

BEHAVIORIST THEORY ON LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ACQUISITION

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Abstract

This paper aims to reveal new productive approaches in the improvement of the learning outcomes, seen from the perspective of behaviorist theory. As such, it has been based upon analyzing of the gathered data using of a sampling made of four children aged 4/6/8/ using comparative-empiric methods of research. Cognitive processes in learning seen through behaviorist and mentalist theory with the focus on innateness and Rationalist theory (otherwise called Cognitive theory), and Interactionism, are some of these theories, which the description of the phenomenon has been explained. Of these, behaviorist theory and mentalist theory are mainly applicable to the acquisition of native languages while the rest can account for foreign language acquisition.

Keywords: *Behaviorism, cognitive, language, interaction, acquisition approach, theory.*

When it comes to language acquisition, departing from the beginning of early childhood, as linguists and researchers who transfer their research outcomes to the younger generations, we usually aim to strengthen even more the approach on the concept “research based teaching RBT.” In choosing this approach, the easiest way to get closer to the role of behaviorism in the teaching and learning process, it is very important to recall the Piagét’s stages of development and their role in the process. Given the first stage is the one which is predominantly characterized with sensory-motoric approach to learning and cognition, we are clear in the sense that behaviorism at this stage does not play any notable role which would in a way explain that the children from birth to their 2nd year of life, are exposed to behaviorist input or stimuli to the children, which is known to cause some movements of sonification, which are appropriate to the sensori-motor learning with these children.⁵²

This means that at this stage, there are no actions which would be characterized with production of sounds and words which are appropriate to the stimuli on which the children are exposed to. This learning environment is mostly defined so for the fact that the children at this age are not critically thinking and there’s I very little of logical perception in their cognitive development, which would enable them delivering some more concrete products of learning as they are offered from the outside world.

⁵² Bloom, L.M. (1974). "Imitations in Language Development: If, When, and Why", "Cognitive Psychology ", p. 380-420.

In other words, their reactions as a result to the outside stimuli, may be seen predominantly reacting on sounds, music, as well as gesture-controlled sound synthesis, which they try to feel and emirate in their way. Scientifically described, their reactions in a way are distinguished and are classified in two types of tasks:

- a) sound-oriented tasks &
- b) movement-oriented tasks.

But as the children grow up, and pass over to the pre-operational and operational stage of cognitive development, the stimuli from outside becomes more evident and more usable in the sense that the children start to use their basic logical features, which direct them to the perception of schematic cognitive patterns, including words, which convey to them actions such as; suggestions, prohibitions, counseling manners and others, which they accept, and most of the time, they react as they are expected to.

At the second and the third stage of Cognitive development, the children are exposed to both, behaviorist and mentalist approach (Innateness), of learning. A combination of both theories, can be noticed in the children's everyday exposure to the knowledge, which in Psycholinguistics theory of learning is named as Rationalist or Cognitive theory, as well as the so called cognitive approach of Interactionism, which all together, define the overall impact of Behaviorist theory in the process of Language learning and acquisition.

As at the operational stage of cognitive development, children go to school and they are exposed to the learning process, the behaviorist theory always fulfills the mentalist one, creating this way wider and richer field of information which are offered for learning and assimilation. Here I'm talking about the approach which is applicable to the acquisition of native languages. Given this, it is very important to know that the above stated basic learning theories are supporting each other in the behaviorist learning as whole, which makes possible a the process running easier and more efficiently.

As such, the learning results show that this is due to the fact that the three theories cannot be divided from each other, which makes the learning process more efficient! This interactivity between the mentioned theories is constantly based and controlled by two important sources of stimuli, which in the case, acts as internal as well as external stimuli. The internal stimuli, as a term may be not so appropriate, this for the fact that the internal stimulation of the learners, in many cases comes as a result of the innateness of the child, concerning things h/s does or performs.

This particular environment of behaviorist learning, in Psycholinguistics is referred to as a situation which cannot always be clearly defined or described, not in cases when it comes to deciphering or explaining the impact which in the learning process, is imposed by native language competences of the learners. At this point it is also important to mention the "component of innateness", which in most of the cases controls the logical implications of the learning process, transferred by the mother tongue of the leaners, which as cognitive actions, in many cases are seen as learning patterns which in one way or another hampering the foreign language acquisition.

