
Theoretical Foundations and Practical Applications of Language and Language Learning Theories in TEFL: A term Paper

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Abstract

This paper explores the significance of language and language learning theories in the context of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). It examines how definitions of language and theories about its acquisition and use provide foundational guidance for classroom instruction, curriculum design, and teacher decision-making. Drawing from structural, functional, and interactional views of language, as well as from behaviorist, nativist, cognitive, social-constructivist theories, and Krashen's Five Hypotheses, the paper highlights how each theoretical perspective influences teaching methodology, materials development, and student-teacher roles. By addressing five guiding questions, the study systematically presents the conceptual and practical implications of these theories for second and foreign language education. It emphasizes that while each theory offers valuable insights, effective implementation requires contextualization based on learner characteristics, classroom dynamics, curriculum standards, and national policy. Furthermore, the paper underscores the need for teachers to act as facilitators, curriculum designers, and motivators, while empowering learners to become autonomous, reflective participants in the language learning process. Concluding that theories serve as hypotheses rather than fixed solutions, the paper calls for reflective and adaptive application to maximize their pedagogical potential. This comprehensive analysis aims to support educators in applying informed, theory-based approaches to enhance English language teaching effectiveness in diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Language Teaching Theory, Hypothesis, Classroom Practice, Language Teaching

Objectives of the Term Paper

1. To define and explain the concepts of language and language learning.
2. To explore the meaning and role of theory in language education.
3. To examine major language and language learning theories.

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4. To analyze the practical application of these theories in TEFL contexts.
 5. To evaluate the relevance of language and language learning theories to curriculum design, classroom practice, and teacher-student roles.
 6. To emphasize the need for contextual and reflective application of theories in adult EFL/ESL classrooms.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the enduring relevance of language and its learning theories, unveiling their beauty and depth. It aspires to bridge the realm of theory and practice, transforming abstract ideas into vibrant classroom experiences. Ultimately, it envisions a harmonious blend of knowledge, expression, and enlightenment in language education. To address these issues, key points are discussed in response to guiding questions presented in the body section, helping to organize the discussion in a clear and understandable manner.

This paper first presents definitions of language offered by various scholars. Although the definitions vary slightly, many reflect similar ideas. For example, some scholars define language as “an instrument to express one’s ideas, emotions, feelings, experiences, and the values and culture of one’s country to others, either verbally or non-verbally” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

In addition to the definition of language, the concept of language learning is also discussed, drawing from various linguistic and educational sources. Furthermore, the paper addresses language theories such as the structural, functional, and interactional views and their relevance to classroom language instruction. In parallel, theories of language learning, including the Behaviorist, Nativist, Cognitive, and Social-Constructivist perspectives, as well as Krashen’s Five Hypotheses, are discussed in terms of their theoretical foundations and applicability to language teaching.

Moreover, this paper seeks to unveil the profound significance of language and its learning theories within the realm of education, casting light on the dynamic interplay between teachers and students. It highlights how their collaborative roles breathe life into theoretical concepts, transforming them into vivid, meaningful experiences within the classroom. The paper concludes with a brief summary of the main points and a personal reflection on the topic.

2. Body

This section is structured around five guiding questions that helped identify relevant sources and organize the discussion effectively:

1. What is language and language learning?
2. What is theory?
3. What are language and language learning theories and their applications?
4. What is their relevance to English teaching and education?
5. What are the roles of teachers and students during theory implementation?

Using these questions, the paper investigates foundational concepts in language and language learning, supported by academic references. The first step is to define the term language. According to Brown (2007), language is “a system of arbitrary conventionalized vocal, written, or gestural symbols that enable members of a given community to communicate intelligibly with one another” (p. 6). Similarly, Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2018) describe language as “a set

of finite or infinite sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements” (p. 14). These definitions underscore the structural and communicative roles of language in human interaction.

In terms of language learning, Ellis (2008) explains it as “the process by which learners internalize the linguistic system of another language” (p. 5). This encompasses both the acquisition of form and the ability to use the language meaningfully in context.

The subsequent sections of this paper delve deeper into theoretical frameworks and their implications for classroom practice.

2.1 Language and Language Learning

2.1.1 What is Language?

According to Sapir (1921), as cited in Lyons (1981, p. 10), “*language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.*” Similarly, Lyons (1981, p. 9) defines language as “*a systematic means of communicating ideas and feelings through the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or written marks that have understood meanings.*” To provide a clearer understanding, Brown (2007, p. 17) outlines the following specific characteristics of language:

- Language is systematic.
- Language is a set of arbitrary symbols.
- These symbols are primarily vocal but may also be visual.
- The symbols have conventionalized meanings.
- Language is used for communication.
- Language operates within a speech community or culture.
- Language is essentially human, though possibly not limited to humans.
- Language is acquired by all people in largely the same way.

