

Crossroads between Behaviourism and Mentalism in Language Acquisition

By

Asime Beryl Okpin, PhD;

International Bible Training College (Ibtc),

Port Harcourt Campus

08064878878; asimeforgod@gmail.com, asimegracewealth@yahoo.com

Abstract

There are several language acquisition theories in linguistic scholarship. In this work, two of these dominant theories - Behaviourism and Mentalism, are examined to see how they contribute to the language acquisition of a learner. Taking a comparative approach, the study considers the principles, strengths and weaknesses of each of these theories. A cursory look at the theories shows that neither of these two theories is plausible enough to solely account for the linguistic acquisition of the learner. The implication is that the language instructor has to make a crucial decision on how these theories can be used in the development of the learner. Essentially, this study concludes that a hybrid approach is necessary for a balanced language acquisition. This is because the tabula rasa principle of Behaviourism which makes language acquisition more of an external factor is verifiable. The same can be said of the cognitive principle of Mentalism, which makes language acquisition a product of the internal factor (mind). The postulation here is that the strengths of both theories should be harnessed to achieve a better result in language acquisition.

1.0 Introduction

Language is a unique possession of man as it is only man that has the ability to speak or acquire language. This trait marks man different from all other creatures. Language then is a code system of communication, a tool of thought, a medium of self-expression, a social institution, a source of ethnic pride and identity, and political controversy (O' Grady, 1987). Imagine a world without language!

Given the functions language performs in human life and society, it becomes an utmost interest to the applied linguists to investigate how man acquires language

from birth (since he was not born with it) or learns a second language. In this work, the critical themes of Applied Linguistics are examined vis-à-vis the main principles for language learning of mentalism and behaviourism and how the language acquirer stands at a crossroads between two theories of language acquisition.

2.0 Applied Linguistics

Applied Linguistics is a broad area of linguistic enterprise in which an attempt is made to marry language theory with practice. It embraces every aspect of language theory, language learning, teaching and evaluation, but primarily concerned with 'the application of linguistic theories, methods and findings to the elucidation of LANGUAGE problems...' (Crystal, 2008, p.31). The critical themes or central concerns of applied linguistics are essentially theories and methods of language teaching/learning and evaluation. When a child is born, the process of language acquisition begins immediately from his immediate community. He acquires the mother tongue with little or no effort. He is however confronted with two giant theories of language acquisition with different points of view: Behaviourism and Mentalism. At some point, the language learner or acquirer stands at a crossroads between these two giant theories and has to decide what to choose.

Behaviourism and Mentalism are two main schools concerning language teaching and learning. Each has different viewpoints towards language learning. The main principles, strengths and weaknesses of each are discussed below.

2.1 Behaviourism and Language Acquisition

The learning theory dominant in the first half of the 20th Century was behaviourism. Throughout the 1950s and 60s behaviourism remained influential, although since that time new theories have made substantial inroads in general acceptance. Behaviourism is a psychological approach to learning that emphasizes observable and measurable behaviour. The behaviourist theory of animal and human learning focuses only on objectively observable behaviours and discounts mental activities. Behaviour theorists define learning as a more or less permanent change in behaviour. In behaviourism, the learner is viewed as passively adapting to their environment. Two of the most famous experiments to prove learning are

based on the "Dog Salivation Experiment" by Ivan Pavlov and the "Skinner Box" experiment with pigeons by B.F. Skinner.

Bloomfield was also one of the most important figures of this theory who influenced the writings of Watson, so he expressed the main principles of this theory by defining language as "Language is behaviour". According to behaviourists, language learning is a change in behaviour. It refers to the conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules and being able to talk about them. Language teaching is the process which facilitates the process of language learning. Behaviourism explains that man was born with a blank sheet and that language is an aspect of human behaviour which deals with things that are observed and measured. Language, according to them is a set of habits and a social process used even by uneducated people. It is not an individual process, but it is something used by all members of society. They believed that language is a rigid system of patterns of contrastive features, a matter of cooperation and interaction among the different users. The main figures of this school are Watson, Thorndike, Pavlov and Skinner. The behaviourists' basic mechanism of learning is stimulus => response => reinforcement.

