/her L1 quite effectively, even without planned and organised teaching. Of course after the child goes to school, a great deal more learning

takes place under 'instruction', especially reading and writing. But this curriculum-based teaching is based on what was learnt earlier through the natural process of socialization. We should also remember here that not everyone goes to school, and of those who do start, quite a few do not stay there more than a few years. Even so, such persons with little or no schooling are quite effective users of the spoken form of their L1. It is worth noting here that in many societies, and this is especially true of all parts of India, children grow up in communities where more than one language is commonly spoken.

**Check Your Progress**

- Notes : a) Write your answers in the space given below.  
b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

1. a) The two processes in the growth and development of a child into an adult are:  
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- b) The process of socialisation involves:  
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2. What is L1? How is it 'learnt' by a child?  
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**2.4 DIFFERENT CONTEXTS AND SETTINGS FOR HUMAN LEARNING**

The total process of socialization as mentioned above is very long-drawn-out and slow, and it covers a complex and comprehensive set of activities. Through these activities the culture of the society — customs, values, attitudes, language(s), folklore, knowledge and skills/technology, etc. — is passed on to each new generation. These ongoing and naturally occurring activities form the most common context for human learning. Children are involved in these activities, but many of them are not specially designed for children - young children and teenagers and adults all take part. These largely informal social activities can be contrasted with the more planned and organized operations associated with **schooling or formal education**.

Schooling, especially because it is spread out over many years is, of course, a part of the broader process of socialisation. The overall purpose and effect of both are virtually the same. But the organized and consciously implemented activities of schooling can be placed in a separate category because of certain special characteristics they have. One obvious feature of schooling is that a few specially designated persons function as **teachers** and children (**learners**) go to specially set up places called **the classroom** where teaching-learning is expected to take place. In the context of school, children have a special opportunity (and responsibility) to learn. They are expected to pay attention and be serious and try hard and so on. This school-related image of the child is indicated by the term **pupil**. This is a useful label, and we shall use it here to distinguish between two roles that children usually have. They are always 'learners' in general because they are involved in the processes of socialisation. Sometimes they are also 'pupils' - who are learning from teachers in class.

A second important aspect of schooling is that only some specific types of knowledge and skill (selected from the total cultural heritage of the society) are covered in the programme of instruction followed there. These selected areas constitute the **curriculum**. Certain other types of activity are treated as extra-curricular. As we all know, quite often these are things that

of activity are treated as extra-curricular. As we all know, quite often these are things that children find more meaningful and interesting than what is in the curriculum or 'portions to be covered'. The formality of schooling requires that what is in the syllabus/timetable has to be 'done' on a given day, not what seems more interesting and enjoyable for the pupils. And then there are many things which are always treated as **outside** the concerns of the school. Learning in these areas is taken care of by the agencies of socialization, or special school - like institutions.

Schools and colleges (especially their classroom and laboratories) represent a very highly structured formal context for learning. There are other contexts where the degree of organization and formality is lower. We find these in the extra-curricular activities of school and in similar activities related to the home and neighbourhood. Some examples are: sports and games, cultural programmes, guides and scouts activities, excursions, visits to museums and exhibitions. These activities are seen as broadly educative: there is the hope that children will benefit (learn) in various ways. But there is not a deliberate plan to 'teach' (and test) following a syllabus, as in the classroom setting. Further, these activities are not compulsory. Children's interests are taken into account.

There is a third type of context we are all familiar with, where there is conscious effort to learn and something we would call 'instruction' is taking place, but the 'arrangement' are highly informal. A family friend (not a professional) functioning as a music teacher or sports coach or driving instructor would come under this category. What is significant is that someone with more skill or knowledge is trying consciously to help and guide a learner with less ability initially to gain more of it, with the cooperation of this learner. An older child trying to 'teach' a younger one how to fly a kite, or ride a bicycle or to play cards would be good examples of this type of highly informal but purposeful and effortful setting for learning. The individual practising something (cycling, singing, reciting) or doing homework or revising for a test, is also learning in this informal but planned and serious manner.

We have briefly looked at the variety of contexts and settings in which learning takes place. What is of interest is that learning seems to occur quite successfully in all of them. We have another principle to record now. Human learning takes place in a wide variety of ways. (There does not seem to be any basis for saying there is a best context and method or even that some are better than others). Making fine distinctions between schooling and socialization, or between formal and informal settings is not of any importance in itself. These categories were used as a means of clarifying some ideas in the discussion above. In fact, as our experience tells us, any real or natural learning situation will have some formal and some informal aspects. We need not worry about placing them neatly into one category or the other.

**Check Your Progress**

- Notes :** a) Write your answers in the space given below.  
b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

3. Human learning takes place in a wide variety of ways. Discuss three contexts in which children formally learn certain skills.

- i) .....
- ii) .....
- iii) .....

### 2.4.1 The Versatility of the Human Learner : The Crucial Role of Learning in Development

One of the points that came up in our earlier discussion was that the child is born with a potential to learn. The environment — representing **opportunity to learn** — plays an important role in determining how this potential is fulfilled. The best example of this is how the linguistic environment of the child determines which one (among the hundreds and thousands of languages this or any child could learn) comes to play the role of the L1. It is possible to respond to this pessimistically by saying that we are victims of fate, and that there is no real human freedom. But surely the more interesting and exciting principle we find here is that human nature is highly plastic and adaptable, and not pre-determined as is in the case with animals. Most animal behaviour is instinctive or biologically pre-determined. All members of a species will show the same patterns of behaviour if development has been normal. For human beings, on the other hand, variability and individual differences in psychological and social behaviour are the norm. We are born with potential which develops in widely differing ways for each of us. It is only at the physical or physiological level that behaviour patterns are essentially alike. Nearly all that goes into our human nature - ideas, beliefs, attitudes, likes and dislikes, hopes, fears, mental and physical abilities, and so on - is the result of learning in interaction with the environment.

A very important point here is that the environment that helps to shape the nature of the person is not fixed. Both the physical and the social environment of an individual can and does change. A young child's family can move from one linguistic community to another, or from living as a small single child family into a large joint family set up, or from a small village to a large impersonal urban centre. The possibilities are virtually infinite and many actual changes do keep occurring. The young child especially has to be able to adjust - which means learn - to new physical and social surroundings. Thus the important principle relating to the environment and learning is that humans have a tremendous capacity to learn and keep learning. This versatility and flexibility is crucial for our survival in drastically changing environments. If we relied largely on fixed and instinctive behaviour patterns we would be unable to cope with new surroundings by changing our behaviour. This is why the plasticity of human nature is so important. It is the essential foundation on which the diversity and richness of what we call human civilization has developed. The capacity to learn mentioned above is also very effectively applied or utilized by nearly all human beings of all ages. (We are not only talking here of a vague hope like "A large country like India has the potential to win 20 gold medals at the Olympics".)

As we look at language teaching more closely in later units of the course, we will find many references to the problems and difficulties that learners have, and the challenges these pose for teachers and curriculum developers. It might be useful then to recall this powerful idea : learning is going on all the time and in various ways and for most learners it is quite successful.

