How Language Learning Shapes Thinking
"An Overview of learning from Pavlov to Vygotsky"

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Abstract :

Language learning is the focal point of any organisation responsible for culture, science, and education in the world. The widespread of foreign languages such as English, which has become inevitable in recent years, has led to the adaptation of many changes in syllabuses as an attempt to cope with the new situation. English, the language of technology today, is also viewed as an alien in because it may threaten the stability of a whole culture. It is then not only an ambition, but also a need; it ranges between choice and obligation. Regardless of these fears, the learning of foreign languages aims at serving students in many different ways. It secures for them an easy and a smooth access to data bases; it encourages them to proceed in their studies; and above all it helps them to know more about the other societies. To be able to reach the ultimate goals of language learning, we must uncover some of the truth behind and beyond its current role and vitality. It is within the scope of the present article that I try to demonstrate how a person's life changes because of a new tongue.

ملخـــــص:

إن تعلم أو تعليم اللغة لمن أولوية الأولويات بالنسبة لأية منظمة مسئولة على الثقافة و العلوم و التربية في العالم. فانتشار اللغات الأجنبية بسرعة و على رأسها الانجليزية, التي أصبح لا مفر منها اليوم, أدى إلى العديد من الإصلاحات فيما يخص البرامج التربوية كمحاولة للالتحاق بالركب و التأقلم مع الأوضاع الجديدة. فالانجليزية و قد أصبحت لغة التكنولوجيا, ينظر إليها البعض كوسيلة للاستعمار و عدم الاستقرار و خاصة فيما يخص الثقافة والهوية, لكنها في الوقت نفسه تفرض نفسها بطرق مختلفة. وبغض النظر عن المخاوف المذكورة سابقا فإن تعلم اللغات الأجنبية يهدف أساسا إلى خدمة الطلبة. فهو يضمن لهم الحصول على المعلومات بسهولة و يشجعهم على مواصلة الدراسة, و زيادة على كل ذلك فهو يسهل لهم معرفة الآخر أي العالم الخارجي و الشعوب التي تسكنه. و لكي نستطيع إبراز الأهداف البعيدة لتعلم اللغات يجب علينا الكشف عن حقيقة الدور الريادي للغات في الوقت الحالي. ومن خلال هذا البحث المتواضع, فإنني سأحاول أن أبين كيف أن حياة شخص بأكملها تتغير بمجرد تعلم لسان جديد .

Introduction

The importance of language learning in any part of the world cannot be underestimated. The widespread of foreign language teaching and learning over a wide range of fields such as political sciences, economics, engineering, business and trade in many universities reveals three main intentions: to provide a firm foundation to benefit from large-scale technology and information; to increase the validity of local education; and to generate *creative individuals*, i.e. individuals with deep insights to cater for present-day challenges and determine future prospects (Mark A.Runco/ qtd in. Tan vii).

Language teaching and learning is one of the most important areas of applied research, a spot where teachers and students assume some responsibility. The rate of the teachers' involvement in this process is not always the same; it depends on the nature of the topic and the students' active collaboration. Farrell and Jacobs stated that" Sometimes the teacher is more actively involved in leading student learning and at other times acts more as a facilitator, depending on the particular activity or depth of integration"(55). Students' participation is then intended to pave the way for the pursuit of good language learning. This latter can not be attained unless communicative language teaching (CLT) is encouraged in our classrooms. CLT in our context implies moving "beyond the teaching of rules, patterns, definitions and other knowledge "about" language to the point we are teaching our students to communicate genuinely, spontaneously…" (Brown 18). It also implies the development of talents of all the types of students that we have without any distinction.

