The Implications of Four Learning Theories for Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract: As a consistently highlighted topic in academia, learning is intricately linked to a wide array of human activities, among which second language acquisition (SLA) stands out as a prominent example. Thus, this paper systematically discusses four learning theories and analyzes their potential implications for the SLA process. In specific, these four theories, namely Behaviorism, Cognitivism, Humanism and Constructivism are examined. Given such a comprehensive investigation of learning theories and a thorough analysis of their implications, this study seeks to synthesize and propose several theory-informed and effective language learning methods, with an attempt to enhance the outcomes of language learning and ultimately facilitate second language acquisition.

Keywords: Learning; Learning Theories, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Language Learning Methods

1. Introduction

Learning is an invisible process that has intrigued many scholars to explore its myth. As many human activities are closely related to learning, especially those in psychology and education, the issue of learning always catches the attention of professionals and scholars and even parents who are anxious to improve the unfavorable academic performances of their beloved children. But what is learning? How can we use the nature of learning or learning theories to guide the mastery of knowledge and, more importantly, the second language acquisition? These are the questions that should be clarified before we intend to seek ways to improve the effectiveness of second language learning.

To address these questions, it is essential to first understand the fundamental concepts and mechanisms behind learning. Learning can be defined as a process through which individuals acquire new knowledge, skills, or behaviors, often as a result of experience or instruction. This process is not only limited to academic settings but also extends to various aspects of daily life. In the context of second language acquisition, learning takes on an even more complex dimension, as it involves not just memorization or repetition but also the internalization of linguistic structures, cultural nuances, and communicative competencies. Therefore, exploring established learning theories becomes crucial in identifying strategies that can enhance language learning outcomes. By examining different theoretical frameworks, we can gain insights into how learners process information, interact with their environment, and ultimately develop proficiency in a second language.

2. Learning and Learning Theories

What is learning? Specifically, according to contemporary dictionaries, learning is explained as "acquiring or getting of knowledge of a subject or a skill by a study, experience, or instruction.".[1] In most cases, learning means a process that student are instructed in the school context. However, from a broader aspect, the definition of learning could be

"Learning is a relatively permanent change in behavioral tendency and is the result of reinforced practice".[2] Combining these various kinds of learning definition, we may find learning is a complex process that could bring us some positive changes like getting knowledge in both behavioral and psychological aspects. Since the learning process is so complicated that there are many learning theories about how human beings acquire a second language. Among those theories, we mainly aim at four renowned ones, which are Behaviorism, Cognitivism, Humanism and Constructivism respectively.

These four theories offer distinct perspectives on the mechanisms of learning, each with its own implications for second language acquisition. Behaviorism emphasizes observable behaviors and external stimuli, suggesting that language learning occurs through repetition, reinforcement, and conditioning. Cognitivism, on the other hand, focuses on internal mental processes, such as memory, problem-solving, and information processing, highlighting the importance of understanding how learners organize and retrieve linguistic knowledge. Humanism shifts the focus to the individual learner, emphasizing motivation, self-esteem, and the role of a supportive environment in fostering effective learning experiences. Lastly, Constructivism posits that learners actively construct knowledge through social interactions and real-world experiences, suggesting that second language acquisition is deeply rooted in collaborative and contextual learning environments. By examining these theories, educators can identify strategies that align with the diverse needs of language learners, ultimately enhancing their ability to acquire a second language effectively.

3. Behaviorism and Its Implications

Behaviorism could be the earliest and most well-known doctrine. As for its definition, Hu Zhuanglin [2] identified it as" Behaviorism is a principle of scientific method based on the belief that human beings cannot know anything they have not experienced." Actually, in the field of psychology, Behaviorism comprises Pavlov's Classical Behaviorism, Skinner' s Operant Conditioning and other theories. However, these kinds of Behaviorism are different in their intrinsic thoughts. In this part, Pavlov's Classical Behaviorism and Skinner' s Operant Conditioning are centered on and compared.

Pavlov was a Russian psychologist and a pioneer that represented Behaviorism. He claimed that learning process was the formation of association between stimuli and reflective responses. This conclusion was based on his best-known experiment about training a dog to acquire a conditioned response. During his experiment, he first provided the dog with meat, but without the sound of bell. Afterwards, he trained the dog to associate the sound of bell with meat, and the dog would salivate once it heard the sound, thus the conditioned response was generated. From the experiment, Pavlov asserted learning was a temporary formation of mental connection. He also developed several laws during the formation of association between stimuli and reflective responses such as the Acquisition Law and the Extinction Law. The Acquisition Law means when conditioned stimuli (the sound of bell) occur with unconditioned stimuli (meat), conditioned responses (salivation) will be acquired. The Extinction Law means habitual responses will decrease and consequently extinct if reinforcement is terminated. Pavlov's behaviorist theories had great impacts on psychology.[3] But a new behaviorist theory came to oppose the classical one in 1930s, which was Skinner' s Operant Conditioning. In 1938, B. E Skinner established his leading role in the behaviorist field in the United States by publishing the book *Behavior of Organism,* in which he added a unique dimension to behaviorist psychology and thus he became a neobehavorist.[1] Skinner adopted the concept of reinforcement to replace the concept of awards-punishments in the Law of Effect, one law of Thorndike's Trial-and-Error learning for he assumed positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement could be better than awards-punishments.