### 2.4.2 The Learner's Role in Learning : Personal but not Fixed Characteristics

Two very general principles which emerge from the earlier discussion are that human learning is very effective and that learning is based on interaction with the environment. This might lead us to think that learning is entirely managed or controlled from the 'outside'; or, in other words, that nearly anything can be taught to human beings by providing the necessary 'teaching inputs'. These inputs are the models for imitation, the illustrations and demonstrations, the explanations, etc. that the typical teacher provides to a class of pupils. But such a view of learning ('controlled from outside') would be quite inaccurate. Learning is NOT simply a matter of absorbing what is made available as inputs, like a sponge soaking up water. The learner is a key factor in determining what is learned, how it is learned and how fast. There are various principles or laws which have been found to apply to the processes of learning. Here we shall just note that various characteristics of the learner will influence what and how he or she learns in a given learning situation or when faced with a set of inputs. Every teacher finds out very soon that this is true. When something is taught or presented to a class, all the pupils do not 'take it in' or learn it in the same way or to the same extent. The nature of the individual pupil seem to be an important factor. Another general fact about learning (that teachers know only too well) is that 'what is learned' is not quite the same as 'what is taught'. Thus learning is strongly influenced by the unique individual characteristics of the learner. This applies both to informal learning and to formal learning. The implications of this 'learner factor' is that we

cannot understand the process of learning without a fairly adequate picture of the individual learner.

In other words, we cannot hope to make planned instruction very effective if we do not match it with the pupil's capacity to cope with the new 'item' of learning and his/her receptivity to it. We shall use the term **readiness** for specific new learning here to denote this combination of ability and attitude that the learner brings to each new learning situation. Judging the readiness of pupils with sensitivity and tailoring instruction to fit well with it constitutes the central challenge in syllabus construction and in teaching.

A very important feature of this 'learner factor' is that it is based on the very large store or reserve of **learnt** abilities and attitudes and interests that every learner has. We are not dealing here with the general and stable characteristics of individuals that we are more familiar with, such as body build, general health and mental ability (intelligence). These characteristics do affect learning, but only in a general and predictable way. Our concern here is not these features, but knowledge, abilities and attitudes and interests that have developed and continue to be developed **as a result of exposure to the environment and the learning this generates**. The large and constantly expanding store of such items represent a learner's special resources - or readiness - for new learning in particular areas.

Sometimes, when a new topic is the focus of learning, there might be in the learner's background store, a small cluster of specific items of knowledge and skill, and high interest, which can be of help and provide a boost to learning in this particular area. For example, a child who is exposed to the tools and procedures of carpentry in the home or neighbourhood might pick up some highly specific knowledge about sizes and shapes and also develop an interest in this broad area. Some time later when certain topics in geometry are being taken up in class, this child will be a 'good' learner even if s/he is generally 'weak' in subjects like algebra and physics. Here we can say the child's **specific readiness** for the topics in geometry have acted as a special advantage and given the learning process a boost.

It is easy to see that this can happen in relation to a wide range of areas in which there is a learning requirement. Thus we can think in terms of a large variety of possible specific readiness. The store or reservoir of abilities and attitudes which is the basis of readiness is built up slowly and steadily as exposure to the environment leads to learning. Its size and richness is not linked to general characteristics like intelligence in any important way. In fact the resource represented by readiness can help a learner be quite successful in learning at least in some areas, even when his/her general progress at studies not very good.

A word of caution is necessary here. The learner's past experiences (which make up the store we have talked about) will not necessarily be an advantage in every case. Sometimes there may be nothing that is of any special help to make a given item easier to learn. Sometimes, the individual's background might even be a disadvantage. This happens when an individual lacks some specific item of knowledge or skill which individuals of that age or in that class are assumed to have. Clearly this is a matter of chance to a large extent, as it is the exposure or opportunity to learn that is the cause of the deficiency. If an individual does not know something many others happen to know, this cannot be treated as a reliable indication of his/her being unintelligent or a poor learner.

There is a second way in which the learner's background store can have a negative influence. This is through the development of a negative attitude (for example, a lack of interest) towards certain activities or topics as a result of 'unhappy' earlier experiences. Many of us would know of cases where an individual's interest in something has been 'killed' by an uninspiring or insensitive teacher, perhaps even a harsh and mean one. The general principle here too is that the individual's personal pattern of learnt knowledge and attitudes can affect future learning. On the whole however, we can say that the variety of specific elements that go into the store of resources of each individual is more helpful and advantageous than harmful, as a factor in the learning process.

To sum up, the learner factor we have discussed above is a highly flexible and changing one. It is personal, but it is only marginally related to stable qualities like intelligence and personality type. (These qualities appear to be strongly influenced by heredity, and so are considered to be relatively unchanging). What matters most as far as effect on learning is concerned is the wide (and ever-increasing) range of items — abilities and attitudes — that have been learnt. This influence of past learning on new learning is a principle that helps us to understand why human learners are so versatile. In many new and challenging situations, the learning of each

individual is supported by the store of resources built up in the past, not only by the 'inputs' provided. An important consequence of this is that an individual's learning pattern is highly personalized, but it is also dynamic as the resources for learning are constantly developing. This is something we need to remember while planning a curriculum.

**Check Your Progress**

- Notes :** a) Write your answers in the space given below.  
b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

4. 'What is learned' is not quite the same as 'what is taught'. As a teacher, what are the learner factors that you notice that influence learning?

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5. What is 'readiness'? What are the ways in which this factor can be used effectively by the teacher in the learning process?

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6. How are the learner's past experiences both advantageous as well as disadvantageous to the learning process?

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## 2.5 DIFFERENT TYPES OF LEARNERS

As we have noted earlier many learners of language are not in school or college. So it is not very useful to categorize them mainly in terms of their class or level in the formal system of education. Rather than this administrative aspect, features which can directly affect their attitude and motivation are more relevant. These are listed below.

### a) Stage of development in mastering the language

There can be young learners who are quite advanced or skilled, and older learners who are only beginners. Learning a language is a slow and long-drawn-out process. Learners can be at many different stages of progress towards high proficiency or mastery. Obviously the way of learning, the need for teacher support, the capacity and willingness to do certain tasks will vary with the stage of progress. So a broad category like 'young learners' can include a variety of types based on how far they have progressed.

### b) The degrees of dependence on externally planned instruction

The general (formal vs. informal) context of learning a language is another factor that has a strong influence on the learner's motivation and involvement. When language is being learnt informally (especially through the process of socialisation) the learners may not even be aware that s/he is 'learning' the language. This is because the focus of attention when there is interaction in natural or real-life situations is **communication** — sending and receiving messages by **using language**. Conscious attention to learning the 'rules' of language is not usual or typical here. As we saw in Unit 1, this mode of language learning is very effective. But, we are forced to admit, many procedures and principles that we associate with 'learning in class' do not seem to be relevant or make much sense in this natural setting. The fact that informal learning is taking place is important when we are considering the teaching of the L1 (or a locally used L2). Alongside the classroom based learning of language, the natural processes of using it are also going on. The formal syllabus usually 'recognizes' only what goes on in class. But learners, especially younger ones, are very unlikely to keep 'language use' in watertight compartments as the saying goes. As we will see in Course 3, the teacher cannot afford to ignore what the learner-user is doing happily and successfully outside the class. The learner's contact with real and meaningful use of the target language (L1 or L2) represents a valuable opportunity that should be exploited imaginatively by the teacher.

### c) Degree of compulsion in the study of language

Let us consider planned and formal instruction in a target language. This is what we have described earlier as the context for studying in the role of a pupil. Two broad institutional contexts are possible. In the first case, the student is taking a prescribed language course because it is part of the formal syllabus requirements for the matriculation or intermediate certificate. Here, final examination marks can become very important to the student, and the examination scheme will usually determine what is seen as significant and worthwhile among the topics and activities of the curriculum. The second context for formal study is the one in which the student makes a conscious decision to take a language course, even though it is not required. The best example of this free choice is enrolment in a part-time language course as an additional activity.

