



Relevance of Learning Theories to English Language Teaching

Beatrice B. Adeyemi

General and Entrepreneurial Studies Unit
Olusegun Agagu University of Science and Technology
Okitipupa, Ondo State, Nigeria
Email: adeyemibeatrice163@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study explores the relevance of learning theories to English language teaching. The significance of learning theories to language teaching cannot be overemphasized. Learning theories help teachers on how best to facilitate learning. They help in motivating students' learning and the outcome. The complex nature of language teaching and learning makes it difficult to teach effectively without having adequate knowledge of those theories that are related to teaching English as a second language. Different cultures and background determine the unique experiences of learners which consequently have impact on learning and assimilation. On this basis, the study recommends the application of theoretical knowledge to teaching English language, and provides teachers with useful background information on how to deliver lessons skilfully and more effectively.

Keywords: Language, cognitive theory, behaviourist theory, transformational theory, teaching, learning

Introduction

Language is a significant tool for interpersonal, intrapersonal, written, verbal and other forms of communication. Through language, thoughts are communicated, points and ideas are shared. Therefore, for English language to be taught and comprehended adequately; knowledge of language theories cannot be de-emphasized. Learning theories assist the language teachers to take cognizance of the relevant background skills that would assist the learners in language acquisition. Many scholars, philosophers, linguists, educationists and psychologists (Chomsky, 1957; Skinner, 1974; Thorndike, 1999) develop interest on different theories in language learning. This is because the nature of language is complex and acquiring it to communicate experiences and feelings requires a considerable grasping of basic concepts.

Sapir as cited by Azikiwe (1998) stresses that language is primarily vocal actualisation of the tendency to see reality symbolically. Therefore, language teachers cannot depend solely on personal experience, emotions, beliefs and mind-sets; but on theoretical issues related to educational practices and language related issues. The multifaceted roles of a teacher cannot be undermined as this is rightly captured by Sharma (2012) that a good teacher is more than just a lecturer in school and colleges; but also, a manager, a planner, a counsellor and a mentor.

Education at any level enlarges the comprehension of what happened before; which connects to what is currently happening and what will transpire later in the future. Through education, learners are opportune to address issues logically and critically. The available medium currently in use to tackle various subject

matters in sciences, social sciences and some disciplines in humanities is English. This signifies that the product of any school in Nigeria should be versatile in using English as a language of interaction and international connections. Nobody is a reservoir or island of knowledge because learning is a continuous process and it takes place when an individual or learner is able to give adequate feedback on what has been acquired during the teaching process and life experiences. In the views of However, Barnes-Holmes and Moors (2013), learning is changes in behaviour that result from experience or mechanically as changes in the organism that result from experience. This experience is long lasting and helps the learner to function in various capacities.

Language is versatile. Therefore, to attest to the versatility of language to human society; the functions of language are categorized into: (i) inter-personal or interactional function; this allows for new relationship and connection with already existing one; (ii) ideational function; this enables people to form ideas and experiences about the environments; and (iii) textual function; this provides opportunities to recall events in permanent form. All experiences in life can be transitory, but once they are recorded or written, they cannot be forgotten. The textual function allows language events to become language texts. This captures the Chinese proverb that *the faintest pen is more powerful than the strongest memory*. According to Singh and Samant (2012), language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. These symbols are auditory and produced by organs of speech. The movable and immovable organs of speech such as the teeth, lips, pharynx, and uvula, among others play significant part in speech production.

Adekunle (2016) opines that the pre-eminent position of English in the daily life and linguistic repertoire of many Nigerians today are quite obvious. Interactions in the classroom are mostly done in English and learners without adequate knowledge of the language are affected in discharging academic activities. In the view of Adeyanju and Egwuogu (2003), language is a

system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which a particular speech community communicates. Human beings do communicate their thoughts, feelings and ideas to one another and they do this either in speech or writing. This implies that language has a multi-purpose functions and interactions through language are multi-dimensional. This indicates that all facilities should be put in place for teachers to teach in ways that will motivate learners to acquire the required knowledge.

In addressing the English language needs of students, all the various resources needed should be provided and the learning theories should not be neglected. According to Hill (2002), learning theories have two principal values. The first is in providing the vocabulary and the conceptual framework for interpreting the examples of learning observed. The second is to suggest where to get solutions to practical problems. With this demand on the language teachers to produce learners that would confidently discuss issues critically and display a high level of understanding of concepts in their disciplines; learning theories must be adequately mastered. This study therefore examines the relevance of learning theories to English language teaching.

