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New Trends In Language Acquisition Theory

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Every method of language teaching has at its heart some theory of language acquisition. For the past three decades or more the theories of behavioral psychologists such as B.F. Skinner have been prominent in the development of the language acquisition background upon which linguists have based many important aspects of the audio-lingual approach to language instruction. In recent years, however, many linguists have begun to feel that the audio-lingual method is not in step with advancements in language acquisition theory. Psychologists have become increasingly interested in the cognitive aspects of language learning, something receiving little emphasis in behavior-

al "stimulus"/"response" theories. It seems important that the classroom teacher have some knowledge of the underlying theories of language acquisition to be most efficient in using any method. At the same time it also seems important to be aware of possible changes and trends that may influence methodology in the future.

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It is the purpose of this paper to examine briefly, in nontechnical language where possible, some of the basic tenets of behavioral theories, as they relate to teaching English as a second language, and to examine similarly, some of the prominent trends in cognitive acquisition theory.

The basic differences between the two theories of language acquisition can be illustrated roughly by comparing first the behavioral and then cognitive viewpoints of language acquisition in children.

"The child associates the sounds of the human voice with need-satisfying circumstances; when he hears his own random babbling, these sounds are recognized to

CONTENTS

New Trends in Language Acquisition Theory	
by William D. Conway	Page 1
A Jabberwockian Approach to Discourse Analysis	
by Nancy A. Arapoff	Page 3
From Pattern Practice to Conversational English	
by Robert G. Bander	Page 5
The Use of "How Much" and "How Many" in TESL Textbooks	
by Alice C. Pack	Page 9

be similar to those uttered by the adults so that the pleasure or anticipation of pleasure associated with mother's voice is now transferred to his own vocalizations. Thus, hearing his own sounds becomes a pleasurable experience in itself, the more so as mother tends to reinforce these sounds, particularly if they by chance resemble a word such as "dada." This induces a quantitative increase in the infant's vocal output. Soon he will learn that approximating adult speech patterns, i.e., imitating, is generally reinforced, and this ought to put him on his way toward adult forms of language."¹

S/R Theory

The behavioral psychologist (as illustrated in the quotation) is interested in what "stimulated" the child to speak, in his "response," and in the manner in which the response was "reinforced" by the praise and attention of the parents and in the pleasure the child received at gaining attention for his efforts, i.e. "secondary reinforcement." The behavioral psychologist, in an effort to become objective and scientific, works much like the structural linguist in that he attempts to work only with what is observable; hence, he is not concerned with the unseen processes of the mind. Later when the child begins to produce sentences that aren't easily shown to be the results of imitation, the behavioral psychologist attributes the new form to a graded process of analogy in which the child is said to be reacting to similarities with previous speech "stimuli."

Cognitive Theory

The cognitive psychologist, on the other hand, emphasizes what goes on in the mind of the child in addition to the external factors.

Here is one of the primary differences between the two approaches to language acquisition, which places them on divergent paths. The cognitive psychologist believes that the mind has a great deal to do with language acquisition rather than act-

ing and reacting as a machine to "stimulus" and "response." While the behaviorists focus on the observable stimulus and response, considering "generalization" as only a part of a larger process, analogously the cognitive psychologist says that pattern recognition and de-coding are the proper subject of study.

Behavioral theories are apparent in some basic features of the audio-lingual method. Usually advocates of this method assume that foreign-language learning is basically a mechanical process of habit formation, and that habits are strengthened by reinforcement and association. Students are guided in such a way that they practice only the right responses. Some experts² have so emphasized the mechanical nature of language acquisition that they claim students can master the foundation structures of the language without reference to meaning. "Pattern practice," one of the central features of the audio-lingual method in which substitutions are made on a basic pattern, would appear to be a direct result of the behavioral idea of "generalization of stimuli." One frequently finds the cue in such a drill referred to as the "stimulus" and the answer as the "response." Little more need be said; the language acquisition heritage is readily appa-

(Cont. on page 6 (Col. II))

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Language

(Cont. from page 2)

rent and the results of its application to language teaching have been excellent, certainly an advancement over earlier methods.

