A Comprehensive Approach for Promoting Literacy and Academic Skills in English Language Learners

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Abstract

The growing diversity in schools dictates alternative approaches to meeting the need of all students. In particular, the changing demographics coupled with the increase in linguistically diverse student populations pose a challenge for teachers and educators alike. Thus, teacher education programs must integrate necessary ingredients to prepare prospective teachers to work effectively with English language learners (ELLs). The process should involve building relevant knowledge and professional skills in teacher preparation programs based on the unique needs of the linguistically and culturally diverse learners. This session draws on efforts by Teacher Education Programs and Teacher Quality initiatives to promote necessary skills in teachers to effectively address ELLs in diverse schools. A comprehensive approach for preparing culturally competent teachers will be discussed. Tips and techniques to better prepare teachers to meet the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students will be suggested. Moreover, key reform elements in teacher education as they pertain to ELLs will be addressed. Pedagogical implications will be drawn for teachers and teacher educators within the current trends and practices especially those dictated by the Common Core State Standards.

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Introduction

Language is a construct that has a special place in everyone's life. It is a dynamic tool that fascinates philosophers, linguists, and educators throughout history. It has also been studied and investigated as a unique social phenomenon given its role, impact, and value for humans and their complex wants and needs. Studying language can be a fascinating process that involves discovery and unraveling of the collective human experience. Since linguistic tools and patterns shed light on unique aspects of interaction among individuals and groups, language has occupied a central role in schools. Instructional and curriculum activities have always integrated language as a basis for any effective learning and teaching.

Language is very central in educating all children early on in their lives. Since acquiring language is an ever-changing, life-long process, schools have always placed a great emphasis on language learning as a pre-requisite for any study of other content areas and subjects. Language provides the foundation for thought processes, inquiry, interaction, and learning regardless of the context in which it is used. Students' success can largely depend on their linguistic abilities and other-language related tools to solve problems and interact with the world around them.

Similarly, promoting an understanding of how language functions in our lives has been integrated in teacher preparation. Teachers have always been required to develop knowledge and skills in language in order to work effectively with learners and other participants in schools. As a pre-requisite for their professional roles, not only have teachers been required to possess

and demonstrate adequate language skills, but to reflect a meta-linguistic awareness about how language functions, how it is characterized, and is utilized in learning teaching situations.

In culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, this has become more necessary than ever before. Studying language traits, aspects and functions has become the basis for understanding language and academic development of all students. Thus teachers are expected to become *linguistic detectives* in an attempt to understand how students learn, and more importantly to draw implications for curriculum planning and delivery to enhance learning outcomes. This need is imperative especially when working with second language learners who bring unique linguistic experiences that should be cultivated.

This paper provides a foundation for understanding various linguistic phenomena related to language descriptions, functions, and dynamics which are necessary for successful discourse in learning/teaching situations. In particular, the discussion provides a framework for promoting successful discourse in terms of the unique linguistic behaviors embedded in human interaction. Finally, pedagogical implications for enhancing linguistic and academic discourse are drawn for teachers working with English language learners.

Definition of Language

Language has long been defined and redefined by educators, researches, linguists and philosophers. There are countless definitions of language ranging from technical definitions of dictionaries to the sophisticated descriptions by philosophers and linguists. Nonetheless, there is a common thread among most definitions and accounts of language. The consensus involves the premise of describing a complex and dynamic system of communication which has salient traits and characteristics. In addition, the users of language have unique ways of harnessing this communicative tool to fulfill their social, cognitive, emotional, cultural needs and wants, a

premise which has become significant in defining language. Language users employ a series of functions in a way that is embedded within their biological endowments. Consequently defining language results in defining human beings and their complex cognitive faculties and social dynamics.

Culling from various definitions and accounts of *language*, Hammerly (1987) synthesizes the following definition*: "A language is a complete, complex, changing, arbitrary system of primarily oral symbols learned and used for communicating within the cultural framework of a linguistic community"* (p.26). Yet, distinction should be made when we refer to *language* and *a language*: the former, refers to the general construct that has a universal value describing the communicative system of any kind including the code of communication among humans; and the latter referring to a specific language such as English, German, Chinese, Sign Language…etc. The distinction is significant in understanding cross-linguistic aspects in linguistically diverse settings. It also helps us understand any language within a larger context of what universal linguistic phenomena might entail. Specific languages have in fact been seen as representations of such larger construct (LANGUAGE).