Language is an important tool for learning, interaction and discussion, without which there will not be verbal or spoken communication. It is therefore necessary that the learners of English master the principles needed in acquiring skills that will enable them utilize various parts of the language as well as express themselves coherently and reasonably. For the learners to arrive at this stage, the learners must be taught in a way that will enable them to learn and assimilate the appropriate language skills. Several researchers (Hill, 2002, Adeyanju, 2003, Culatta, 2020) have pointed out the indispensability of learning theories to language teaching. However, many language teachers do not possess the knowledge of the learning theories so as to have some scientific bases for teaching. This inhibits the language teachers' effectiveness and invariably affects students' mastery of appropriate language skills. This study therefore examines the relevance of learning theories to English language learning.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are to

- i. explain learning theories;
- ii. examine the relevance of learning theory to English language teaching;
- iii. identify the different learning theories in relation to language teaching; and
- iv. relate the theories to language learning and teaching.

Theories of Learning

A theory is a proposition based on a hypothesis. According to Omidéyi, Adesina and Adika (2002), a theory is an orderly, integrated set of statement that explains and predicts behaviour. Oladele (1998) states that a theory represents general laws or principles of observed events. A theory of learning is the aftermath of several research and investigations by educationists. Learning theory provides the teacher with practical and workable guideline information in the teaching process. Gagne as cited by Ing (2012)) indicates the three aspects of teaching which can benefit from the knowledge of learning theory. The first is the planning of courses, curricula and lessons. The second is the conduct of instruction; while the third is the assessment of what has been learnt. Teachers' adequate comprehension of the learning theories will significantly assist learners to gain maximally from learning activities. Ing (2012) further points out that learning theory can guide in the presentation of what is to be learned. sJackman (2020) depicts learning theories as the unpack complex cognitive processes that provide useful mental models for educators to structure design courses around while also providing insights on best practice during and after learning activities.

Self-directed judgment and principles cannot actually give authentic answers to issues relating to learning and teaching. Available research work on teaching and learning can complement current learning activities. The training learners undergo transcends the immediate environment to understanding of the world around them. Learners' acquisition of appropriate skills, development of mental and social capabilities as well as competences equipped them to contribute

to the development of the society. According to Omidéyi, Adesina and Adika (2002), theories are tools for advancing knowledge because they tell us what aspects of child behaviour are important to observe at least for the moment, and why they are important. Learner cannot be taught in a vacuum.

There are various factors that combine to distinguish an individual from others. In the view of Azikiwe (1998), every child is unique and no two children are the same physically, mentally and intellectually. Some are fast learners while others are slow learners. Some are introverts, others are extroverts. It is the responsibility of an efficient teacher to select goals, contents, methods, and evaluation strategies that will serve the purpose of every learner. Theories provide essential framework for generating new knowledge and assist teachers to tailor teaching-learning activities in ways that will benefit the learners.

Gagne as cited by Ing (2012) indicates that whenever teachers verify their activities against the standards of learning theory, they are accomplishing two things. These are: (1) they are avoiding the grossly inappropriate actions which, though seemingly desirable on other grounds, nevertheless fail to promote learning in students; (2) they are adopting and maintaining attitudes which support learning as the central purpose of their activities. Utilizing learning theories in teaching activities enable learners to use the knowledge acquired in different situations. This provides opportunities for the teacher to evaluate the methods of teaching in line with other prevailing techniques. Lavadenz (2011) describes learning theories as conceptual or philosophical orientations about ways that human beings learn. Some of the learning theories and their theories that will be specifically considered are classified into: behaviourism, cognitivist and constructivism. Each of these theories and theorists will be discussed in relation with English language teaching.

Cognitive Theory and English Language Teaching

The theory of cognitive development was first propounded by Jean Piaget, a Swiss Psychologist

and theorist in child development. In a study carried out by McLeod (2018), it was indicated that Piaget's theory of cognitive development explains how a child constructs a mental model of the world. Piaget opposed the idea that intelligence was a fixed trait, and regarded cognitive development as a process which happens as a result of biological maturation and interaction with the environment. The knowledge of this theory will assist the teachers to have some scientific basis for teaching. By comprehending this theory, teachers can select the most appropriate and suitable approaches to teaching. According to Piaget as cited by McLeod (2018), children are born with a very basic mental structure (genetically inherited and evolved) on which all subsequent learning and knowledge are based.

