

## **An Attempt toward a Tentative Complementary Perspective in Language Acquisition: A Panacea**

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to have a complementary perspective toward theory construction. In this regard, the present writers hold that contending theories in the realm of language acquisition reveal that there is not a universal consensus among researchers to adopt a theoretical perspective. Having elaborated on the conflicting nature of the available theoretical perspectives suggested till now, the present writers hold no one can claim that one specific theory should stand in platform and the rest to the margin. In effect, the paper is hoped to take a relativist orientation to the development of a theory. Accordingly, the relativist orientation can be accomplished if both linguists and developmental psychologists do not draw a sharp line between their territories. Now it is time to come out of years of disciplinary existence that might not offer new guidelines. Moving towards transdisciplinarity or interdisciplinarity entails increasing mutuality and harmony in the collaboration of conducting a comprehensive research. Henceforth, to achieve agreement, it is indispensable to have a complementary look on what has been suggested. This complementary look entails that the scholars avoid proposing syncretistic recollection of old vocabulary suggested in different theories. Methods and approaches.

**Key words:** Behaviorism • Cognitivism • Doubt • Paradigm shift • Sociocultural theory

### **INTRODUCTION**

Contending theories in the realm of language acquisition reveal that there is not a universal consensus among researchers to adopt a theoretical perspective. There is a movement from an ad hoc amateurish research to a much more serious enterprise of professionalism [1]. Along the same line, there are a number of theoretical perspectives advanced in the realm of English language teaching to describe how language is acquired. Among them, we have behaviorism, cognitivism and socioculturalism that cannot be totally divorced from each other. Each of these theories can be thought of as shedding light on one part of the language learning process; however, no one overarching theory of second-language acquisition has yet been widely accepted by researchers. Together, these theories of language learning provide a theoretical framework for communicative L2 teaching and learning. In this regard, Meyer [2] holds

that the adoption of an innovation in a theory proceeds from emergence through diffusion to stabilization in isomorphic form and that the process will not occur at the expense of sending the traditions to the margins. Moreover, such an innovation is not the product of linearization. Accordingly, Meyer goes on to hold that education systems characteristically propose innovations. There are three mechanisms by which institutional isomorphism occurs: coercive (conformity to political institutions), normative (compatibility with formal educational and professional networks) and mimetic (common responses to uncertainty based on modeling). As a result of these mechanisms, organizations modify themselves to conform to the institutional norms and expectations of an organizational field.

The present paper in an attempt to elucidate some conflicting natures of the available theories of language learning adopts a relativist approach in the realm of language acquisition in general and teaching, in particular.

**Theory Construction: A Relativist Look:** An interesting point about human beings is that they are keen on learning about recent discoveries; however, they may know nothing about the earlier discoveries. In fact, they show little interest in what have been discovered. Thus, it is a truism that understanding of the past provides an explanatory tool [3]. Accordingly, no one is fair to take an absolutist perspective in denying the fact that what behaviorists have achieved in the past paved the way and provided an empirical tool for abductionists (e.g. [4]) to claim that relying on external input cannot account for the creative aspect of language use. Moreover, even Chomsky [4] does not take an absolutist perspective and claims somewhere that no acquisition takes place in vacuum. In other words, what makes Chomsky assert that a native speaker is able to create and understand infinite number of sentences never heard before was earlier ignited by the lack of attention to introspection from behaviorist camp.

Taking an anti-Platonist stance in theory construction, the writers pursue the claim that assuming theory development as a process of exploration [5] entails the need to collect new information and explore different phenomena and different patterns in the potentially infinite world of facts and data [6]. In effect, from a relativist mind, different theories can co-exist productively, without making an attempt to contradict each other. More importantly, in evaluating theories the context in which a particular theory is employed is of vital importance. Accordingly, Ellis [7] asserts it is unwise and probably impossible to attempt to evaluate theories without reference to the context in which they were developed.