As a complex social phenomenon, language exerts a huge power on interaction as well as on learning and teaching. Language is a system of communication without which human interactions might be impossible. While linguists have viewed language as a window on the human mind, it can also account for diverse psychological patterns and sociocultural behaviors.

Language: Traits and Properties

Language has a unique set of properties and traits that have direct implications for learning and teaching especially in second and foreign language classrooms. A major task of developing language and academic skills is to meet the learning demands that are often dictated

by the nature of language, its properties and characteristics. Each language manifests its traits in certain ways that may vary from one language to another at the surface level. Nonetheless, there are underlying characteristics that universally describe any language. These include, but not limited to, the following:

Language is unique

Language represents a set of unique patterns that shape the interaction processes among individuals and groups. Human beings are endowed to use language in unique ways. What distinguishes language use among humans is the fact that it is so comprehensive, unrestricted, evolving and dynamic. Children represent an example of how language comes alive in their early struggle to get their countless wants and needs met. Thus language is a tool for survival; it is also a medium that can preserve the cultural and ethnic beings of individuals and groups. At the same time, the sociocultural environment can play a significant role in enhancing the linguistic being of individuals and communities.

Unlike the restricted function of language among non-humans (e.g. how bees communicate), the infinite possibilities of language use are only unique to humans. In fact, this enormous range of possibilities is seen as a complex need for existence. Thus, language functions as a tool not only to fulfill human communicative needs (psychological, social, ethnic, cognitive, educational…etc.), but is necessary for their survival.

Humans reflect countless utterances that indicate language uniqueness. The language use in humans is a reflection of the complex biological, physical, emotional, cultural, and social needs and wants. Much of the light is shed on language as a unique phenomenon when one learns a second or foreign language. This usually involves unique ways to communicate and

utilize aspects of language (such as phonemes, morphemes, vocabulary, grammar rules, etc.) to fulfill communicative needs and demands.

Let's draw an analogy to illustrate how language is unique. Consider food which is universally essential for fulfilling human needs for survival. Food is uniquely prepared and flavored depending on where one lives and society's shared traditions and customs. How ingredients are combined and cooked for final preparation are also unique to individuals and groups despite the common essence of food ingredients. Ultimately food is meant to be digested to sustain life. In like a manner, language is unique depending on geography, ethnicity and culture. Various groups reflect various flavors of language displayed by visible features (spelling systems, icons, etc.), audible characteristics (acoustic features, intonation, etc.), and semantic values (interpretations, symbolisms… etc.) of universally used linguistic signs and utterances.

Linguistically and culturally diverse learners reflect behaviors that can manifest language uniqueness in many ways. At the same time, they reflect their own unique ways to harness language in fulfilling communicative needs. In their developmental stages learning English, for example, they tend to translate their needs by communicating in unique ways that may range form being idiosyncratic to innovative. Regardless of the form or strategy they use to accomplish this, they do so by what every unique human does when using language.

Language is universal

Related to the first characteristic, language echoes universal thought patterns and processes. This property is also a natural reflection of the basic needs of human beings regardless of their history, geography, and culture. Human interactions and actions have always been accomplished regardless of cultural, social, historical, geographical barriers and gaps.

Language has made it possible to understand human experience and activities based on commonalities that bond humans together.

It has been assumed that language is a window on the mind that promotes our understanding of the essence of who we are as humans (Chomsky, 1986). As far as language is concerned, it reflects universal literacy patterns that promote a global understanding of this unique social phenomenon. Accordingly, when we study language and literacy, we are allowed access to social, cultural, ethnic, and cognitive behaviors that are bound by various determiners based on variations of intelligences, perspectives, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. Language is a universal medium to facilitate interaction with the world around us. Understating the medium and its complex components and the relationship among its components allows us to better understand ourselves and others.

Structurally, language can uniquely vary across the continuum of human experience. Nonetheless, there are universal structural features that characterize almost any language such as (1) *All languages, for the most part, have sound systems; (2) Most languages, if not all, use words and sentences; and (3) All languages have rules that govern use*. However, variations in nuances, forms, and conventions vary. Still structural traits hold a universal value. In second language classrooms, variations of language use are manifested especially at the structural levels. For example, languages vary in their pronunciation patterns of sounds found elsewhere. Rules may be applied differently based on the language at hand. An understanding of the way second language learners use English can help in promoting an awareness of the universal traits of language.

Language is both verbal and non-verbal

Despite the primacy of speech, language can take non-verbal and kinesthetic forms. Very early in their life, children display this property by their verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Although oral discourse is the pathway to developing other language skills, non-verbal discourse is a major part of the process as well. The value of non-verbal cues lies in their role of enhancing the verbal messages to ensure effective communication; the reverse can be true as well.