### 2.5.1 The Effect of Learning Contexts on Learners

In the section above we have seen some of the different contexts in which a person could be in the role of learner (of a particular language). All these contexts represent conditions 'outside' the learner. They are not related in any way to the learner's personal qualities such as health and stamina, mental ability or educational qualifications. Anyone could be at any stage of progress towards mastery of the target language; anyone could be studying a foreign language through a part-time evening course. The interesting point about these contexts is that they can influence the general attitude and motivation of the individual in his/her role as **learner**. Each context in a very general sense can be linked to a certain type of learner approach. The combination of attitudes and motivation that goes with each type is relevant to our discussion because this can affect the **level of effort** on the learner's part; and this can, as we know, influence how 'successful' learning is.

It is easy to see that a person who has made a conscious decision to try and become proficient in using a language (even though it is not required) will have a favourable attitude and be highly motivated. We would all agree perhaps that teachers of such students are very fortunate.

On the other hand, it is true that many students are caught up in situations (especially in formal education) where they have to study a language, simply because it is a requirement in the +2 or degree syllabus. They may not have any genuine interest in learning the language, beyond passing the examination. A teacher with many such pupils does face a discouraging situation. However, it is important to see this in the context of formal education. Here a major part of any programme is made up of compulsory courses - which all students have to study, whether they are really interested in or like all the subjects and topics. So this problem is one that all teachers face. The need is to make the curriculum in operation — the actual activities in the classroom — interesting to the pupils. In one sense the language teacher, especially the teacher of English in India, has certain advantages. Language is something that children are always 'using'. Further English is fairly widely seen as an asset because of its association with job opportunities and social prestige. So the English teacher is better off than the teacher of compulsory mathematics or compulsory geography.

The general principle we need to note here is that the context of learning is linked to 'expectations'. Those students who are mainly concerned about meeting examination related requirements will want to 'see' evidence of teaching or classroom activity that they feel is going to be useful in this respect. These learners may not readily put in a lot of time and effort related to extra activities, even though these are seen by the teacher (and curriculum designer) as desirable. Similarly, learners who are very keen on learning to 'speak' well and with confidence may be quite resistant to grammar exercises or indepth discussions on the views of some essayist or poet. The teacher needs to be aware of the **learners' expectations**. But of course a curriculum cannot be reduced to only those things learners clearly want. This is where the teacher's resourcefulness in motivating students becomes important.

**Activity**

1. As a teacher of English, list at least three ways in which you can use the 'informal' language learning context of the learners for teaching in the classroom.

- i) .....
- ii) .....
- iii) .....

2. If you were to design a syllabus, how would you include learner expectations in it?

- .....
- .....
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**2.5.2 Personal Qualities of Learners**

In the section above we have focused on the contexts in which a person relates to a target language as a **learner**, and seen how this factor influences the attitudes and motivation of learners. The same person can be a learner of two different languages at the same time, and have a different general approach in each context. Here we see that a general 'rule' about 'the learner' need not always be applicable even to the same individual. We shall now turn to look at some of the more personal qualities of individuals that seem to be relevant to their behaviour as learners of language.

**a) General scholastic ability**

Difference among pupils in the speed and effectiveness of learning school subjects is something

we are all familiar with. The general mental ability that underlies scholastic success is loosely called **intelligence**. The terms 'bright' and 'clever' are also used to indicate a high level of mental ability. The notion of intelligence is strongly linked to the capacity 'to think', 'to reason logically', 'to solve abstract problems' and so on. It is true that this capacity is very useful in coping with schoolwork and doing well in formal written examinations. But we must remember that intelligence in this narrow sense is not absolutely essential for gaining proficiency in a target language. This is the significance of the fact that we noted in Unit 1 that persons who never went to school and are illiterate can still be quite skilled and fluent users of a language in its spoken form. Such persons would not normally do well in conventional intelligence tests. Even so, their language development seems quite satisfactory. The point to be noted here is, that the so-called 'bright' pupils who get high marks in most examinations, need not be the best language learners. Other pupils who are probably classified as 'average' by teachers might prove to be very good at language learning. We must be careful not to underestimate their ability.

#### b) Cognitive style

One of the interesting findings of research into human mental or cognitive processes is that individuals have certain typical or preferred styles of perceiving the environment, thinking and problem solving. These individual differences are **not** differences in the level of cognitive ability, which would make some persons more successful in learning than others. These styles are genuinely alternative patterns — something like being left-handed or right-handed. The research done in the area of cognitive style and its impact on language acquisition/learning is discussed in Unit 4 of this block. A few of these possible style variations will be noted here:

##### i) Reflection vs. impulsiveness

Some persons are relatively quick in coming to a conclusion or taking a decision, when faced with an open-ended situation. Others tend to pause and reflect and consider various possibilities fairly thoroughly before coming to a decision. Obviously both styles have advantages and disadvantages. Examples of classroom situations where these differences might show up are

- selecting a question or an essay topic when a choice is provided;
- suggesting solutions or approaches during the discussion of some problem.

Any class will have a few pupils of both types. Pupils who are impulsive rather than reflective will probably make more mistakes. But they may also learn more because they are more active.

##### ii) Risk-taking vs. cautiousness

This dimension is related to how much confidence about 'winning' or 'being correct' a person needs in order to act decisively. Risk takers are those who are prepared to 'take a chance' even when they are not very sure they are going to be correct. They are not very anxious about being 'wrong' sometimes. Persons who are cautious on the other hand, will not act or move forward unless they are quite sure they will be correct or successful in doing something. They seem to be more concerned about avoiding failure or defeat than in gaining **some** successes at least. Pupils of both types are found in the typical class. Obviously the ways in which they tackle the same situations and problems will be different.

##### iii) Field-independence vs. field-dependence

This dimension of difference among individuals is linked to their way of perceiving and responding to the situations which they have to attend to. Some persons take in the whole stimulus situation (or field) and respond to this overall impression, without paying much attention to components and details. They also tend to be sensitive to the attitudes and opinions of the people around them. Such persons are called **field-dependent**. Those whom we call **field-independent** are more likely to analyse a given situation and see parts and relationships among parts. They pay less attention to the overall picture or field. They are likely to be more interested in the practical and technical aspects of problems to be tackled than in working with others and making teamwork their priority.

Pupils who are more field-dependent usually need more structuring and guidance from the teacher. The relatively field-independent ones are more able to break down a general requirement or job into smaller parts and start working towards these short term goals. For instance, when a project or assignment is suggested, the latter type may be able to pick up a general idea and begin to develop a plan more or less on their own. The others may need more

guidance from the teacher about such a plan of action; they may also need more support and reassurance from the teacher while working on the plan. It is important to note here that these pupils are not 'weak' learners who need a lot of spoonfeeding. They too can think on their own and produce high quality work like their more field-independent peers. It is only their style of getting started and working that is different.

#### iv) Divergent thinking vs. convergent thinking

This dimension is based on the distinction that is sometime made between intelligence and creativity. Some psychologists have suggested that there is a significant difference between solving given problems directly in an expected or recommended manner and taking a fresh look at the nature of the problem itself. In the former case, the framework of the problem as given (or commonly understood) is accepted and the correct or best solution is pursued in a logical and systematic way. This type of problem solving is what we associate with intelligence. The style is called **convergent thinking**, because the process seems to be one of narrowing down and gradually reaching the correct solution. The second style involves raising questions about the problem itself and the way it has been presented. This approach may lead to reframing and reformulating the problem and this makes unexpected or unconventional – or creative – solutions or approaches possible. The term **divergent thinking** is used because of the process of opening up (rather than narrowing down) that is involved here. Many important discoveries or formulations of new theories in various fields have been associated with 'leaps of the imagination' or breaking out of the conventional way of approaching problems.