This kind of difficulties comes more into view with more complex grammatical structures, as well as other grammatical and language differences between L1 and L2. At this point, given that interaction, or friction between the two languages, as a clear and well defined evidence, considering its affect in the learning process via a logical constellation of a cognitive mindset efficiency, seen first of all as an approach it, I may conclude that the interaction mentioned above, inevitably serves as a fixed and well defined rule in the whole learning process.

Furthermore, it is a combined process, against which learners, teachers, researchers, all together cooperating in the TREE (Teaching, Researching, Education and Evaluation) education chain, as well as all those interested in behaviorist theories of learning and their implementation in the practice of learning, represents a rule or a concept, which must be consciously endorsed in process of the second language learning as a whole.

A couple of Principles concerning Behaviorist Theory in Language Learning

It is known that behaviorist theory has proved that little children learn first words of language, being spoken to them by other people, in first rank by their mums and others around. This happens through the so called “role models” performed via a process which includes activities such as; rewards, prizes, imitation, and other rewarding oral practice. In these actions, the above mentioned “role models” of learning, with the little children’s entourage, usually offers the so called stimulation and rewards relationship”⁵³

In cases when we observe an infant attempting performance of simple words of language, or moments when h/s, is trying to imitate, the sounds or the words they hear, or even some longer clichés or speech structures, the infants are praised and rewarded, which means that they are given love and a boosting forward for the efforts they make. On the other hand, in this kind of learning behaviorist learning entourage, we conclude that the theoretical description of these learning phenomena are in a way over watched or monitored by adults, due to many reasons. But this approach sometimes raises questions such as the ones which can be described as strong component in infant’s language learning in general.

The question is the one which reflects a situation which affects the learning, the other way around! It is a question which is related to the lack of stimuli or rewards, not given by the “so called inattentive parents.” In most of the cases, these are the parents who are pretty busy thus, not present around, when their child tries to learn and speak! The question here is the one which causes hampering of the learning process with these children. Other cases against this theory include “learning the use and meaning of abstract words, evidence of novel forms of language not modeled by others, and uniformity of language acquisition in humans”(Cooter & Reutzel, 2004).

Some basic explanation concerning the background of the Behaviorist Theory in the learning process with the children

Given that Watson and Skinner did not share the Chomsky’s theory regarding innateness, as a key predisposition to learning, they think and have proved on their way that behaviorist theory is predominantly focusing and believing the fact that little children at early stages of life, i.e. at the first Sensory Motoric stage of their cognitive development, experience and learn slowly the oral language. This slow and poor content language, transferred to them via a simple communication full of affection using gesture, imitation, rewards, puts aside the Chomsky’s theory that innateness is predominant and overcoming behaviorist approach of learning. There are research actions which are based upon my personal empiric-comparative method of research, which involves both theories of learning at the same scale. This means that a 2 years child, cannot learn based only upon one of these approaches!

⁵³ Brooks, Nelson (1960). *“Language and Language Learning and Acquisition, Routledge Press, London, p. 222-230.*

This for the fact that a child being exposed to behaviorist external language input, learn the half of the language quantum encountered, whereas considering his innateness (inherited by parents, good language learners), the child may reach a double language output, which cannot be explained other ways but as a result of both components. In practical context this means that children who have a good innateness predisposition and being exposed to the behavioral language input entourage, learn as much as double the language, compared to those who are exposed to only one of these approaches.