**Psychology in Line with Philosophy:** No one denies that achievement in the realm of language acquisition is much benefited from behaviorist stream of thought. Behaviorism has its roots within positivism [8]. The term positivism, as a version of empiricism [9] was first coined by the French philosopher, Auguste Comte who believes reality cannot be observed [1]. Along the same line, Comte's concept of positivism was based on scientific objectivity and observation through the five senses rather than subjective beliefs. In other words, positivism defines knowledge solely on observable facts and does not give any credence to non-observable entities such as feelings and values [10]. In sum, as Mack [1] maintains, "positivism maintains that the scientist is the observer of an objective reality" (p. 2), not the constructor of the reality. To positivists, knowledge and facts exist in the world and can be discovered by setting up experiments in

which conditions are carefully controlled and where hypotheses are tested. Thus, according to Mack [1], the purpose of positivist school of thought is "to prove or disprove hypothesis" (p. 2). Furthermore, positivists believe that the knower and the known are independent and that the research enquiry is value free [11]. Positivism espouses the view that entities of one kind are reducible to entities of another. Such anti-dualist perspective is not compatible with the attitude that mind and body are two real entities; neither of them can assimilate to the other. The reductionist feature of positivism is closely tied to quantitative methodologies and experimental methods to data collection and analysis. In his famous book, "The logic of scientific discovery" Popper [12] declares that there are no absolute truths. Moreover, he claims that scientific theories cannot be confirmed but only falsified. Henceforth, to Popper, falsifiability is a key feature of logic of science. In a sense, if a theory is not falsifiable, it is not scientific. However, that something is falsifiable does not mean it is false, rather it means that if it is false, then observation or experiment will at some point demonstrate its falsehood. For example, the assertion that "*All pelicans are white*" is falsifiable, because it is logically possible that a pelican can be found that is not white.

In sharp contrast with positivists, constructivists (also known as interpretivists) who take an anti-positivist stream of thought lay emphasis on the ability of individual to construct meaning. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who is sometimes considered to be the first to have put forward the ideas of constructivism, describes the mind as "an active organ which transforms the chaos of experience into orderly thought" (p.2) [13]. Vaihinger (1852-1933) elaborating on some of Kant's ideas argues that the purpose of the mind is not to reflect reality, but to assist individuals on their journey (cited in [13]). Along the same vein, Pritchard and Woollard [13] maintain that Vaihinger implicitly refers to the fact that "mental effort is directed toward making sense of what is experienced on the journey of life and constructing an understanding of the many varied experiences encountered on the way" (p.3).

As Ratner [cited in [14]] states, "it is logical that before a child can converse about something, he/she needs to know what it is" (p. 15) In fact, as Piaget (1970 cited in [14]) believes, language is just one aspect of human cognition. To him, cognitive development (and consequently linguistic development) means experimenting with the environment and constructing one's personal meaning of it. In fact, learning is the result of a conflict between what a person knows and what he is

going to learn; this is what Piaget called disequilibrium [15] or in Dewey's [16] terminology, perturbation. Accordingly, as Brown [15] considers cognitive development as a process of moving from states of doubt (disequilibrium) to certainty (equilibrium). Equilibration, according to Brown, is the progressive interior organization of knowledge. As put forth by Piaget, equilibration is accomplished by two complementary processes: (1) assimilation (modifying incoming information to fit our knowledge) and (2) accommodation (modifying our knowledge to include new information). Nevertheless, Piaget's model of accommodation appears to "contain implicitly the notion that it is only the child's efforts which are the process of accommodation. A person accommodates to the environment when he/she realizes that his own strategies have failed to solve a problem" ([17], p. 35). In a sense, his model per se is dialectical; the dialectic of assimilation and accommodation. To Shayer, it is strange that why Piaget who once asserted that social factors were involved in cognitive development did not credit Vygotsky as having provided the concepts that might have complemented his own work. Nevertheless, though not having a common point of departure:

...both Piaget and Vygotsky present a view of the developing child centered on an idea of the child as a single, unified subject, 'epistemic' for Piaget, 'cultural' for Vygotsky. In each case the child appears to live in a world which is marked by a homogeneity of meanings, so that in neither case is there a clear recognition that the social world is a world of differences and contrasts. ([18], p. 66).

