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Theoretical Approaches vs. Teacher as a Role Model Towards Language Learning

ARBERORE BICAJ and ARIF SHALA

Abstract

Everyone learns a foreign language in their own way, but generally it is never considered to be very easy. The way a foreign language is taught is a significantly important area of academic research. This paper tries to identify the ways in which a foreign language can be most easily learned in order to identify the best strategies. Acknowledging the global impact of the English language, this paper explores the theoretical approaches, starting from the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach and the Task-based approach. Also considered is the role of the teacher as a model in language learning. Therefore, in order to reach conclusions, foreign language learning has been approached on a theoretical level by examining the international literature. In this way, a compilation of the literature has been produced and analyzed in order to fulfill the purpose of this research.

Keywords: foreign language, role model, communicative language teaching approach, task-based learning, teacher.



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Introduction

Over the years, one important question in language studies has been how languages are learned, and more specifically, how a second language is acquired. In this regard, there is a general understanding that people learn a second language to different levels of achievement, which makes it very important to understand how is it that some are more effective than others when it comes to learning a second language (Sykes, 2015). According to the literature, strategies used in language acquisition are of particular importance (Oxford, 1990). To that end, Rubin (1975) explained that strategies refer to the techniques used by learners in order to learn a language. Oxford (1990) expanded on this definition by noting that learning strategies are the techniques used by learners to store, retrieve and use the acquired information. According to Oxford (1990), learning strategies are none other than the actions of the learner which serve the purpose of making learning effective and easier, but also more enjoyable. Overall, learning a second language is a very complex process that involves metacognition, cognition and ultimately effective strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

A number of researchers have attempted to explore what makes a good learner (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Eckman, Highland, Lee, Mileham, & Rutkowski Weber, 2010; Griffiths, 2008; Ortega, 2013). Evidently, successful English language learners employ learning strategies more often when compared to learners who were not as successful (Green & Oxford, 1995). Furthermore, successful learners use higher level strategies more effectively and more often when learning (Lan & Oxford, 2003). A study by Lan (2005) involved 1,191 elementary school children learning English as a second language, and explored the learning strategies employed by the students. The data suggested that students used strategies such as analyzing mistakes in order to not remake them, asking for help in understanding words, relaxing strategies to avoid stress, flashcards to learn new words and sentences, and finally, asking for clarification or speaking at a slower pace.

Studies addressing topics on secondary language learning have generally been conducted on the learning of English language, mainly due to its status as a "global language." A global language is generally understood to be a language which has received a role in every country. Languages which are spoken as mother tongues in several countries do not necessarily make that language global. So is the case for the English language, which is the mother tongue in several countries such as the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. In order to be considered global, a language must be recognized for its special role within countries and communities which have a mother tongue other than the first. As a general note, there are two ways in which a language can receive a "global status." First, a language can officially become a second language within a country and as such be used in government, education media and courts. This means that the acquisition of this language as early as possible is desired. Such is the case for the English language, which is the official second language in countries such as Singapore, India, Nigeria and Ghana, to name but a few. On the other hand, a language can also be a priority for a country without need to receive any official status. This means that children will learn this language as a second language and which will be given a priority by adult learners. In this regard, English is the primary foreign language learned in more than 100 countries worldwide (Crystal, 2003).

Due to its global status, English is learned worldwide. Therefore, understanding how best to teach and learn English as a second language is of particular importance to researchers and scholars. The current study will examine the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach and the Task-based approach, with special focus on the advantages and disadvantages of both methods.

In addition, this paper will argue that in both approaches, the role of the teacher is key since teachers serve as role models during language learning. Humans have an incredible capacity to learn and a significant part of human learning happens either on purpose or accidentally when observing the behaviors of others. Unlike other forms of learning, in observational learning, one single model can transmit new forms of thinking and acting to an unlimited number of people across different locations, testifying to the multiplicative power of observational learning (Bandura, 1999). Evidently, learners model their teachers during communication in a foreign language, and in doing so they are unable to discriminate between proper language structures and their teacher's mistakes. When it comes to the theoretical models addressed in this paper, the teacher is the model and learners model the vocabulary, phrases and overall language of the teacher. While teachers continue to serve as role models, technological developments (i.e., language learning software) has the capacity to mitigate this situation.