According to Behaviorism, learning could be the process of habit formation. From this perspective, language habits are formed when learners respond to the stimuli in the language environment and subsequently have their responses reinforced so that they could remember the language stimuli. Second language acquisition was thus viewed by Behaviorists as a process of overcoming the habits of the native language so that new habits of the target language could

be acquired. What's more, behaviorists view the second language learner as "a language producing machine", while Chomsky's nativist accounts of SLA view that learner as "a grand initiator" .[4] This is why in the past years behaviorism has been blamed. However, there are still some implications of Behaviorism for second language acquisition.

Actually, Behaviorism has many implications for second language acquisition. Amid these implications, one is that second language learners would train themselves to do some drills of a fixed sentence pattern, which could strengthen their memories of a certain language point. In addition, learners would practice again and again their oral language for a perfect speech would be a result formed by the habit of everyday practices. Besides, A good second language learners must have a keen observation. Regarding to it, the second language learners must be active in creating "stimuli". In other words, be sensitive to the listening materials, reading materials or the teachers' lecturing. Novice second language learners should also pay great attention to imitation. Language learners ought to imitate the input he or she encounters from the audio or visual way. All in all, SLA is a lifelong repeated process, second language learners are supposed to practice and learn the language all the time.

When the direction turns to the language teachers, some implications could be concluded as follows. Firstly, in behaviorist learning theory, the learning environment is very important, for it is the sources of language learning stimuli. In this sense, a qualified teacher should be conscious of providing sufficient and good quality input to the students. In the sense of respondent conditioning learning, it is very instrumental to ensure the fine tuning stimuli. In this light, it is very advisable to make students have appropriate access to English films of the original editions or English newspaper and so on. Secondly, for the existence of operant behaviors, a second language teacher should be considerate of the language learners. They should manipulate the principle of encouraging and rewarding, which is the positive reinforcement. On the other hand, it is implied that the presentation of an adverse stimulus will lead to the absence of a certain behavior (negative reinforce). Therefore, a second language teacher must attend to his or her expressions and behaviors carefully, which might become the prospect stimuli.

4. Cognitivism and Its Implications

A movement that responded Behaviorism is Cognitivism. In psychology, Cognitivism is a theoretical framework for understanding the mind. Following the behaviorist school of thought, Cognitivists criticized Behaviorism for it neglected the role of cognition, for although behaviorists acknowledged the existence of thinking, they still identified it as a behavior. With an attempt to answer how and why people learn by attributing the process to cognitive activity, cognitivists put what was going on in the mind on the top list.

Cognitivism was popular in the 1950s, competing with other learning theories. There are three main parts of Cognitivism, namely Gestalt Psychology, Piaget's development psychology and Ausubel's theory of meaning learning. Gestalt Psychology was an early representation of Cognitivism, originally derived from Germany because in German, Gestalt is equivalent to "pattern, organization" in English. It centered on the innate organizing principles like pattern or configuration in human perception, recognition, etc and it argued that a whole is greater than the sum of its parts, which appealed to a whole view.

Another preeminent framework of Cognitivism is Piaget's development psychology, which suggests that human beings move through four different stages of mental development. Piaget illustrated when children began to learn about the world, they would take an active role, like a little scientist because they would perform their presupposed experiments, make observations, interact with the world around them and build their knowledge edifice.[5] Four stages are included in Piaget's development psychology, which are Sensorimotor stage (0-2 years), Preoperational(age 2-7), Concrete operational stage (age 7 - 11) and Formal operational stage (age 11 and up). His theory focuses not only on understanding how children acquire knowledge, but also on understanding the nature of intelligence.

Ausubel was an American psychologist whose most significant contribution was on the development and research on meaningful learning and advance organizers. Influenced by Piaget, Ausubel claimed that understanding concepts, principles, and ideas are achieved through deductive reasoning. Thus, he suggested learning should focus on the idea of meaningful learning instead of rote memorization. In his book *Educational Psychology*: *A Cognitive View,* he illustrated "The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly",[6] which means construction of knowledge begins with our observation and recognition of events and objects through concepts we already have. In other words, in order to learn meaningfully, individuals must relate new knowledge to relevant concepts they have already known. By contrast, if rote learning is adopted, though it can also incorporate new information into the pre-existing knowledge structure, the interaction between new knowledge and pre-existing knowledge is inadequate.

The implications of Cognitivism for second language acquisition are multiple. As Cognitivism posits the individuality during the learning process and learning is not a habit but a result when learners interact with the environment, emphasizing the important roles of cognition, meaning comprehension, independent thinking in conscious activities, for second language acquisition, one of the implications could be that learners should be motivated to learn rather than be a passive learner because autonomous learning is better than being crammed from the teachers and some language potentials would be activated during the self-dependent learning. Another implication is that the cultivation of learning abilities and creativity since Cognitivism proclaimed self-contruct in the inner structure of cognition is essential.