Molenda [19] also claims that constructivism shares the post-modernists' dissatisfaction with positivist assumptions that all knowledge is socially constructed; knowledge is not there but is constructed in the mind of the knower. Molenda further adds, "truth is made, not discovered" (p. 9). Johnson (1990, as cited in [19]) was also among the first who criticized the objective epistemology of positivism as it does not emphasize the ability of the individual to construct meaning. Mack [1], in the same line, holds truths can never be objectively observed from the outside rather it must be observed from inside through the direct experience of the people. Moreover, Cohen, Manion and Morrison [10] maintain that the role of the scientist in the interpretivist paradigm is to, "understand, explain and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants" (p. 19). Researchers in this paradigm seek to understand rather than explain [1].

The constructivist, or interpretivist, paradigm was heavily influenced by hermeneutics and phenomenology [1]. Hermeneutics is the study of meaning and interpretation in historical texts. This meaning-making cyclical process is the basis on which the interpretivist paradigm was established [20]. Phenomenology also advocates the "need to consider human beings' subjective interpretations, their perceptions of the world (their life-worlds) as our starting point in understanding social phenomena [20].

Essentially, we are inheritably destined to interact with others to gratify our needs. As Firth and Wagner [21] note "language is acquired and learned through social interaction and should be studied in interactive encounters" (p. 287). To better appreciate the concept of the socio-cultural nature of language development, it is a felt need to briefly review, Bakhtin's [22] dialogical perspectives and Vygotsky's [23] sociocultural theory. They undeniably have tremendous effects on the flourishing of social-oriented perspectives of language development.

Bakhtin's [22] dialogical perspective emphasizes the sociality of intellectual processes. According to Bakhtin, language lies on the border between oneself and the other. What Bakhtin calls as dialogism connotes mutual participation of speakers and hearers in the construction of utterances and the connectedness of all utterances to past and future expressions. Bakhtin views that our use of language is respected as an appropriation of words that at one time existed in other people's mouths before we make them our own. As Hall (2002, cited in [24]) claims, in such a view, an utterance can be understood fully by considering its history of use by other people, in other places for other reasons.

Vygotsky, as to Pritchard and Woollard [13], also considers social interaction as "a fundamental aspect of successful cognitive and intellectual growth" (p.14). Unlike Piaget who considers language development as an individual phenomenon, to several scholars (e.g., [22];[25]), language development is social. Vygotsky places great emphasis on dialogue and interaction. According to Vygotsky [25], in the cultural development of a child, any function has two planes and appears twice: first on a social plane as a relationship between people and in interpsychological category, then on a psychological plane within the child as intrapsychological category. To him, "all the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals" (p. 57).

To a certain extent, Vygotsky's psychology is inspired by the work of Karl Marx. Vygotsky, objecting to Cartesian Dualism, attempted to resolve this problem by drawing upon Marx' theory of dialectical materialism: There is not much space in this paper to do more than maintain that Cartesian dualists posit that there is a divisible, material body and an indivisible, immaterial mind which interact with one another; neither mind nor body can be reduced to each other in any way. To better appreciate the concept of dialectical materialism, it is better to throw a glance at Marx's materialist philosophy. Materialism asserts the primacy of the material world: in short, matter precedes thought. Materialism is a realist philosophy of science, which holds that the world is material; that all phenomena in the universe consist of matter in motion, wherein all things are interdependent and interconnected and develop according to natural law; To Marx the ideal is nothing else than the material world which is reflected by the human mind and translated into forms of thought.

In Marx's concept of labor, labor appears from the very beginning as a process mediated by tools and at the same time mediated socially. In a nutshell, mediated by tools, work is performed in conditions of collective activity. Engestrom [26] puts forth, "mediation by tools and signs is not merely a psychological idea" (p. 29). Engestrom further adds, "it is an idea that breaks down the Cartesian walls that isolate the individual mind from the culture and the society" (p. 29).