Theoretical approaches to language learning

In a globalized world where interdependence is increasing and learning languages has become invaluable to career and educational prospects, understanding the theories on second language learning has become more important than ever (Zhou & Niu, 2015). When it comes to language learning, there are several theoretical models discussed in the literature, with a clear distinction between the two major theoretical models, namely the structural method and the communicative method.

According to the structural approach, learners learn specific forms of a language, as well as learn their meaning. On the other hand, the communicative method maintains that learning happens when learners are able to use the language in much the same way that they use their native language (Zhou & Niu, 2015). According to this method, the learners will learn semantics and other formal properties of the language without drawing specific attention to them (Widdowson, 1990).

It ought to be clarified that there is no perfect one-size-fits-all method for all learning situations (Zhou & Niu, 2015). Widdowson (1990) argued that teachers have had the tendency to rely on one method over the other. Instead, each method should be used in a way that complements the other, and both should be integrated when teaching a foreign language (Zhou & Niu, 2015). Based on the existing literature, this paper will compare two methods of learning and teaching a second language, while focusing on their advantages and disadvantages, with an emphasis on the role of the teacher in facilitating learning.

At the same time, if the focus is on Bandura's approach that treats learning through observation, teachers can be accepted as a model and key learning factor (Bandura, 1986). Bandura considers observational learning as an advanced capacity for expanding knowledge and competencies more rapidly through diverse models, considering that social modeling cuts the learning process (Bandura, 2008).

Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT)

According to Daisy (2012), the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) employs communication in language learning. To that end, CLT emphasizes communication skills as the most important competency in language teaching, and develops strategies to teach language based on the link between communication and language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Since its emergence in 1970, CLT has been the key model in teaching English as a second language (Zhou & Niu, 2015). Support for CLT came from Krashen (1981), who maintained that language acquisition is as a result of the use of language in situations where interaction and communication are fostered. Krashen (1981) is a supporter of the hypothesis that formal teaching of language structures does not enable learners to become fluent in communicating in the new language. Krashen (1985) emphasized the need for learners to be exposed to higher level language by the teacher. While they are not expected to immediately reproduce these structures, instead they can enjoy prolonged exposure to language before being expected to communicate themselves.

As noted by Richards and Rodgers (2001), CLT is successful because it pays attention to the social and functional meaning of language, in that the social meaning and communication of linguistic form is of equal importance. According to Hymes (1966), learners will not be able to use language in social settings if they learn only grammar or linguistics. It is therefore vital that the contexts of language be incorporated into the teaching of a language. Based on this method, communication is the starting point for establishing learning goals and instructional methods. This form of learning focuses on developing the competencies necessary to communicate, and has evidently spread globally (Zhou & Niu, 2015).

Since CLT emphasizes the learning of communicative competencies, it means that the focus is on teaching fluency. The latter refers to the use of language to interact in a meaningful and comprehensible manner (Zhou & Niu, 2015). The CLT approach argues that language is a tool to interact in social situations and as a result, communication ought to be the cornerstone of language learning and language teaching (El-Dakhs, 2015). The books developed according to the CLT approach are composed of chapters titled, for example, education, job interviews, or apologizing. While communicating, learners are encouraged to be fluent and not to focus on the errors they make, as errors are viewed as an accepted side effect of language learning (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

Due to this emphasis, a considerable amount of literature has been published which points out that the focus on fluency is a key disadvantage to this method as it favors native speakers (Chang, 2011). In this regard, Harmer (2003) explains that by “avoiding” focusing on the teaching and learning of grammar, students have come to develop fluency that is inaccurate. CLT tends to draw attention to fluency and as a result, places considerably less emphasis on accuracy. An example would be the manner in which CLT approaches errors. Generally, errors are viewed as a signal of failure on the part of students and teachers; but in the CLT approach, errors mean that one is making progress in the route to internalizing the language being learned. On that note, CLT also emphasizes certain approaches towards dealing with errors. To elaborate, if the error is unrelated to already learned concepts, it should be avoided. Similarly, the teacher ought to avoid correcting mistakes which could lead to loss of concentration on the communication task in hand, or if it interferes with the students’ motivation or class dynamics. This approach of teachers has reportedly led to

students feeling neglected by the fact that their mistakes were left uncorrected, whilst others reported feeling that they were not making any progress (Zhou & Niu, 2015).