5. Humanism and Its Implications

Humanism is another kind of learning theory which takes from the perspective of humanistic psychology and forms its basic idea about the essence of learning. Unlike Behaviorism or Cognitivism whose research fields are constrained in the explanations of specific behaviors or mentalities, Humanism extends the scopes that could explain the development of learning. In detail, from the point of humanist view of humanism, learning is the growth of personality and it is relevant to human nature. As for the concept of human nature, humanistic psychologists were attentive to what it means to be fully human and sought pathways and technologies that could assist humans in reaching full humanness. Humanistic psychologists criticized Behaviorism for Watson has once proclaimed that he could train any human infant to become any person as long as the opportunity could be given.[7] One of the preeminent humanistic psychologists is Maslow who proposed the theory of human motivation. The following parts are mainly about Maslow and his learning theory.

Maslow was famous for his hierarchy of needs, the main idea in his book *A Theory of Human Motivation*.[8] He divided the hierarchy of human needs into five elements, consisting of the physiological needs, the safety needs, the love needs, the esteem needs and the need for self-actualization. Specifically, the physiological needs are the basic needs of eating, drinking, sleeping, etc. The safety needs mean that humans need shelters or weapons to prevent themselves from being attacked. Considering children, Maslow mentioned that the indication of the child's need for safety is his/ her preference for undisturbed routine or rhythm and an orderly world. When both the physiological and the safety needs are satisfied, the needs for love and affection would emerge, that is the third level of hierarchy of needs, the love needs. The person in need of love would seek for friends or other affectionate relations with others. The fourth level, the esteem needs are based on the gratification of the former three needs and this kind of needs is a desire for self-esteem and the esteem of others since such kinds of esteem could help build confidence. If these needs are thwarted, a feeling of inferiority would appear. After all the above needs are fulfilled, the need for self-actualization is a new one that means each person tends to become actualized in what he/she is potentially, and become everything that one is capable of becoming. From the hierarchy of needs, we know human learning is always accompanied with various of needs, which

could give us some reflective thinking about how we can promote the learning process, especially the process of second language acquisition.

There are some implications of Maslow's hierarchy of needs to second language acquisition as well as the language teaching. Firstly, we could not ignore the physiological needs, such as water, food, because they are the sources that could back up and motivate us to learn. Secondly, we could set goals to outline what we want to achieve, such as a planning for learning a second language, which could help us feel energetic to achieve the self-actualization needs about language learning. Thirdly, friends and families are those we can search for help once we feel dismal during the language learning.

6. Constructivism and Its Implications

Constructivism is a theory to explain how knowledge is constructed in the human beings when information comes into contact with existing knowledge that was developed by experiences. It has its roots in cognitive psychology and biology and an approach to education that lays emphasis on the ways knowledge is created in order to adapt to the world.

Constructive psychology could be considered as a revolution in educational psychology. Piaget first established this idea, with some followers such as Ausubel. The main contents of Constructivism are about the views of knowledge, students, learning and teaching. In terms of knowledge, it suggests there is no absolute truth in knowledge. When concerning the part of students, it emphasizes students would get the variety and difference of experiencing the outside world while such diversity could be a precious learning resources so that teachers could find the developing point from students' pre-existing world experiences. As for the learning, it combines the active self-construction, interaction and context. Constructivism also provides its thoughts about teaching, which means teachers should know about the background knowledge of students to guide students to obtain new meanings and modify the previous concepts. Besides, teachers should help students learn new abilities and skills, organize, evaluate and monitor the cognitive process of themselves, which could promote the comprehensible learning.

Constructivism has implications for the theories of instruction as well as second language acquisition. Discovery learning, collaborate, project-based, task-based are a number of applications that base teaching and learning on Constructivism. Discovery learning is a teaching method as well a learning method for second language acquisition, which requires learners to discover the knowledge by himself/herself instead of being presented the learning materials and language points. It can also help learners to brainstorm what they know so that the new context could be built up with the previous knowledge. Task-based teaching is a recently heated teaching principle for many educationalists would just monitor their classrooms, while the role of students would be the most important one rather than that of teachers. It could motivate students to learn autonomously and think actively and independently.

Conclusion

From what we have discussed above, more discoveries about learning theories are presented. Those learning theories are various in their ideas, but they all aim at achieving second language acquisition. We could not deny totally any theory since all of them have both pros and cons. What we should do is to combine their merits to guide our second language learning and teaching. We could actually figure out the language learning methods from those learning theories and their implications. For example, Behaviorism could foster us to use the imitating method to learn the second language. Cognitivism could guide us to develop methods to meaning comprehension and independent thinking. Humanism could direct us to use language methods to set goals to fulfill our needs step by step. Constructivism could inspire us to adopt a discovery learning to find out the link between what we know and do not know. In conclusion, these four learning theories are favorable references in terms of second language acquisition.

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