It is easy to see that divergent thinking is what leads to new or original interpretation of literary and other texts, and throws up the ideas or images that go into artistic production. On the other hand, where the problems are such that 'rules' have to be followed rather than broken, convergent thinking is more appropriate.

#### c) Personality disposition

The qualities mentioned above are linked to ways of perceiving and thinking. An individual's personality as we usually think of it has more to do with ways of behaving and ways of relating to the social environment. Some of these dimensions of personality or 'nature' are:

- i) Outgoing (extroverted) vs. withdrawn (introverted)
- ii) Active and energetic vs. lethargic and sluggish
- iii) Positive self-concept vs. negative self-concept.

These dimensions do not indicate neat categories. The nature or personality of individuals can be more in one direction than in the other. Various dispositions, such as these will influence the way pupils behave or participate in class. They will make certain types of activity or social situation more comfortable or acceptable to the individual, and similarly certain other activities might be difficult or unpleasant. It is important to remember here, too, that these are only different (and natural) ways of behaving; they are not directly linked to high or low ability or capacity to learn.

#### d) Handicapped learners

A significant number of pupils in schools have handicaps of various types. Some of them, especially poor hearing can interfere considerably with the learning process.

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## 2.6 LEARNER FACTORS IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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The emphasis of theory and practice of second language learning in the late nineteenth and greater half of the twentieth century was mainly on the behaviourist ideas of association between stimulus and response. It viewed the human mind as a blank slate and considered language learning as a mechanical process of habit formation. The greatest advocate of this view was the American psychologist B.F. Skinner. This view was challenged by the revolutionary ideas of Noam Chomsky in 1959. He felt that behaviourism simplified the learning process and underestimated the role of **creativity** of the human mind. He asserted the remarkable capacity of the child to "generalize, hypothesize and process information in a variety of very special, apparently highly complex ways... which may be largely innate, or may develop through some sort of learning or through maturation

of the nervous system (p.158)". This shift had a tremendous impact on research in both the first and second language learning. The learner, rather than the teacher or the materials, became the focus of study. The learner began to be viewed as an active participant in the process of learning. In teaching, more and more emphasis began to be given to those exercises in teaching which would help the learner to induce the language system and internalise the rules that govern the target language. However, focus on the learner gradually led researchers such as Widdowson, Morrow and others to look beyond the linguistic needs to the **communication** needs of the learners. Another important consequence of the increasing focus on the learner was that the output of the learner began to be considered independent of the learner's first or target language. This output began to be called 'transitional competence' (Corder 1971), 'approximate system' (Nemser 1971) and 'interlanguage' (Selinker 1972).

This shift from the teacher and the teaching materials to the learner, his/her needs and his/her linguistic output has also led some researchers to look into the learner characteristics in greater detail and identify those characteristics that appear to be more responsible for success or failure in second/foreign language learning. Significant among the learner characteristics identified so far, include the learner's age, intelligence, aptitude, motivation, attitude, personality and cognitive style.

### 2.6.1 Age

Most people, including some psychologists and linguists, believe that children are better at learning second languages than adults. Penfield (1953) argued that the human brain loses its plasticity after puberty. He stressed that children relearn their language after injury or disease. Lenneberg (1967) suggested that lateralization made the brain functions become specialized in the early teens. Another explanation for this apparent decline in adult language acquisition was that the adult's abstract mode of thinking interfered with natural language learning process. Yet another explanation for the decline in adult learners is that they generally do not have the same peer group pressure, the intensity of motivation and attitude towards the target language and culture that children have. Seliger (1978) points out that there is much evidence to show that children acquire the phonological system of another language much better than adults, and proposes the concept of 'multiple critical periods' correlating with localization and the gradual loss of plasticity. It appears that language acquisition abilities are not lost at once. There is only a gradual reduction of such abilities. Whitaker (1978) points out that though there is evidence that under unusual circumstances language acquisition may occur after puberty, possibly through the right hemisphere of the brain, it is neither as rapid nor as successful as normal acquisition.

However, several researchers have shown that adults are actually better learners than children. Cook (1991) refers to the research carried out on the English-speaking adults and children who had gone to live in Holland. He reports that Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) found at the end of three months that the older learners were better at all aspects of Dutch language except pronunciation.

### 2.6.2 Sex

Several studies of first/second language acquisition have shown girls to be better learners than boys. Trudgill (1974) showed that women used the prestige linguistic forms more frequently than men, and related this phenomenon to female social insecurity. Trudgill argued that women are socially and economically less secure than men and compensate for it linguistically. Society expects women to be more correct, discreet, quiet and polite and increases the pressure on them to use more 'correct' and prestigious linguistic forms than men. In a study of Panjabi migrant children in England learning English as a second language, Agnihotri (1979) showed that girls assimilated the prestige linguistic variants faster than the boys while resisting the stigmatised variants. Another researcher, Satyanath (1982) found that Kannadiga women in Delhi showed a higher percentage of assimilation of linguistic features associated with Hindi (the language of the host society) and a higher degree of usage than men. He found that younger women assimilated the host society's language and culture maximally. Unlike Trudgill (1974) who considered social insecurity to be responsible for higher use of prestige forms, Satyanath explained this in terms of the socio-cultural aspects of the Kannadiga community in which women negotiate a greater part of the interaction with the host society.

However, in the field of formal foreign language learning there are only a few studies investigating sex as a variable. Even in these studies, several investigators generally found

girls to be better learners. Burstall (1975) pointed to an interesting possible relationship between sex differences and socio-economic status. NFER study revealed that the most marked sex differences occurred in the secondary schools where the students were predominantly from the lower socio-economic strata.

**Check Your Progress**

- Notes : a) Write your answers in the space given below.
- b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

7. Who, according to research, are better language learners, boys or girls? Why?

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**Activity**

3. Have you ever consciously tried to notice any difference in language learning habits of girls and boys? Make a list of the differences. If you have not noticed these things before, observe 2-3 boys and 2-3 girls in your class for a month or so, and make a list of differences in their learning habits. Also take a note of what language features each of the sexes tries to learn faster than the other.

- i) .....
- ii) .....
- iii) .....
- iv) .....
- v) .....

**2.6.3 Intelligence**

**What is intelligence?**

Intelligence is usually conceived of as the ability to understand, to learn and think things out quickly, especially compared with other people, and consists of verbal ability, reasoning ability, concept formation ability, etc. Carroll (1965) conceived of intelligence as the learner's capacity to understand instructions, and to understand what is required of him/her in the learning situation. It is a talent for not getting sidetracked or wasting one's efforts.

**Intelligence Tests**

Most of the intelligence tests measure a number of abilities simultaneously. The most commonly used individual intelligence tests include Stanford-Binet test, Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS), Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC). Some of the group tests of intelligence are Army Beta Test, Army Alpha Test, Army General Classification Test (AGCT), etc. The Stanford-Binet test is used for children from two to sixteen years of age and puts heavy stress upon verbal ability. It can't be used with children who are illiterate. Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) consists of the following verbal and performance (non-verbal) subtests.

**Verbal Subtests**

- Information
- General Comprehension

**Performance (non-verbal) Subtests**

- Picture arrangement
- Picture Completion

- |                      |                 |
|----------------------|-----------------|
| Memory Span          | Block design    |
| Arithmetic reasoning | Object assembly |
| Similarities         | Digit symbol    |
| Vocabulary           |                 |

The group text, **The Army Beta Test**, meant mainly for illiterates and foreigners not proficient in English, emphasizes non-verbal problems for which simple instructions can be given orally.

