

The Debate between Language as Nature and Nurture and its Implication on English Teaching

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Abstract

Nowadays, cultural interaction becomes significant. More and more people take initiative to learn new language. On the one hand, they have to study various language knowledge. On the other hand, some of them are confused about the originality of language, which is the issue of whether language is nature or nurture. Also, learning a new language is a popular topic in language teaching. Different ideas about whether language is nature or nurture influence teaching methods. Language is not only about how to communicate effectively but also the human essence. To provide a possible understanding of the issue, this essay mainly discusses the debate that whether language is nature or nurture and how it can be used in English teaching. In the end, this essay points out that more discussions should be held between whether language is nature or nurture. Meanwhile, the teaching methods should depend on students' language gift and actual learning performance.

Keywords

English Teaching; Language; Nature; Nurture.

1. Introduction

Different people from different places begin to interact with each other in the modern world. With the development of cross-cultural communication, the interaction of various languages becomes obvious. Consequently, more people have the intention to learn different languages. During the learning process, people will be involved in an issue: Is language nature or nurture. Given this reality, only knowing the language is the tool of communication is not enough. Language itself contains more meanings than just a tool that enables people to communicate. When it comes to making further signs of progress on language, Chomsky(1972) noted that "we are approaching what some might call the 'human essence', the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man.". Furthermore, the belief of language as nature or nurture affects English teaching. Therefore, this essay focuses on the previous linguistic hypothesis and its implication on English teaching. It concludes that language involves both nature and nurture and the English teaching method should be appropriately adjusted according to these two parts.

2. Language as Nature

According to the description of Genesis, during a period when people in the world said the same words, they decided to build a tower to "make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth"(KJV Genesis 11:4). However, "the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth"(KJV Genesis 11:9). Since the human language had been completely changed, the tower was called "Babel Tower". In Babylonian, the English word "babel" is written like "bābel" and it is similar to another Babylonian word "bālal" which means confound. They have "similar pronunciation"(Hamilton, 1990) and "similar characters"(Gibson, 1993). It is necessary to emphasize that the author of Genesis "has never said that babel means confound. There is a

possibility that “the author made readers realize ‘bālal’ by mentioning ‘bābel’ ”(Ellis, 1966). Not only does “Babel Tower” contains a bunch of theological meanings, but also it has abundant linguistic one. A great number of scholars and linguists have been discussing whether Babel Tower exists or not for many years. Moria Pez(2014) raised the question that is there a benefit to the multiplicity of languages. Also, according to Jacques Derrida(1985) noted that Voltaire showed his confusion about the word ‘babel’ in his Dictionary of Philosophy”. Meanwhile, some scholars approve of the Babel Tower theory. As Josh McDowell(2007) pointed out that Trombetti claimed that he can pursue and manifest that all languages have the same origin, Jespersen even claimed that language is given to the first person by God. The theory battle of language origin is still ongoing. Although the language in the modern world sounds different, there is still similarity in various languages. English sentence structure like subject-verb-object is similar to the one in Chinese. Also, the “world” in Cantonese, its pronunciation is similar to the “world” in Japanese. Dungan people could speak Shanxi dialect even though there is a far distance between their habitats. There is more evidence to look for and it is not certain whether Babel Tower theory could be a possible solution to this issue.

