

LANGUAGE LEARNING THEORIES: BEHAVIOURISM, MENTALISM AND AFFECTIVISM

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Abstract

This work focuses on the pedagogical implications of language learning theories, namely behaviourism, mentalism, and affectivism, and their applications in the learning of English as a second language. The behaviourist emphasized on observable traits in learning language through imitation, repetition and memorization. The mentalist is of the view that language learning is a mental concept that involves an innate processing machine in an individual that enables one to learn a second language known as language acquisition device (LAD). From affectivist's point of view, the emotional needs, motives and attitudinal disposition of the learner are the primary factors in language learning. Exposure to this work will enable both learners and teachers of language to differentiate learning theories and adopt the most suitable ones into teaching and learning.

Keywords: Behaviourism, Mentalism and Affectivism

Introduction

The learning theory of language acquisition suggest that children learn a language much like they learn to tie their shoes or how to count; through repetition and reinforcements. According to this theory, children learn language out of a desire to communicate with the world around them. The process of speech and language development in children is complex and interrelated. For normal communication to develop, there must be an integration of anatomy and physiology of the speech systems, neurological development, and interactions that encourage them. Language development includes both receptive and expressive language (Yule, 1996).

Language is specie-specific. That is, only human beings possess the capacity to use language. The genetic make-up of human beings makes language acquisition, and comprehension is unique to man. Pinker (1975), asserts that the shape of human vocal tract seems to have been modified in evolution for the demands of speech. Also, (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2010), says that young children have certain characteristics that predispose them to learn language. These characteristics include the structure of the vocal tract which enables children to make the sound used in language and the ability to understand general grammatical principles, such as the hierarchical nature of syntax. Moreover, a look at animal communication reveals a rigid pattern of signs. Chimpanzees used in language learning experience are taught in a contrived way by humans to acquire rudimentary abilities to request for food and to tickle. This contrasts sharply with the natural ability of children to acquire language in a seamless unencumbered manner. No animal has been trained to learn human language. Animal vocalism remains fixed as it was ages before history. Human beings usually learn or gain knowledge either in a conscious or sub-conscious way. Learn is a relatively permanent change in a behavioral tendency and is a result of reinforced tendency. There are actually few theories that has been used to describe the language that is acquired or learned. This work will dwell on behaviorism, mentalism, and affectivism as learning theories and their pedagogical implication to language learning.

Concept of Learning

According to Alhassan (1985: 17), learning is the totality of the acquisition of factual information, the mastering of skills and means to aid further study (understanding); the entire socialization process, the

acquisition of behaviour patterns, the styles of tackling problems of everyday life and more. Learning is a dynamic process whereby, through interactive experience, insights or cognitive structures of life spaces are changed and so becomes more useful for future guidance. Gagne (1970:3) attempts a definition which seems to have a wide appeal when he writes that learning even takes place when the situation affects the learner in such a way that his/her performance changes from a time before being in that situation to a time after being in it. The change in performance is what leads to the conclusion that learning has occurred. Thus, learning is a change in human disposition of capability which can be retained, and which is not ascribable to the process of growth. It is important for you to note that all changes in performance that brought about by the environment may properly be referred to as learning. This view of learning is identical to the definition that says that learning is a modification in behaviour due to experience. When you look at the stages of a child's development, you can see that he first knows how to eat, then sit, to crawl about, to be able to stand, to walk, to run about, and to speak. The child is now capable of doing some things which he could not do earlier in his life. It may be said that in these respects, the child has learned because 'observed changes in behaviour are evident of learning' (Balogun, 2001:43). Many psychologists agree that learning is a general term for relatively lasting or permanent changes in performance or behaviour caused or produced directly by experience. O'Connor (1993) submits that a study of learning is part of the larger study of psychology, which may be defined as the scientific study of human experience and human and animal behaviour. Olaitan (1992) defines learning as a collection of experiences which a person progressively acquires to be regarded as educated in his/her society. Behaviour theorists define learning as nothing more than the acquisition of new behaviour based on environmental conditions. According to behaviorist thinking it wasn't really necessary for learners to internalize rules; instead they learn the right patterns of linguistic behaviour, and acquire the correct habits.