Principles of Behaviourism

The main principles of Behaviourism are summarised below.

1. Language learning is habit formation. It is similar to learning to type, so it is a conscious process.
2. Speech is very important to show the performance and evaluate learning through that performance. Performance is the actual use of language (Dineen, 1967, p.80). Language is behaviour, so it is learned by behaving. Foreign language learning is a mechanical process. Teachers should feed the students step by step, so they are related to the behavioural psychology.
3. Drills are one of the important techniques used in language learning.
4. Stimulus-response is one of the main principles in language learning.
5. Reinforcement, repetition, trial and error are used widely in language learning. Motivation is the desire to achieve proficiency in a new language in order to participate in the life of the community that speaks the language (Dulay et al., 1982, p.47). These psychological principles are emphasized in language learning.

6. Language is universal so there is more than one element participating in learning, like society, learners, psychological facts, environments, teachers, textbooks, etc. They emphasize only the external factors that can be seen and observed.
7. Language teaching depends on analogy rather than on rules for teaching the structure of language.

Strengths of Behaviourism

Some of the strong points of this theory are:

1. It is based on observable behaviour. This means that the learner learns by what is seen in the environment. The teacher also knows what the learner has learnt by what the learner does.
2. It focuses on behavioural analysis. This means that the theory tends to explain why people behave the way they do. In other words the behaviour of people is directly tied to their learning.
3. It is rooted in reinforcement either through reward or punishment.

Weaknesses of Behaviourism

The major pitfall of this theory is that it implies that the child has no input in the language acquisition process. Some of the weaknesses of the behaviourist approach towards language teaching/learning include the following:

1. This school was derived from the study of the animal's behaviour (e.g. Pavlov's dogs, Thorndike's chicken, and Skinner's pigeons) and not from the study of human behaviour.
2. Learning depends on the principle of (stimulus-response) for animals, but the matter is completely different concerning language learning.
3. They claim that they can explain all kinds of behaviour, but complex thoughts in language cannot be explained in behaviour.
4. No regards are given to the innate capacity of human being in learning and give interest to what is seen and observed.
5. Rewards must be given immediately in the process of learning.
6. Chaining which means the response is not rewarded until making another two or set to be chained. Teaching and learning cannot be explained in the process of (stimulus- response), but it can be used to learn simple things only.

2.2 Mentalism and Language Acquisition

The mentalist theory of language learning, developed in America first by Noam Chomsky, and later by Eric H. Lenneberg (a neuropsychologist), came up as a reaction against the Behaviouristic language learning theory, and contradicted its precedent at almost every point of basic structure. The major principle of Mentalistic language acquisition theory is that "everybody learns a language, not because they are subjected to a similar conditioning process, but because they possess an inborn capacity which permits them to acquire a language as a normal Maturation Process" (D.A. Wilkins, 1972, p. 168). In 1965, in a book titled *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Chomsky claimed that there are innate properties of language because a child masters his native language in a very short time in spite of the highly abstract nature of rules. After this, in an article entitled "Linguistic Theory", Chomsky called this innate knowledge 'Language Acquisition Device' (LAD). He also insisted that every normal human being is born into a society with a LAD, which embodies the nature and the structure of human language. LAD is what counts for language acquisition where environment has got no import for the learning process at all.

LAD, in fact, was offered by Chomsky as an explanation why kids develop competence in learning a first language in a relatively short time, just by being exposed to it, owing to the fact that every normal human being is born with a LAD.

Principles of Mentalism

The following in summary are the main principles that underlie the mentalists' approach to language acquisition process:

1. Language is universal. This can also be said with respect to language acquisition and language use.
2. Foreign language learning is emphasized on the internal factors which are unseen; that is they think that each person has an innate capacity for using and learning language.
3. Most of the principles of Behaviourism, like reinforcement, rewards, repetition, etc. are not important because we can learn with or without these principles and there is no role for the external factors like environment and social factors in language learning.
4. Even if we know a great deal about the speaker, we cannot expect when he will speak or what he will speak.