Based on these definitions, one can conclude that language is a vital tool that allows human beings to express and share their emotions, experiences, desires, and social and cultural knowledge, whether verbally or non-verbally.

2.1.2 What is Language Learning?

Language learning is an active and continuous process that begins at birth, particularly with the acquisition of one’s first language. It continues throughout life as learners use language to communicate thoughts, feelings, and experiences; form relationships; and make sense of the world around them. Brown (2007, p. 19) defines language learning in terms of the following characteristics:

- Learning is the acquisition or gaining of knowledge and understanding.
- Learning entails the retention of information, concepts, or skills over time.
- Learning signifies the presence of memory and cognitive organization.
- Learning demands active participation and conscious engagement.
- Learning is relatively permanent, though susceptible to the natural process of forgetting.

- Learning flourishes through consistent effort and deliberate practice. Learning results in a change in behavior.

Thus, language learning is not only about acquiring linguistic knowledge, but also about using it meaningfully in various social contexts.

2.2 What is Theory?

The term *theory* is not limited to academic formulations labeled as linguistic, learning, or cognitive theories. It also refers to the assumptions and underlying beliefs that inform curriculum planning, classroom practices, teaching judgments, and everyday decisions made by language educators (Stern, 1981).

According to Stern (1981), theory becomes especially evident in contexts such as language teacher training, supervision, curriculum development, textbook writing, program selection, and resource justification. In essence, theory guides the rationale behind language teaching and learning decisions.

2.3 Theories of Language and Language Learning

This section discusses two core areas: theories of language and theories of language learning, alongside their practical relevance to English language teaching.

2.3.1 Language Theories and Their Relevance to Teaching

According to Richards (2001, pp. 20–21), there are at least three theoretical views of language that have shaped current teaching approaches:

2.3.1.1 *The Structural View*

This view perceives language as a graceful system of interrelated elements, artfully woven to convey meaning with precision and beauty. It envisions language as a symphony of structure and expression, harmonizing thought and communication. Paul (2010) argues that language learning under this view involves analyzing the structural patterns of language through observation, variation recognition, and the internalization of rules.

In practice, this view supports teaching through linguistic elements such as phonology, grammar, and vocabulary. Teaching techniques such as drills and pattern practice are emphasized, commonly seen in methods like the Grammar Translation Method, Audio-lingual Method, and Aural-Oral Approach.

Example:

- **T:** I have a pen. Say after me: book.
- **Ss:** I have a pen.
- **Ss:** I have a book.
- **T:** pencil, bag
- **Ss:** I have a pencil.
- **Ss:** I have a bag.

Such substitution drills help learners practice sentence structure and build vocabulary systematically.

2.3.1.2 The Functional View

This view emphasizes the communicative and semantic aspects of language over its structural aspects. Halliday (1975) proposes that the function of language shapes its very form, emphasizing that language is not merely a means of expression but a reflection of human purpose. He identifies seven primary functions of language, each revealing a distinct facet of communication's richness:

1. **Instrumental** – to obtain needs and fulfill desires.
2. **Regulatory** – to influence or control the behavior of others.
3. **Interactional** – to build and sustain social relationships.
4. **Personal** – to voice individuality and express emotions.
5. **Heuristic** – to question, explore, and discover the world.
6. **Imaginative** – to craft fantasies and creative expressions.
7. **Representational** – to share ideas, facts, and information.

This approach is useful in teaching communicative competencies such as requesting, advising, inviting, or expressing feelings. It aligns with Notional-Functional and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches.

2.3.1.3 The Interactional View

In this view, language is seen as a tool for building social relationships and negotiating meaning through conversation (Vishwa Prasad, 2018). It focuses on interaction patterns, sociolinguistic features, and communication strategies.

The relevance of this view is evident in fostering respect and engagement in the classroom. It helps teachers value learners' input, encouraging learner autonomy and better interaction.

To implement this in class, teachers can create communicative situations for greetings, invitations, and other social exchanges. The Communicative Language Teaching method strongly supports this perspective.

2.3.2 Language Learning Theories and Their Relevance to Teaching

Theories of language learning provide insight into how students acquire a second or foreign language, and which teaching methodologies best support this process.