The shift in the theoretical basis of language acquisition, as mentioned earlier in the introduction to this paper, has been away from behavioral theories towards a re-emphasis of the importance of the mentalistic or cognitive aspects. Men such as George A. Miller, Eric H. Lenneberg, and Noam Chomsky have been helping to research and develop new aspects of this type of theory. Chomsky writing in "A Review of B.F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior" published in 1959 says, "As far as acquisition of language is concerned, it seems clear that

for the day does not work. Then there should be constant variety. Activities in which most of the students are passive should alternate with sessions in which everyone participates. Students should be prepared for each activity so that they will know what they are to do and why they are doing it. Cultural differences must always be kept in mind in arranging activities. If a teacher uses reading materials, movies, and pictures, he should build the material into a unit. Activities such as oral reports, round tables, and discussions require considerable preparation. Invariably students will not know how to pick out main ideas, organize, and summarize. Much teacher help is needed here. Finally, experience suggests that conversation classes should be assigned to the most experienced and ingenious teachers, those who will be willing to undertake extensive curriculum building. With careful planning and constant self-evaluation, the instructor of conversational English will find his course to be a richly fulfilling experience both for his students and for himself.

Acquisition

reinforcement, casual observation, and natural inquisitiveness (coupled with a strong tendency to imitate) are important factors, as is the remarkable capacity of the child to generalize, hypothesize, and 'process information' in a variety of very special and apparently highly complex ways which we cannot yet describe or begin to understand, and which may be largely innate, or may develop through some sort of learning or through maturation of the nervous system."³

In the same article Chomsky presents considerable evidence to support his views that the foundation terms of behavior psychology (stimulus, response, reinforcement) are "vague and arbitrary." He points out that the stimuli cannot be determined in more complex behavior. Chomsky in effect, reopened the door to studies in language acquisition, making a powerful case for further research and a broadening of the scope of study.

Basis for Collaboration

Chomsky (1957 and 1965) provided linguists and psychologists with a common ground for useful collaboration when he developed his idea of a generative grammar. He began with a basic distinction between "competence" and "performance." A language user's competence is his knowledge of his language; and his performance is the actual use he makes of that knowledge in concrete situations. Chomsky developed his grammar to describe the user's competence rather than, as in most other grammatical studies, dealing solely with what has been produced, i.e., "performance."

Generative Grammar

By a generative grammar Chomsky means simply a system of rules that in some explicit and well-defined way assign structural descriptions to sentences. Obviously, every native speaker of a language has mastered and internalized a generative grammar that constitutes his

Theory —

knowledge of his language.⁴ Because competence is not directly observable, but rather a process of the mind, and because Chomsky's grammar provides an avenue for exploring these areas, a wedding of psychology and generative grammar has come about in the efforts of both groups to explain how this "competence" is acquired.

Predisposition for Language?

Some of the theories of this new generation of "psycholinguists" are extremely thought provoking. Perhaps the most startling, at first, is this claim: "That children can acquire language so readily can mean only that they have some innate predisposition for this kind of learning, and this can only mean that evolution has prepared mankind in some very special way for this unique human accomplishment,"⁵ say George A. Miller and Frank Smith in the introduction to The Genesis of Language, a compilation of papers read at the "Language Development in Children" conference held in April of 1965.

David McNeil, in the same conference, presented a case suggesting that early speech is not an abbreviated and distorted form of adult language but the product of a unique first grammar.⁶ This is particularly interesting when contrasted with the behavioral point-of-view presented earlier in this paper.

In constructing a grammar a linguist hopes to reconstruct the competence possessed by fluent speakers of the language. A child hopes to become such a speaker, so he, too, must reconstruct the competence of fluent speakers. He must formulate the grammar of the language to which he is exposed. A linguist can check his grammatical description with his knowledge as a fluent speaker. The child can't do this. The child must acquire language from the great variety of speech that he hears spoken around him. Linguists now postulate that language acquisition, for the child,

is based on something called "explanatory adequacy. This "adequacy" is related to his innate capacity for language which can be represented by a set of linguistically universal statements, or "language universals" as they are often called.⁷ The child, then, is said to formulate his grammar on the basis of his innate capacity or on language universals which are part of the competence of all children. This biological endowment gives him the ability to think abstractly--to classify words and to develop generalizations about the structures of the language.

