

# The Secrecy Underlying Young Language Learners' Learning

Nima Shakouri Masouleh, Razieh Bahraminezhad Jooneghani

**Abstract**—The study investigated the educational implications that can be derived from the work of a variety of celebrated figures such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner that will be helpful in the field of language learning. However, the writer believed these views were previously expressed not full-fledged by Comenius who has been described by Howatt (1984) as a genius—the one that the history of language teaching can claim. And we owe to him more than anyone.

**Keywords**—restructuring, assimilation, equilibration

## I. INTRODUCTION

JOHANN AMOS KOMENSKY, widely known as Comenius, who has been named as a pioneer of early childhood education (Peltzman, 1998) believed in social reform through education. He was among scholars that showed such a profound empathy for and insight into children's learning is a key factor in children's success in learning [14]. Many implications can be drawn from Comenius's works. Children are enthusiastic learners. Enthusiasm creates competition among learners. Enthusiasm can be emerged in the face of a child while playing. Such generalizations if scrutinized lead us to one of Comenius's most famous tenets that is his stressing of the pleasure principle in learning. The teacher can make the learning agreeable by making the school a form of play (Murphy, 1995) [10]. To Comenius, the role of teacher in helping children to move towards independence is undeniable (Kelly, 1969) [7]. This involves supporting, guiding, grading input and syllabus, cooperating which the author thinks are the underlying key words of many theories of second language learning; with this background that many of the educators owe to the works of Comenius, the one who has been described by Howatt (1984) as a genius, possibly the only one that the history of language teaching can claim [5]. The paper is an attempt to elucidate the hidden ideas of celebrated people, such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner that can be employed in a second language learning classroom. Understanding these issues can certainly help teachers to better ground the process of teaching to children.

## II. LITREATURE REVIEW

Children are often more enthusiastic and lively as learners. They are live competitors in the class who are in search for pleasing the teacher. However, children do not find it as easy to use language to talk about language; in other words, they do not have the same access to metalanguage as the adults have, yet their lack of inhibition seems to help them to learn much faster.

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As Cameron (2001) states, "These are generalizations which hide the detail of different children, and of the skills involved in teaching them" (p. 1) [3]. To him, there is a need to unpack these generalizations to find out what lies underneath as characteristic of children as language learners (p. 1).

Generally, awareness of individual difference factors could be useful for teachers to better understand how children get close to the process of learning. The factors that vary among individuals can be classified into child-internal and child-external factors (Paradis, 2011) [13]. Child-internal factors, according to Paradis (2011) include language aptitude, transfer of morphosyntactic features/constructions from L1 to L2 and cognitive maturity as represented by chronological age and child-external factors mainly refer to those that determine the quantity and quality of the input the child receives in the target language.

To Cameron (2001) knowledge about children's learning is seen as central to effective teaching. Successful lessons and activities are those that are tuned to the learning needs of pupils, rather than to the demands of the next text-book unit or to the interest of the teacher (P. 10) [3]. To understand, how a child gets close to the process of learning, drawing on the key elements of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner's works seems helpful.

### A. Jean Piaget

To Piaget a child is an active learner and a sense maker (Cameron, 2001). The concept of active learner connotes that the child interacts with the world around, and tries to solve the problems presented by the environment. As Cameron (2001) refers it is through taking action to solve problems that learning occurs. The knowledge that results from such action is neither imitated nor in-born, but is actively constructed. As behind every action there is a thought hidden behind, in this way, action is internalized (Cameron, 2001, p. 3) [3]. Piaget, in contrast with Vygotsky, gives a less important role to language. To him, cognitive development is the prerequisite of language development. He sees cognitive development as a process of maturation with which both genetics and experience interact. The developing mind is seeking equilibration: a balance of what is known and what is new. This is accomplished by the complementary process of "assimilation" (a process by which the incoming information is changed or modified in our mind so that can fit in with what we knew earlier.) and "accommodation" (the process by which we modify what we know to take into account new information).

The term accommodation is an important idea that has been taken into second language learning under the label "restructuring" used to refer to the re-organization of mental representation of a language (McLaughlin, 1992, as cited in Cameron, 2001, p. 3) [2].

These two processes contribute to what Piaget called adaptation. Accordingly, Brown (2001) contends 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. To better appreciate the concept of assimilation and accommodation, imagine what happened when a child who has learned to use a spoon in order to eat his/her food is presented a fork to eat with. She may first use the fork like the spoon; this is the assimilation of the new tool to existing skills and knowledge. When the child realizes due to prangs, there must be another way to eat the food. Instead of spooning, he/ she must spike it. At this moment, accommodation occurs: the child's action adapts to the something new (Cameron, 2001) [3].