It is worth noting that non-verbal cues are culturally-bound and may cause communication barriers in the diverse settings. For example, while the *OK* sign that might connote approval and praise in one culture, it can be interpreted as a sign of threat and warning in other cultures (such as the case in some Semitic languages like Arabic). Likewise, rising pitch and intonation contours in one's speech, while appropriate and acceptable by speakers of a given region, might be interpreted as evasive and rude by members of other regions.

Language is arbitrary and non-arbitrary

One of the most challenging traits involves the arbitrariness of language symbols and signs despite the existence of non-arbitrary icons and sounds. Arbitrariness in language abounds ranging from how sounds are articulated and represented to the way rules and conventions apply while exceptions exist. Nonetheless, there are certain non-arbitrary elements that can be identified at the sound and word levels. For example, onomatopoeic words such as *buzz, crash,* and many others illustrate the one-to-one correspondence between meaning and sound.

Although the evolution of language signs and symbols might reflect predictability and patterning, language changes over time have made it difficult to reason and rationalize about the arbitrary nature of language signs and symbols. In many instances, students learning English as a second or foreign language face a huge burden of trying to make sense of inexplicable

conventions, rules, and linguistic items that should be learned "as is" without any rationale attached. For example, gender marker can be ambiguous in English; words *pilot, teacher, architect, doctor* …etc. can refer to a male or female while in other languages a gender marker is attached in some way to refer to each gender.

In second language classrooms, arbitrariness can pose a huge challenge when learning a language. For example, learners of English as a second language face a lot of challenges while learning unpredictable patterns in pronunciation as well as the relationship between what is seen (spelling) and what is said/heard (pronunciation). Unlike many languages such as Spanish and Arabic, English is not phonetic; i.e. there is no one-to-one-correspondence between pronunciation and spelling. For learners of English as a second language, this will sound a chaotic process especially if their native language has a more predictable sound-letter relationships. Even for teachers of English as a second or foreign language, this will cause a pedagogical challenge when teaching students.

Language includes receptive and productive skills - both heard and spoken.

Although language skills are interdependent, they fall within the dichotomy of one's receptive and productive abilities to use language. Generally, the receptive skills include listening to and understanding audible signals and comprehending the written texts while productive skills include the ability to speak and write. A set of sub-skills presupposes each in some hierarchical sequence. For example, one's ability to write is based on their ability to decipher the interrelations between spoken and visual signs, combining these in words, phrases, and sentences, and most importantly making sense out of what is written and/or spoken.

The relationships among these elements are hierarchical and sequential. The sequence and directionality can be horizontal and vertical. For example, the text can be described as a

structural hierarchy of letters combined into more complex language units and aspects woven together to represent a larger message and content. The way one reads and/or writes a given text presupposes an ability to understand the intricate structure, hierarchy, directionality, and the overall lexical representation of the written piece.

Certainly not all languages have the same hierarchical orientation such as directionality. For example, in some languages people read and write from right to left (e.g. Hebrew, Arabic, Farsi…etc.) while in others reading takes place from left to right (e.g. English, Spanish, German...etc.). Learners of English as a second language will have to make necessary adjustments to re-orient their language tools accordingly.

Language is governed by explicit and implicit rules.

Language is by no means a random phenomenon. It has a set of governing rules and regulations. Some of these are purely linguistic, while others are social and psychological or a combination of both. At the same time, some of these rules are overtly applied; others are covertly followed. Of course, rules have exceptions as well. To illustrate, consider the following questions when one engages in a conversation with in a given context:

- *How is a conversation initiated appropriately?*
- *What words are chosen in the context of the conversation?*
- *What social rules are followed when people converse?*
- *How are turns taken or given during a conversation?*
- *What expressions are used and what expressions are avoided?*

These questions and others can reveal the rule-governed nature of language. Many of the rules we apply are dictated by structural conventions while others are required by social norms.

Regardless of their nature, rules can provide patterns to organize and manage the linguistic system. Rules are natural ways to facilitate any systemic processes and outcomes. Although there are universally embedded rules across human languages, such rules vary and may be determined by non-linguistic determiners such culture, region, ethnicity and the like.

Language is creative, dynamic, and constantly changing.