Communicative Language Teaching, since the 1970s of the last century, has been perceived as a rebellious teaching method. It put an end to the practice of traditional teaching methods such as the Audio-Lingual Method and the Grammar-Translation Method, which emphasised the production of correctness and accuracy in language. Farrell and Jacobs pointed out that CLT, after having emerged

began to change the emphasis to where learners produce the language with a focus on fluency and where errors are seen as being a part of development. In traditional classes, teachers were seen as the knowledge providers and sole controllers of the class. In the approach English language teachers share this control and "facilitate" learning rather than dispense knowledge. (2)

In this present article, I try to draw attention to some of the new roles and practices of English teachers and learners. By roles and practices is meant what our teachers and learners should do to create a pertinent environment to apply up-to-date teaching methods and techniques to get reliable outcomes. I also try to address some critical issues with a great attention to the social reality of (English) language learning.

2-How language learning takes place

Language learning, as it were, refers to the human being's change of behaviour, which is ascribed to personal experiences in life. In addition, it is maintained that all types of learning have in common the human ability to perceive instruction so as to respond to different stimuli competently. The responses may be habitual (responses to ordinary events), conceptual (responses to frequent stimulus), perceptive (the continuous effects of a past experience), or more specifically associative (the ability of an individual to join a new stimulus with a particular response). Association, as an independent type of learning, occurs mainly through the process of conditioning. The earliest conditioning experiment was carried out by the most famous 19th-century Russian physiologist Ivan Petrovich Pavlov, who conditioned dogs to salivate to the sound of bells.

In fact, many other theories about language learning emerged in the early 20th century, but none of them was more appealing than Behaviourism, which offered rational explanations of learning. The "Behaviourist Theory" flourished and became predominant in the 1930s and in the next two decades. It was headed by the psychologist

Skinner and the famous American linguist Leonard Bloomfield, who rejected the description of the internal aspect for the sake of scientificity. Therefore, they accounted only for what was observable; the primary linguistic data (PLD). "Skinner contends that one does not learn by doing alone but instead learns as the result of the consequences that follow what one does. Hence, to teach (to discipline) is to arrange such consequences."(Tauber 48). Skinner and Bloomfield also believed that leaning is a mere application of general principles of learning; that it is controlled by the conditions under which it takes place; that the same conditions lead to the same rate and amount of learning (Jordan et al. 21).

The "Behaviourist Theory" of language learning was based on the assumption that verbal behaviour is not different from other behaviour and is acquired in the same way by process of conditioning, imitation, generalisation, and reinforcement. Moreover, the infant starts learning with nothing more than the powers he possesses to learn any thing. It undoubtedly showed several weaknesses, but it grew clear that it was workable over a long span of decades, and it became the basis for further studies in new overlapping areas such as linguistics and sociology where its applicability was of grand interest.

In the late 1950s and the early 1960s, an evolution appeared in Psychology in which Freud developed the introspection technique. This latter was adopted and applied by Noam Chomsky, and from this came what is known as Explanatory Grammar (Observable Grammar), which involves the description of the internal, external and inbetween aspects. Chomsky then made a distinction between the psychological reality, the external reality and the transformations of the deep form into the external form. This marked the birth of a fresh trend of language learning called Mentalism, or the "Mentalist theory" of language learning. This new form of grammar (description) derives from the assumption that language is peculiar to human beings; that they are born with a specific programme for acquiring it; that it is learned by some sort of data-processing device specific to language learning, proceeding by heuristic process of hypothesis and testing; that language is a matter of rule-governed behaviour, not a matter of

habit; and that what we learn is not responses but rules for making these responses. That is, Chomsky and his disciples had as a conviction that learning is not controlled by the conditioning process, but by the possession of an inborn capacity which is universal; that socialised human beings acquired language, but animals do not; and that the conditions of learning are inside the individual, not outside it.