### 1. Restructuring

The idea of restructuring as an intake process, as Kumaravadavilu (2006) claims, is derived from the work of Cheng (1985) and others in cognitive psychology, although is followed by some modifications by McLaughlin (1987). The notion of restructuring contrasts with proceduralization proposed by Bialystock & Ryan (1985, cited in O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p.66) [12]. While proceduralization entails accelerating learning processes performed more slowly by novices at the task, restructuring according to McLaughlin (1986) refers to the process of imposing a new organization on information already stored in long-term memory. In other words, It refers to the process by which second language learners replace previous strategies with new approaches instead of simply performing the same reading processes more quickly as they become more proficient (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 66) [12]. Examples of restructuring in second language acquisition, as described by McLaughlin, are interlanguage, where individuals restructure transitional grammars that are seen to violate more recently acquired principles, or the use of new learning strategies, where individuals apply strategies to second language acquisition which they had previously found effective with native language tasks. Accordingly, Kumaravadivelu (2006) says:

Restructuring can be traced to the structuralist approach enunciated by Piaget, who maintained that cognitive development is characterized by fundamental, qualitative change when a new internal organization is imposed for interpreting new information. Thus, restructuring is neither an incremental change in the structure nor a modification of it, but the addition of totally new structure to allow for a totally new interpretation. Unlike the first two intake factors, restructuring accounts from discontinuity in L2 development. It connotes that there are some types of learning that occur gradually and continuously, but restructuring is a sudden phenomenon. It takes place incidentally and quickly, taking little processing time and energy (p. 47) [9].

The concept of sense maker denotes that a child actively tries to make sense of the world. Asking questions, seeking an answer for questions ...are examples of the sense-making feature of a child. The child's experiences and senses are a gateway to the acquisition of language. The senses are the primary and constant guide to knowledge (Keatinge 1967) [6]. He/she constantly endeavors to make sense the actions of others. However, his/her sense-making is restricted to his/her experience.

By drawing on Piaget's idea of adaptation, we can see how that environment provides the setting for development through the opportunities it offers the child for action. Transferring this idea metaphorically to the abstract world of learning, we can think of classroom as a site of creating and offering opportunities to learners for learning. This view coincides with ecological thinking that sees events and activities as offering affordances or opportunities for use and interaction that depend on who is involved (Gibson, 1979, citen in Cameron, 2001, p. 4) [3]: for example, to a human being, a tree affords shelter from the rain to a bird, the same tree affords a nest site or buds to eat.

To wrap it all up, here's what Renshaw (2004) thinks Piaget's wine can bring to our language-learning 'dinner' for our learners [15]:

- adults and children tend to think and perceive things differently, which is not to say that children are not capable of logical and/or abstract thinking – just because the children do not appear to understand something you say, do or perceive is not justification for assuming they are not capable of understanding it;
- Piaget's Stages of Development can tentatively serve as a model for curriculum or activity design (focusing perhaps more on 'how' something is taught rather than 'what' is taught), but use them only as a starting point and don't let them become a straight-jacket that prevents opportunities for exploring the language or methods as they arise naturally in the classroom;
- Make a learning 'environment' as rich as possible in terms of providing new things to think or talk about (posters, realia, etc) – remember that children instinctively want to find out new things and are capable of constructing new knowledge about language for themselves based on trial-and-error, but without a suitable environment this instinct becomes diminished;
- Remember what assimilation and accommodation mean and involve, including the fact that they are interrelated when it comes to children's learning – when children's overgeneralization of a language rule results in a non-target form, see it as an important first step in finding and accommodating new language, not as an 'error' that needs to be jumped on immediately for correction;
- Recall that Piaget's best known theories generally neglect social factors in learning and work from the idea of a child finding new knowledge independently – combining his theory with Vygotsky's notion of 'social scaffolding' and Bruner's notions of 'routines and formats' can create an extremely effective method for helping young learners acquire new language.