Language is considered to be determined not by experimentation or self discovery, but by selective reinforcements from speech and language models, usually parents or other family members. This means that there are external forces that shapes a child's language acquisition and learning, which sees the child as a reactor of these forces (Cohen et al, 1996).

Concept of Language Learning Theories

Cohen et al (1996), posits that learning theories differ in method and conclusion because the theories focused attention on certain aspects of the total learning processes. Difference in the results are uninspiring if it is remembered that psychologist have used animals of nearly every species, are generated no less than six theories of learning. In addition, theoretical approaches to the study of behaviour are bye-product of such experiments. The engineer has theories of light, electricity, and matter, the medical doctor has theories of genetics, just as the teacher/ educator is in command of learning theories. Particular attention will be paid to behaviourism, mentalism and affectivism as language learning theories in this section.

Hutchison and Waters (1987) speak about "learning theories' which provide the theoretical basis for the methodology, by helping us to understand how people learn" (Hutchison & Water, 1987, p.23). It is the psychological processes involved in language use and language learning. It is natural that learning strategies vary and corresponds with learners' their age, level or for what reason they study English. The ways adults acquire language differ from the way children do. Advanced group expects different attitudes from beginners, and teachers determine which aspects of ESP learning will be focused on to meet learners' needs and expectations successfully. Some of these theories are: (a) Behaviourism (b) Mentalism (c) Affective/Humanistic Theory.

Behaviorism

Behaviorism focuses on observable behaviours which are changed as the symptoms of learning. According to Brown (1987:17), the behaviouristic approach focuses on the immediately perceptible aspects of linguistic behaviour- the publicly observable responses. Learning only occurs when there are changes in behaviour and observable as an evidence of changing. Feeling and mental processes are not acceptable in Skinner's human behavior's theory. However, he still accepted the existence of mind. Behaviorists consider learning a language as a set of mechanical habits which are formed

through a process of imitation and repetition. Humans learn a language through repeating the same form and text until it becomes a habit. Children imitate the sounds and patterns which they hear around (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). So, it was proposed that learners would repeat words they heard and tried to use it in their conversation until it becomes regular basis of life. Behaviorists therefore think learning a language especially second language (L2) should be learnt through extensive drill and practice. Besides that, behaviorists also justified that learning a new language is learning a new set of habit.

According to Ellis (1999), learning could be a manipulation of the environment to provide the required experience. This theory formation of habit is related to the environment where learning is recognized as Stimulus-Response (S-R) by Pavlov and Skinner. In 1950s, schools of psychology successfully prevailed S-R in the form of behaviorism to ensure the connection between both elements. Behaviorists might consider effective language behaviour to be the production of correct responses to stimuli (Brown 1987). According to the theory, behavior happens in casual, associative chains; all learning is thus characterized as associative learning, or habit formation, brought about by the repeated association of a stimulus with a response Hadley (1988 cited in Rubeling 1993, p.45). So, its best known proponent, B.F. Skinner used rats to conclude that conditioning has a 3-state procedure: stimulus, response and reinforcement. From here, Skinner presumed that human learning and animal learning are parallel; thus, L2 learning is also similar as well as other kinds of learning can be explained by the same laws and principles. Every process of learning has to be followed by reinforcement. Every learning is the establishment of habits and the result of reinforcement and reward (Demirezen: 1988). In behaviorism, there are two different types of reinforcement, where the response or behavior is strengthened and positively augmented by praise or reward. For instance, when a student answers a question correct, and the teacher awards him/her a star, then the student will try to answer another question because he/she is more confident and motivated. In contrast, the second reinforcement will be negative reinforcement If a student is been scolded by his/her teacher after getting an answer wrong, he/she would tend not to give an answer by the next question and answer session because it would make him/her feel embarrassed. In short, positive reinforcement helps learners develop correct habits. Furthermore, behaviorist learning theory also claimed that old habits interfere with the acquisition of new ones. Learning of the L2 would be facilitated since all the learners had to do was to transfer L1 habits (Ellis: 1990). That means errors in first language learning (L1) are the results of interference in L2. It has to be avoided and prevented. L1 interference should be avoided as well as corrected on the spot if they do occur. One of the examples of extensively drilling in learning is Audio-Lingual Method, which is an American method. Audio Lingual Method focuses on accuracy (pronunciation and intonation). Ellis (1990: 23), asserts that “for learning to be effective, habits have to become automatic.” In short, language learning pattern has to be “over-learned” and the contents based on common day’s dialogues as well as expression, followed by the positive reinforcement which will help students to develop correct habits. Learning the structures of language is more emphasized if compare to the vocabulary. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) speak about “learning theories’ which provide the theoretical basis for the methodology, by helping us to understand how people learn” (Hutchison & Waters, 1987, p. 23). It is the psychological processes involved in language use and language learning. It is natural that learning strategies vary and corresponds with learners’ groups, their age level, or for what reason they study English. The ways adults acquire language differ from the way children do. Advanced group expects different attitudes from beginners, and teachers determine which aspects of ESP learning will be focused on to meet learners’ needs and expectations successfully. Behaviorism is a learning theory that focuses on objectively observable behaviours and discounts any independent activities of the mind, such as classic conditioning and behavioural operant conditioning.