Ajala (2002) highlights that the goal of teaching and learning of English across the primary, secondary and the university is to help learners to communicate effectively in the language. Being able to communicate in the language naturally is the ability to read, write, speak and understand the language when used in the process of communication. Communication is highly important for proper interactions with others and for academic purposes. Toro, Camacho-Minuche, Eliana-Tapia & Paredes (2018) indicate that providing students with real communicative contexts is the best option teachers can make, because students can exchange real information, so language and phrases will emerge according to the situation. It is also necessary that students have a lot of exposure to the language; the linguistic input they receive should provide them with opportunities to produce and use the language in any situation, motivation then plays a very important role in encouraging students to verbally communicate. Piaget identifies four stages in his theory. These are: (i) Sensorimotor stage (from birth to 2 years); (ii) Preoperational stage (2 to 7 years); (iii) Concrete operational stage (7 to 12 years); and (iv) Formal operational stage (12 years and upward). Each of these stages is significant to teaching from the elementary to the tertiary levels of education.

McCain (2013) opined that the sensorimotor stage starts at birth and is characterised by the

absence of language. At this stage of intellectual development, people learn about themselves and their environment through motor and reflex actions. The Preoperational stage indicates the periods at which the acquisition of vocabulary to represent objects and experiences are manifested. The third stage which is the Concrete operational stage provides a platform for logical and rational thinking. The formal operational stage which is from age 12 upward enables the adolescent to think, reason and logically analyse than when at the concrete stage.

Oladele (1998) highlights the assumptions of Piaget's theory. These are: (1) heredity and environment play significant roles in cognitive development. He indicated that it is possible that an infant possesses all the necessary genetic traits and innate (inborn) factors for co-ordination, and yet is not able to manipulate objects because it has been deprived of playing with things necessary for the development of such skills; (2) He opines that people have a natural tendency to know and will actively work to extend their knowledge. This necessitates the interaction of people with their environment; and (3) all living organisms share things in common which are organisation and adaptation. Every organism tends to integrate experiences into coherent systems, this represents organisation. This innate tendency of an organism to interact with its environment in Piaget's opinion is known as adaptation. The theory of Piaget signifies that for the child learner to be adequately informed, various stages are involved which must be sequentially followed, without by-passing any.

Piaget's theory therefore assumes that learning should be in sequential order, from known to unknown, from simple to complex and from concrete to abstraction. This will help the learners at each level of development to harmonize amicably their experiences with the social demands and challenges. Teaching and learning English should be from exposing learners to the simpler forms of topics to the more complex aspects. This enables the learners to align previous studies to new activities in language learning. A learner that was exposed to the past tense form in primary school might not have mastered the correct usage in secondary school.

Such a learner may construct ungrammatical sentences like: (i) *The man drove the car.* (ii) *Richard has rang the bell.* For sentence (i), the correct past tense form of drive is drove. This shows that not all verbs in English select base + -ed for their past tense. Likewise, in sentence (ii), the correct form of the present perfect tense is “has rung.” However, subsequent levels of learning activities will assist the learners to differentiate between the use of the correct forms of the past tense and the present perfect tense. Thus, there is a graduation from one level of understanding to another. Piaget further argued that the stages of cognitive development can never be skipped because each successive stage builds on the accomplishments of all previous stages. There is the need to align new experiences with previous knowledge for better understanding. Lavadenz (2011) revealed that second language educators must be knowledgeable about the development of learning theories both in terms of their historical development and in terms of their analogous relationship to language teaching.

Skinner's Behaviourist Theory

Skinner (1974) was one of the proponents of the behaviourist theory. He propounded the theory of operant conditioning. He differentiated between positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement. According to McCain (2013), Skinner's theory of learning is responsible for distinguishing two different types of behaviour. These are (i) Respondent Behaviour and (ii) Operant Behaviour. Both types of behaviour are necessary to observe and measure aspects of a human's environment, the action of a human's behaviour and the consequences of a human's behaviour.

In Skinner's theory, operant conditioning is shown in the establishment of response through reinforcement. Reinforcement occurs when an action is socially accepted that it produces positive reinforcement such as praise, awards, recommendation, commendation and giving of prize. Learners tend to assimilate and comprehend better when appropriate reinforcement is used. The lecturer should see to it that the learning experiences commensurate with the learners' repertoire so as to get the best

learning outcomes. The teacher should endeavour to reinforce the behaviour in the learners which needed to be repeated for subsequent good performance. If the teacher observes that the students could not answer the questions pose to them after the teaching learning process, there would be the need to review or reteach the topic. However, if a good number of them responds correctly to the questions, positive reinforcement should be provided for the approved behaviour.

Bruner (1966) is one of the proponents of Constructivist theory. He opines that students' learning progresses and learners acquire new knowledge based on previous knowledge. Previous knowledge of learners has to do with the already acquired skills and ideas. According to Culatta (2020), the instructor should try and encourage students to discover principles on their own. The responsibility of the instructor is to translate information to be learnt into a format appropriate to the learner's current level of understanding. Bruner as cited by Culatta (2020) states that a theory of instruction should address four major areas. These are: (i) predisposition towards learning; (ii) the ways a body of knowledge can be structured so as to be readily grasped by the learner; (iii) the most effective sequences in which to present material; and (iv) the nature and pacing of rewards and punishment.