Haught [27] holds that Vygotsky believes mind is not in opposition to the material world, but embedded in social activities and mediated by the tools people employ in their activities [27]. To sum up, Vygotsky argues that human beings do not act directly on the physical world but rely, instead, on tools and labor activity, which allows us to change the world [28]. The tools may be physical as well as symbolic. Included among symbolic tools are numbers, music and above all language. We use such tools to mediate and regulate our relationships with others and with ourselves and thus change the nature of relationship. In fact, the manner in which an individual uses a tool reflects knowledge of how the tool should be used. Seen from this distance, the goal of psychology, in Vygotsky's view (cited in [28]) is to understand how human social and mental activity is organized by means of culturally constructed artifacts. Thus, as developed by Vygotsky, "perception, cognition, thinking and emotion are not merely derived from activity but are themselves

activities. Activity and cognition are inseparable and unified. Instead of sticking to a dualistic view of mind and action, we have a new construct of 'mind as action'" (Wretch, 1998, cited in [25]).

Two basic tenets of Vygotskian sociocultural theory are activity theory which reflects the fundamental idea that motives for learning in a particular setting are intertwined with socially and institutionally defined beliefs; and mediation which proposes that human mental activity is mediated by tools and signs, the foremost tool being language [29]. To Vygotsky (1979 cited in [24]), language development results from transforming innate capacities rather than by unfolding them. Moreover, the transformation of innate capacities happens once they intertwine with sociocultural constructed means, which are either physical or symbolic. When these means become available for individuals to begin interaction in socially meaningful activities, they gain control over their mental activity.

**Need to Re-Describe Theories:** Popper [12], as a critic of logical positivism, points out due to unpredictable nature of scientific theories, no one can evaluate the reasons why a theorist adopted a new one. In this regard, Popper puts forth that there is no predictable process or set of rules for creating new ideas. In fact, to him, truth does not exist in an absolute sense. Popper, in his essay, "The Problem of Induction" claims theories cannot be confirmed but falsified. Accordingly, "if this falsification does not occur, we say that the theory has been corroborated, which for Popper means that it has been subjected to a test" ([30], p. 110). Nevertheless, falsifying the evidence does not happen inductively. Popper in contrast with Kant who asserts that induction is an a priori synthetic truth, argues that if something is knowable a priori, then it does not entail any justification based upon experience. Henceforth, to Popper inductive logic leads to an infinite regress of more inductive reasoning. That is, the evaluative theory cannot itself be legitimated without appeal to another evaluative theory [31]. In sum, to Popper, induction has no place in logic of science.

Through a relativist lens, a multitude of theories can coexist co-productively. Whether one sticks to one specific theory or another one is not a matter of rationality but of taste. However, when one sticks to the tenets of a given theory, he or she will see no reason to change his attitudes until his or her ideology is consistent with a hard

reality [32]. Consequently, the new sensibility was more pluralistic and less serious and moralistic than modernism. Ultimately, a theorist, as Ellis [11] argues, will not decide whether a theory should be used; the one who decides is the consumer of the theory and the consumer based on his or her aesthetic value determines what theory should be chosen. Furthermore, the choice is made not at the expense of suffocating other voices. In much the same way, Lantolf [34] metaphorically puts forth, let all flowers bloom. Henceforth, claiming that what emerges from the school of cognitivism must be at the expense of suffocating behaviorists' voice is absurd. Kuhn [31] claiming that even normal science is necessary for progress encourages conformity and suggests that in order to maximize results, scientists should accept assumptions uncritically and bow to the paradigms. One solution to cope with the theories suggested earlier is appealing to re-describing rather than challenging with them.