In this article, I am not going to compare and contrast between Behaviourism and Mentalism, nor am I going to get into describing the components of each. I believe that the two schools are not in conflict; they merely put different emphases to the task of teaching and learning of language. Both have much to offer as a means of developing teaching as well as learning strategies in the context of language study and literacy. For this reason, among others, what I respectfully propose to my colleagues is to blend the behaviourist and the mentalist principles. To blend the two theories means to increase the pedagogical focus of our universities; therefore, the teaching of any module (course) whatsoever cannot be dropped from the curriculum or would be considered a separate unit. As far as I am concerned, the teaching of Linguistics can be adjusted to the previously mentioned principles; the teaching and learning of the other modules is, as I see, more dependent on their nature. The blended (proposal) approach is based on the understanding that students must be motivated to learn some basic modules such as grammar and written expression before they can tackle other areas. It therefore stresses the social and psychological aspects of language by engaging students in observing and studying how people use language in a variety of settings. That is, it provides opportunities for students to become aware of the fundamental technicalities of language.

The teacher's intervention here is a crucial part. Teachers must keep an eye on students as they are interacting in class, identify problems, and then offer activities that students can do immediately. Teachers must provide students with more appropriate guidance to ensure that they receive information correctly; that they are really on the right path. So, it does not matter if it happens that a teacher has a class of slow learners. What matters most is the teacher's delayed

intervention, inappropriate supervision, and irrelevant exercises. Exercises may measure the students' progress, and thus may inform the teacher of what to do in the next stages of the course.

3-Skillful language teachers and learners

Recently, in my classes, I have noticed that the majority of students have turned out to be of one type. Two thirds of each class show no or just little interest and keep on waiting for me to act and react by myself. These students have often been so lazy, but I did not pay attention to this at the beginning of the academic year. I doubt that the Linguistics syllabus is not well designed, or that the points included in it are not at the reach of the first year students. I also assert that I and my colleague teachers are doing our best to both remedy any difficulties that might arise in classes and coordinate from time to time to guarantee the same flow of information. We then proceed to list off the possible elements—definitions, concepts, ideas, simplified versions of theories, because " All teachers should be prepared to be held accountable to explain to any student, parent, fellow teacher, principal, or school board member what they are doing and why" (Tauber 14)—and, sometimes, we realise that the secret element might be homework or perhaps a paired drill. As I consider the heavy burden on my shoulders and those of my colleagues, I understand that there must be something missing or blurred.

In fact, I am not sure but I guess that the lack of *communication* in class is a crucial factor. Communication varies as the lesson goes on, and it attributes, each time, a new role to the teacher. Therefore, teachers should play their roles properly. Seifert and Sutton noted that:

> As the teacher, therefore, you find yourself playing an assortment of roles when communicating in classrooms: Master of Ceremonies, referee—and of course source of new knowledge. Your challenge is to sort the roles out so that you are playing the right ones in the right combinations at the right times"(154).

As a new teacher, I have noticed an important association between what I see in my classes and the teaching of a course in a foreign language such as English. Just as we were students who could activate lessons and could, at the same time, create an appropriate atmosphere where all of us acted efficiently, we should encourage students to recognise the "delicious" and "flavourful" taste of what it means to learn language; we should enhance in their personalities what it means to be self-reliant and resourceful; we should make them in a way or in another identify the craft (skill) of being good language learners. *Motivation* is then another crucial factor which must be taken into consideration. Jordan et al. stated that:

> Motivation is an important factor in academic success. When students are motivated to learn, academic achievement is significantly increased. A motivation towards learning can stem from numerous sources –example, from external sources such as assessment requirements or the expectations of parents or teachers. (154)

Both communication and motivation are considered to be a duty and a necessity. There are undoubtedly personal learning strategies and, meanwhile, there is always a role to be played by the teacher. When we teach, sometimes we are more scientific, like when we try to follow a driving code. At other times, we need other partners to change the routine of a "one –way" teaching operation; we may ask questions or even make quizzes, attempting to make countless choices in the teaching-learning process. Moreover, we should not forget about the question of time. *Time* is also a significant criterion; if it happens that a teacher does not organise a sequence of well selected activities or elements in his lesson, he may fail to achieve the essential or the soul part of knowledge he intends to cover. In other words,

> The efficient use of time is an important variable in helping students achieve learning goals and making the classroom a pleasant place for teachers and students.... Instructional strategies must be planned to fit into fixed time frames, where it is the clock—and not your assessment of whether students need more time on a topic—that dictates the beginning and end of a lesson. (Mcleod et al. 3)

Imagine, for example, connecting to the Internet where the data are feasible, but sited in hundreds of pages. That's like covering different ideas at a time, or moving from one idea to another without any pause. Therefore, time is neglected and nothing is under control.