The **Army Alpha Test** designated for the typical individual who can read and write, include some of the problems like the following:

- A. If 5 1/2 tons of bark cost \$33, what will 3 1/2 cost? ( )
- B. A train is harder to stop than an automobile because  
 ( ) it is longer, ( ) it is heavier, ( ) the brakes are not so good.
- C. If the two words of a pair mean the same or nearly the same thing, draw a line under same. If they mean the opposite or nearly the opposite, draw a line under opposite.
- |               |            |      |          |
|---------------|------------|------|----------|
| comprehensive | restricted | same | opposite |
| allure        | attract    | same | opposite |
| talent        | hidden     | same | opposite |
| deride        | ridicule   | same | opposite |
- D. If, when you have arranged the following words to make a sentence, the sentence is true, underline true; if it is false, underline false.
- |                                      |            |
|--------------------------------------|------------|
| people enemies arrogant many make    | true/false |
| never who heedless those stumble are | true/false |
| never man the show the deeds         | true/false |
- E. Underline which word is appropriate.
- |                                       |          |          |
|---------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| The pitcher has an important place in | tennis   | football |
|                                       | baseball | handball |
- F. Underline which word is appropriate.
- |                                     |       |        |       |        |
|-------------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|--------|
| Dismal is to dark as cheerful is to | laugh | bright | house | gloomy |
|-------------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|--------|

**Role of Intelligence**

All these tests may be useful as measures of mental ability of either an individual or a group of individuals. But these scores cannot be treated as sure predictors of success in a foreign/second language. Nor can they be considered as a reflection of abilities to acquire language. Pimsleur et. al. (1962) reported on a large number of studies examining the relationship of intelligence with foreign language learning. Though some of the studies gave evidence for the positive relationship between intelligence and success in a foreign language, most of the studies were skeptical of such relationship. Carroll and Sapon (1959) noted that very few of the abilities measured in an intelligence test were found relevant to foreign language learning, and it was for this reason that there was very insignificant relationship between the scores on an intelligence test and a foreign language test. More research is needed to identify those abilities that match significantly with foreign language scores. Incidentally, these abilities have been called by many researchers as language aptitude abilities. We shall look into these abilities in the next section.

**2.6.4 Aptitude**

**What is Aptitude?**

Aptitude for a particular job or skill is the ability to learn it quickly and easily and to do it well. What people generally call a 'knack for languages' is nothing but aptitude for languages. But it is very difficult to determine what this knack is. It is certainly more than 'having an ear' for languages because everyone learns his/her first language.

It is popularly believed that some people have more aptitude for learning second languages

than others. This observation has generally been made in connection with classroom learning, and not learning in real-life situations.

### Aptitude Measures

The two best known measures of FL (foreign language) aptitude for native speakers of English are the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) developed by Carroll and Sapon (1959) and the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (LAB) (1966). MLAT incorporates four main factors that predict a student's success in the classroom. This consists of:

- i) phonemic coding ability: student's ability to use phonetic scripts to distinguish phonemes in the language.
- ii) grammatical sensitivity: student's ability to pick out grammatical functions in a sentence.
- iii) inductive language learning ability: student's ability to generalise patterns from one sentence to another.
- iv) rote learning: student's ability to remember vocabulary lists of foreign words paired with translations.

These components were eventually measured in the following five subtests of MLAT:

**Part one: Number Learning:** The respondent is taught, on tape, the Kurdish number system from 1 to 4, plus the 'tens' and 'hundred' forms of these numbers, then tested by hearing numbers which are combinations of these elements, e.g. 312, 122, 41, etc. The test aims at measuring associative memory.

**Part two: Phonetic Script:** This subtest measures phonemic coding ability. The respondent learns a system of phonetic notation of some English phonemes. S/he is then tested on this, e.g. 'Underline the word you hear: Tik; Tiyk; Tis; Tiys'.

**Part three: Spelling Clues:** This is a speed test that measures both native language vocabulary and phonemic coding ability. The respondent is given clues to the pronunciation of a word, e.g. 'luv' for 'love' and is then asked to choose a synonym from a list of alternatives:

- A. carry
- B. exist
- C. affection
- D. wash
- E. spy

In this case C. **affection** corresponds most nearly in meaning to 'luv'.

**Part four : Words in a sentence:** This tests grammatical sensitivity. The respondent is given pairs of sentences. In the first sentence (key sentence) in each pair a certain word or a phrase is underlined, and the respondent is asked to tick (✓) one of the five underlined words or phrases in the second sentence that functions most nearly like the word or phrase in the key sentence in the pair. As you can see, in the following pairs of sentence:

London is the capital of England,

He liked to go fishing in Maine

the word 'he' in the second sentence performs the same function as 'London' in the key sentence.

**Part five : Paired Associates:** The respondent studies a written Kurdish - English vocabulary list, practices the stimulus - response pairs seen, and is then tested by means of multiple-choice items. This is a test of associative memory. For instance, the respondent is asked to decide which word of English has the same meaning as the Kurdish word roo.

### Example

roo

- a) art
- b) draw
- c) run
- d) ask
- e) camel

The correct choice is a

There are several slightly different forms of MLAT available. The MLAT itself is for use with people of 14 years of age and above. There is also an elementary form (EMLAT) for use with



children between the ages of eight and eleven. There is also a short form of the test for use when the time is limited.

Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (LAB) is appropriate for children aged 13 to 19. It emphasises inductive language learning capacity and auditory ability. Pimsleur et. al. (1966) suggested that 20 to 30 per cent of children underachieve in foreign language learning because they have poor auditory ability.

### Review of Research on Aptitude

Most research in language aptitude since then has been either in validation of the existing tests, or developing aptitude batteries for use in particular countries. For instance, the York Language Analysis Test has been developed and has been widely used in Britain. The most important research aimed at the production of a new test battery has been carried out by the American Armed Forces. This was the result of dissatisfaction felt with MLAT for not being able to discriminate at higher levels. Another type of research has examined the component for aptitude in greater depth. Skehan (1980-1982) examined the memory component in detail. He hypothesized that an ability to analyse text, to extract its propositional content and remember such content would be related to greater foreign language learning success (Skehan 1989 : 31). Jakobovits (1970) suggested that sub-contents of FL aptitude may be exploited usefully in foreign language teaching. The teacher who has the information about the aptitude of his/her students can modify his/her instructional materials accordingly. This information can also be used to stream students into different classes with different goals. It can also help to advise students whether s/he should set a particular target in a given time frame.

## 2.6.5 Cognitive Style

### What is Cognitive Style?

It refers to an individual's typical way of organising his/her universe, and reflects his/her personality or preference and not his/her ability or intelligence. For example, two boys Anwar and Kanwal, look at two different kinds of cars but their responses are quite different. Anwar thinks of how comfortable each car is, whereas Kanwal comments on each car's engine, its capacity and how each car is designed differently. These responses of Anwar and Kanwal show that Anwar focuses on the usefulness of the car and Kanwal on the technical aspects. The former therefore is a functionalist and the latter an analyser. Both the responses reflect different styles of learning or cognitive styles.