It is clear that this conclusion nowadays is seen as a fact, can be explained by the behaviorist theory, being basically a psychological theory in its foundations, determined by J.B.Watson. It is the same impact this theory persists nowadays, which as such, is seen as a theory of native language learning, advanced in part as a reaction to traditional grammar. The supporters of this theory are Bloomfield, Mowrer, Skinner, and Staats. On the other hand, given the fact that Thorndike was the first behaviorist to explore the area that learning is the establishment of associations on particular process of behavior and consequences of that behavior, we can say that basically the so called behaviorist theory of stimulus-response learning, particularly as developed in the operant conditioning model of Skinner, considers all learning to be the establishment of habits as a result of reinforcement and reward"⁵⁴

This is an explanation which analyzed deeply would look pretty much reflecting the Pavlov's experiment, which long time ago, has proved to indicate that stimulus and response work together! However, this is for the case of the dog as an animal which does not work based upon logical predispositions, as humans do. Based on this, we may say those stimuli and reward relationship, as components affect the strengthening and the learning outcomes of the language.

However, we must not forget that the innateness is something which has not been considered so deeply and seriously by Skinner or Watson and neither Pavlov, since all the three of them, forgot that the way a child learns a language can be explained to the genes this child has been passed , depends to this category, the babies obtain native language habits by his parents, both or only one of them engulfing good talent in language learning. Cording to all what was said and concluded above, we cannot say that, it is obvious that only behaviorist theory must be seen as a learning theory defined only as an efficient relationship in language learning which should be explained only by the stimulus-response cognitive psychology.⁵⁵

To my personal experience, coming as a result of monitoring method of research of little children (bilingual ones), the theories which exclude or rule out blending of behaviorist and innateness theory in learning a language, are to be considered into details and have to be analyzed and researched closely, as there is now way we can exclude neither of them. This for the fact that they are components which fulfill each other and are carried out with our genes and the external exposure of the child, to a given language.

In other words, we must realize that children are known to develop some natural affinity, which I see it as something which has been transferred to them by their parents, and which as such should be seen as a genetic as well as a psychological asset, supporting the learning language both, in their social surroundings and in their parental codified genes transmitted or overpassed by their parents. A highly complex learning task, according to this theory may be learned by being broken' down into small habits.

⁵⁴ Brace and Jovanovich, (2001) *"Language and Psychology- An Introduction to Psycholinguistics"* New York: Harcourt p.122-134.

⁵⁵ Brace and Jovanovich, (2001) *"Language and Psychology- An Introduction to Psycholinguistics"* New York: Harcourt , p. 301-310.

These are formed correct or incorrect responses, are rewarded or, punished, respectively. Thus it is clear that the acquisition of learning in infancy is governed the acquisition of other habits.⁵⁶

Counterarguments concerning Behaviorist theoretical approach to Language Learning

As it has been always known, teaching a language whatsoever is a cohesive process which involves dozens of theoretical explanations to the outcomes of the process of learning. This can be explained by the fact that that, language learning as a pretty productive endeavor, which as such embodies the interaction of the human behavior and human mental processes of the involved learners. Each theory may not be complete model for the investigation of language learning.

The following counter-arguments can be made upon the working principles of behaviorist theory, which as such come as a result of this paper's empiric analysis, having a sampling of three children of the age 4/6/8/. In this regard they have been classified to react as follows:

1) All three children have reflected activities which reflect some "basic strategies of language learning", which as such develop in the context or the frame of behaviorist activity, and which as such have been classified as; imitation (all three children) reinforcement, (only the one 8 y.o.), and rewarding(all three of them). This conclusion, in my analysis has showed that the data base analysis concerning language acquisition, learning proved to have demonstrated that the children of 6 i.e. 8 y.o. when it comes to imitation of language structures, have shown some actions which in a way rise the tendencies of language structure innovation. Furthermore, these children, according to the fact of the researches quoted below, "vary considerably in the amount that they imitate" (L. BloomS, L.Hoods, and P. Light Bown, 1979; 308-400).

In this regard, the fact that the tendency of these three children does not imitate such structures like words, phrases, clauses and sentences assessed with the same scale, reflects the cause why their success, will reach different rates, even though it must be admitted that imitation is very useful in the acquisition of new vocabulary items. When it comes to the learning or imitation reinforcement, "Unfortunately this view of learning receives little support from the available evidence"⁵⁷

2) Another reaction which has been observed with the sampling in the focus, is the one which shows behaviorist theory as a process of learning, in which the learning and acquisition, both are balanced and as such they strictly rely on more issues like; on conditioning, generalization, rewarding, widely praising, etc. All these issues of the stimuli nature, it is clear to support and strengthen the development of analogical learning of the children in focus. But on the other hand of this tested and verified behavior, theoretically expressed as pretty efficient in the learning and acquisition process, there's always a 'but' which leaves room for explanation of the phenomenon in a different way.

