

A Study of Second Language Acquisition Theory and Practice in a Japanese Commercial English School

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1. Introduction

Behaviourism is a school of psychology which insists that human behaviours result from our interactions with the environment, rejecting the influence of internal mental states on human learning (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 56). This paper argues that many commercial language schools in Japan promote a behaviourist theory of learning at odds with recent developments in TESOL. The first half of this paper frames one such company's teaching method as behaviourist, before challenging its claims with more contemporary cognitive theories and research. These theories stress the influence of internal mental states on learning. Having established two opposing viewpoints, the second half of this paper analyses teachers' responses to these learning theories. My research highlights the conflict between the teachers' beliefs and the theory of learning underpinning their company's curricula. This leads to a discussion of the implications of this conflict for both learners and teachers. The issue is further complicated by insights into how the teachers *actually* teach, and the implications of the company's approach and the corporatisation of language learning generally. In the final analysis it is claimed that a less dogmatic teaching approach could benefit this language school, but that the necessary changes are unfeasible.

2. The research context

The research was carried out at a commercial language school based in Hiroshima City. This school is an established brand with a national and international presence in the language learning market. The company employed eleven native English-speaking instructors, teaching

a variety of English courses (business and social), to Japanese learners of different ages, backgrounds and occupations. Learners are taught privately or in level appropriate groups using in-house textbooks or third-party material. The company markets its instruction style as a unique ‘method’.

3. Defining the company instruction ‘method’

The company’s method follows the ‘Presentation, Practice, Production’ (PPP) lesson structure. PPP is the lesson model developed within the Situational Language Teaching (SLT) method, established in the 1960s and still widely used today (Richards and Rogers: 2001, 47). PPP is a three stage teaching approach whereby pre-selected language items are presented, then practiced in a controlled way before learners are allowed to produce the language more freely in the final stage. It has been suggested that there is a clear connection between this teaching approach and behaviourism (Knight, 2001: 149; Richards and Rodgers, 2001, 67).

4. Defining behaviourism

Behaviourism asserts that humans develop stimuli-response connections from which we learn behaviours; we become conditioned to act in certain ways (Brown, 2007: 88). B. F. Skinner (1957) identified that a *stimulus* elicits a *response*, followed by *reinforcement* (either positive or negative) which encourages or discourages repetition of the behaviour. Repetition of this process leads to ‘good’ habit formation. This model can be applied to language learning and informs PPP. This paper examines each PPP stage in turn, outlining its functions before showing how it adheres to behaviourist theory. Cognitive theories of learning and research pertinent to PPP are then introduced to challenge these behaviourist claims.

5. Literature review: SLA theories and research relevant to PPP

5.1 The Presentation Stage

This stage involves the presentation of pre-selected language items by the teacher, using objects, pictures or actions to demonstrate the meaning of vocabulary and structures. The lan-

guage is then modelled by the teacher in full sentences for the student(s) to repeat. In-house textbooks present seemingly ‘simple’ grammar before more complex structures. The lesson topic and related vocabulary service these grammatical structures, especially at beginner to intermediate levels. Introduction of the simple present tense might utilise a picture book and resemble the following interaction between teacher (T) and student (S):

T: Look at this picture. Is it morning or evening?

S: It’s morning.

T: Good. Is it 7 o’clock or 11 o’clock?

S: It’s 7 o’clock.

T: That’s right. Is this breakfast or lunch?

S: It’s breakfast.

T: Yes. He eats breakfast at 7 o’clock. Repeat.

S: He eats breakfast at 7 o’clock.

T: Good!

5.1.1 The Presentation Stage and Behaviourism

This pre-selection, grading and sequencing of language items is typical of the ‘Type A’ syllabus identified by White (1988: 75, 1989: 85). This is a structural syllabus, which assumes that language can be divided into units of grammatical structures for the learner to master, given enough time. These items are to be acquired in a linear and additive way, from simple to complex, passed down from expert (teacher) to passive receiver (learner). This mirrors the accumulative nature of behaviourist theory; while one stimulus-response connection can lead to a simple behaviour, more complex behaviours arise from the building up of *chains* of responses (Brown, 2007: 88). More complex behaviours are formed once simpler behaviours are established (White, 1989: 85). A key tenet of the language school method under discussion here, therefore, is that language items are acquired incrementally across lessons, chapters, textbooks and syllabi. As such, teachers should not deviate from the textbook’s sequencing, as this risks breaking the ‘chain’.