This innate capacity seems to be approachable through a linguistic theory such as that of generative grammar. Some linguists, such as McNeil, expect that this grammar may include such things as statements of the difference between the base and surface structures, rules of formation and transformation, and definitions of various grammatical relationships. It seems likely that the emphasis given to transformations in some of McNeil's research may indicate this is a point of particular interest to teachers. He feels that what the child acquires may be a knowledge of particular transformations. McNeil accounts for the speed at which native speakers learn the language (1 1/2 to 3 1/2 years of age) by the hypothesis that what children learn first are features that correspond to linguistic universals,⁸ i.e. abstract features, which allow him to systematically approach the patterning of the language.

Role of Practice

Perhaps of more interest to the language teacher are McNeil's statements concerning the role of overt practice, imitation, and expansion in language acquisition. Speaking of the role of overt practice, McNeil said, "Some authors seem to believe that all of language acquisition can be attributed to the gradual strengthening of responses (behavior terms). It is clear, however, that this sanguine view is condemned to frustration, for there are no responses to be strengthened in the base structure of language."⁹ McNeil narrowed down the role of practice

to "Does practice theory characterize what a child does in order to find the locally (native language) appropriate expression of linguistic universals?"

He suggests that children do not produce speech simultaneously; that they have arrived at some sort of grammatical description before they attempt what seems to be the practice of novel forms.. Further, in examining the behavioral "response strength" (practice increases strength of response), McNeil cites a number of examples to the contrary where the practiced form is far from dominant, such as is found in the eventual triumph in a child's language of regular verbs over irregular verbs even though the latter are practiced more often. While not discounting practice entirely, McNeil feels "that whatever salutary effects practice imitation might offer, practice may not be very important to language acquisition."¹⁰

Use of Expansion

The principle called "the expansion of child speech" (Brown, 1964) may have, according to McNeil, some instructional purpose. Here, the child, who hasn't reached the same level of abstraction in the use of language as an adult, says something such as "Papa name Papa." The adult follows by saying, Yes, Papa's name is Papa."¹¹ Some linguists feel that this sort of expansion may have considerable importance in the child's acquisition of language.

It seems clear to this author that cognitive studies are producing valuable contributions to language acquisition theory and that these theories will soon be directly involved in the formulation of new methodology for teaching many subjects in the school. Teaching English as a Second Language should particularly benefit from new insights that may be discovered. At the same time, it also seems worth noting that no substitute or revision of the audio-lingual approach of any significance has yet been made available.

(Cont. on page 9)

(Cont. from page 8)

FOOTNOTES

1. Eric H. Lenneberg, "The Capacity for Language Acquisition," The Structure of Language, ed. Fodor and Katz (New York, 1964), p. 601. (This quotation does not represent the author's own theories of language acquisition.)

2. R. L. Politzer (1961) quoted by Wilga Rivers, The Psychologist and the Foreign-Language Teacher (Chicago, 1964), p. 20.

3. Noam Chomsky, "A Review of B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior," The Structure of Language, ed. Fodor and Katz (New York, 1964), p. 563.

4. Frank Smith and George A. Miller, "Introduction," The Genesis of Language (Cambridge, 1966), p. 4.

5. Smith and Miller, p. 3

6. Smith and Miller, p. 7

7. David McNeil, "The Creation of Language by Children," Psycholinguist Papers, ed. J. Lyons and R. J. Wales (Edinburgh, 1966), p. 100.

8. Ibid., p. 101.

9. David McNeil, "Developmental Psycholinguistics," The Genesis of Language, p. 67.

10. Ibid, p. 72.

11. Ibid, p. 73.