### Types of Cognitive Styles

#### a) Field-independence – Field-dependence

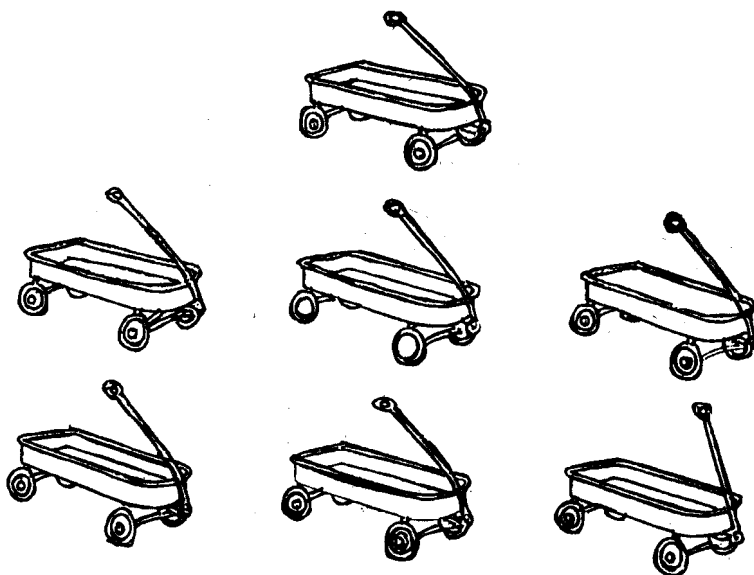
Researchers have broadly identified three different cognitive styles, which they call **field-independence/field-dependence**, **reflection-impulsivity**, and **categorization styles**. The cognitive style called **field-dependence** is defined by a person who cannot consider an object or event separately from the context in which it appears. The context in which an object appears is its field. On the other hand, the **field-independent** persons have the capacity to process information or consider an object or event independent of the context. For example, when a person with a field-independent cognitive style looks at a painting he has no difficulty in finding the central motif of the painting and relating the details to the central motif.

Researchers have related this concept of field-independence/field-dependence to second language learning. Skehan (1989) noted that the field-dependent persons would have greater communicative competence, greater conversational resourcefulness, greater negotiation skills, all of which should be beneficial for exposure to language and therefore to language development through interaction (p.111). One research group noticed that field-independence helped the learners with conventional classroom learning. Another research group found a very significant relationship between field independence and performance on a French oral production test and on a French listening comprehension test. On the other hand, some other researchers did not find any significant difference in how much the learners spoke and how well they spoke among the learners with either the field-dependent or field independent cognitive style. These and many other researchers suggest that there is at best, a weak relationship between field independent cognitive style and second language learning.

### b) Reflection - impulsivity

The cognitive style that refers to the degree to which children reflect upon a problem is called **reflection - impulsivity**. One of the tasks used to find out whether a particular individual is reflective or impulsive is to ask him/her to choose a picture or design that is similar to the standard picture or design. This method is known as Matching Familiar Figure Test.

Here is an example of an item taken from the Matching Familiar Figures Test. The child is asked to find out which of the following six pictures on the bottom is exactly the same as the 'standard' on the top.



The learners who are faster and less accurate are called impulsive, and those who are slower and more accurate are called reflective. Researchers have shown that learners after the age of eleven are better able to answer with greater speed and more accuracy. The tendency to be reflective/impulsive is not fixed and therefore can be altered with training.

### c) Categorization styles

The cognitive styles broadly called categorization styles refer to how an individual classifies or arranges information, things or objects. They have been sub-divided into three types:

- i) descriptive - analytic style
- ii) categorical - inferential style
- iii) relational - contextual style

A **descriptive - analytic** cognitive style concentrates on a single detail common to all objects. A **categorical - inferential** style focuses on the class of objects, whereas a **relational - contextual** focuses on a common theme or function.

Each of these cognitive styles may have its effect on second language learning. Though the field-independent/field-dependent cognitive style has been explored in detail in relation to second language learning, other cognitive styles need to be studied in detail in this context. It is felt that a difference in the cognitive style of a learner may make a significant difference in success in second language learning. It is also important to remember that since these differences are highly individual they should be kept in mind at the time of selecting teaching strategies and developing any educational curriculum.

### Check Your Progress

- Notes : a) Write your answers in the space given below.  
b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

8. What is a cognitive style? How is it different from intelligence? Make a list of the cognitive styles listed by researchers. Illustrate all of them with at least one example each.

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9. Which of the cognitive styles do you think is more important for developing communicative skills in second language learning?

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10. 'Learners have different cognitive styles'. How is this observation useful for classroom teachers and material writers?

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### 2.6.6 Personality

#### Review of Research on the Role of Personality

Several researchers (e.g. Pimsleur et. al. 1964, Smart et. al. 1970, Bartz (1974) have emphasized the importance of personality in foreign/second language learning. Pimsleur et. al. (1964) compared average achievers and underachievers in high schools and noted that a successful learner was invariably found to have personality traits such as **social conformity, extroversion, flexibility** and **tolerance for ambiguity**. Smart et. al. (1970) on the other hand, showed that higher achievers received significantly lower score on social spontaneity scale than others, and were found to have introvertive tendencies. Bartz (1974) found that introversion, soberness and self-sufficiency were strongly correlated with oral components of communicative competence. He further demonstrated that students with traits of imagination, placidness and

low anxiety tended to score higher on the written components of communicative competence test. Genessee and Hamayan (1980) failed to find any positive relationship between personality variables and achievement. Even Strong (1983) working on a group of kindergarteners in a California school did not find any relationship between a measure of extroversion and various measures of structure, vocabulary and pronunciation of the target language. Thus, it is evident that the question whether certain personality traits help language learning is still an open question. Skehen (1989) suggests that future research must firstly attend more vigorously to contextual factors such as the age of the extroverts learning a second language and the environment in which it is learnt. For instance, extroverts in the younger age group may have different relationship with language proficiency as compared to the older extroverts. Similarly, extroverts learning a second language in a formal situation may not have the same set of correlations with proficiency in the second language as the extroverts learning it in a naturalistic environment. Secondly, future research must also try to improve the definition of the trait-contrast as used in language learning. For example, a construct like extroversion may have certain meaning as it is used in psychology, but it may have a restricted meaning in second language learning. Thirdly, the instruments used to measure personality traits need to be more systematic and reliable.

### How is Personality Measured?

Personality traits in a person have been elicited by psychologists in a number of ways. Most commonly, a questionnaire consisting of several statements is given and the subject is asked to agree or disagree with them on a 5-point scale, ranging from 'not at all' (scored '1') to 'very often' (scored '5'). The aggregate score on the statements is regarded as score for the trait measured. Not all traits are assessed by agreement or disagreement to verbal statements. For example, in the technique called Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) the subject is presented with a number of pictures usually of people involved in somewhat ambiguous situations, and is asked to write a story about each. These responses are analysed to find out the personality traits of the subject.

#### Check Your Progress

- Notes : a) Write your answers in the space given below.  
 b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

11. What are the main personality traits explored in the foreign/second language research?

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 .....  
 .....  
 .....

12. Which of the personality traits is found to have more influence on second/foreign language proficiency?

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 .....  
 .....

### 2.6.7 Attitude

#### What is Attitude?

According to Allport (1954 : 45), 'an attitude is a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related'. In operational terms an individual's attitude is according to Gardner (1985) 'an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individual's beliefs or opinions about the referent (p.9)'.

#### Review of Research on the Role of Attitudes

The nature of attitude of a second language learner can vary from the attitude towards the teacher or the language itself or the group that speaks the language. It may also refer to more general dispositions such as **ethnocentrism**, **authoritarianism** or **anomie**. Attitudes towards

learning the second language and the second language community have received more attention than other factors in second language research. Some researchers support the belief that measures of attitudes towards learning a second language and the second language community correlate significantly with achievement. For example, Lambert and his associates at McGill University conducted a series of studies (Gardner & Lambert 1972) to investigate the role of attitude in second language learning and came to the conclusion that 'a friendly outlook towards the other group whose language is being learnt can differentially sensitize the learner to the audio-lingual features of the language, making him more perceptive to forms of pronunciation and accent than is the case for a learner without this open and friendly disposition'. (Gardner & Lambert 1972 : 134)

Spolsky (1969) argues strongly that 'one of the most important attitudinal factors is the attitude of the learner to the language and to its speakers' (p. 274). In an investigation of 315 foreign students from 80 different countries living in the U.S.A., he found significant association between the perception of similarity between self and English speakers and grades in English. Similarly, Oller, Hudson and Liu (1977) found achievement in the second language correlating highly significantly to evaluative reactions to the target language group. Burstall (1975) quotes several studies which show a positive correlation between attitudes and achievement. But she is skeptical about the causal relationship between the two. She quotes the NFER evaluation which shows that an early achievement in French affected later attitudes towards and achievement in French to a significantly greater extent than early attitudes towards French affected the subsequent development of attitude or achievement. The initial success or failure in language learning may thus be a powerful determinant of linguistic attitudes.

