

Psychology in Foreign Language Teaching

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Summary

In this essay, I am going to discuss the two main ideas which foreign language teaching is based on. Also, I shall examine their applicability to foreign language teaching.

1 Introduction

Psychology studies animal and human behavior. When we talk about human behavior, it is impossible to separate language from human behavior. Therefore, it is natural that psychology has a lot to do with language. In fact psychologists have studied mother-tongue acquisition and found some learning principles. As D. A. Wilkins (1972)¹ stated: 'if there really are general language learning principles involved, this cannot be without interest for foreign language learning.' In fact, as an application of this general theory of language acquisition, an audio-lingual approach has been developed, at least. Then, what is this general theory which an audio-lingual approach is based on? This is called behaviorism and owes a lot to B. F. Skinner. His main theory is based on a Stimulus-Response theory, that is to say, as D. A. Wilkins (1972)² stated: 'every utterance and every part of an utterance is produced as the result of the presence of some kind of "stimulus". The stimulus, to which the utterance forms a "response" ...'

1. D. A. Wilkins (1972), p. 160.

2. *ibid*, p. 160.

We shall see the behaviorism and its practical application to language teaching technique more in detail in the next section. However, since the Second World War, a behaviorists' theory claiming that learning is entirely the product of experience and that our environment affects all of us in the same way, has been attacked by mentalists who claim that everybody has an innate language learning mechanism which determines learning identically for each of us. N. Chomsky attacked behaviorism, claiming that the research with animals which B. F. Skinner relied on, cannot explain a form of behavior that animals are not capable of, namely, the behavior of acquiring language. Because all normal human beings can acquire their language, they must have an innate capacity which is not acquired socially. In spite of this fact, when lessons are carried out in classrooms, mentalists owe a lot to methods developed by behaviorists, especially in the field of pronunciation drills.

In the following sections, we shall look into these two ideas, behaviorism and mentalism, their problems and their application in classrooms. In conclusion, we shall argue which idea, behaviorism or mentalism, is acceptable in language teaching.

2 Behaviorism

Here is a sample drill which is used in the classroom at elementary levels.

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| Teacher : Repeat after me! | 'He goes to school.' |
| Students in chorus : | 'He goes to school.' |
| Teacher : Question! | |
| Students in chorus : | 'Does he go to school?' |
| Teacher Model : | 'Does he go to school?' |
| Students in chorus : | 'Does he go to school?' |
| Teacher : Answer 'Yes.!' | |
| Students in chorus : | 'Yes, he does. He goes to |

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| | school.' |
| Teacher : Answer 'No.!' | |
| Students in chorus : | 'No, he doesn't. He doesn't go to school.' |
| Teacher Model : | 'No, he doesn't. He doesn't go to school.' |
| Students in chorus : | 'No, he doesn't. He doesn't go to school.' |
| Teacher : Then 'Where?' | |
| Students in chorus : | 'Where does he go?' |
| Teacher Model : | 'Where does he go?' |
| Students in chorus : | 'Where does he go?' |
| Teacher : 'to college' | |
| Students in chorus : | 'He goes to college.' |
| Teacher Model : | 'He goes to college.' |
| Students in chorus : | 'He goes to college.' |

This drill is intended for grammatical practice : Yes/No question formation, Answer formation and Interrogative question formation. The first point to note is that this drill is in four phases : stimulus, active response, model response and repetition. Teachers' instructions ending with exclamation marks are stimuli. Then, follows students' active responses. Active responses are followed by model responses immediately. This time continuity is claimed to be the basis of all exhortations in educational setting by behaviorists. Finally, each correct sentence is reinforced by repetition which strengthens the learning. In this case each target sentence is repeated twice. According to behaviorists, the more often repeated, the more reinforced.

Here arise some problems. Students are supposed to make an active response but they prefer to wait until they get model answers. Furthermore, this drill is carried out in a rythmical way, that means,

rather quickly, so that the students will not get bored. It promotes this tendency. Then, the response cannot be active any more. This is nothing more than mechanical repetition, of which Dakin (1973)³ termed 'structure speech' as being correct drill performance but not language. This leads to the following fact. Although the students respond correctly and quickly in this drill, they cannot manipulate these three grammatical formations in uncontrolled situations, namely in normal conversation which is real human behavior. This is attributed to behaviorists' tendency of avoiding 'meaning' from the drills, because 'meaning' implies inner mental complexity which you can find inside the individual and which the behaviorist considers as objectionable and unnecessary. In other words this drill is meaningless, by which it is meant that the students can do this drill by parroting, once they get the structure.