While I and my colleagues support learning outside the classroom, we also believe that much has to be done as a cooperative work inside it. The library and the Internet are reliable sources of knowledge as well as hopeful atmospheres for any one who wants to accelerate his or her learning process. I do believe that the rate of learning depends mainly on how eager the student is to change things. That is to say, none in the world may get a kind of ready knowledge of craft without making efforts. Most of our students, indeed, need to get learning assignments where they should show some acquired skill from what has gone before in the courses. Meanwhile; however, we are required to give them a mark or show them a smile. We may even give them our feedback on the essential points, or comments such as "very nice" or "vague" scribbled in the margin. All in all, we should help them to improve their craft of learning.

If any one of us went through his or her own archives of learning (copybooks, corrected assignments, papers… from when we were children), we would certainly laugh at the way we used to draw lines, to write sentences, and to express ourselves; we would also notice the different marks and remarks noted at the tops of our papers. Whatever the type of _assessment_ is on our papers it puts an end to the continuous expectations of the students, i.e. it makes them develop different aspects of learning at different paces. What is more, it helps teachers to better understand what the changes of the students' traits mean and how they can support each trait in the classroom. Many educationalists believe that:

> Assessment is a major contributor to raising standards in schools in terms of teaching, learning and student achievement. Properly handled, with consistency, reliability, validity and rigour, it can have a major positive effect on learning and can improve students' own understanding of how they can learn more effectively and improve. (Cohen et al. 323)

Recognising the importance of communication, motivation, time and assessment is already a firm foot on the way to good learning; while, denying it entails some peril. These four components may be more helpful in the overall language leaning operation if we regard them as permanent as any other experience in our classes. Namely, if any of them is neglected or rather underestimated, a part of the learning process eludes us. This is only because, as I mentioned it earlier, the phenomenon of learning is so varied and diverse that its consideration on a single scale may not be recommended. Teachers then must give importance to every single element which they think it may be of some help. Teachers must also bear in mind that both teaching and learning are a question of experience, i.e. everyday we learn, and everything we learn is added to our own archives as a skill.

To conclude the main points emphasised under title (3), of the present article, I couldn't help but say that a good management of only a few essentials in class leads to a rise in attention, comprehension, and above all creates a promising atmosphere where both the teacher and the students interact properly. This pedagogical and learning interaction is the source of flourishing achievement. What is more, interaction bridges the gap between the teacher's role and that of the students; classes where students do most of the talk and act without restraints, and where teachers are mere guides, are said to be the best. Here, reaction is smooth and may be more natural than at any other setting. Moreover, feedback depends on two things: the nature of the skill being taught and the students' need for more or extra information. If students feel satisfaction, they behave with comfort and show their desire to move on; however, if they feel that something is missing, they remain suspicious of everything. They may hinder or at least lessen the rate of learning.

4-Language learning and thinking

Language is a central part of human life. Without language, a host of our intrinsic as well as natural activities are unimaginable. That is, making friends, visiting places, expressing emotions, forming relationships, advising others, being a lover or a parent is unreachable

unless we use words. "Language is the air that we breathe and the water in which we swim. It comes as naturally to us as seeing the sky or digesting our food. It is as vital a part of us as our name and personality"(Hill and Flynn 1). Language learning, thus, is an obligation which we cannot avoid. Language learning is more than a need, it is " a prerequisite for engaging in formal education and has both a social and cognitive role (Jordan et al. 184).