Namely, theoretically sometimes we all as researchers and professors, cultivate the feeling that the phenomenon, in particular cases may cause frictions between us, which are related to the process of learning or teaching, that encourages the learner to construct phrases, clauses and sentences which are designed on previous cognitive schemes which have been as a net of game rules, which as a final outcome (always observing closely the children's production), in many ways,

⁵⁶ Jones, Hubbard and Thornton Wheeler (1983). "A Training Course for TEFL OxfordUniversity Press.Palermo. " p. 331-340.

⁵⁷ David S. (1968). *Psychology of Language Foresman and Co.Rivers,* " Dallas: Scott, M. Wilga " p.144-150.

and in particular with children undergoing the pre operational stage of cognitive development, obstruct the natural production of language expressions and structures.

3) The other and the most evident reaction which has been noticed with the sampling in the focus, is the one referring to the so called “obstructions made on based the instinctive behavior”, which is evident to harm the language creative efficiency as an efficient way of assimilating of words and structures in a language. However, as well all know, a language cannot be learned so easily, and this is a fact which scientifically refers to the learner’s nature qualifying it as acting intrinsically. Given the fact that there’s a threshold level in language learning, this verified facts, would mean that in general, the children as well as the adults we teach, must base their learning and acquisition on a strong consciousness, which as we all know, works being supported by repetition and skills aiming to structure or build up a more efficient linguistic intuition, the acquisition of which, in this particular case, marks the foundations of the created level of learning threshold. This approach, may even more be strengthen in the practice of learning i.e. in the enrichment of the learning threshold, if we explain it via innateness capacity in the children’s as well as in the adults’ learning as a general and complex cognitive constructivist process.

4) Another counterargument concerning behaviorist theoretical approach to Language learning and acquisition, is the not enough treated observation of the rate of “social influence on learning” as a process, which represents a remarkable factor influencing the children learning outcomes.⁵⁸ The question which we all address from time to time, is the one whether and to what extent and rate, the social environment impacts and promotes learning in general? In other words, this is an issue which has a strong impact, which simply seems to be not enough worked and researched on.⁵⁹

Conclusions

Language learning and acquisition further on remains as a complex process, which changes through all four stages of Piaget’s Cognitive development. However, for the behaviorist theoretical and practical operation with the process, it always remains an enough “incognito field of research”, remaining based upon conditioning the learner, by learning actions of imitation, practice, reinforcement, and habituation, which constitute the steps of language acquisition in general. Given this, as a complex process involving a wide range of factors which in one way or another impact the learning, we as researchers and professors, have to bear in mind that behavioristic theories of learning, usually represent a variety of associations such as the Thorndike, Guthrie, Hull and Skinner ones and on the top of all this, the so called “theory of the school of functionalism.”

Furthermore, we must recall the fact that behaviorism has its shortcomings, but we must not see it as a denied theory which is based upon the ‘informal’ conclusions which say that the learning process is predominantly of a behavioristic processing nature, i.e. exclusively a verbal behavior. This point of view is changing more and more in modern times, due to the IT advancement and the state of the art technologies in LL, as well as the learning and acquisition in general, which as a new era, puts behavioristic e theories not always in the first rang of important factors, as there are other factors such as the innateness combined with the passive exposure to the language in a highly

⁵⁸ Stern, H.H. (1999) “Teaching Foreign Language Skills”-Chicago: Chicago University Press. p.88-120.

⁵⁹ Clark, Herbert and Eve Clark (1977). Harcourt, Brace and World. “New York Univesity Press, p. 211-220.

IT environment, when young children classified to the 1st stage of Cognitive development of Piagé, reach a larger volume of learning content that their mates a hundred years ago. However, the traditional learning scheme known as “stimulus and response”, remains the one which we all refer to from time to time, seeing it as a rich generation source of information to our research endeavors.

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