### B. Lev Vygotsky

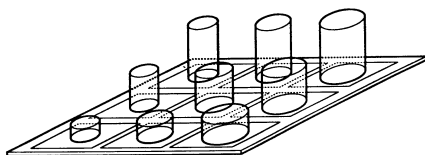
Vygotsky's views of development differ from Piaget's. To Vygotsky, language development is prerequisite for cognitive development (Brown, 2011). However, he never undermines the role of cognitive development. According to Vygotsky, language provides a child with a tool. As Cameron (2001) states, this tool opens new opportunities for doing things and for organizing information through the use of words as

symbols [3]. Accordingly, Aitchison (2012) maintains “words are tools of thought, and you will often find that you are thinking badly because you are using the wrong tools, trying to bore a hole with a screw driver or draw a cork with a coal-hammer” (p. 53) [1]. For Vygotsky, social interaction through language is prerequisite to cognitive development (Brown, 2011). In fact, the child of Vygotsky, unlike Piaget’s, is not alone. In other words, he/she alone is not responsible for his language development. The Child of Vygotsky is born in public and is social. He/she, with the help of others, develops his language; that is, people play important roles in helping children to learn, bringing objects and ideas to their attention. The people play the role of mediators: they mediate the world for children and make it accessible to them.

Vygotsky’s concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD), as Cameron, (2001) claims gives a new meaning to intelligence or ability (Cameron, 2001) [3]. Cameron (2001) states rather measuring intelligence by what a child can do alone, Vygotsky suggested that intelligence was better measured by what a child can do with skilled help. The term ZPD connotes the distance between the learner’s existing developmental state and his potential development. Put another way, a learner has not yet learned but capable of learning. A child has not yet learned, but with the help of his peers can become a good learner (Brown, 2001). The implication of Vygotsky’s ZPD in classroom can be elucidated in the clause “what next it is the child can learn” (Cameron, 2011, p. 8); this, as Cameron (2011) argues, has applications in both lesson planning and in how teachers talk to pupils minute by minute [3].

#### *C. Jerome Bruner*

Like Vygotsky, Bruner also views language as the most important tool for cognitive growth. Bruner described language as a tool of thought, and demonstrated in a range of studies the ways in which language enables children to develop their thinking and perform tasks that would otherwise be impossible. In his famous ‘Nine glasses problem’, for example, he showed that children who could describe the patterns in a  $3 \times 3$  matrix of glasses (which were taller or shorter one way and thinner or fatter the other) were also able to transform the matrix (i.e. arrange the glasses in a mirror image pattern). Children without the relevant language to call on, however, were only able to reproduce the pattern exactly as they had seen it [2].



*Bruner's nine glasses problem*

Bruner’s metaphor of scaffolding refers to the idea that a child can be supported within an activity. A child who does not know how to take a fork, with the help of his or her mother can do learn this task much faster.

Scaffolding has been transferred to the classroom as teacher-pupil talk [2]. Wood (1998) suggests the following ways that teachers can scaffold children’s learning:

<i>Teacher can help children to</i>	<i>By</i>
attend to what is relevant	suggesting praising the significant providing focusing activities encouraging rehearsal
adopt useful strategies	being explicit about organization
remember the whole task and goals	reminding modeling providing part-whole activities

(cited in Cameron, 2001, p. 9)

Bruner’s idea of formats and routines allows scaffolding to take place and combine the security of the familiar with the excitement of the new (Cameron, 2001). Bruner’s example of routine is of parents reading stories to their children from babyhood: the child sits on the parent’s lap with a large picture story book, in a way the parent and child turns the page together; as the child gets older, the type of book, the roles of parent and child change, but the basic format remains. A routine event, thus, is any purposeful activity made up of smaller segments of activity and like the notion of a script it has strong temporally invariant structure, recurs frequently, and has goals, rules and props well understood by the participants (Nelson, 1986, cited in Kleeck, 2004, p. 186) [8]. Highly restrained routine events, according to Bruner (1983) refers to formats which he defines as having a sequential structure, clearly marked roles, and scripts for the accompanying communication (Kleeck, 2004) Routines are considered helpful to young children’s language learning, because they provide a kind of “organizational prosthetic” (Constable, 1986, as cited in Kleeck, 2004 p. 186) that serves to diminish the information-processing load (Shatz, 1983 cited in Kleeck, 2004) [8]. Since the child knows how to form a mental representation, he or she spends less energy to attend to the structure of activity itself. As such, more attention can be devoted to the meaningful substance of the activity and the language that accompanies that activity (Kleeck, 2004) [8].

Transferring the routine implications of child language learning to language classroom provides us with opportunities to check language development. Imagine students want to complete a task familiar to them. Familiarity of the event provides opportunity for them to predict meaning and intention; however, the routines provide them with variations and novelty that can involve more complex language (Cameron, 2001) [3].

Bruner argued that in order to enable the transfer of thinking processes from one context to another, children needed to learn the fundamental principles of subjects rather than just master facts. Jerome Bruner’s other major contribution to our understandings about young children learners is encapsulated in his phrase the spiral curriculum. This is his view that, in principle, anything can be taught to children of any age, provided it is presented in a way that is accessible to them.

