Language Learning Theories

A Theoretical Background

Assaiqeli (2013), in an article entitled "Theories of language learning: A contrasting view", tried to answer four questions which would enlighten the reader and make him synthesize a comprehensive and comprehensible image of the underpinnings of language acquisition and language learning. Assaiqeli asked "Is language a capacity originating primarily from the brain, or a system originating primarily from the environment? Is it genetically endowed and readymade" or "environmentally fashioned and evolving"? "(ibid, p. 34). In Assaiqeli's view, the preliminary answer to the aforementioned questions is that Bloomfield, Skinner, Chomsky, and Halliday are the founding fathers of Structuralism, Behaviourism, Cognitivism, and the Social Semiotic which have respectively tried to explain how people acquire and learn languages. Whereas, other scholars believe that when "speaking of theory in language learning, there are four major and familiar theories of language acquisition and language learning namely behaviorism, cognitivism, humanism, and constructivism (Fauziati, 2016, cited in Budiman, 2017, p. 102).

* Behaviourism

From a pure pedagogic point of view, Behaviorism considers learning or language learning in terms of the change of the students' behaviour in the classroom. If they prove to be able to produce language (oral or written) under the control of their teacher who is supposed to offer a reward to those who show positive changes (correct patterns of language) and punish those who show the opposite. Budiman (2017) sates that:

> Behaviorism theory views that learning is changing the behavior of students, from being able to produce oral or written product, and the task of the teacher is to control the stimulus and the learning environment in order to change the desired destination approaching, gift giver sand teachers of students who have been able to show significant changes while punishment given to students who are notable to show the change of meaning (p. 102)

The same idea was explained by Steinberg and Sciarini (2006, p. 200) by arguing that "Despite the diversity of these anti-Mentalist theorists, they hold one principle in common: they argue for the study of the physical body (including the brain) where they can relate bodily processes and functioning of the body to situations and events in the physical environment"

The role of Behaviourism and its influence in language learning and teaching lies in the use of many language teaching methods especially the Audiolingual method (ALM). The latter rests heavily on the concepts of (1) Stimulus-Response and (2) an assumption that second language learning relies on the individual's experience with the process of mother tongue learning (Budiman, ibid, pp. 107-108).

* Cognitivism

Cognitivism has been defined as "the study of mental processes such as sensation, perception, attention, encoding and memory that behaviourists were reluctant to study, because cognition occurs inside the 'black box' of the brain"(Jordan, Carlile, and Stack, 2008, p. 36). The development of Cognitivism as a separate discipline owes much to the failure of Behaviourism to fully explain language acquisition (Yilmaz, 2011). Another definition of Cognitivism is that "Cognitive science is an expansive area. It has its roots in the first half of the twentieth century at a time when academics from the disciplines of psychology, artificial intelligence, philosophy, linguistics, neuroscience and anthropology realised that they were all trying to solve problems concerning the mind and the brain (Pritchard, p. 17).

From the above definitions, one may conclude that observable bahaviour alone is not enough to understand how people learn things. In other words, one should not only take into consideration the environment, but the internal (mental) mechanism and their operations which take place when the learner tries to perceive that environment. In other words, it should be admitted that the individual has a role to play in discovering the world around him and in processing the information that he receives. This is, in brief, what Cognitivism has brought as a new way to learning.

As far as language acquisition and language learning are concerned, Tsvetkova (2016) mentions that in their first contact with the world, children start to distinguish and identify both objects and processes; they start using simple words which become more elaborate by the time and so much the same can be observed in learning a second language. Speakers of L2 build sentences using words and items following the language rules (p. 125).

In terms of the discipline's contribution to language teaching and learning, Yilmaz (2011, pp. 208-209) mentions that "Cognitive apprenticeship, reciprocal teaching, anchored instruction, inquiry learning, discovery learning, and problem-based learning are the most distinctive methods of teaching based on a cognitive perspective on learning". Cognitive apprenticeship is the method which helps students to grasp concepts and procedures; Reciprocal Teaching is the method which helps students to discover the meaning of a text through dialogue and discussion between the students and their teacher; Anchored Instruction refers to urges students and teachers to find answers to questions in realistic contexts; Inquiry Learning as a method has roots in Piaget's theory of cognitive development and aims to help students to develop their higher-order thinking skills through a process of investigating, for instance, an issue so as to find solutions; Discovery Learning, which is also based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, encourages students to discover principles and relationships by engaging them in asking questions, doing research, and so on; and and Problem-based Learning presents students with a real life problem suggesting many possible solutions and asking them to find answers to that problem (ibid, pp.8-11).