Knowledge should be structured in a way that the learning experiences are related to activities in the larger society. English language fall within the subjects classified under the spiral curriculum; unlike others that belong to the linear curriculum. The spiral curriculum is when a set of topics taught at the elementary level still featured at the advanced stage of learning; though with greater difficulty. In the linear curriculum, the reverse is the case, as most concepts don't replicate themselves at the higher level. However, in practical terms, no curriculum is solely spiral or linear; each has the features of the other. Rintaningrum (2008) maintained that Bruner proposed a spiral curriculum concept to facilitate structuring a curriculum around the great issues, principles, and values that a society deems worthy of the continual concern of members.

Chomsky's Transformational Theory

Chomsky (1975), an American linguist and philosopher propounded the theory of transformational/ generative theory. He is called the father of modern linguistics. His theory attempts to explain that language is innate, which signifies that human beings are born with the ability for language. However, the skills in speaking and using language efficiently must be learnt and utilized. Clark as cited by Aljoundi (2014) states that “even if children are born with a learning mechanism dedicated to language, the main proposals is to focus only on syntactic, the rest is to be learnt.” This indicates that in spite of Chomsky’s belief that children have the innate ability to learn language, there is need to learn and develop by social interaction with the environment. Chomsky as cited by Vantha (2016) indicated that most of the knowledge on language is innate, so the child has a large part of prior knowledge on language structures in insubstantial and only learn the idiosyncratic structures of the language. The core of this theory is the idea that all human languages originate from a common source, an innate set of grammatical rules and approaches that is hardwired into the human mind. Bumfit as cited by Azikiwe (1998) indicates that language has to do with the relationship between words and experience and it could be produced and received in form of the verbalization of experience or experience of verbalization. This is putting experiences into words for others to understand; as well as to comprehend the experience of others put into words. It is through language that communication and interactions take place. For learning to be thorough, teachers should provide learning resources for active learning activities.

The theory of Chomsky has brought into recognition the special equipment known as Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Lillo-Martin as cited by Aljoundi (2014) further explains that the innate knowledge referred to as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), encompasses the principle common to all languages named the Universal Grammar (UG). In the view of McNeil as cited by Lavadenz (2011), the LAD comprises of four internal linguistic properties. These are: (1) The ability to distinguish speech sounds from other sounds in the environment; (2) The ability to organize

linguistic events into various categories that can be defined; (3) The ability to recognize that only certain types of linguistic structures are possible and others are not; and (4) The ability to evaluate language production to determine accuracy of production.

The internal structure of statements comprises language universals. Chomsky who believes strongly in transformational theory affirms that two basic structures occur in any utterance. These are the surface structure and the deep structure. The surface structure develops from the deep structure. Tomori (2004) indicates that the deep structure of a sentence is the underlying syntactico-semantic component of the sentence, and the surface structure is the form in which the sentence appears phonologically or orthographically. When a surface structure connects to more than one deep structure; there is a case of ambiguity. Transformations unite the sentences and clarify the connections between them, yet they also create an interesting complexity that must be unravelled by the learners as the surface structure is decoded into its deep structure components.

Learners must acquire the level of linguistic competence that will place them in position to use words objectively, creatively and critically. Bornstein (2008) states that linguistic competence involves the following abilities: (i) to produce and comprehend a theoretically infinite number of sentences; (ii) to recognize grammatical and ungrammatical sentences; (iii) to perceive the structure of sentences; (iv) to recognize sentences that are paraphrases of each other; and (v) to detect ambiguity. The activities in the English language class should be thorough, captivating, exciting and such that will enable the students to learn naturally. Nunan (2010) points out that pedagogical task describes what learners do in the classroom to activate and develop their language skills. He stated that in spite of the fact that the tasks are designed for the classroom, there should be a connection between the activities done in the classroom and the world beyond the classroom.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no gainsaying that learning theories are potentially pertinent when utilize in teaching learning activities. The teachers are the facilitators of learning activities. They provide guidance, help and supervision to enhance smooth flow of interaction and discussion. Their familiarity with the theories will prepare them to create and provide captivating opportunities and atmosphere for learners. In this era of information explosion, it is significant that students learn to think and reason independently; and the language teachers equip with the knowledge of the theories will create appropriate methods to teach the language lessons effectively.