Thus, having encountered a set of ideas at a practical level when they are young, they will use this knowledge to help them understand the same ideas at a more symbolic or abstract level when they are older. So learning is viewed as a spiral in which the same point is returned to and revisited, but each time at a higher or deeper level.

The last but not the least implication derived from the work of Bruner is believed that learning should serve the future. His starting point is that "Students...have a limited exposure to the materials they are to learn. How can this exposure be made to count in their thinking for the rest of their lives?" (Bruner, 1960, p.11) Bruner explained that learning can serve the future in two ways, through: (1) specific transfer to task that are similar to those originally learned; and (2) non-specific transfer—the transfer of principles and attitudes [2].

#### *D. Young student's difficulty in language learning*

It is undeniable to say that children also face problems while learning a language. According to Gordon (2007) children face difficulty (1) in second language decoding; (2) in predicting meaning while reading in a second language [4].

Decoding, according to National Institute for Literacy (2007), is defined as the learner's ability "to correctly decipher a particular word out of a group of letters" (p. 3) [11]. As Gordon (2007) claims decoding is difficult for language learners, simply because they do not hear the language the same way as native speaking children [4]. For decoding to take place two skills get involved: phonemic awareness and phonics (NIFL, 2007). Phonemic awareness refers to the understanding that spoken words are made up of individual units of sound, and the ability to identify and manipulate these individual units of sound, as well (NIFL, 2007). At least initially, as Gordon (2007) argues language learners perceive English words as a jumble of odd sounds [4]. Parsing words into individual sounds with the purpose of assigning letters to these sounds is particularly challenging for a child who is beginning to learn English. Also, a young beginning level language learner is confronted with another challenge, not experienced by native language speakers. It is difficult (and sometimes impossible) for language learners to figure out where one word ends and another one begins.

Thus, the lack of phonemic awareness on the part of part of students and the problem that they face in figuring where one word ends or begins, can be solved if phonemic awareness instruction is directed toward students from the initial stages of second language learning (Kamil, 2006). Phonics, according to NIFL (2007), refers to the understanding of the relationship between the letters in written words and the sounds of these words when spoken. What makes young learners face difficulty in decoding is the fact that they prefer to put down what they hear; that is, they create a direct link between sounds and letters. Phonics helps students to recognize familiar words and decode new ones, providing these students a predictable, rules-based system for reading. Adolescents with decoding difficulties need more intensive practice to develop the ability to decode.

The second problem takes place when students face difficulty in predicting meaning. Making predictions or

guesses about the text is another strategy that language learners will find difficult (Gordon (2007) [4]. Implicitly, not knowing some properties of language such as collocation and syntax presents language learners with challenges when they are engaged in the psycholinguistic guessing game of reading. A child, for instance, on encountering the word bedtime is able to predict that it will probably be followed by the word story. Similarly, she will most probably be able to predict that the word tuck will most probably follow the word in (Gordon, 2007) [4].

Lack of linguistic knowledge is closely connected with the fact that language learners have background experiences that are quite different from those of their English-speaking peers. Children who were raised in the United States draw on a vast repository of information when reading books in English. They have less difficulty understanding texts, because they are familiar with the scenarios and situations which children's books describe. Whether a story tells of a birthday party, a tooth fairy, or a play date, chances are that children who are native speakers of English have participated in these activities and know how they tend to evolve.

### III. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Language learning must not be considered as an end itself to a child, but rather as a means of finding out about the world, of forming new concepts and associations. The process will certainly be facilitated if the child is scaffold.

As Scott and Yterberg (1990) claim young children are enthusiastic and positive about learning well, it is important to praise them if they are to keep their enthusiasm and feel successful from the beginning. If we label children failure, then they believe us (p.3). The role of a teacher as a humanizer can provide a secure atmosphere for the student's activity. Scott and Yterberg (1990) contend once children feel secure and content in the classroom, they can be encouraged to become independent and adventurous in the learning of the language. Security is not an attribute or an ability, but it is essential if we want our pupils to get the maximum out of the language lesson.

Accordingly, here are some of the things which help to create a sense of atmosphere:

- 1) Pupils need to know what is happening, and they need to feel that you are in charge
- 2) Respect your pupils
- 3) Don't give children English names. Language is a personal thing, and you are like the same no matter what language you are using
- 4) Avoid giving physical rewards or prizes. It tells others that they have not won and it does not help learning to take place. It is far better to tell the pupils, that you like his or her work. This gives the pupil a sense of achievement which does not exclude the other pupils. Include, don't exclude (p.11)

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