To illustrate what really lies behind language learning, we should set out to investigate and understand the facts of language use, to categorise and emphasise language functions. These latter are so natural that it is too difficult to realise what in fact they are. Since they are diverse and overlapping, the functions of language might be divided into micro functions (specific and individual uses) and macro functions (more general uses).

The Micro functions can be exemplified by many human actions and activities. The cheers made by fans of sports when they watch their favourite team on TV (physiological function), the records of things such as texts which remind us of the past (recording function), the ability to identify things and people by means of names (identifying function), etc. The Macro functions; however, have to do with more general activities. The most significant ones consist in the fact that language enables us to express and understand ideas (ideational) (Evans and Green 6); that it represents the speaker in his society or it identifies his rank (interpersonal function); and that it may become a means of joy (Brown 224) for any one who has a good command of it (poetic function). The poetic function, in fact, does not refer to poetry, but to what it means to be a good user of language; if someone knows what to do with words; he may get rid of the grief and the evils of a bad situation.

So far, we have seen that language has many different functions, which are quite natural and they result from the needs of the human being. We have also noticed that these functions overlap, which makes it difficult to consider them as being separate from each and one another; sometimes they cannot be perceived easily, nor can they be categorised in terms of their distinctive features. In other words, when there is a human need, language is the means or the tool that indicates it. We have labels such as orange, apple, and bananas to refer to some

types of fruit; we have expressions like "I like you", "I love you", "My darling…." to use in case of a date or a phone call between lovers; we have also many ways to send complete and more complicated messages to others. This implies that the chief function of language is communication (Evans and Green 9), and that in the process of communication a great deal of thought is exchanged between the interacting agents.

5-How Language shapes thought

The basis for the relationship between language and thought is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This hypothesis highlights the idea that thought is determined by language for two reasons. First, language facilitates the conceptualisation of ideas and it provides us with different options to externalise these ideas. This ability of expressing different ideas may influence our way of reasoning. Second, by revising many experiments that investigated the influence of spatial (Levinson) and temporal (Boroditsky) concepts on non-linguistic thought and action, it was found that Dutch and English speakers were less accurate in calculating their location in a foreign nature than the Guguu Yimithirr speakers. However, English speakers were faster in answering questions when the choices order was on a horizontal axis than Mandarin speakers, and vice versa. This led to the conclusion that habits in language encourage habits in thought (Evans and Green 98-101).

Another view of the relationship between language and thought stresses the idea that there is a reciprocal influence. This view also highlights the handling of this give-and-take influence when it comes to addressing areas such as language acquisition because language is culture bound, and thus the cognitive development and the linguistic development go hand in hand; they interact and shape each other. This was well expressed by Brown as he affirmed that:

> No discussion about cultural variables in second language acquisition is complete without some treatment of the relationship between language and thought…It is commonly observed that the manner in which an idea or 'fact' is stated affects the way we conceptualise the idea. On the other hand, many of our ideas, issues, events, and discoveries create the need for new words… (208)

The words which we use to advertise or persuade people to buy and do things are desirable because we really need to use them. The real intention behind this is to sell goods or change people's minds. On the other hand, when our ancestors coined proverbs and idioms they relied on their experience with language from which they made suitable choices. These proverbs and idioms, today, can be used in different contexts to communicate the same thoughts differently. That is, we can opt for adapting some of them to new settings. In addition to words, we may use sentences. Subtle differences in the formation of sentences such as the change of the verb, the tense, the article, and so on, may affect the addressee. So, any change of meaning causes a change of understanding, at least from a constructivist perspective. Constructivists, being the opponents of behaviourists, believe that education (as a means of developing thinking) is largely reliant on the relationship between learning and language. In their search for meaning, through a full interaction with all the elements of the learning milieu, learners' developing thinking influences and is influenced by language. Powell and Caseau maintained that:

> The relationship between learning and language is at the core of constructivist approaches to education. . . . the belief that learners construct their own meaning from interaction with texts, problems, materials, students, teachers, and other features of the learning environment. (qtd in. Farrell and Jacobs 60)