* Mentalism

Demirezen (1989) defines Mentalism as the theory which was advanced by Noam Chomsky in the 1960s and which claimed that it is not the environment that is responsible for language development (acquisition), but the speaker's inborn knowledge of language (p. 153). The basic principle of the mentalist language acquisition theory is that "everyone learns a language, not because they are subject to a similar conditioning process, but because they possess an inborn capacity which permits them to acquire a language as a normal Maturational Process" (D. A. Wilkins, 1972, p. 168, cited in Demirezen,1989,153). This inborn capacity which is the property of every human being (universal) is one of the most

powerful concepts of Chomsky's theory (Hamza, 2014, p. 10). Hamza (ibid) continues to say that according to Lyon (1997),

LAD in analogy is that box that contains all those universals. And the linguistic data that the child receives do not shape this device (universal); they only serve as triggers to activate this LAD to work. Consequently, what makes one language different from another (English from Arabic for instance) is the inference at the time linguistic data is available to the child at the time of his acquiring his mother tongue. But at the core level all these latent rules are common to all languages

Correspondingly, in Burner's (2005) view and with more detail,

The Language Acquisition Device (LAD) and UG are both concepts initiated by the well-known linguist Noam Chomsky. The idea is first of all that all human beings have innate grammar knowledge, which Chomsky called competence, and secondly that there is a universal grammar underlying all languages. The former is based on the argument that learners are indeed able to produce and understand language constructions which they have never heard before. The latter concept relates to Chomsky's principles and parameters, accounting for what languages have in common and what distinguishes them, respectively (p.44)

The role of Mentalism and its influence in language learning and teaching lies in the emergence of several theories and approaches in methodology such as Generative Grammar (GG) and Monitor Theory (MT). karakaş (2020, p. 58) maintains that these theories and approaches

have contributed to the field of English Language teaching and highlighted many points of grammar like syntax. They all have many common assumptions related to the human mind or brain. Some of them like MT and LAD were developed with the influence of the main principles of rationalist position towards knowledge, although they were not founded by Chomsky himself. To sum up, the biggest contribution of Rationalism is its emphasis on the internal accounts of language learning that helped the theories stated above to appear within the area of ELT. For example, courses in the ELT programs such as Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition and Approaches and Methods in Language teaching often refer to theories drawn out of rationalist view. The study of these mentalist theories may help prospective teachers better understand the language acquisition process and further provides them a scientific foundation for rendering foreign language teaching process to be as similar as to the first language acquisition process.

* Constructivism

Many definitions, in education, have been given to Constructivism. Dagar and Yadav (2016, p.2) present the following:

1. "It is assumed that learners have to construct their own knowledge individually and collectively. Each learner has a tool kit of concepts and skills with which he or she must construct knowledge to solve problems presented by the environment. The role of the community, other learners and teacher is to provide the setting, pose the challenges, and offer the support that will encourage mathematical construction."

2. "The doctrine itself holds that 'language users must individually construct the meaning of words, phrases, sentences and texts."

3. "Constructivists allege that it is we who constitute or construct, on the basis of our theorizing or experience, the allegedly unobservable items postulated in our theories."

4. "The central principles of this approach are that learners can only make sense of new situations in terms of their existing understanding. Learning involves an active process in which learners construct meaning by linking new ideas with their existing knowledge"

Based on the above definitions, the advocates of the theory claim that the learner is responsible for constructing his own knowledge and skills from what surrounds him. The language learner, on this basis, is supposed to construct the meaning or meanings of language items. He theorizes and links idea and new thought through experiencing language in different situations. So, in teaching language in a real constructivist learning classroom, the teacher can use combination of these learning strategies (ibid, p. 4): Use of multimedia/teaching aids, Scaffolding, Case studies, Role plying, Storytelling, Group discussions/Group activities (reciprocal Learning), Probing questions, Project based learning, and Use of learning strategies for social and emotional learning of students. As for the task of assessment, Constructivist learning requires a qualitative approach. The latter is based on real-life tasks and performance which entail completing certain learning assignments to develop the students' learning process and language production (ibid).

3.2 Most Important Achievements of Recent Second Language Learning Research

In the last three decades, there have been a number of studies in the area of second language learning (SLL). From a linguistic perspective, Chomsky's language acquisition device (LAD) and the Universal Grammar approach continue to be used in second language research (Krashen) and to explain and provide evidence about how people learn a second language and how the latter is influenced by their first language. From a cognitive perspective, there have many attempts to explain the acquisition of learning strategies and the rules which underlie language learning and performance, but there has been no clear empirical evidence to support these claims. From the functionalist tradition stance, second language development has been substantially made clear. That is, the role of context, the role of interaction between learners, and the role of society and culture have been added as crucial factors influencing SLL (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, pp. 57-59).