Research in second language learning has also shown that success or failure in a second language is also related, though weakly, to general disposition of the learners such as **ethnocentrism** or **authoritarianism**. Gardner and Lambert (1972) believe that:

'Learners who have strong ethnocentric or authoritarian attitude or who have learned to be prejudiced towards foreign peoples are unlikely to approach the language learning task with an integrative outlook (p.16).'

Authoritarianism refers to anti-democratic feelings and is generally measured through respect for authority, use of force, nationalism, etc. Agreement or disagreement with some of the following statements may elicit the second language learners' authoritarian/democratic disposition:

1. Children should always obey their elders.
2. Eye-teasing or rape is a serious crime; the culprits should be hanged in public.
3. If people would talk less and work more, everybody will be better off.
4. What young people need is strict discipline and the will to work for the country.

Ethnocentrism, on the other hand, refers to people who suspect foreign people and ideas and is generally measured through attitude towards the foreigners, preservation of nationality, respect for national symbols, etc. Agreement or disagreement with the following statements can elicit second language learners' ethnocentric tendencies:

1. Certain people who do not salute the national flag should be punished.
2. India is surrounded by enemies on all sides; we should strengthen our armed forces very fast.
3. Epics greater than 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata' cannot be written.
4. Indian women are chaster than women elsewhere in the world.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) examined the influence of these dispositions in learning second languages in Maine, Louisiana, Connecticut and Philippines. It is only in the Connecticut study that authoritarianism was found to have significant correlations with achievement variables other than listening comprehension. In Maine, the ethnocentric syndrome is not directly related to any of the French achievement measures. In the Connecticut study, ethnocentrism configurates only with achievement variables of free speech. Similarly, in the Louisiana study ethnocentrism configurates only with one component of listening comprehension. Khanna (1983) working with undergraduates found very significant correlations between achievement in English and authoritarian and ethnocentric tendencies.

Research on the relationship between attitudes towards the target language and achievement in it has raised several issues. It has been found that attitudes towards learning languages are more related to language achievement than attitude towards any other school subject. Further, some aspects of attitude are more highly related to language achievement than others. Some research has shown girls to be better second language learners than boys. Attitudes have also been found to be influenced by the students' upbringing. Attitudes towards the target language vary from one geographical area to another. Some research has shown that attitude towards learning a second language becomes less positive with age because learners become more mature and aware. It is also noticed that as learners grow older, the correlations between the attitudes towards the target language and achievement grow higher, though less positive. More research needs to be done on the effect of age and sex on evaluative reactions towards the target language speakers. Research has shown that the learners who had more exposure to the target language also had more exposure to the target language speakers. It has also shown that the learners who had more exposure to the target language also had more favourable attitudes towards it.

**Check Your Progress**

- Notes : a) Write your answers in the space given below.  
b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

13. Is attitude towards a thing/person inborn or acquirable?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

14. Is attitude an individual trait or family trait?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

15. Are attitudes static or subject to change. If the latter, what, according to you, can change a person's attitude?

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.....  
.....  
.....

16. How do you distinguish authoritarianism from ethnocentrism?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**Activity**

4. In section 2.6.7 you have been given statements that can be used to elicit authoritarian and ethnocentric attitudes of people. Make a questionnaire using these statements and ask some informants to respond to these statements on a five-point scale as below:

i) Children should always obey their elders.

completely agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	completely disagree
5	4	3	2	1

If a person puts a tick (✓) at 4 he is an authoritarian, and if s/he ticks (✓) at 2, s/he will be called non-authoritarian or democratic.

5. A researcher used the following statements to elicit the informants' attitude towards learning French:

1. Learning French is really great.
2. I enjoy learning French.
3. French is an important part of the school programme.

6. Think of at least four statements that you may like to use to elicit Indians' attitude towards learning English.

- i) .....
- ii) .....
- iii) .....
- iv) .....

7. A researcher used the following statements to elicit attitude towards French Canadians whose language was being learned by a group of learners:

1. I would like to know more French Canadians.
2. Some of our best citizens are of French Canadian descent.
3. French Canadians are a very sociable, warm-hearted and creative people.

8. Think of three statements that would elicit Indians' attitude towards English speaking Indian elite.

- i) .....
- ii) .....
- iii) .....

## 2.7 MOTIVATION

### 2.7.1 What is Motivation?

The term **motivation** in the second language learning context is seen according to Gardner (1985) as 'referring to the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity (p.10)'. The desire to learn the language, or favourable attitudes towards learning the second language, do not reflect motivation in and of themselves; The individual may wish to learn the second language and may enjoy doing it, but, if this is not accompanied by a striving to do so, then it is not motivation in the real sense. It is only when the desire to learn the second language and favourable attitude towards it are linked with the effort or drive to achieve it, then we can say that the learner is motivated.

### 2.7.2 Types of Motivation

Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1972) have done pioneering work to explore the nature of motivation specific to language study. They built on Mowrer's (1950) concept of identification, which is the tendency of the child to imitate the parent in first language development. They

considered the extent to which people esteem and want to identify with not only particular individuals but also foreign peoples. Gardner & Lambert suggested that those people who identify positively with the target language group would like to resemble the target language group, understand their culture, and be able to participate in it. This pattern of motivation they call an **integrative orientation**. Gardner & Lambert (1972) contrasted this orientation with **instrumental orientation** which is characterized by utilitarian objectives such as obtaining admission in a particular course, professional advancement, and so on. The learners' interest in the other group is confined to achieving personal advantages.

In order to elicit these motivational orientations, statements such as the following have been devised.

#### **Integrative motivation**

I am studying English because

1. It will help me to mix with English people.
2. It will improve my personality.
3. It will help me to better understand English people.
4. It will help me to read and understand and appreciate English literature, music and films.

#### **Instrumental motivation**

I am studying English because

1. It will help me to get a good job.
2. It will help me to become a better educated person.
3. It will help me to get a degree.
4. It will help me travel anywhere without any difficulty.

### **2.7.3 Review of Research on Motivation**

Gardner and Lambert (1975, 1972) showed that success in a foreign/second language learning is likely to be less if the underlying motivational orientation is instrumental rather than integrative. Burstall (1975), however, pointed out, that this hypothesis was examined in the course of NFER evaluation of the teaching of French in primary schools and only a partial support to the view put forward by Gardner & Lambert could be established. Although pupil's attitude and achievement proved to be closely associated, motivational orientation of individual pupils appeared to be neither exclusively integrative nor instrumental. It is interesting to note that in the Philippines study (reported in Gardner & Lambert 1972) the authors' hypothesis was challenged. Their research showed that in settings where there was an urgency about mastering a second language for utilitarian ends, the instrumental orientation to second language learning is very effective. Wong (1982) in fact, did not find motivational orientations of Chinese students learning English correlate with their achievement. A (1988) study gave substantial evidence against the hypothesis that integrative motive was positively related to second language achievement. However, Khanna, Verma, Agnihotri and Sinha (1990) did find significant correlations between the motivational orientations of ESOL learners in the U.K. and the teachers' ratings of their English skills. These studies clearly suggest that a student may learn a second language with an integrative motivation or with instrumental motivation or with both or with some other motivation. The relative importance of these orientations varies from one part of the world to another, and is also dependent on the learner's mental makeup and cultural background.

