Second Language Acquisition Theories for Thai Students

Somchai Watcharapunyawong*

Owing to the endless development of the world’s communication technology, languages have become an essential tool for people from different countries. As a result, over the past few decades, people have paid attention to language learning. Many a language such as English, Japanese, Chinese, French, etc. is taught and studied widely in schools as well as in universities. In order to enhance second language learners to be able to perform their language competence effectively, at least a second language acquisition theory is necessary for school teachers and university lecturers to employ.

As a matter of fact, there are a number of learning theories proposed by scholars. Some focus on human behaviors, and others are in relation to learning approaches that can be applied to develop learners’ cognition. Therefore, it is crucial for each teacher to determine which theory is the most appropriate for his/her students.

As I am one of university instructors who teaches English to those whose native language is Thai, I have always realized the importance of second language acquisition theories used along with teaching approaches. In this article, the theories of Jerome Bruner, Stephen Krashen and B.F. Skinner are introduced in brief in order to be one of alternative selections for any other teacher related to the area of language teaching.

Jerome S. Bruner, a famous psychologist born in New York, proposes a theory of the active learning process which is employed by many academic educators in both schools and colleges. Bruner (1996) states,
It is surely the case that schooling is only one small part of how a culture inducts the young into its canonical ways. Indeed, schooling may even be at odds with a culture’s other ways of inducting the young into the requirements of communal living. What has become increasingly clear is that education is not just about conventional school matters like curriculum or standards or testing. What we resolve to do in school only makes sense when considered in the broader context of what the society intends to accomplish through its educational investment in the young. How one conceives of culture and its aims, professed and otherwise.

According to the aforementioned notion, Bruner emphasizes on learners’ outcome more than curricula used in schools; in other words, he considers that many schools employ conventional teaching methodology, which they do not realize how important students’ learning progress is. Bruner, therefore, creates a learning theory directly related to students’ self-improvement called “The process of education” (Bruner, 1960). This theory is sometimes referred to “the active process of learning”.

The active process of learning focuses on learners’ background knowledge. That is to say, in order to acquire the second language quickly, students have to relate the new experiences they obtain to their own previous knowledge. Nonetheless, this process is dependent upon the readiness of each learner. In addition, teachers’ instructions play a major role on students’ learning readiness. Good teachers should not only have understandable dialogues but also make learners have their own interests in learning. Bruner (1960) mentions, “interest in the material to be learned is the best stimulus to learning, rather than such external goals as grades or later competitive advantage.” All in all, according to this theory, passive learners require protection from teachers in order to be more confident to participate in classroom activities. Furthermore, adjusted current environment is needed for students’ learning adaptation interacted with their previous knowledge (www.pgeps.pg.k12.md.us, 2008)
Another theorist of second language acquisition is Stephen Krashen. His theory emphasizes on comprehensible input that encourages learners to be able to use language both inside and outside classrooms with no anxiety. In other words, they can apply what they learn in class to their real life situations. According to Krashen (1986), “The classroom is of benefit when it is the major source of comprehensible input. When acquirers have rich sources of input outside the class, they are proficient enough to take advantage of it” (p. 58). More interestingly, the correction of mistakes is not required immediately when learners make mistakes. Thus, grammatical rules are not an essence for students who learn English as the second language. Krashen (2005) believes, “Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules.”

In a nutshell, language mistakes are not corrected directly from learners at once; however, teachers are to correct the mistakes from the comprehensible input instead and try to encourage the learners to memorize the grammatical patterns from the corrected input.

The other theorist in this article is B.F. Skinner, one of the well-known psychologists. His theory is based on learner’s behavior. Stimulus and response of learners are the major factors of conditional operation. According to Skinner (1998), “During the operating, the organism encounters a special kind of stimulus, called a reinforcing stimulus, or simply a reinforcer.”

Reinforcement is classified into two types- positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement happens when teachers require to encourage their students who study well. Prizes or praise can be given to them. This makes the students need to work hard and participate in classroom activities. On the other hand, negative reinforcement can be done to those who perform undesired
behaviors by withdrawing rewards or praise. As a result of this, they do not want to go on their unsatisfying interactions in classrooms (Boeree, 1998).

In conclusion, learning theories are considered as an effective educational tool for teachers to use for their student’s cognitive development. However, each theory is not appropriate for every classroom. Hence, it should be teachers’ responsibility to study the theory in which they are interested carefully in order to employ it for the real learning progress of students.

References


