
Second Language Learning: Exploring Relevant Theories and Applications

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Abstract

This study centers on the exploration of the theories of second language learning and their applications. Three research purposes and three research questions guided the study. The significance of the study was also slated. Three main theories and their intricacies were explored. These theories include: Krashen's Theory, behaviourism theory (operant and classical conditioning) and social cognitive learning theory. The learning applications as well as implications of the aforementioned theories were as well highlighted and related to learning environment. The study recommended among others that the learners of this study should strictly imbibe the knowledge in this study in both teaching and learning the English language as second language. It is therefore conclusive that this study has enough information that can ameliorate the stressful process of acquiring a second language.

Keywords: Learning, Language, Krashen's Theory, Behaviourism Theory, Second Language.

Introduction

Second language learning has to do with when one who already has a first language sets to acquire another language (second language). In most cases, especially in the context of Nigeria, second language is usually the English Language. Hence, every speaker of the English language in Nigeria is a second speaker, hence, acquired it. In this respect, several theories have been

propounded to help the second language learner of the English language. These theories are aside from the general learning theories such as Behaviourism theory, Social learning theory, among others. The main purpose of theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is to shed light on how people who already know one language learn a second language. The field of second-language acquisition involves various

contributions, such as linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychology, cognitive, science, neuroscience, and education. These multiple fields in second-language acquisition can be grouped as four major research strands: (a) linguistic dimensions of SLA, (b) cognitive (but not linguistic) dimensions of SLA, (c) Socio-cultural dimensions of SLA, and (d) instructional dimensions of SLA. While the orientation of each research strand is distinct, they are in common in that they can guide us to find helpful condition to facilitate successful language learning. Acknowledging the contributions of each perspective and the interdisciplinary relationship between each field, helps the second language researchers to have a bigger lens on examining the complexities of second language acquisition.

Statement of the Problem

Acquiring a second language after one have already learned and most probably, grounded in the first language often comes with a lot of challenges. Such challenges as interference of the first language, both in making structures and at word levels, among

other abound. In this light, it becomes pertinent that some approaches to learning a second language is propounded to ease the confusion and other challenges involved. Some studies have actually concentrated in bringing up better ways to make the learning of this kind possible and easy. But a greater number of these studies focused on the skills that enhance second language learning. Hence, very few centered on the theories and application in second language learning. Thus, this study.

Significance of the Study

Being that human existence, relationship and engagement are facilitated by language. The speakers of a common language therefore, have the leverage for greased communication and common understanding for better functioning. This study is thus, of great significance to a lot of individual learners of a second language, groups, institution and engagements.

In the first place, the individual learner of a second language will find this study important in that it will make an analysis of

the application of theories that will aid their better learning and understanding of the English language as a second language and it will simplify the process for them.

It is not out of place to say that the study will be of importance also to the group of teachers who teach the English language as a second language. They will, through the discussion of the study, understand the best process to teach English as a second language in order to achieve the desirable outcome.

This study will as well be of importance to the institution of language learning. They will find this study as a guide to teaching and learning the English language more effectively to the achievement of the desirable objectives.

This study will be of a greater significance in promotion of peace and unity in a larger society. Since the understanding a common language fosters better socio-personal engagement, it is to assume that when the students, through this study, learn the English language better the common use

of the language in the larger society will be remarked by understanding and peace.

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of the study is to explore theories of language learning and their applications. Specifically, the study sort to:

- a. Identify relevant linguistic theories that can be used to learn English as a second language.
- b. Study these relevant linguistic theories for learning a second language.
- c. Explore the application of these theories in effective teaching and learning of the English language.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

- a. What are the relevant linguistic theories that can be used to learn English as a second language?

- b. What are the principles that foreground these relevant linguistic theories for a second language?
- c. What are the applications of these theories in effective teaching and learning of the English language?

are several theories that are propounded for the learning of a second language learning (L2). It is really a mixture of these theories that helps explain a student's second language acquisition (SLA). Amongst all the theories, the most widely known and well theories of a second language learning are:

Theories of Second Language

A theory is contemplative and rational type of abstract or generalizing thinking, or the results of such thinking, Terry, (2013; P.1). Depending on the context, the results might, for example, include generalized explanations of how nature works. The word has its roots in ancient Greek, but in modern use it has taken on several related meanings.

Theories guide the enterprise of finding facts rather than of reaching goals, and are neutral concerning alternatives among values. A theory can be body of knowledge, which may or may not be associated with particular explanatory models. To theorize is to develop this body of knowledge. The main purpose of theories of second language is to shed light on how people who already know one language learn a second language. There

1. Krashen's Theory (1997)

This theory consist of second language acquisition and consist of five main hypothesis:

- a. The acquisition-learning hypothesis;
- b. The monitor hypothesis;
- c. The input hypothesis;
- d. The affective filter hypothesis
- e. The natural order hypothesis

a. The Acquisition Learning:

According to Krashen, there are two independent system of foreign language performance: 'the acquired system' and 'the learned system' the acquired 'system' or '**acquisition**' is the process children undergo when they acquire their first language. It requires meaningful interaction in the

target language natural communication in which speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances, but in the communicative act.