1. **Classic conditioning** occurs when a natural reflex responds to a stimulus. We are biologically “wired” so that a certain stimulus will produce a specific response. One of the more common examples of classical conditioning is the educational environment is in situations where students exhibit irrational fears and anxieties like fear of failure, fear of public speaking and general school phobia.

2. Behavioural or Operant Conditioning occurs when a response to stimulus is reinforced. Basically, operant conditioning is a simple feedback system: if a reward or reinforcement follows the response to a stimulus, then the response becomes more probable in future. For example, leading behaviorist B.F. Skinner used reinforcement techniques to teach pigeons to dance and bowl a ball in a mini-alley. This is like reinforcing a child each time he does something right. Behaviorism does not account for all kinds of learning, since it disregards the activities of the mind. Behaviorism does not explain some learning—such as the recognition of new language patterns by young children—for which there is no reinforcement mechanism. Research has shown that animals adapt their reinforced patterns to new information. For instance, a rat can shift its behaviour to respond to changes in the layout of a maze it has previously mastered through reinforcements. Behaviorism can also be thought of as a form of classroom management. Behaviorists believe that if teachers should provide positive reinforcement or rewards whenever students perform a desired behaviour, they will learn to perform the behaviour on their own. The same concept applies to punishments.

Mentalism

The leading proponent of this theory is Noam Chomsky, who criticized the behaviorist theory of language learning. He contradicted that “if all language is a learned behaviour, how can a child produce a sentence that has never been said by others before?” According to Chomsky, language is not a form of behaviour, rather it is an intricate rule based system and a large part of language acquisition in the learning of this system. He argues that thinking is rule-governed. It is a finite, and fairly small sets of rules that enable the mind to deal with the potentially infinite range of experience it may encounter. He insisted that learning consists not of forming habits but of acquiring rules, a process in which individuals experiences are tested and modified by subsequent experience (Chomsky, 1965). The hypothesis that language acquisition and learning is not random but systematic is evidenced on the fact that all normal children are endowed with similar brains and mental capacities that direct the way and order language is used irrespective of the variations in the sample they are exposed to. Furthermore, the mentalists call attention to the fact that no adult has to teach a child that language is organized according to general principles or rules. This is apparent when a child makes “mistakes” on the generalization of a given concept like the word “brought”. The child says “bringed” instead of “brought”, having no knowledge of an exception to the rules he has learnt. This generalization occurs in the learning of syntax and semantics.

The view that every child is born with innate characteristics or a disposition to acquire the language of his immediate environment, is in the assertion that within every human person, there is an innate processing machine which is concerned with linguistic information. This processing machine or device is known as Language Acquisition Device (LAD). This LAD is known currently as Universal Grammar (UG). UG is located in human mind or brain. One important fact about UG is that it is exclusive to humans alone and it is capable of giving every human being the grammar of his language. The device also explains why children master their language/s at a fairly good speed, being able to handle new linguistic situations that arise (Otagburuagu and Anyanwu, 2003). Another credit to the mentalist theory is the view that the human child is creative and is capable of churning out new expressions which the adult had not given the child to imitate. This disputes the behaviorist theory that human being is a tabula rasa, a blank and recipient entity that depends entirely on the adult input. The human being is seen as a dynamic and creative participant in both word processing and structural ordering (Lyons, 1981).