Reflecting the nature of its users, language is a dynamic process that represents human intelligence and creativity, and changes to meet the communicative demands in time and space. Most importantly, it responds to human needs with a high degree of flexibility and complexity. The intellectual capital of its users is transmitted from one generation to another. Similarly, human experiences and civilizations are permanently recorded through language and its devices.

As a vehicle to undertake these complex social functions and roles, language can only do so if it is dynamic (and not static or rigid). One can examine this through language comparisons over time. For example, much of the terms used hundreds of years ago may have been altered to meet the communicative demands of today; likewise, countless numbers of language items and words that reflect society's technological communicative demands today never existed before but have become a major part of our daily routines.

Language Aspects

In addition to language traits and properties, there are several aspects of language that affect the scope and sequence of language learning and teaching especially in diverse settings. Language aspects have been delineated by many linguists in an attempt to understand the structural dimensions of language (see e.g. Bollinger 1980, 1981). These aspects are systematic and uniquely interrelated. They also represent various levels of complexity that current language arts frameworks and guidelines, including the English language development (ELD) standards,

seek to address. While these aspects represent an integral component of the language system, each aspect has a set of layers within its own structure. These aspects include:

1. ***Phonological elements and patterns:*** These consist of phonological and phonetic elements that make up the sound system of language.
2. ***Orthographic representations:*** The spelling system of how linguistic signs are visually represented in some written form.
3. ***Morphological components:*** The various components that compose words and vocabulary.
4. ***Syntactic structural patterns:*** The sets of rules that govern sentence structures.
5. ***Semantic levels and meanings:*** The interpretation and meaning of language signs and their combination especially at the word and sentence levels.
6. ***Pragmatics and contextual language use:*** The ways in which all aspects of language interact and how they are utilized by language users to meaningfully communicate in a given context.

Despite this universal structural frame that characterizes language as a human system, these properties and aspects may be shaped by certain unique cultural, ethnic, geographical, and historical variables. In other words, they vary from one language to another in the way they are utilized in the communicative process. In addition, language use varies based on sociocultural contexts and expectations of a given group and/or individual. These components are the basic ingredients of any discourse event or activity (spoken of written) in which we engage. They also provide us with the linguistic tools necessary to undertake any linguistic task *(more about how these affect second language learning and teaching will be discussed later)*. In fact, users of any language employ these structural components as a holistic system that functions in a very complex, yet dynamic, way.

The Anatomy of the Speech Event: Elements and Functions

For native speakers of any language, interaction is a natural process when engaging in any speech or communicative event. In other words, it is a spontaneous, automatic, subconscious, and systematic process which is frequently taken for granted. For example, we don't think about how we talk the way we don't think about how we walk. We tend not to be conscious about the dynamics of walking or talking unless something breaks down.

Yet there are complex underlying factors that could determine the ease or difficulty in the communication process. The deeper level of interaction involves a balanced juggling act which requires subconscious application of multiple rules and principles. It is also dictated and governed by certain conditions, factors, elements and certainly demands. All of these are determined by a given context which frames the bulk of linguistic elements to give language use social and individual utility and value. The context also sets the parameters of "doing language" as to, for example, what to say, when, to whom, where, why, and how. In other words, there is a wide range of functions and purposes that are accomplished simultaneously when the interaction occurs in a given context.

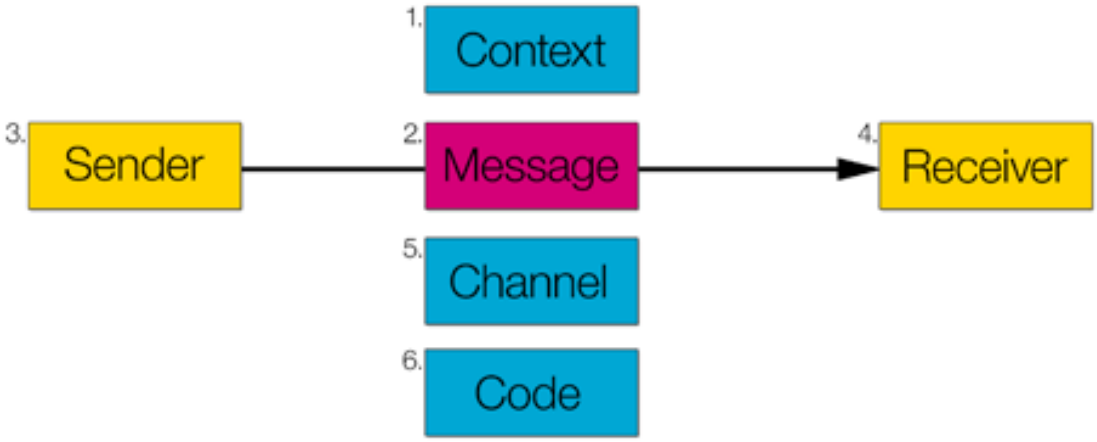
In an attempt to unravel this process, a Russian born American philosopher, Roman Jakobson, provided model that dissects the discourse process and explains the underlying premise of various elements involved. Jakobson's classic piece, *Linguistics and Poetics*, appeared in 1960, outlined several functions of language that illustrate hidden elements of discourse during any speech event. This landmark account has gained little attention among linguists and educators. Nonetheless, the model proposed by Jakobson has provided the