The belief that interaction is very vital both for constructing meaning and for a language to live on is in itself an other indicator of the mutual influence between language and thinking. Speakers need

language to communicate and live harmoniously, and in turn, language needs a speaking community (including background, actions, and events) to continue to exist. Halliday wrote:

> Language comes to life only when functioning in some environment. We do not experience language in isolation—if we did we would not recognize it as language—but always in relation to a scenario, some background of persons and actions and events from which the things which are said derive their meaning. (qtd in. Kukulska-Hulme 78)

Interaction in the evolution of language was weighed from another angle. Emphasis was put on both infancy and childhood (or adulthood) to show that the dichotomy of 'though and language' has been addressed by many people and has been expressed by many voices. One of these latter is James Britton who wrote, in identifying the Vygotsky's contribution to pedagogical theory, that the book entitled *Thought and Language* opened the door for many discoveries and implications. These new inferences, according to him, can be summarised as follows:

1-Word meanings develop during childhood though the meanings are not as sophisticated as those of adult speakers.
2-The ideas arrived at by inference from (or evidenced by) our own experiences are cultivated by experience and are afterward stored as our own knowledge.
3-Vygotsky believed that mastery of the written language- reading and writing- had a deep influence on the achievement of abstract thinking.
4-Speech in infancy precedes thinking because children at this early age repeat the parental words to express themselves without looking for meaning as adults do. (qtd in. Brindley 235)

6-Conclusion

In this article, I have recommended to my colleague teachers to reconsider their understanding and implementing of some essentials of teaching in their classes. I have shown that these essentials stem from

my modest teaching experience as well as the connections I often make between input (teaching material and methods) and output (students' behaviour). By examining these connections and looking for remedies in our field, these connections can be better elucidated. Most importantly, when considering ourselves as co-learners, the heralds of success greatly increase.

Language learning plays an ever more important role as nutrition in our life. This role has been covered by the discussion on language and communication, and language and thought, which might have been the reasons for many people, including the author, to learn languages and hope to work in the field of education. These reasons have turned out to be an ever-lasting ambition that spurs many researchers to continue learning about their profession in order to help the field of teaching to develop. They deem that communication, freedom, and resourcefulness in the classroom have boosted their marches forward, for today a lot of traditional practices are on their way to vanish. In addition, their awareness of the utility of technology in enhancing their performance and that of the learners is gaining floor in the field because technology provides sophisticated and useful tools.

7-Further Readings

1- John F. Hall, *The Psychology of Learning* (1966), provides a comprehensive account of the empirical data that theories of learning are designed to integrate.

2- Ernest R. Hilgard and Gordon H. Bower, *Theories of Learning*, 5th ed. (1981), is the standard reference on this subject.

3- Ernest R. Hilgard and Donald G. Marquis, *Hilgard and Marquis' Conditioning and Learning*, 2nd ed. rev. by Gregory A. Kimble (1961), describes theoretical issues as they apply to simple learning.

4- The separate articles reproduced in Gregory A. Kimble (ed.), *Foundations of Conditioning and Learning* (1967), develop some of these arguments in more detail and also present synopses of the theoretical positions of Hull, Guthrie, and Tolman.

5- Gregory A. Kimble, Norman Garmezy, and Edward Zigler, *Principles of Psychology*, 6th ed. (1984), is a general textbook that

covers several theoretical issues and should be particularly useful on the topics of memory and retrieval.

6- William Bechtel and Adele Abrahamsen, *Connectionism and the Mind: An Introduction to Parallel Processing in Networks* (1991), gives an overview of connectionist theory and higher-level cognitive processing.

7- David E. Rumelhart *et al., Parallel Distributed Processing: Explorations in the Microstructure of Cognition*, 2 vol. (1986), is a landmark collection of articles on the connectionist theory of learning.

8- Philip Johnson-Laird, *The Computer and the Mind*, 2nd rev. ed. (1993), provides an easy introduction to cognitive science.

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