This theory is of the opinion that thinking is rule governed. Chomsky sees learners are thinking beings who are capable of coping with infinite range of possible situations from a finite range of experience. The mentalist acknowledges that the mind use individual experiences to formulate hypothesis. For example, knowing that words which ends in ‘-y’ take ‘-ies’ to form their plural, while those that ends in ‘-f’ will change to ‘-ives’, the learner given these rules can form a lot of plurals for words they have not seen before.

Affectivism

This school of thought sees learning, particularly the learning of a language as an emotional experience. They believe the feelings that the learning process evokes will have a crucial bearing on the success or failure of such learning. The emotional reaction to the learning experience is the essential foundation for the initiation of the cognitive process. According to cognitive theory that has an affinity with Affectivism, learning is a process in which the learner actively tries to make sense of data. This theory treats learners as thinking beings and puts them firmly at the center of the learning process, by stressing that learning will only take place when the matter to be learnt is meaningful to the learners. Hence, it is the emotional feelings of the learner towards what is being learnt that will enhance his thoughts about the learning processes (Corder, 1973). The affective hypothesis stipulates that anxiety, worry, distress and so on will hinder the improvement of language learning. (Bialystok, 1990).

Pedagogical Implications

Behaviorism relies only on observable behaviour and describes several universal laws of behaviour. Its positive and negative reinforcement technique can be very effective-such as in treatment for human disorders including autism, anxiety disorders, and antisocial behaviour. Behaviorism is often used by teachers who reward or punish student behaviours. Behaviorism is often seen in contrast to constructivism. Constructivists are more likely to allow for experimentation and exploration in the classroom and place a greater emphasis on the experience of the learner in contrast to behaviorist. The behaviorist postulates that language behaviours are learned by children through imitation, reinforcement and copying adult language behaviours. Other important concepts of behavioural theory are imitation, rewards and practice. This implies that a young child will try to imitate sounds and words it hears from its parents the best it can. When a child attempts oral language or imitates the sounds or speech patterns, they are usually praised or given affection. Behavioural theory is adapted to study children's language by observing, describing and counting specific language behaviours. This basic stimulus-response model acquires a child to imitate sound and reinforces the sound production with verbal praise by the teacher or parents. The children's sounds are shaped into increasingly closer approximations of the target sounds, and when they are able to produce the target sound correctly, the sounds are practiced in a variety of words and sound combinations. When children do not use certain language structures that are appropriate for their age they most likely have not acquired them naturally and would need to improve in therapy. Helping children learn how to combine words, phrases and sentences, make them convey messages to others. Also instructing about how to use language appropriately in different social contexts and environment, allows them to use appropriate pragmatics when communicating.

Affective factors are emotional factors which influence learning. They can have a negative or positive effect. Negative affective factors are called affective filters and are an important idea in theories about second language acquisition. For instance, a learner's attitude to English, to the teacher, to other learners in the group and to yourself as a learner are all affective factors that have impact on how well we learn. Affective factors may be as important for successful language learning, if not more so, than ability to learn. Teacher can reduce negative factors and develop positive ones by doing activities aspects of the course and choosing activities that are motivating for the age and interests of the learners. The cognitive theory tells us that learners will learn when they actively think about what they are learning. This pre-supposes the affective factor of motivation. Motivation is important in the development of ESP. Gardner and Lambert (cited in Hutchison & Waters, 1987) identified two forms of motivation: instrumental and integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation is the reflection of the external needs of the learners. The learners learn a language not because they want but because they need the language for something such as for study or work purposes, to transact business with the owners of the language, and learning a language for exam purpose and not for leisure, etc.

Integrative motivation, on the other hand, derives from the desire on the part of the learners to be members of the speech community that uses a particular language. Integrative motivation, according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) "is an internally generated want rather than an externally imposed need" (p.48). Example could be new trend of many parents speaking English to their children at home

in order to hasten their children's integration into English dominated prestigious social class in the society. This implies that the value of learning is determined primarily by the society. People learn what the social learning environment permits them to learn by way of subjects offered, quality of teachers/ instruction facilitators, quality of the curriculum, quality of the learning environment, and so on. It is important to note that what the learning society is capable of offering does not suit its definition of an educated man, a vacuum is created which has to be bridged by making learning more meaningful and relevant to the societal perception of an educated man. Dinkmeyer (1985) defines learning as a change in behaviour resulting from the interaction of the organism with its environment. Learning is dependent upon activity or special training and in this sense, differs from behavioural change which is as a result of experience.