The company’s in-house curricula is designed according to this ‘simple to complex’ strategy. The language school’s management did not give me permission to show any of the in-house materials, however ‘Business Result Pre-Intermediate’ (Grant and Hudson, 2009) is a textbook

commonly used at the Hiroshima branch. In this text present tense structures are taught before past tense forms, both prior to more 'complex' future forms. In addressing each tense, the same design is evident; the simple past tense is introduced before the more 'difficult' present perfect. However, this view of language acquisition is problematic.

5.1.2 Defining 'simple' language items is difficult

Behaviourist theory insists that increasingly complex sub-skills are learned until the primary skill is mastered. Swan equates language learning with the 'progressive courses of instruction' (2005: 382) followed by pilots and surgeons. This assumes that a judgment is made about the relative complexity of the sub-skill in question. However, Pienemann, Johnston and Brindley (1988: 219) argue that a native speaker's definition of 'simple' grammar invariably differs from that which is simple for the second language learner to acquire. Grammar rules that are easy to *state* may not be the easiest to *acquire*. Research by Meisel (1987, cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2006) suggests that learners reliably use irregular past tense forms before regular (-ed ending) forms, even though the former would appear to be more complex than the latter.

5.1.3 Developmental stages

The difficulty of judging language item complexity is supported by our knowledge of (often counterintuitive) developmental stages. In his 'Monitor Model' (2009), Krashen theorises that the L2 is acquired in predictable sequences across learners of differing first languages. In his Natural Order Hypothesis he concludes that research shows that there are set developmental stages regarding the acquisition of grammatical morphemes (2009: 12). Research by Pienemann, Johnston and Brindley (1988) found a six stage sequence for the acquisition of questions by German and French learners of English. Further empirical evidence of developmental sequences regarding negation, relative clauses and possessive determiners (Lightbown and Spada, 2006: 82) suggests that we can predict the order in which students will learn certain forms. If we accept that development stages are unavoidable and obligatory (Long, 2001: 182) we can conclude that learners will not acquire a language item until they are ready to do so. It follows that curricula based on the behaviourist model rather than natural developmental stages are fundamentally flawed; 'chains' leading to more complex language acquisition cannot be formed, because development stages cannot simply be skipped (Pienemann, Johnston

and Brindley, 1988: 230).

5.2 The practice stage

The language school method's practice stage has two phases: 'controlled' practice followed by 'less-controlled' practice. Both phases use 'Initiation, Response, Feedback' (IRF) cycles, as defined by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). This is a three turn format whereby the teacher initiates interaction, the student responds by using the target language, before receiving feedback from the teacher. IRF can operate along an axis of mechanical to demanding, depending on whether the third turn is concerned with recitation, display, cognition or precision (van Lier: 2001; 95).

5.2.1 The 'controlled' and 'less controlled' practice phases

The 'controlled' practice phase is purely mechanical, as the teacher asks a series of closed questions to elicit the target sentence introduced in the presentation stage. The teacher praises or corrects the response. This can be considered 'recitation' (according to van Lier's scale) inasmuch as the student is simply repeating the previously presented sentence. For example:

T: Does the man eat breakfast at 7 o'clock?

S: Yes, the man eats breakfast at 7 o'clock.

T: Good. Does the man eat breakfast at 8 o'clock?

S: No, the man eats breakfast at 7 o'clock.

T: That's right.

The 'less controlled' practice phase requires the learner to use the target language items in a picture description, skit or information gap activity. This is a more demanding form of IRF requiring greater articulatory and precision (van Lier, 2001: 95). For example:

T: Now, tell me about your morning.

S: I get up at 6 o'clock.

T: Excellent. What time do you eat breakfast?

S: I eat breakfast at 7.30.

T: Good.