### **2.7.4 Is Motivation the Cause or Result of Success?**

Another question that has engaged the attention of second language researchers is whether it is the motivation that causes success or vice versa. Burstall (1975) working with primary school children learning French came to the conclusion that it is the achievement which is primary and motivation the consequence. Hermann (1980) too argued that it was the degree of success within the instruction which had produced the different motivational orientations. Similar results have been reported by other researchers. However, Gardner (1985) asserts that there is no evidence that differential success influences attitudes and



motivation. In the absence of any conclusive evidence about the direction and nature of relationship between motivation and success, more in-depth research is needed which monitors levels over time in some detail rather than takes the 'snapshot' approach through test administration at the beginning and end of courses.

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## 2.8 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have noted the great capacity for learning that human beings have. Most human behaviour, especially social and cultural behaviour is the result of **learning**: it is not instinctive and pre-determined. The learning of language (a seemingly never-ending activity) is the best example of the tremendous versatility and vitality of the human learning processes.

We have also seen that learning is a highly individualized process. Each person's unique learning history has a strong influence on what and how s(he) learns from a given situation. The notion of **readiness** for new learning in a specific area is relevant here. A critical feature of readiness in this sense is that it is the **result of learning** and so is constantly changing and developing. This tends to reinforce the differences between individuals (in the same class for instance). An even more important consequence of changing readiness is that the same person may function differently (as a learner) in different situations and as time passes. A pupil's status as a 'good' or 'poor' learner is therefore not fixed and generally applicable. For each new occasion for learning the individual starts with a fresh combination of knowledge, skill and attitude that can make the levels of involvement and success quite different from those of other occasions. This point carries a very important lesson for us. We should not pre-judge a pupil's learning capacity on the basis of his/her past record (or what is more common, 'reputation'.) A pupil who has been weak in some subject area need not remain that way always. As new topics are taken up, the value of that pupil's readiness might change significantly and there could be a spurt of successful learning. The opposite might also happen sometimes.

As we shall see through various units of this course, the learning of language involves a wide variety of tasks and cognitive operations. (This variety is much greater for language than for the typical subjects of the school and college curriculum.) In designing and implementing a syllabus for teaching a language (English), which is one of the main topics of this course, the professional aim is always to adjust teaching inputs to the needs (or readiness) of the learners. We have seen here how difficult it is to pin down learners and arrive at a definite and stable description of their learning ability. There are learning-related differences across individuals and within the same individual. This might seem to be bad news as far as effective syllabus design goes. However, the main point emerging out of this unit is that the capacity to learn languages that human being of all ages have is something truly remarkable, and this is put to good use even when there is no teaching to support it. What we need to do is make the 'situations' of syllabus and teaching-based learning more like the varied natural language learning situations which we know of. We have not come to any definite answers to our 'who' questions. But we have a sense of the capabilities of learners of language in general, even while recognizing their individuality.

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## 2.9 KEY WORDS

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- attitude** : the attitude which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each other's languages or to their own language. Positive or negative feelings towards a language or a language group may affect a person's ability to learn a language.
- auditory** : related to hearing.
- authoritarianism** : anti-democratic tendencies.
- anomic** : in learning a new language people may emotionally begin to move away from their own language and culture, and at the same time may not be sure about their feelings towards the new language group. This leads to a feeling of insecurity.
- behaviourist theory** : a theory of psychology which states that human behaviour should be studied in terms of physical processes only. It led to theories of learning which explained how an external event (a stimulus) caused a change in the individual (a response). This theory had a tremendous impact on language learning.

<b>bilingual</b>	: a person who knows and uses two or more languages.
<b>cognitive process</b>	: any mental process which learners make use of in language learning, such as inferencing, generalization, monitoring, memorizing, etc.
<b>cognitive style</b>	: the particular way in which a learner tries to learn something. In second or foreign language learning, different learners may prefer different solutions to learning problems. For example, some learners may want explanations for grammatical rules, other may not require them.
<b>critical period</b>	: the theory in child development that says that there is a period during which language can be acquired with greater ease than at any other time.
<b>curriculum</b>	: an educational programme which states : : a) the educational purpose of the programme (the end to be achieved) : b) the context, teaching procedures which will be necessary to achieve this purpose (the means) : c) evaluation procedures to see whether a programme has been successful or not.
<b>ethnocentric</b>	: the desire to interact mainly with one's own language group. People with such tendencies are convinced about the superiority of their own culture and language.
<b>first language</b>	: generally a person's mother tongue or the language acquired first.
<b>input</b>	: (in language learning) language which a learner hears or receives and from which s(he) can learn.
<b>interlanguage/transitional competence/ approximate system</b>	the type of language produced by second/foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a language.
<b>inductive language learning</b>	: learners are not taught grammatical or other types of rules directly but are left to discover or induce rules from their experience of using the language.
<b>lateralization</b>	: the development of control over different functions in different parts of the brain.
<b>motivation</b>	: the desire to learn a second/foreign language, and the effort used in learning it. Two types of motivation are sometimes distinguished: : i) <b>instrumental motivation</b> : desire to learn a language because it would fulfil certain utilitarian goals, such as getting a job, passing an examination, etc. : ii) <b>integrative motivation</b> : desire to learn a language in order to communicate with people of another culture who speak it; the desire is also there to identify closely with the target language group.
<b>phonological</b>	: the establishment, description and arrangement of distinctive sound units of a language.
<b>phoneme</b>	: the smallest unit of sound in a language.
<b>phonemic</b>	: the study or description of the distinctive sound units (phonemes) of a language and their relationship to each other.
<b>phonetic notation</b>	: special symbols which express the sounds of an actual spoken utterance. A transcription of such an utterance in phonetic symbols is said to be in <b>phonetic notation</b> or <b>phonetic script</b> .
<b>target language</b>	: the new language which a person is learning.

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## 2.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. Refer to 2.3.1 for answer.
2. Refer to 2.3.1 for answer.
3. Read 2.4 for answer.
4. Read 2.4.2 for answer.
5. Readiness refers to the receptivity of a learner (in terms of ability, attitude and interest) to learn a new item.
6. Read 2.4.2 for answer.
7. Generally girls are better language learners than boys because of
  - social insecurity which increases the pressure on them to use the more correct forms (Trudgill, 1974; Agnihotri, 1979)
  - greater interaction with the host society (Satyanath, 1982)
8. Cognitive style refers to an individual's typical way of organising his/her universe, and reflects his/her personality or preference.

Intelligence, on the other hand, is conceived of as the ability to understand, to learn and think things out quickly, especially compared to other people.

The cognitive styles listed by researchers are:

  - i) Field independence - field dependence
  - ii) Reflection - impulsivity
  - iii) Categorization styles.
9. Of the three cognitive styles listed, it appears that field independence - field dependence best correlates with language learning ability.
10. Read 2.6.5 for answer.
11. The main personality traits explored with regard to foreign/second language research are : social conformity, extroversion, flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, self-sufficiency, imagination, anxiety, and so on.
12. All the aspects of the personality mentioned in section 2.6.7 have not been adequately researched with regard to learning the second/foreign language. Different researchers have come up with different results.
- 13, 14 and 15. Write your own views.
16. Authoritarianism refers to anti-democratic feelings.

Ethnocentrism is concerned with insularity, preservation of nationality and a suspicious attitude towards foreigners.

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## 2.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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