Human beings learn. This statement looks and sounds simple, yet it has generated as much controversy as any statement could in the behavioural, natural, or physical science. Travers (1996) points that man is a philosopher before he is a psychologist or an educator, and as he sees human nature, so he sees the nature of learning. Consequently, learning is viewed as a cognitive, problem-solving process whereby man actively seeks and uses environmental clues that enable him to form concepts, solve problems, and think creatively. Travers opines that human learning depends upon three pre-conditions namely: a functioning biological organism; an on-going social/cultural/religious/political/economic environment, and an opportunity for a biological being to interact with any form or forms of the environment in two and thereby learn from it.

Human learning is the ultimate goal of our educational systems. Man turns to several disciplines to discover what aids or hinders learning, and to grope towards a more adequate knowledge of the process itself. From biology, the student of learning takes information about growth and development, he utilizes facts about man's activities in groups and what impact environmental forces have on learning. From anthropology, he derives insights into the meaning of cultural difference. What the specific cultural value its learning, and how the individual, reflecting his culture, has learned to learn. Cultural is the total way of life of a people. It includes everything from how people welcome a newborn baby to how the dead are buried. All disciplines can contribute to our knowledge about learning. Learning may involve many variables. Cohen (1998) similarly states that learning may be grouped into no less than five categories:

- a. The characteristics of the learner, such as developmental aspects;
- b. Characteristics of the teacher/instructional facilitator;
- c. Classroom/study center interaction;
- d. Characteristics of the learners group, and
- e. The physical setting.

This tends to indicate that the nature of learning may not be all that easy to comprehend. Cohen again attests to this when he writes that we do not as yet have any universally accepted description of the learning process application to all kinds of learning, in all human beings, at all age levels, and in all situations. It is important to note that the development of learning and intelligence and their great educability are what distinguish humans from all other living creatures. An important distinction between learning in lower animal and learning in humans is that even when simple association learning is involved, one rarely sees the building up of isolated connections between single sets of stimuli and responses. Such connections occur, but in human learning we tend to notice their appearances only as they form chains of associations. The type of association learning common to humans, and the relative rapidity of the learning process, tends to obscure the observation of the learning of the links themselves. In human learning, two particular abilities seem representative: the first of these is a consequence of a highly developed sensory ability and manual which enables us to learn the use of tools. This is variously referred to as sensor motor learning, motor learning or skill learning. It includes all related abilities from manipulating a pencil, learning to operate a complex machine, to playing a musical instrument with perhaps virtuoso ability. A second class of Human learning results from an equally coincidence of physical and mental endowment, the ability to learn to use verbal materials. As learning theory developed in the United States of America through the efforts of Thorndike, Hull and others, so also developed was the view that learning, human and animal

learning, maze learning and language learning, could potentially be understood merely by the principles embodied in classical conditioning. This is one of the theories of learning discussed in several study units of the course material. For all such theories, psychologist carried out experiments mainly with the use of lower organisms such as rats, pigeons, chimpanzees, dogs, and such similar creatures.

Conclusion

There are misconceptions as to what learning is. Learning is part of almost every aspect of psychology. In addition, the concept of learning was examined. You have also learnt some definitions of learning. Learning is the totality of the acquisition of factual information, the mastering of skills to aid further study, the acquisition of behaviour patterns and styles of tackling problems of everyday life. Observed changes in behaviour are evidence of learning. Speech involves the mental and physical behaviour expressed by human being in his communication with his environment. The learner has to articulate his physical and mental prowess in his bid to learn a second language. In schools, teachers try to develop the motor and mental skills of learners and guide them for better performance. For effective language learning to take place, all the language learning theories behaviourism, mentalism and affectivism have to be put together or combined. The learner's emotion, physical and mental dispositions are accounted for in learning of a second language. With the National Language Policy that enjoins the learning of another Nigerian language apart from one's mother tongue; the globalization and increasing multilingual needs of the world, it is beneficial to learn as many languages as possible. Children acquire language because they are biologically predisposed towards acquiring language of the immediate environment where they readily interact with people around them.

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