5.2.2 The practice stage and behaviourism

The 'controlled' practice phase is concerned with 'echoic behaviour' (Skinner, 1957: 55), the generating of responses similar to that of the stimuli, reinforced by praise or correction. The IRF format can be aligned with Skinner's behaviourism; the 'initiation' by the teacher provides the stimulus, the 'response' is the operant, and the 'feedback' from the teacher provides reinforcement leading to habit formation (or 'punishment' to eliminate 'bad' habits). The 'controlled practice' phase aims to automatise production of the target structure through repetition and strict error correction.

The 'less controlled' practice phase, although more demanding, still follows the IRF pattern and has the characteristics of this kind of exchange: it is teacher-centred; not co-constructed; discouraging of student initiation, interruption, questioning or closing (van Lier, 2001: 95). In this way it is typical of White's 'Type A' syllabus within which behaviourism operates. The learner is expected to respond to teacher stimuli in a limited way, using prescribed language items, in order to be praised (reinforced).

This practice functions as preparation for the production stage. Therefore, the positioning of this stage is non-negotiable; focus on form should take place *before* communicative tasks.

5.2.3 Ausubel's Subsumption Theory

David Ausubel (1977) argues that meaningful learning is more efficient than rote learning. Rote learning involves the mental storage of disparate items, which in their disconnectedness interfere with one another, resulting in poor retention when conditioning ceases. Meaningful learning connects new items with what we already know (subsumption), building a cognitive structure of meaningful associations which is systematically added to and edited (Brown, 2007: 94). This theory suggests that the rote practice of language items typical of PPP is inefficient, pointing instead to the need for learners to utilise their existing language resources while engaged in meaningful communication.

5.2.4 Interlanguage Theory

Ausubel's Subsumption Theory suggests a learner's cognitive structure undergoes reorganisation, a theory developed by Selinker who coined the term 'interlanguage' (1972). The interlan-

guage (IL) is the linguistic system used by the learner, positioned between the learner's native language (NL) and the target language (TL). As learners speak they engage in a process of trial and error towards achieving the TL 'ideal'. Resultant errors and interlocutor feedback help the learner evaluate their progress and provides an impulse for the re-evaluation of their knowledge. This development of the interlanguage happens in a non-linear way, as learner errors demonstrate. Patsy Lightbown's research (into the acquisition of the progressive *-ing* form by French learners of English) shows a U-shaped developmental pattern, from early accurate use of the target structure, to deviation, to a final accurate representation of the language item (Gass, 2008: 237).

Interlanguage theory leads to several conclusions. Firstly, learner development is a creative, non-linear and unstable process (Mitchell and Myles, 2001: 18). Learners often display characteristics of several different developmental stages at the same time, challenging the behaviourist notion of the incremental and permanent acquisition of language items (Lightbown and Spada, 2006: 92). Secondly, learner errors are necessary and evidence of L2 development (Brown, 2007: 257). Thirdly, learner errors can be understood through the psycholinguistic processes shaping utterances (Selinker, 1972: 217), potentially signposting effective future instruction.

5.3 The production stage

In theory, the production stage allows the learner to speak freely, and is concerned with fluency. Towards this aim, error correction is delayed until post-task. The method used by this study's language school encourages a second enactment based on eliminating these errors.

5.3.1 The production stage and behaviourism

The production stage is superficially concerned with learner autonomy, and is shaped by behaviourist learning theory. Teacher and student expect the target language item(s) to be used in this stage. Experience tells us that the teacher is listening for use of the target forms, and subsequent feedback centres on how well they are produced. This process conditions the learner into meeting the teacher's expectations, behaviour reinforced by repeated PPP lessons. In effect the IRF pattern is being repeated, only this time in a seemingly 'authentic' interaction instead of a drill, towards the aim of meeting the lesson 'goal'.

5.3.2 Demands on attention

In fact, the production stage's two central aims - accuracy and fluency - are rarely achieved. Learners frequently produce the target language items inaccurately or not at all (Hedge, 2000: 164). This may reflect the disconnect between their developmental stage and the syllabus; they are simply not ready to learn the language item. Skehan (1996: 50) and Willis and Willis (2007: 17) suggest that insufficient attentional resources affect output; learners can focus on the target form (accuracy) or meaning (fluency), but rarely both. In research by VanPatten (1990) beginner and intermediate learners of Spanish had difficulty in consciously attending to both linguistic features and informational content in the input. We can conclude by saying that focus on accuracy undermines the aim of fluency, while fluency is often detrimental to the form-based aims of PPP.