Secondly, the behaviorist claims that correct responses should be reinforced and then learned. However, in a real situation, a response is not necessarily formally correct, although it should be an appropriate response to the stimulus. As for the above-mentioned drill, it is not incorrect at all to answer 'College.' to the question 'where does he go?' This appropriate response is not reinforced at all and the students do not even notice this possibility, if the drills are carried out mechanically without paying attention to the meaning.

Finally, according to the behaviorist, learning can take place by making a response. Then, how can we learn the things which do not require responses, such as hearing and writing? Of course, they can be through speech, which the behaviorist deals with first of all. However, it cannot be always the case.

The behaviorist, however, has developed the language laboratory which is still quite popular. As J. Dakin (1973)⁴ described, 'By enabling each student to work full time on his own, it promotes a

3. J. Dakin (1973), p.20.

4. *ibid*, p. 12.

maximum of active response and repetition. Each correct response of the learner can be rewarded or confirmed by his hearing'.

3 Mentalism

Mentalists' views contradict the behaviorists at almost every point. The fundamental difference is that the mentalists believe in the existence of an inborn capacity by which a language is acquired as a normal maturational process, whereas the behaviorists attribute the acquisition of language to conditioning processes. In other words, human beings have internal innate mechanism through which a language is acquired. According to D. A. Wilkins⁵ this innate mechanism, namely, the 'language acquisition device' named by mentalists, is said to operate in the following way. 'A child, from birth, is exposed to language which acts as a trigger for the learning device. The device has the capacity to formulate hypotheses about the structure of the language to which it is exposed. The child is, of course, quite unconscious of this process. The hypotheses are tried out in the child's own language production and are regularly checked against the further data that his exposure to the language provides. As he finds that his hypothesis cannot account for all the data, he modifies the hypothesis and checks it again.' For example, small children often utter, 'I breaked my toy.' or 'I goed to the park.' It shows that the child's hypothesis about the structure of the language was that past-tense is formulated by adding '-ed' to the infinitive form of the verb. Because it is corrected by the adults normally, he modifies the hypothesis. Here we can find another difference between behaviorists and mentalists. As D. A. Wilkins (1972)⁶ states, behaviorists name this construction of sentence 'analogy' whereas, mentalists tend to think in terms of the production and application of 'rule'.

5. D. A. Wilkins (1972), p. 169.

6. *ibid*, p. 171.

In the field of language teaching, mentalists claim that rule-learning should be the basis. However, the question of how to teach the 'rule' was not answered. Should it be taught in the way the children acquire their mother-tongues? It is impossible to take vast amounts of time to learn a foreign language. We cannot just expose the learners to the language. There should be adequate exposure to the target language. One thing to note about 'adequate exposure' is that it should be 'adequate exposure' to meaningful language, a concept which is neglected by behaviorists.

Let us see an example of a meaningful drill by J. Dakin (1973)⁷ intended for the language laboratory.

Tape : The other day my friend Harold decided to get married.

Students : Why didn't he stay single?

Tape : Because he had met this beautiful girl. But his plan failed.

Students : Why didn't he succeed?

Tape : Well, he proposed to her but she refused.

Students : Why didn't she accept?

Tape : Because she said her father had forbidden it.

Students : Why didn't he permit it?

Tape : Because he hates Harold.

Students : Why doesn't he like him?

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Each sentence of this drill is related and makes up a story. The students can follow the story at the same time as they do exercise. Because they are required to form negative interrogative questions, they have to use verbs which did not appear in the tape. In this case, they have to use the verbs or the phrases which have the opposite

7. J. Dakin (1973), p. 76.

meaning of those in the tape. Therefore, they cannot do this drill just by parroting and they do not get bored so easily compared with the behavioristic drills.

This drill is not advocated by a mentalist. However, this drill owes a lot to the mentalists' idea that the exposure to meaningful language helps the students to formulate and revise his hypothesis about the structure of the language.

4 Conclusion

As the arguments in section 2 and section 3 show, each idea, behaviorism or mentalism, lacks an empirical basis when each of them is applied to foreign language teaching. For example, there is a question of whether the experiments with animals done by behaviorists can explain human behavior. On the other hand, innate ability advocated by mentalists can not be proved in an empirical way. However, if our teaching techniques had not been based on the theory at all, they would have been merely a succession of improvisations.

Among linguists mentalism tends to be more popular nowadays. However, we cannot control inner mechanism by teaching. What we can do by teaching is to influence the externals, not the internals. Also it is impossible to believe that we can learn without doing anything. Therefore, the rule-producing mechanism which is advocated by the mentalists should be supported by external conditioning, in other words, drills which are advocated by behaviorists, though the drills should be meaningful and not mechanical.

It seems contradictory that foreign language teaching is based on two theories which differ completely each other. However, until we know much more about the psychology of foreign language learning itself, we accept both of the theories, behaviorism and mentalism, though not completely.

Bibliography

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