5. Mentalists think that the correct response or the incorrect one does not mean that learning is done.

Strengths of Mentalism

Some of the strong points of Mentalism are:

1. Language learning is a mental construct. This suggests that language learning is a process of constructing mental representations of linguistic forms and meanings.
2. Language learning is the product of the mind. It is formed and learnt in the mind before it is expressed.
3. Language is an aspect of human nature. Language and its ability to communicate are considered as basic aspects of the nature of man.

Weaknesses of Mentalism

Arguments against the mentalist approach are:

1. There is no role for the external factors in language learning while in fact there is a great deal of these factors in language learning.
2. They emphasized the innate capacity of learners only and neglected the other factors such as age, time and the social environment of the language acquirer.

3.0 Behaviourism *versus* Mentalism: The Crossroads

From the foregoing, it is apparent that neither behaviourism nor mentalism is without weaknesses. The language acquirer therefore stands at a crossroads to choose between them. In foreign or natural language acquisition, neither of the two approaches is self-sufficient enough to satisfactorily cater for the holistic need of the language acquirer. Both have undoubtedly made great contributions to the language enterprise. A major contribution of Mentalism is that it reveals that the behaviourist's attitude to the study of language acquisition and learning was shallow and unsatisfactory. Through the mentalist theory, the impact of the internal environment (the mind) of the learner is also seen. On the other hand, most of the steps taken in language teaching inclination of Mentalist theory seem rather theoretical and less practical. A language acquirer, whether natural or foreign, does need some practical methods to demonstrate his language ability. Language is an art and requires practical drills, imitation, reinforcements etc., which function together with the innate LAD.

Without adequate drills - which is a necessary device to maximize correct active language production, guided rule learning, efficient repetition and reinforcement under free conditions, all of which imprint the correct utterances into the mind of the students, nothing can be achieved. It is at this point Behaviourism and Mentalism meet each other as they serve as complementary theories to explain the processes involved in the learning and teaching of languages. In this respect, we can say that the child's language acquisition is based on the on-going activity of the interaction of not only the external impressions but also the internal systems (the cognitive processes). Therefore, if we ask which theory the language acquirer has to choose as the most suitable approach towards language acquisition, learning and teaching, the answer is both because he needs both the innate LAD and other external factors for a balanced language acquisition.

4.0 Conclusion

As there are weaknesses and strengths in every individual, so are there weaknesses and strengths in every linguistic theory. It therefore behoves those in the language enterprise to blend the strengths in both theories to achieve a better result. For a language teacher at every level, a blend of term and principles for better performance is the best choice. If it should neither be solely Behaviourism nor Mentalism, *then it should be Mental-behaviourism!*

References

- Chomsky, N. (1959). "A review of B.F. Skinner's verbal behaviour". *Language*, 35
 (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge: Massachusetts
 Crystal, D. (2008). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics* (6th ed.). Oxford:
 Blackwell Publishing.
- Dineen, F. P. (1967). *An introduction to general linguistics*. New York: Holt, Rinehart
 and Winston inc.
- Jones, H. & Wheeler, T. (1983). *A training course for TEFL*. Oxford: Oxford
 University Press.
- Lennenberg, E. H. (1967). *The biological foundations of language*. New York: John
 Wiley and Sons.
- McNeil, D. (1968). "On theories of language acquisition" in T.R. Dixon and D.L.
 Horton (Ed.), *Verbal behaviour and general behaviour theory*. New Jersey:
 Prentice-Hall Inc.

- O,Grady, W. et al (1987). *Contemporary linguistics: An introduction*. London: Longman.
- Oktaviarini, M. (2011). *A comparison of two theories of language teaching: Mentalism and Cognitive Code*. Retrieved from <http://maryszone.blogspot.com/2011/03/comparison-of-two-theories-of-language.html> on 29th of February, 2016.
- Pei, M. (1966). *Glossary of linguistic terminology*. New York: Double day and Company.
- Wilkins, D.A. (1972). *Linguistics in language teaching*. London: Edward Arnold.