2.3.2.1 Behaviorist Theory of Language Learning

Behaviorists contend that language learning blossoms through imitation, practice, reinforcement, and the graceful rhythm of habit formation. As Hasseini (2012) observes, in an L2 setting, learners are gently molded to replace native patterns with new linguistic behaviors through repeated exposure and nurtured reinforcement. This theory underpins the Audio-lingual Method (ALM), which emphasizes drills and mechanical practice.

Example:

- **T:** Knife
- **Ss:** Knife
- **T:** Good. But the 'k' is silent. Say: knife, knife, knife

- **Ss:** Knife... knife... knife

Through repetition and correction, learners internalize correct forms. This method remains in use, especially at the kindergarten and primary levels in contexts like Ethiopia.

2.3.2.2 Nativist/Innate Theory

The nativist theory posits that humans are born with an innate capacity for language learning. Chomsky introduced the concept of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), a hypothetical module in the brain responsible for recognizing the structure of any language (Brown, 2007, p. 37).

Chomsky outlines four innate properties:

1. Distinguishing speech sounds from other sounds
2. Classifying linguistic data
3. Recognizing permissible language systems
4. Evaluating and simplifying linguistic input

Although adult learners do not acquire language exactly like children, they use innate cognitive processes to construct grammatically correct sentences. This theory aligns with the Natural Approach, which emphasizes meaningful communication over explicit grammar instruction.

2.3.2.3 Cognitive Theory

Cognitive theorists argue that language learning involves mental processes like analyzing, reasoning, and problem-solving. Carroll (1966) as cited in Demirezen (2014) explains that language is acquired through conscious control of grammar and vocabulary, supported by internal processing and memory.

Learners are encouraged to discover rules through inductive reasoning, rather than being explicitly taught. Teachers facilitate this by connecting prior knowledge with new content and by guiding students through analysis and critical thinking tasks.

Example: A teacher may ask students to describe their surroundings, encouraging them to use cognitive strategies such as guessing, comparing, and organizing information to express themselves more accurately.

2.3.2.4 Social Constructivist Theory

According to Brown (2007), social constructivism emphasizes the role of social interaction and collaborative learning in constructing both cognitive and emotional perceptions of reality. In this regard, Vygotsky (1978) as cited in Brown (2007, p. 23) asserted that children's thinking and meaning-making are socially constructed and emerge through interactions with their environment.

In the ESL/EFL context, this implies that language learning is a form of socialization. Learners are viewed as active participants, and both teachers and learners act as co-constructors of meaning. To implement this approach, teachers should provide authentic, contextualized tasks in a less controlled environment that fosters collaboration. Approaches such as Community Language Learning and Notional-Functional Syllabi are particularly suited to this perspective.

2.3.2.5 Krashen's Five Hypotheses of Language Learning

2.3.2.5.1 *Input Hypothesis*

Krashen's Input Hypothesis eloquently suggests that language acquisition flourishes when learners encounter comprehensible input just beyond their current grasp ($i+1$). When the input is either too simplistic or exceedingly complex, the delicate rhythm of learning falters, and true acquisition may fail to blossom. According to Krashen, listening and reading should be prioritized, as speaking and writing will develop naturally with sufficient input. Teachers should ensure that the classroom environment is low-anxiety and input-rich (Krashen, 1995). Kumaravadivelu (1948) highlights that simply talking with students in a way they understand may be "the best possible language lesson," as it ensures learners receive the input necessary for acquisition.

The relevance of this hypothesis lies in the connection between meaning and form, and in the instructional strategies that help learners decode and internalize the language through input.

2.3.2.5.2 *Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis*

Krashen differentiates between:

- **Acquisition:** A subconscious process of internalizing language through natural communication.
- **Learning:** A conscious process involving explicit knowledge of language rules.

Both are essential for adult L2 learners. In the classroom, teachers should balance formal instruction with communicative practice, allowing learners to internalize rules naturally while also understanding them explicitly (Zhao, 2008).

2.3.2.5.3 *Monitor Hypothesis*

The Monitor Hypothesis states that formal language knowledge (i.e., learning) acts as a monitor to edit or correct language output produced via the acquired system. This means learners apply rules when there is time, focus on form, and awareness of correctness.

Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 183) provide the following pedagogical implications:

- Present as much comprehensible input as possible.
- Use visual aids and context to enhance understanding.
- Focus on listening and reading over grammar drills.
- Reduce affective filters by creating a supportive and communicative classroom.