CLT generally focuses on ensuring that learners interact with the language; that is, that they use it in different activities with the underlying assumption being that students will eventually, sooner or later, learn the grammar rules as well. The learning of grammar rules ought to take place naturally as the language is used (Widdowson, 1990; Zhou & Niu, 2015). However, reality shows that this transition is not as natural as originally thought, with learners not acquiring grammatical knowledge through communication (Widdowson, 1990). In CLT, teachers rely on materials, roleplays, dialogue and other activities which emphasize and stimulate communication with the aim of developing language writing and speaking skills (Zhou & Niu, 2015). According to the literature, the CLT approach has led to problems in teaching English as a second language among foreign learners, since it can make learners feel insecure about their learning. Regardless of the severe criticism it has attracted, CLT remains the preferred approach in teaching English language among foreigners (Savignon, 1991). Compared to traditional approaches in teaching foreign languages, which do not lead to fluent second language users, CLT was seen as a welcome change (El-Dakhs, 2015).

Task-based learning (TBL)

Task-based Language (TBL) teaching is a form of communicative approach, in that it urges learners to interact in the language they are learning (Huang, 2016). It is therefore important to understand what the term “task” refers to. According to Breen (1987), tasks encompass all the learning activities which have a preset objective, content to be learned, specified strategies and a set of outcomes for learners who engage in this activity. Similarly, Nunan (1989) refers to tasks as the work done within a classroom in order to interact and produce in the language one intends to learn. Accordingly, tasks have specific goals (i.e., communication), procedures (i.e., activities completed by learners), as well as teacher and learner roles (i.e., the role in completing tasks) and finally classroom settings (Nunan, 2011). To that end, in this process, the meaning is the most important and the form comes secondary.

In TBL there are three types of tasks. The first refers to information-gap tasks or tasks focusing on transferring information from one learner to another. Second is the reasoning-gap task, which refers to the development of new information through reasoning, perception of patterns, perception of links, inferring or deductive thinking. Finally, the opinion-gap refers to tasks which enable learners to share their feelings, thoughts, and preferences in relation to a specific development or situation (Prabhu, 1987). On the other hand, Pattison (1987) specified seven types of tasks namely, role play and conversation, questions and answers, interaction strategies, picture stories, discussions, decisions, and puzzles and problems. A final classification was provided by Richards (2001), who argued that tasks can be of several types including, but not limited to, jigsaws, solving problems and decision making.

Task-based activities have been the focus of research studies mainly for pedagogical reasons. According to the interactions theory, task-based activities enable learners to interact with the language (Bao & Du, 2015), while also enhancing the participation and confidence of the learners and thereby encouraging them to speak fluently (Lopes, 2004; Tinker Sachs, 2007). One problem applying task-based activities has proven to be in cases

where learners are in the early stages of second language learning and who are more likely to engage in conversation unconnected with the task assigned to them (Bruton, 2005; Carless, 2008). However, some literature suggests that regardless of language acquisition level, task-based activities enable learners to analyze and develop language as well as develop strategies to address specific tasks (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998).

Influence of teachers as role models in language learning

Language experts argue that the most appropriate models of language use emerge from native language speakers. Linguists start from the intuition of the native speaker, using the quantities of their speech, until the language teachers encourage their students to be like native speakers (Cook, 1999).

In the third edition of the Harmer script, titled “The practice of English language teaching,” the following issues are also highlighted: Modifications in attitudes to language study, with serious attempts to improve classroom procedures, and acknowledgement that teacher development is key to the quality of student experience (Harmer, 2001).

If these issues are linked with the pedagogical aspect in learning a foreign language, the need and role of the teachers in learning a second language becomes immediately clear.

But before that, the awareness of students to learn a foreign language is emphasized, through the use of correct forms, because errors arise from not knowing the rules of the target language, forgetting them or from not paying attention. The author Byalstok, first gave a theoretical framework regarding the role of conscious knowledge, until Rutherford and Smith in 1985 argued that “raising consciousness” draws the attention of students through the recognition of formal language properties which facilitate language learning. Up until now, behaviorists have rejected this theory, considering consciousness not epiphenomenal, playing no causal role in human life (Schmidt, 1990).