Having outlined PPP as used at the language school under discussion (and competing theories relevant to its functions), the second half of this paper will examine the teachers' opinions regarding behaviourist and cognitive approaches. Description of the survey design and process will be followed by discussion of the results.

6. Method

6.1 Participants

All eleven of the language school's teachers were invited to respond to the survey, from whom nine completed surveys were received. The nine participants included six males and three females. Six participants were aged between 25-34 years old, two between 35 and 44, and one between 45 and 54. One participant had less than one year of second language teaching experience, while three colleagues had between two and four years. Two teachers had between five and seven years experience, while three participants had over eight years experience. Five participants had qualifications relevant to foreign language teaching; three held CELTA/TESOL certificates, one held an TESOL/Applied Linguistics masters degree, one a qualification classified as 'other'. All nine participants spoke at least one other language; one at beginner level, five at lower intermediate, one at upper intermediate, and two at advanced level.

6.2 Instruments/Materials/Apparatus

This study used a twenty-one item questionnaire, with a five point Likert scale. Four key statements regarding the language school’s method were targeted by four items each. These items surveyed teachers’ *beliefs* specifically. This multi-item scale was used to average out idiosyncratic interpretations of individual items, as well as interrogate different aspects of each statement (Dornyei, 2007: 104). Positively and negatively worded items were included to maintain interviewee focus and prevent one-sided responses on the Likert scale. Five additional items surveyed teachers’ *actual practice* in relation to the teaching ‘method’. Table 1 shows the statements and related items. In the final questionnaire the items were mixed up.

Table 1 Questionnaire statements and items

| Statement | Questionnaire item | Item number in final questionnaire | Rationale for item |
|--|---|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. We should teach simple grammatical forms before complex ones | Students should learn simple language structures before moving on to more difficult ones. | 1 | Indicative of behaviourist theory of learning |
| | It is acceptable to introduce grammar from a higher level textbook. (reversed coding) | 6 | Contradicts behaviourist ‘incremental’ learning |
| | We should stick to the textbook’s grammar point(s) for each lesson. | 14 | Supports behaviourist ‘incremental’ learning |
| | We should teach grammatical forms as the need arises during lessons. (reversed coding) | 16 | Contradicts behaviourist ‘incremental’ learning |
| 2. Intensive practice of each grammatical form is necessary for it to be acquired | Grammar should be taught after communicative tasks. (reversed coding) | 5 | Suggests the use of ‘deep end’ performance, not behaviourist skill building |
| | The student should decide how and when to use target structures. (reversed coding) | 8 | Contradicts the teacher-centred behaviourist approach, i.e. White’s Type A syllabus (1989) |
| | Drills are necessary for learning a grammatical structure. | 10 | Behaviourist theory of learning |

| | | | |
|---|--|----|---|
| | Controlled practice is key to learning a grammatical form. | 21 | Behaviourist theory of learning |
| 3. Strict and timely error correction is necessary to prevent and eliminate bad habits | Errors should be corrected as soon as they are made. | 2 | Behaviourist theory of learning |
| | We should only correct errors which interfere with understanding. (reversed coding) | 4 | Agrees with interlanguage theory |
| | Learner errors are a sign of development. (reversed coding) | 11 | Agrees with interlanguage theory |
| | Delayed error correction is less effective than immediate error correction. | 17 | Behaviourist theory of learning favours immediate error correction |
| 4. Mastery of the target structure is the expected lesson outcome | I expect the learning 'objectives' of each lesson to be met. | 3 | The success of a behaviourist approach lies on mastery of language item |
| | Simultaneous fluency and accuracy is unrealistic. (reversed coding) | 7 | Agrees with VanPatten's research (1990) |
| | Learner awareness of the target structure is itself a satisfactory lesson outcome. (reversed coding) | 13 | Contradicts the behaviourist insistence on mastery of language item |
| | I expect students to use the target structures correctly by the end of the lesson. | 19 | Agrees with a behaviourist approach |
| 5. Questions about teaching practices | I teach simple language forms then build up to more complex ones. | 9 | Behaviourist approach |
| | I make my students practice the target structure before attempting the 'goal'. | 12 | Behaviourist approach |
| | I present the language necessary for the student to complete the lesson goal. | 15 | Behaviourist approach |

| | | |
|---|----|-----------------------|
| I make my students drill the target structure(s). | 18 | Behaviourist approach |
| If the student makes an error using the target structure, I correct them immediately. | 20 | Behaviourist approach |