Inspired by Rorty [35] who argues that philosophy must be re-described, Reason [36] claims we should also re-describe inquiry. That is, we are attempting to speak differently in the face of an entrenched vocabulary, not to be in challenge with them. Accordingly, as Reason and Bradbury [37] assert, it is felt important to develop a talent for speaking differently and articulating what we do with new metaphors rather than be caught in entrenched vocabularies. In other words, on claiming that re-describing is an important term for Rorty, Reason [30] continues:

if we want to argue persuasively for a new view of phenomena and we can no longer lay claim that our view is a better representation of reality, we are caught in a 'contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed vocabulary which vaguely promises great things' (p. 9).

In this regard, theories are neither comprehensive nor modular. They have inclination towards multiplicity. Spolsky (1988, cited in [7] sees this multiplicity in this way that theories do not generally succeed in replacing their predecessors, but continue to coexist with them uncomfortably. This leads to the emergence of pluralists' views that like Schumann (1983, cited in [38]) holds SLA research as an art rather than science; thus, since it is art, we do not have absolutely right or wrong phenomena; they are simply more or less appealing to various audiences.

## CONCLUSION

Claiming that two theories can co exist comfortably is not less than a realistic wish. All the theories suggested in the realm of language acquisition inter-relate somehow. To the same degree, claiming that the assumptions raised by cognitivists are more comprehensive than those raised by behaviorists is not logical. It seems to the authors that the metaphor of participation provides us with an alternative position. Our world neither consists of separate things, nor is it constructed through language, but rather emerges through relationships which we co-author and in which we partake. Therefore, it is not logical to assume that one theory can take into account any unanswered questions. As Ellis [7] asserts, it is unwise and probably impossible to attempt to evaluate theories without reference to the context in which they were developed. Thus, instead of challenging with traditions, we need to re-describe them with new terminology and be in attempt to provide some modifications rather than change their epistemology.

Schumann (1983, cited in [39]) in his article 'Art and Science in Second Language Acquisition Research' likened theory-construction to other kinds of creativity, such as painting. Accordingly, when he compares two competing theories which exist co-productively, he wrote:

When SLA is regarded as art not science, Krashen's and McLaughlin's views can coexist as two different paintings of the language learning experience—as reality symbolized in two different ways. Viewers can choose between the two on an aesthetic basis, favoring the painting which they find to be phenomenologically true to their experience. Neither position is correct: they are simply alternative representatives of reality (p.6).

In the same line, Lantolf [35] puts forth searching for "a definitive theory or even a small number of commensurable theories is troublesome" (p. 739). Aesthetically, it is not fair to assume that the emergence of one theory appears to be at the expense of suffocating others' voice [32].

Yet, what is a felt need in language acquisition is to strengthen cross-linguistic data base in the realm of language acquisition. In this vein, Lust [40] holds, "there remains a dearth of cross-linguistic data" (p. 268). Lust also goes on to hold, "factoring out what is biologically programmed from what is learned, requires expansion of the cross-linguistic data base, especially if cross-linguistic data is collected in a theoretically guided form and uses

scientific methods allowing calibration of comparable data across languages” (p. 268). Furthermore, claiming that the knowledge that the language faculty provides must be dissociated with what aspects of grammatical knowledge develop over time entails precise specification of the model suggested [40]. This can be accomplished if linguists and developmental psychologists, for instance, increase their ambiguity of tolerance. Now it is time to come out of years of disciplinary existence that might not offer new guidelines. Moving toward transdisciplinarity or interdisciplinarity entails increasing mutuality and harmony in the collaboration of conducting a comprehensive research. Henceforth, to achieve agreement, it is indispensable to have a complementary look on what had been suggested. This complementary look entails that the scholars avoid proposing syncretistic recollection of old vocabulary suggested in different theories, methods and approaches. The outset of such a look should begin with this statement by Lust [40] that learning and innateness are not contradictory, but complementary. Furthermore, success in transdisciplinarity is deeply rooted in having cynical attitudes towards disciplinary achievement as progress will not be achieved if we move in line with solid reality. As Goldfarb (1991, cited in [41]) argues, “Cynicism in our world is a form of legitimization through disbelief” (p. 30).

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