Therefore, there is a controversial approach between linguists and psychologists regarding the importance of consciousness in learning a foreign language through the rules on one side, and on the other, the minimal role of consciousness, in this matter.

Settings in which the teacher is the person responsible to develop and monitor learning pose two important disadvantages. First, it is in these settings that learners can display boredom, and learning a foreign language easily becomes an experience stripped of any sense of enjoyment. Secondly, language cannot be learned if the student is not willing to explore the language. It is this exploration of the language and experiencing it that is linked to students’ enjoyment of learning (Tinkle, 1985; Zhou & Niu, 2015). According to Lewis (1986), what we explore by ourselves remains with us far longer than what is told to us. Evidently, the role of the teacher in learning a second language is invaluable.

The teacher-student relationship is key to learning and teaching, and it is this relationship that determines the learning settings in different countries (Telli, den Brok, & Cakiroglu, 2007; Yu & Zhu, 2011). This relationship is key to class management (Doyle, 1986), and student engagement in learning (Brekelmans, Slegers, & Fraser, 2000). Furthermore, the learner-teacher relationship determines a whole range of vital factors including, but not limited to, the attitudes of learners towards learning, motivation and achievement (Brekelmans, den Brok, van Tartwijk, & Wubbels, 2005). In addition, many studies have

reported that the perceptions held by students on teachers' behaviors, predicted motivation and performance in learners regardless of the subject being taught (den Brok et al., 2005).

Similarly, the characteristics of teachers (i.e., cooperation vs. dominance) have been linked to student performance in a number of countries such as the Netherlands (Brekelmans, Wubbels, & Créton, 1990; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005), Australia (Henderson, 1995), Singapore (Goh & Fraser, 1998), and South Korea (Kim, Fisher, & Fraser, 2000). As such, it has impacted students' enjoyment, confidence and persistence (den Brok, 2001). Waldrip and den Brok (2003) argued that the cultural background of the teacher is also important, as this has been found to result in conflict when students' expectations are not in accordance with those of their teacher. The role of the teacher above all is to ensure that the student is stimulated to learn and to prevent learners from distancing themselves from learning (Aldhafiri, 2015), whilst ensuring that learners remain active in their learning, and ensuring that the process is learner-centered (Brekelmans et al., 2000). Additionally, students were found more likely to participate in activities and collaborate when they perceived the teacher to be interactive and close to them. On the other hand, learners with teachers who refused to be close to their students were found to be not motivated to engage in learning (Brekelmans et al., 2000).

Motivation is considered to be the main determinant in the learning process of second/foreign language acquisition. This was noted by two Canadian psychologists, Gardner and Lambert, who grounded motivation research, and respectively, motivational theory. They developed the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), and identified that the primary emphasis is based more on motivation components of the social environment, than the foreign language classroom. This means that Gardner's motivation construct does not include cognitive aspects of motivation to learn (Dornyei, 1994).

Finally, there is overwhelming research to be found in the literature emphasizing the undeniable impact of teacher characteristics on student enjoyment of learning, confidence, and learning efforts (den Brok, 2001; den Brok et al., 2005; den Brok, Fisher, & Scott, 2005). While there has been considerable research on the link between teacher characteristics and student learning, there has been little on the impact of teachers as role models in second language learning.

It is the argument of this paper that students learn from teachers by observing their interaction with the language. According to the social learning theory of Albert Bandura, learning can happen through observing the behaviors of others. In supporting his theory, Bandura coined the term observational learning (modeling) in order to explain how people learn by watching others. Observational learning happens when there is a model, a person acting or behaving in a certain way. Finally, learning happens when there is a model present, a real person or a fictional character, showing behaviors in books, on television, or through online media (Bandura, 1999). Observational learning is one of the key concepts of the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). The theory postulates that learning happens by observing others behave (Groenendijk, Janssen, Rijlaarsdam, & van den Bergh, 2013). This form of learning allows learners to develop skills and knowledge from information gathered from the observation of models (Bandura, 1986; Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 1978). It is of paramount importance to clarify that modeling is not a form of mimicry, as it can lead to new and innovative behaviors. The most advanced form of observational learning is attained through abstract modeling. In abstract modeling, observers are able to gather rules applying to

actions and judgments. In cases when people successfully gather rules, they are able to apply them to novel actions which, although unique, tend to rely on the same or similar rules (Bandura, 1999).