6.3 Procedure

Paper questionnaires were distributed by myself during the week beginning May 4th 2014. The participants were asked to complete the survey in their free time. All nine responses were personally collected in the same week at the language school.

6.4 Data analysis

The five points on the Likert scale were assigned a numerical value, from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree), with a neutral value of 3 (neither agree nor disagree). Items supporting the main statements adhered to this coding. Items that challenged the main statements were subject to reversed coding; from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The item responses were then summed and averaged, giving a mean score indicating the extent of agreement with each statement.

For clarity, the 'agreement with item (mean)' in each table follows the 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree) coding.

7. Results and discussion

The responses to each statement will now be examined in turn, followed by a discussion of their implications. Key data is summarised in the following tables.

7.1 Statement 1: We should teach simple grammatical forms before complex ones

The PPP approach relies on a carefully graded syllabus and textbook, and teacher-led lessons (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 44). The results shown in Table 2 suggest that the participants in my sample agree with the behaviourist principle of presenting and teaching language incrementally, from simple to complex. Item 1 in the questionnaire explicitly expresses this idea and finds strong support. However, the participants also support deviation from the text-

Table 2 Agreement with statement 1

| | Questionnaire item number | Agreement with item (mean) | Agreement with statement (mean) |
|-------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Statement 1 | 1 | 4.44 | 2.97 |
| | 6 | 3.66 | |
| | 14 | 2.22 | |
| | 16 | 3.11 | |

book and curriculum pacing.

This contradiction suggests that the teachers agree with ‘common sense’ skill-building theory, but recognise a problem with the ‘one size fits all’ textbook grading and sequencing of language forms. There is little support for the strict sequencing of language demanded by the language school’s ‘method’ and many of its in-house textbooks. This points to an awareness of individual learner differences and openness to creative teaching methods tailored to the student.

7.2 Statement 2: Intensive practice of each grammatical form is necessary for acquisition

Table 3 Agreement with statement 2

| | Questionnaire item number | Agreement with item (mean) | Agreement with statement (mean) |
|-------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Statement 2 | 5 | 3.22 | 3.18 |
| | 8 | 3.22 | |
| | 10 | 3.55 | |
| | 21 | 3.66 | |

Table 3 shows the participants have an ambivalent attitude towards controlled practice generally, and are open to more communicative approaches such as post-task focus on form (item 5) and greater learner autonomy (item 8). The teachers see the value of drilling (item 10), although we do not know to what extent this lies in paying attention to syntax, pronunciation, and confidence building (Hedge, 2000: 167), rather than being essential for acquisition, as the PPP approach asserts.

In general, there is no strong belief in intensive, repetitive practice. However, neither are more communicative, student-centred approaches fully endorsed. This uncertainty points to gaps in SLA knowledge, and provides an opportunity for a more rounded approach to teacher training. Instead of focusing solely on practical teaching techniques, in-house training could introduce SLA theories such as interlanguage theory and associated research. Complementing practice with theory may be welcomed by the teachers, many of who are qualified and experienced professionals, and language learners themselves. Importantly, it could provide opportunities for professional development and lead to more considered and effective teaching (Ellis, 2001).