The “**learned system**” or “**learning**” is the product of formal instruction and it is comprised conscious process which results in conscious knowledge ‘about’ the language for example knowledge of grammar rules. A deductive approach in a teacher-centered setting produces ‘learning’ while an inductive approach in a student – centered setting lead to “**acquisition**”.

b. The Monitor Hypothesis:

This explains the relationship between acquisition and learning and defines the influence of latter on the former. The monitoring function is the practical result of the learned grammar. According to Krashen, the acquisition system is the utterance initiator, while the learning system performs the role of the ‘monitor’ act

in a planning, editing, and correcting function when three specific conditions are met:

- The second language learner has sufficient time at their disposal.
- They focus on the form or think about correctness.
- They know the rule.

According to the Krashen, the role of the monitor is minor, being used only to correct deviations from “normal” speech and to give speech a more “polished” appearance.

c. The Input Hypothesis

The input hypothesis is only concerned with “acquisition”, not ‘learning’. According to this hypothesis, the learner improves and progresses along the ‘natural’ order when he/she receives second language ‘input’ that is one step beyond his/her current state of linguistic competence. For example, if a learner is at a stage “I”, then acquisition takes place when he/she is exposed to

“comprehensible input” that belongs to level $i + 1$. Since not all of the learners can be the same level of linguist competence at the same time, Krashen suggests that natural communicative input is the key to designing a syllabus, ensuring, in this way that each learner will receive some ‘ $i+1$ ’ input that is appropriate for his/her current stage of linguistic competence.

d. The Affective Filter Hypothesis

This embodies Krashen’s view that a number of “affective variable” play a facilitative, but non casual, role in second language acquisition. These variables includes: motivation, self-confidence, anxiety and personality traits. Krashen claims that learners with high motivation, self confidence, a good self-image, a low level of anxiety and extroversion are better equipped for success in second language learning. Low motivation, low self esteem, anxiety, introversion and inhibition can raise the affective

filter and form a “mental block” that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. In other words, when the filter is “up” it impedes language acquisition. On the other hand, positive effect is necessary, but not sufficient on its own, for acquisition to take place.

e. The Natural Order Hypothesis

This is based on research findings; which suggest that the acquisition of grammatical structures follows a ‘natural’ order which is predictable for a given language, some grammatical structures tend to be acquired early while others late. This order seemed to be independent of the learners’ age. L1 background, conditions to exposure and although the agreement between individual acquirers was not always 100% in the studies, there were statistically significant similarities that reinforced the existence of a Natural order of language acquisition. Krashen however, points out that the implication of the natural order

hypothesis is not that a language program syllabus should be based on the order found in the studies. In fact, he rejects grammatical sequencing when the goal is language acquisition.

2. Behaviourism Theory

This theory is mechanistic in nature, because it describes observed behavior as a predictable response to stimuli or experience. One of the proponents; B. F Skinner posits that human being at all ages learn about a language by reacting to conditions, or aspects of their environment, that they find pleasing, displeasing or threatening. He equally favours associative learning, where a mental link is usually formed between two activities or events. The two known types of associative learning include the classical conditioning and the operant conditioning.

a. Classical Conditioning

The classical conditioning was propounded by a Russian psychologist, Ivan Pavlov. He

carried out experiments where dogs learned to salivate at the sound of bell or the footsteps of the caretaker. The experiment constituted the foundation of classical conditioning, in which a response or salivation to a stimulus or the bell or the caretakers' footsteps is evoked after repeated association with the stimulus the eventually elicits food. The American behaviourist, John Watson experimented stimulus-response theories on children, where he claimed that he mold any child in any way that he chose. In one of the earliest classical conditioning in human beings, J.B. Watson set out to teach an 11 month old baby to fear furry or hairy white rat. The noise scared or frightened him as he began to cry. After a repeated pairings of a rat with the loud noise, the baby feebly cries with fear or seeing only the rat, without the loud noise. This study according to J.B. Watson suggested that a baby could be

conditioned to show fear about things he had not been afraid of, before the experiment. This implies that classical conditioning is a natural form of learning, which occurs even without intervention. So, by learning what events that are paired or go together, the learners can expect or anticipate what happens next, and this knowledge can make the world of learners to be more predictable and orderly.