As Zhao (2008) notes, excessive correction may hinder natural acquisition. Instead, teachers should allow students to engage in meaningful communication, develop self-monitoring, and correct errors subconsciously.

2.3.2.5.4 *Natural Order Hypothesis*

This hypothesis asserts that language is acquired in a predictable sequence, similar to how children acquire their first language (Prasad, 2018). Thus, ESL/EFL instruction should follow a logical and natural progression starting from letters → words → phrases → sentences—and focus on presenting skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the order in which learners naturally acquire them.

2.3.2.5.5 *Affective Filter Hypothesis*

The Affective Filter Hypothesis focuses on emotional variables such as motivation, anxiety, attitude, and self-confidence, which can either facilitate or block language acquisition.

Krashen (1995) as cited in Zhao (2008) suggests that lowering learners' affective filters can enhance acquisition. Teachers should:

- Create a friendly, non-threatening environment.
- Use motivational strategies such as praise, encouragement, and interactive tools (e.g., games, puppets, role-plays).
- Help learners build self-confidence and sustain interest in language learning.

In essence, a classroom environment with low affective barriers supports higher learner engagement and success.

2.4 The Relevance of Language and Language Learning Theories to Education

Language and language learning theories are essential in shaping effective education systems.

Stern (1981) outlines the following benefits:

- Theories provide a broader perspective on the connection between language teaching and disciplines such as education, psychology, linguistics, sociology, and politics.
- Theoretical frameworks support curriculum design, methodology selection, and lesson planning.
- They empower educators to justify language programs, defend teaching positions, and contribute to scholarly and public discussions.
- Theories help define techniques, procedures, and the philosophical foundation of language instruction.

On the other hand, the relevance of language itself in education is emphasized by Rassool (2004), who states that:

- Language is a key tool in global communication, especially in a technology-driven and culturally diverse world.
- It plays a crucial role in identity formation, social discourse, and ideological expression.
- Language shapes educational policy, media narratives, and cultural production.
- It is central to the imagination of national identity and cohesive community building.

Fernandez (2008) adds that language learning contributes to:

- Intellectual and cultural enrichment.
- Cross-cultural communication and social cohesion.
- The development of linguistic and cultural capital within communities.
- Economic growth, employment opportunities, and global competitiveness.

2.5 The Learners' and Teachers' Role in Language Learning Theories Implementation

Language learning theories determine the roles and interactions of teachers and learners in the classroom.

2.5.1 Learners' Role

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), learners are expected to:

- Plan their own learning programs and take responsibility for classroom participation (cognitive strategy).
- Monitor and evaluate their progress (metacognitive strategy).
- Collaborate and learn interactively with peers (interactional view).
- Tutor and support other learners (socio-constructivist view).
- Learn from multiple sources including the teacher, peers, and resources.

2.5.2 Teachers' Role

Richards and Rodgers (2001) suggest that teachers play multiple roles, such as:

- Curriculum designers who apply theories of language and learning.
- Facilitators, counselors, or models in guiding the learning process.
- Content selectors who determine what to teach and how.
- Interaction managers who structure communication in class.
- Leaders and motivators who build rapport and learner autonomy.
- Teachers also acknowledge learner diversity, using their prior knowledge and experience to tailor instruction.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, language and language learning theories play a critical role in the field of English language education and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). These theories provide the essential theoretical foundations upon which teaching methods, techniques, procedures, and instructional materials are developed. The effectiveness of any foreign language teaching method largely depends on the theoretical framework that underpins it. Key concepts from a given theory often lead to changes in methodological orientation, which, in turn, influence textbook design, material selection, and classroom practices.

Shifts in dominant theoretical paradigms result in significant changes in both curriculum design and classroom procedures. Each theory of language and language learning discussed in this paper, whether structural, functional, interactional, or grounded in behaviorist, nativist, cognitive, or social constructivist approaches, offers unique insights and contributions to the understanding of how languages are learned and taught. While each has its strengths and limitations, they collectively enrich the practice of language education.

It is important to note that most of these theories were initially grounded in observations of first language acquisition in children. Therefore, in adult language learning contexts, it is essential that educators contextualize and adapt these theories in line with the learners' backgrounds, instructional environments, available materials, curriculum frameworks, and national education policies.

Ultimately, a theory is a hypothesis or assumption about how learning occurs. Its value lies in how systematically and contextually it is applied. If misused or implemented inappropriately, even a sound theory may hinder rather than enhance learning outcomes. Thus, informed and

reflective application of language learning theories is essential for effective and meaningful language teaching.

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