7.3 Statement 3: Strict and timely error correction is necessary to prevent and eliminate bad habits

Table 4 Agreement with statement 3

| | Questionnaire item number | Agreement with item (mean) | Agreement with statement (mean) |
|-------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Statement 3 | 2 | 2.88 | 2.77 |
| | 4 | 2.44 | |
| | 11 | 4 | |
| | 17 | 2.66 | |

Table 4 highlights a belief that errors can signal development (item 11) and not simply a bad habit to be eliminated. There is little support for strict error correction (item 2) and the teachers see value in delayed correction (item 17). However, the importance of explicit feedback is understood, and the teachers value accuracy (item 4). This suggests that teachers believe that the type and timing of error correction depends on lesson variables; learner personality and level, classroom dynamic and the language items being taught. Their beliefs are in line with interlanguage theory and a willingness to accept errors as a natural condition of learning. We can infer that the teachers understand language learning as a creative endeavour, and are willing to give students space to communicate. As such, these results are a repudiation of an essential element of the behaviourist approach.

7.4 Statement 4: Mastery of the target structure is the expected lesson outcome

Table 5 Agreement with statement 4

| | Questionnaire item number | Agreement with item (mean) | Agreement with statement (mean) |
|-------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Statement 4 | 3 | 3.77 | 3.3 |
| | 7 | 2.66 | |
| | 13 | 3.33 | |
| | 19 | 3.44 | |

Table 5 shows that there is no strong belief among my colleagues that mastery of the target structure can (or should be expected to) be achieved. As such, a key tenet of the behaviourist approach is rejected. While learning objectives are generally seen as attainable (item 3), we do not know if these goals are modest or ambitious. Indeed, there is some support for learner *awareness* as a satisfactory outcome (item 13), suggesting lesson objectives may be modest. Responses to items 7 and 19 suggest there is still a role for presenting research to teachers during in-house training. This could serve to confirm teachers' intuition; that second language learning is 'typified by incomplete success' (Mitchell and Myles, 2001: 20), that classroom learning is inadequate in the face of such a complex task, and most learners fail to achieve anything resembling native-like command of the language (Lightbown, 1985: 179).

7.5 Actual teaching practice

The fact that the 'agreement with statement' mean scores are grouped around the neutral 3 implies two things. Firstly, that the instructors do not teach according to any specific theory of learning, even though several individual item results point to an openness to meaningful communicative classroom interaction. Secondly, there is little enthusiasm for the beliefs underpinning the language school's behaviourist approach. We can reasonably expect that the instructors have formulated their own pragmatic approaches to teaching, perhaps based on experience and intuition, but difficult to verbalise (Brown, 2007: 312). As such, we would expect to find a diverse range of teaching practices, reflective of the multiple classroom contexts in which they operate. Surprisingly, table 6 disproves this hypothesis.

In the classroom the teachers are compelled to follow behaviourist practices with which they share little belief. This is a result of the contractual obligation to teach according to the

Table 6 Actual teaching practices

| | Questionnaire item number | Agreement with item (mean) |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Actual teaching practices | 19 | 3.77 |
| | 12 | 3.66 |
| | 15 | 4.33 |
| | 18 | 4.22 |
| | 20 | 2.77 |

school's 'method'. Teachers are trained in the method prior to employment, and regularly monitored to ensure conformity to its behaviourist approach. Monitoring scores have a direct influence on salary and re-contracting negotiations.

The company bases its reputation on the method, and this is reflected in the advertising and syllabi. When a specific teaching approach is enforced from above, opportunities for introducing and practicing alternative SLA theories are unfeasible. When that approach is behaviourist, the consequences for the learner are significant; interlanguage remains undeveloped, communication strategies are unexplored and pages and chapters are turned under the assumption that the target structures have been mastered. An accumulative learning approach fosters unrealistic expectations in students, and in this language school conflicts with teachers' beliefs about language teaching and learning. Teacher development is ignored, with potentially negative consequences for instructor morale and classroom practice.

8. Conclusion

This paper has shown that the teachers do not share many of the beliefs which underpin the 'method' of the company for which they work. However, their actual teaching practices conform to the very approaches they question. This is indicative of the conformity that this (and other) commercial language schools demand to maintain its position in the marketplace. It offers one explanation for the disconnect between SLA theory and practice (Ellis, 2001: 56), and challenges Long's claim that methods prescribed in teacher training become less relevant in classroom practice (2001: 181). Furthermore, it poses a wider question of how the corporatisation of language learning can be reconciled with contemporary SLA theories and research, for the benefit of both learners and teachers.

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