Application to Language Learning

The language learning implication of this theory is that a repeated behavior or approach creates a desirable change needed. Hence, learning a second language can be made effective by a repeated contact with the target language. Since the objects used for the above experiments prove that certain repetitions bring about conditioning in behavior, it is applicable to human beings, just as claimed by the proponent of this theory. Hence, repeated drill, contact

with the second language, practice of the second etc, can earn a second language learner a perfect knowledge and ability to use the language fluently.

b. Operant Conditioning

An American psychologist B. F. Skinner (1904-1990) formulated the principle of operant conditioning by experiment primarily on rats and pigeons but maintained that the same principles apply to human beings. Skinner discovered from the rat puzzle box that an organism or a learner tend to repeat a response that has been rewarded or reinforced. In the same vein, the same organism will tend to eliminate or suppress a response that has been punished. Reinforcement is a consequence of behavior that makes it likely that an accepted behavior will be repeated, while punishment or withdrawal of reinforcement is a consequence of behavior that decreases the likelihood of repetition of unaccepted responses.

Baby Chiamaka lies peacefully in her cot. When she happens to smile, her mother goes over to her cot and played with her. Later, her father does same. As this event is repeated, the baby learns that her behavior of smiling can attract desirable loving attention from her parents; so she keeps smiling to attract the love of her parents. This originally accidental behavior of smiling suddenly becomes a conditional response. This kind of learning can be called operant conditioning, because the learner or the child learns from the consequences of operating on the environment. If the girl's parents had frowned while the child smiled to them, she would less likely to smile again. The implication of all these to teaching and learning are supposed to be at the fingertips of all competent teachers. When reinforces one person may be punishment to another person.

Application to Language Learning

Reinforcement is stressed here as a veritable tool for effective language learning especially in a second language context. The implication of the operant learning theory to learning a second language is that a language character that is encouraged is most likely to be repeated and the one that is punished is also most probably to stop. Teachers of a second language are therefore to apply the concept of positive reinforcement to any positive language habit among the learners. However, they should as well display their displeasure when a learner does not seem to get it right. This way, the learner will struggle for the right knowledge and the right use. To this point, the relevance of this theory to language learning cannot be over emphasized.

3. Social Learning Theory

This is otherwise known as social cognitive theory, which was developed by an American psychologist Albert Bandura, while

the behaviourists believe that the environment chiefly act on a person for his development. Bandura (1989), believes that the impetus or the moving force for development comes from the person. Social learning theory posits that people learn appropriate language mainly by observing and imitating models that is, by watching other people considered to be better examples of the behaviour or mannerism being emulated. This process is known as modeling or observational learning. Imitation of models has remained the most important aspect or elements of learning by children, especially as it concerns; dealing with aggression, learning a language, developing a moral values, role playing in the family and peer group adventures, etc. Through a corrective feedback on their behavior, learners gradually develop standards for judging their actions and inactions, and become more discriminatory in choosing

models that represent those standards. They equally begin to develop self-confidence in themselves that they even possess the characteristics needed in life activities. Thus, learning occurs through modeling or socialization. ‘Socialization’ is usually applied by some designated social agents, like the family, peers, religious sects, and the school and job environment. Learners draws their exemplified models from some or all these social agents. This justifies the latest name of the theory, as “social cognitive or environmental theory approach”, because an individual is what he is as a result of others around him. This theory strongly maintained that there is no such a thing like self-made man or woman, due to the fact that it takes a group to make an individual. If you train a child well, he will surely behave like one.

Application/Implication on Second Language Learning

Modeling is a major means of learning whatsoever, language not excepted. It is moreover endowed from this theory that learners of a language can learn by mere observation from the environment. Teachers of a Second Language in this regard are to be role models. It is therefore arguable that student do not learn only what the teacher teaches them in classes but also observe what and how the teacher uses a second language outside the classroom setting; in his/her personal engagements. Having known this, teachers are to be at their best at all times considering that a lot of people learn from what they do, even when they (the teachers) are not aware.

Recommendations

From the analysis above, it can be rightly recommended thus:

The study of the theories of second language learning is a step to foster effective learning of a second language. It is therefore encouraged that more measures be

investigated for the effective learning of the English language as a second language. This way, the stress and challenges associated with learning English as a second language can be curbed.

Second, the learners of this study should strictly imbibe the knowledge in this study. Considering the application and implication of the discussed theories as highlighted in this study. It is expected that if teachers of a second language can be guided by these application, the outcome of a second language learner's struggle will always be awesome. It equally recommended that future researchers refer to this study as a foundational knowledge for researches in related areas.

Conclusion

To conclude, a second language is a language learned after an individual has learned a first language. On the context of Africa; Nigeria inclusive, the English language is taken as a second language. In this regard, the learning of the English language as a second language in Nigerian context has

always posed difficulties ranging from first language interference and other environmental factors to physiological, emotional and personal factors. It is in light of these, that certain scholars come up with propositions that can help in effective decoding of a second language. Several theories have been proposed as ideal to this. This study therefore investigated some of these relevant theories of learning the English language as a second language and equally highlighted their applications in a practical engagement.

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