

Theory and Practice of Second Language Learning-- A Critical Analysis of Theories and Approaches in SLA

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Abstract: During the development of globalisation, economic trade and cultural communication have become frequent between countries. As a result, the demands of learning more languages than a mother tongue are growing faster, which has also caused the development of the theories of teaching and learning a second language. This essay discusses issues about the theories and practice of learning and teaching a second language. The purpose of this essay is to, through the analysis of different theories and methods of second-language learning and teaching, find a more efficient way of teaching a second language and optimising the design of language classes.

Keywords: Second Language Learning; Theories; Task-based Learning

1. Introduction

Over decades, many different hypotheses and theories to second-language acquisition and teaching have come and gone (Griffiths and Parr, 2001). In the first section, two teaching methodologies, the grammar-translation method and the communicative method, will be introduced and evaluated critically. Moreover, two experiences will be shared and discussed in the second section. One is my experience of learning an FL; the other one is my observations in a Scottish primary school, where the students learning Chinese as a Foreign Language. The third main section of this article will illustrate some key factors that can improve the efficiency and outcome of language classes, such as task-based learning and the proper use of CLT method.

2. Two teaching methodologies

2.1 The grammar-translation method

According to Griffiths and Parr (2001), the grammar-translation method mainly aims for teaching language learners to build an understanding of how the language works through teaching and practicing translation and form. As a result of that, the outcomes of paper examinations from those language learners turn out to be satisfactory.

Moreover, there is limited space for students to build up their system of knowledge. Huang (2001) states that the proper order of teaching a language learner should be comprehensible L2 input, gradually building up the form of the language, and then using the FL. The grammar-translation method has been widely employed in various countries' foreign language classes for many years.

2.2 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach

Belchamber (2007) explains the CLT approach from three perspectives, which are a focus on communication, a priority on using TL as the language of communication, and authentic and meaningful class interactions. The strengths and weakness of the CLT approach will be analysed as follows.

Firstly, the CLT approach aims at improving communicative abilities in daily life, such as communicative competence (Huang, 2001). Secondly, ^[1]students learn the language and form unconsciously through tasks designed to achieve particular language goals. Thirdly, Howatt (1984) distinguishes two versions of the CLT, which are the "weak" version and the "strong" version. The weak version is defined as the ability to communicate in L2. This can be structured to fit situations and taught by teachers.

3. Personal Reflection on Learning a Foreign Language

3.1 Personal reflection on my experience of learning an FL

Since the vast majority of high school graduates take the College Entrance Examination (CEE) to get admission to universities, the daily tasks that English teachers gave to us were the recitation of text, the pronunciation of vocabulary words in each unit, and completion of an exam paper, which mainly consisted of drills and translation exercises for the purpose of passing the exams. As the teaching style mentioned above, the grammar-translation approach took a significant proportion of the class time.

3.2 Personal reflection on the observation of Mandarin classes in a Scottish primary school

The Mandarin classes I am observing are in a primary school in Scotland, and the students in primary 3 have been studying

Mandarin for the third year. I have the chance to observe the teaching style of a teacher teaching Mandarin and students' reactions as they are learning a foreign language; I also have the chance to observe the outcome. From my observation during these two semesters in the primary school,^[2] the students had a noticeable progression in Mandarin language skills.

To sum up, I would like to compare my experience with the one I observed. Firstly, the purposes of teaching are different. The English learning in my high school was designed for the CEE, but the one at the primary level is for the cultivation of the interest of students. Secondly, the tasks are different in each class; one uses paper exercises, and the other uses task-based learning. Therefore, the successful Mandarin teaching I witnessed in Scotland inspires me to use the CLT approach in my future teaching and to design the class around the students' interests.

4. The key factors to optimise language learning in an SL class

4.1 The communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based learning (TBL).

The CLT approach focuses communication, but some doubt the efficacy communication among language learners on the beginner level (Belchamber, 2007) because they have very limited knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. However,^[3] the strong version of the CLT approach solves this problem. As introduced and discussed in the first section, the strong version approach keeps the strengths of CLT approach, and grammar is explained through mother tongue (Howatt, 1984).

TBL could benefit language learning in SL classes in these aspects. During the first stage of explaining the tasks, the learners receive rich exposure and comprehensible input in TL. The purpose of SLA could be achieved through authentic tasks and the students also learn the form.

4.2 Proper Use of Mother Tongue (MT)/L1

According to Butzkamm (2003), many schools recommend that language teachers plan monolingual lessons in FL classes and only use the MT when encountering difficulties. However, Butzkamm (2003) thinks that the MT should be used as a tool to access the L2 quickly,^[4] precisely, and completely.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, three main ideas were discussed and illustrated. Firstly, different approaches were introduced, and the strengths and weaknesses were critically discussed. Secondly, my personal reflection is divided into two parts, which are my experience of learning a foreign language in high school and the observation of the Mandarin class in a Scottish primary school. Only specific conditions and the making of proper adjustments could help the language class to make the best outcome of language learning. In the meantime,^[5] the effectiveness of learning a language could be based on the theoretical perspective as well as the realistic conditions.

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