impetus for many developments in linguistic theories and subfields of language study such as semiotics, pragmatics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics (see e.g. Gumperz, 1982, 1986).

According to Jakobson, any speech or communicative event involves six elements or factors. These include:

1. ***Context:*** the social and physical aspects in which the messages interchangeably take place.
2. ***Message:*** the subject or topic of the conversational event.
3. ***Addresser:*** the person involved in sending the verbal message (sender/enunciator).
4. ***Addressee:*** the person on the receiving end of the event (a receiver, or enunciatee of the message).
5. ***Contact:*** the link and connection between sender/addresser and receiver/addressee through which the message is channeled.
6. ***Code:*** common language or agreed upon code of communication between participants.

An illustration of these elements and factors is depicted by the following figure:



source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jackobson%27s_Communication_Model

In addition, Jakobson (1960) spoke about the multifunctionality of the speech event and

identified six functions of language. Summarized by the Wikipedia as appeared on its website, these functions are:

1. ***The Referential Function:*** corresponds to the factor of Context and describes a situation, object or mental state. The descriptive statements of the referential function can consist of both definite descriptions and deictic words, e.g. "The autumn leaves have all fallen now."
2. ***The Expressive (alternatively called "emotive" or "affective") Function:*** relates to the Addresser and is best exemplified by interjections and other sound changes that do not alter the denotative meaning of an utterance but do add information about the Addresser's (speaker's) internal state, e.g. "Wow, what a view!"
3. ***The Conative Function:*** engages the Addressee directly and is best illustrated by vocatives and imperatives, e.g. "Tom! Come inside and eat!"
4. ***The Poetic Function:*** focuses on "the message for its own sake" and is the operative function in poetry as well as slogans.
5. ***The Phatic Function:*** is language for the sake of interaction and is therefore associated with the Contact factor. The Phatic Function can be observed in greetings and casual discussions of the weather, particularly with strangers.
6. ***The Metalingual (alternatively called "metalinguistic" or "reflexive") Function:*** is the use of language (what Jakobson calls "Code") to discuss or describe itself.

Source http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jackobson%27s_Communication_Model

As pointed out earlier, language users for the most part, take this complex process for granted during speech events since it is a subconscious, and automatic activity. The automatic interplay of the multiple functions is hardly noticed until the communicative process is interrupted. Once communication breaks down due to a “mal-function” of one or more

elements(s) under certain conditions, users of language become more conscious and engage in "repairing" strategies to continue carrying on the discourse task at hand. Examples of repairing activities may be illustrated when one asks for clarification or repeating of what was said. This also can apply to written discourse in some ways because readers and writers assume the same roles as senders and receivers of the intended messages in the texts.

It can be concluded from Jakobson's model that the language use is systemic and involves an exchange of multiple domains that transcend the purely linguistic ones. Generally, these domains are two-fold: cognitive and social in nature. Within each domain, there is a series of elements, components, factors, and conditions that should be present for a successful communication in a given context.

Abstract as it might seem, the process becomes more concrete during the application and use of these functions in real-life situations. Having this mind, Halliday (1973, 1975) studied how children utilize these functions in their daily interaction with others (adults, peers) and the world around them. His findings echo the conceptual framework for the Jakobsonian discourse model. Linguistic data collected from Halliday's observations of children reflect a systematic pattern that could be categorized in a series of functions. Halliday identified seven language functions that describe the discourse activity, as well as the social and cognitive exchange, among language users (See also Halliday, 1989, 2004). These language functions include:

Instrumental: is based on the need to get something

Regulatory: is based on control of the present situation

Interactional: based on the social exchange among language users

Personal: is based on the self-disclosure using language as a tool

Heuristic: is based on inquiry and need to obtain information

Imaginative: is based on the creative aspect of language use

Informative: is based on the shared knowledge via language

One can easily decipher these conceptualizations by Jakobson and Halliday by paying closer attention to the dynamics of the speech events the way we utilize them in everyday life. Similarly, observing others using language can provide a greater insight about the overt and covert patterns of interaction. Of course, variations abound in the way language functions are employed based on the contextual demands, nature of the message, traits of participants (personality, mood, gender, age…etc.), and a whole host of other intervening variables and conditions.