The learning theories should not be jettisoned as majority of the language teaching instructional devices are provided in conformity with some of the ideas derived from these theories. Suffice to say, most textbooks that guide teachers have been produced by those who believe these theories. The knowledge of the theories will enable teachers to know how to assess, treat and encourage learners to gain comprehensively from each language learning experience.

English language learning is planned on the bases of the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. As a result of the unique characteristics of language in every human endeavour, learners must try all they could to master the concepts being taught.

References

- Adekunle, O. O. (2016). Exemplifications of politeness phenomenon in some English as a Second language encounters. *Grammar of Linguistics and Society*. A festschrift for Wale Osisanwo, Ile – Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press
- Adeyanju, D. & Egwuogu, C. (2003). *Vital Aspects of English Usage for Tertiary Institutions*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers (Nig.) Ltd.
- Aljoundi, E. K. (2014). *Language Acquisition theories*. witwatersand: the university of Witwaterstand.
- Azikiwe, U. (1998). *Language Teaching and Learning*. Ibadan: Africana-Fep Publishers Limited.
- Bornstein, D. (2008). *Readings in the theory of grammar: from the 17th to the 20th century: Language Arts and Discipline*. Michigan: Winthrop Publishers, University of Michigan.
- Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Towards a Theory of Instruction*, Harvard University Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic Structure*. Monton: The Hague.
- Culatta, R. (2020). Constructivist Theory (Jerome Bruner). Available online at www.instructionaldesign.org/theories/constructivist/
- De Houwer, J., Barnes-Holmes, D. & Moors, A. What is learning? On the nature and merits of a functional definition of learning. *Psychon Bull Rev* 20, 631 – 642 (2013). <http://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-013-0386-3>
- Hill J. R. (2002). Learning theories. Available Online at scholar.google.com/citation
- Nunan, D. (2010). A task-based Approach to Materials Development. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 1(2), doi:10.7575/aiac.a1n.2p.135
- Ing M. (2012). Learning Theories in Lawton et al (eds). *Theory and Practice of Curriculum Studies*. USA: Routledge Library Editions: Education, pp. 68 - 69
- Jackman D. (2020). Learning Theories. Available on line at www.edapp.com/blog/learning-theories/
- Kolawole, C. O. O. (2002). Content and Process in the English Curriculum in Ajala J. A. *Designing content of the Curriculum*. Ibadan: MayBest Publications.
- Lavadenz, M. (2011). From Theory to Practice for Teaching of English Learners. *TheCATESOL Journal* , 22(1): 18-47
- McChain, L. H. (2013). An explanation of learning theories and their application in the Classroom: A critical perspective: A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the Requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Sciences with a Specialization in Psychology at Shimer College.
- McLeod, S. A. (2018). *Jean piaget's theory of cognitive development*. Simply Psychology. Available on line at <https://www.simplypsychology.org/p>

- Nunan, D. (2010). A task-based Approach to Materials Development. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 1(2), pp. 135 -160. doi:10:7575/aiac.a1n.2p.135
- Oladele, J. O. (1998). *Fundamentals of Psychological Foundations of Education: Handbook For Education students and Teachers*. Lagos: Johns-Lad Publishers Ltd
- Olu Tomori, S. A. (2004). *The morphology and syntax of present-day: An Introduction*. London: Heinemann Publishers.
- Omidéyi, Z. A., Adesina, O. J. & Adika, L.O. (2002). *Issue on childhood and Adolescent Psychology*. Ibadan: M. Alofe (Nig.) Enterprises.
- Rintaningrum, R. (2008). Constructivist Theory and a Teaching and Learning Cycle in English. *Journal of Social Humaniora*, Vol. 1, Doi:10.12962/j24433527.v1i1.682
- Sharma, D. (2012). Job satisfaction of secondary school class teachers. *Indian Journal of Psychometry and Education*. 43(1), pp.21 – 24. ISSN: 0378 - 1003
- Singh, A. A. & Samant, S. V. (2012). The Role of Language in Research. *Lokavishkar International E-Journal*, 1(4)
- Skinner, B. F. (1974). *About behaviourism*. New York: Knopf; (distributed by Random House).
- Thorndike, E. L. (1999). *Education Psychology: briefer course*, New York: Routledge, ISBN 978-0-415-21011-9
- Toro, V., Camacho-Minuche, G., Plaza-Tapia, E. & Paredes, F. (2019). The use of the Communicative language teaching approach to improve students' oral skills. *English Language Teaching* 12(1), pp. 110-118
- Vantha, R. (2016). Transformational Generative Grammar and Cognitive Theory of Noam Chomsky – A Theoretical Study Pune Research Scholar, *An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, 2(5), pp.2