When it comes to theoretical approaches such as communicative and task-based methods of teaching a second language, the teacher serves as a role model. Students reproduce expressions, words and terminologies used most often by the teacher. Similarly, in cases of nonnative English speaking teachers, learners will also reproduce any mistakes made by the teacher. This paper argues that technological developments, when it comes to software in learning a second language, will help mitigate the situation and compliment teachers as role models. Online learning is the source of learning in the new century, with students learning as much from online sources as they do from teachers.

Discussion and Conclusion

The role of the teacher is often considered ineffective, especially when emphasizing learning by exploring, rather than learning from others. In this case, the authors, Schank, Berman, and Mackpherson (1999), considered that the life requires us to *do*, more than it requires us to *know*, in order to function; so it may be related to learning by doing, nowadays when schools are in need of radical change. Starting from this perspective, students will better perform useful tasks, if we let them do it (as cited by Reigeluth, 1999).

While teachers serve as role models in classrooms worldwide, in cases when English is not the native language of the teacher, it can easily lead to students learning the wrong vocabulary or grammar rules. Fortunately, developments in technology can mitigate this situation by providing additional sources of learning to complement the learners' exposure to non-native English speaking teachers. In this case, the linguists associate the use of foreign language by applying native language models, while language teachers encourage the pupils to be like native speakers!

Technological developments of recent years have resulted in an increased number of online courses and web-based learning opportunities. This process has significantly increased the interaction possibilities between teachers and students, as well as amongst students themselves (Hajebi, SeddiQ, Fahandezh, & Salari, 2018). These developments have ultimately resulted in learners gaining more freedom in managing their own learning, without being dependent upon teachers or other factors (Hajebi et al., 2018). Now, more than ever before, learners have the freedom to decide when to engage in learning activities (Khany & Khosravian, 2014). It is this convenience in particular that is most valued in web-based learning (Shi et al., 2006). Evidently, the opportunity entailed within web-based learning is one that is rather more valued by adult learners of foreign languages, as it is they who are generally too busy to consider classroom-based learning. It is through this type of learning that students can exercise control over their learning (Hajebi et al., 2018), but in the meantime also develop the skill to learn individually (Khany & Khosravian, 2014). In the literature, there is evidence that in many countries, teachers of English as a foreign language increasingly prefer the utilization of technology-based learning in comparison to other approaches (Khazai, Vahid Dastjerdi, & Talebi Nejjhad, 2011).

Recently, efforts to develop software programs which could be applied to independent and individual learning have increased, and it is through these programs that learners can

discover words and thereby increase their vocabulary (Tozcu & Coady, 2004). In a study assessing the learning of vocabulary, it was discovered that learners who were exposed to pictures in web-based learning programs performed better in vocabulary tests compared to students who were exposed to videos (Yusuf, Sim, & Su'ad, 2014). Evidently, researchers and scholars are continuously emphasizing the potential of using technological developments in language learning (Chang & Lehman, 2002). It is argued that students are able to monitor, control and construct meaning, while being exposed to different web-based teaching programs (Juwah et al., 2004).

In terms of the developments seen in recent years, weblogs (blogs) have been the focus for a number of researchers and experts (Richardson, 2004). Blogs are a very popular form of information sharing, communication and online publishing, and as such, they are expected to become a vital part of web-based learning (Hajebi et al., 2018). It is argued that blogs enable learners to collaboratively learn alongside other learners, as well as to share their knowledge whilst publishing their own experiences (Shafaei & Abdul Rahim, 2015).

In conclusion, nowadays there are a wealth of resources that can be utilized by learners of English as a foreign language. Web-based learning is an extremely important form of learning, since it exposes learners to models other than their teacher as the traditional source from whom they can learn. To summarize, the most influential theoretical models place the emphasis on communication and in learning to communicate. The task-based approach, where teachers are generally the primary role model, is based on the relations that teachers build with their students, and on the attitudes of the student toward learning, as well as their motivation and achievement. Given this, the role of the teacher may be seen to increase, depending on the way that they apply improvements to the classroom education process, as well as seeking out opportunities for professional development that affect the quality of their students' experiences. It is through web-based learning that learners can expand their learning opportunities and expose themselves to language patterns generally associated with native speakers.

Notes

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