Generally, the discourse process results in the accomplishment of multiple cognitive, linguistic, cultural, and emotional tasks intended (consciously or subconsciously) by participants. A major outcome of this engagement in the discourse activity is maintaining what Jakobson referred as a "phatic communion" or rapport which is not merely linguistic in nature but socio-cultural as well.

Interestingly, the discourse engagement is not rigid nor static; it is rather dynamic and flexible process. It allows participants in the speech event to use fixations and repairs to maintain the communion, focus, flow, clarity, emphasis, and meaningful communication. This can be illustrated by many shifts in tone, mood, roles, style, and even some times in language.

If such process takes place in one language, it arguably can occur in more that one and/or a combination of two languages. A good example of this possibility is seen in the process of ***code-switching*** which involves alternating from one form or language to another during the course of the conversation. Code-switching also takes place in written discourse. There are many forms and manifestations of code-switching in any linguistic community.

Although this phenomenon may be more noticeable among linguistically and culturally diverse participants, it also exists among participants engaging in discourse using one common language or "code". In monolingual settings, participants shift in style all the time (e.g. from formal to informal and vice versa) to maintain communicative continuity and rapport. In some languages, it is a typical discourse activity in which contextual demands and speech situations dictate switching from one form to another form of the same language. Some languages have a case of ***diglossia*** in which two forms of the same language are asymmetrically functional. For example, Arabic is a ***diglossic*** language which has two forms: one High or Classic form of the language that is used in formal settings (spoken or written), and the Low or Informal form that is used in less formal and casual spoken or written discourse. Sometimes, code-switching involves diglossic discourse not only within the language itself but across a second or foreign language as the following diagram illustrates in which the code-switching occurs between forms of Arabic and French among Tunisians. This form of diglossic code-switching is a very common interactional phenomenon among Arabic language users when also using English.

Although most languages are not diglossic (in the technical sense at least), they tend to reflect such dichotomy of various forms used in certain varying contexts. For example, Wheeler (2008) examines the process of code-switching among urban African American learners and their strategies involved in using certain grammatical notions during the communicative process.

For learners of a second language and multilinguals, code-switching is a frequent occurrence and can be employed under certain conditions and for various purposes. While some learners of a second language display avoidance and silence (under-use) during the language learning process, other learners generally tend to use (or often over-use) everything at their disposal in discourse events to maintain communication.

Successful interaction and communication using language systems and functions involve a high level of cognitively demanding tasks. In addition, the linguistic tools available for individuals and groups facilitate these tasks and make them feasible to accomplish. Integrating language components in the cognitive and social exchanges is an indicator of the intricate relationship that should not be taken for granted in language learning and teaching particularly in linguistically diverse contexts. Accordingly, being aware of the process, its dimensions, intricacies, and demands, can have direct implications for language learners and teachers alike.

Implications and Applications

The complexity of linguistic behavior displays an array of intervening set of factors, characteristics, components and functions. This complexity should not be examined or understood in the abstract sense. Rather it should be viewed and analyzed through the prism of concrete experiences of individuals and groups utilizing language to fulfill their cognitive and social needs. Models that have accounted for various linguistic dynamics have enhanced our understanding of what goes on in the minds and lives of language users at the individual and group levels. What is gleaned from these views can help in providing the appropriate conditions for effective utilization of language systems and functions. As they seek to systematically and meaningfully fulfill complex wants and needs, human beings rely heavily on language in thinking, learning, and exploring the world around them. In particular, teachers of language can integrate the implications of existing models to enhance learning outcomes in schools.

Finally, understanding language traits, components, elements, functions, and other determiners can assist teachers and learners. Knowledge about how these are interwoven and utilized in the communicative process should embed instructional planning and delivery. Unless

learners and teachers develop an understanding of the value of language and how it functions, it might be difficult to effectively utilize linguistic tools to promote learning and teaching outcomes. Accordingly, instructional planning requires building on language traits, components, and functions. One way to accomplish this is to account for cognitive and social demands as learners use language tools at their disposal. In addition, contexts and situations should be provided for concrete experiences in language learning and teaching.

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