When people were babies, they could only make sounds like “ha” or speak a very simple word. But when they grow up, some of them could make complicated conversations like speech or debate. This dramatic change, which is a significant part of linguistic study, catches scholars' and scientists' attention. A number of them claim their theories. Back in the 1950s, structuralism and behaviorism dominated psychology in America. Structuralism mainly focuses on the phoneme combination and sentence structure to find out its characteristics and rules. Behaviorism thinks that when the human brain is born, it is just like a blank paper. The human brain acquires knowledge and ability by the way which is “stimulation-reaction”. Although both of these two theories made their contribution to psychology at that time, there are still deficiencies. According to Chomsky(1955) pointed out that scientific theories should not be satisfied with the classification description of various facts, but they should make an explanation about them. Structuralism focuses on the sentence structure but fails to notice the deep structure behind the sentence. For example, famous sentences from Chomsky like “ John is easy to please” and “John is eager to please”. From the point of view of structuralism, these two sentences are equivalent. Nevertheless, there are various meanings between them. For behaviorism, one of the deficiencies as Ning(2010) pointed out that it puts human learning into the category of animal learning and ignores human’s consciousness and mind which play a rule in human learning. Given the deficiencies of these theories, Chomsky claimed the “Universal Grammar” hypothesis. It suggests that humans are born to have a so-called “language acquisition device” which helps children learn how to speak. It is necessary to mention that this device is not commonly recognized as a biological organ-like lung and kidney. Also, Chomsky confirmed that only human has such a device by the famous “Nim Chimsky Experiment”.

3. Language as Nurture

When feral children and the story of Genie come to people’s minds, some scholars suggest that language should be a nurturing one. One hypothesis is Input Hypothesis which was found by Stephen Krashen. According to the hypothesis, people have to understand language information or receive an understandable language input model to learn a language. As for the input model, the $i+1$ model which means that input language should be a bit more difficult than the learner’s current language ability would be the fit. There are many domains relating to the Input Hypothesis. The most widely known one is second language learning in the classroom. According to Krashen’s hypothesis, it seems that the more second language input, the better for students to learn a second language. Some scholars even suggest teachers ban mother tongue from the classroom completely. However, as Macaro(2009) pointed out “ no studies which have

demonstrated that switching to the first language as opposed to maintaining second-language discourse, in specific circumstances, actually leads to better learning whether in the short term or the long term.” Given the native culture’s influence and learner’s factors such as initiative towards one language, it could not be certain to say that more second language input is the best solution to language teaching. Whether L1 should be spoken in the classroom of L2 has been discussed widely by different scholars for years. This discussion would be going on until an appropriate solution comes out.

Naturally, students get a certain amount of output after receiving input for some time. Whether students get better output or not depends on themselves. Therefore, hypothesis on how to better improve output for students have been discussed for years. Among various methods, an influential one is the “comprehensive output hypothesis” which claimed by Merrill Swain. The hypothesis suggests that learning takes place when learners encounter a gap in their linguistic knowledge of the second language. By paying attention to this gap, learners have the awareness of it and maybe capable to adjust their output so that they can make further progress in a language (Swain, M. & Lapkin, S. 1995). From the hypothesis, three main functions contribute to the output: noticing function, hypothesis-testing function, and metalinguistic function. These functions make learners aware of reflecting what they have learned and enable them to internalize linguistic knowledge. However, a difficulty with comprehensive output is how to properly push students to speak in a second language. For some students, it could be uncomfortable for them to speak. Consequently, it could cause anxiety for them to speak the second language. Without the foundation of speaking, it could be hard for some students to create effective output.

4. Implication on English Teaching

Everyone may acquire Universal Grammar. Whether it functions well or not depends on different people. For people whose Universal Grammar performs well, they could be considered to have a language gift. Other people do not have such a gift. When they sit in the same classroom, this is what English teachers have to face. Teachers have to think about appropriate teaching methods for various people. Also, during the learning process, teachers need to adopt a step-by-step teaching method not only to preview what they have learned but also to help them to understand new linguistic content. In other words, students’ language gifts and various learning processes contribute to the adaptation of the change of teaching methods. For example, in mainland China, some English teachers are confused about how to make teaching better. They focus on how to achieve the general course purposes but overlook students’ various individual abilities like their language gifts and comprehension ability. Some students may be capable to follow the teaching schedule but other students are not. Also, due to examination orientation, some teachers are inclined to convey more grammatical knowledge about how to gain a better grade but fail to improve students’ practical language skills like how to speak more fluently and confidently in front of people. As a result, some Chinese students know exactly how to deal with examinations but they could not speak a simple English sentence. These students are usually considered as “mute English speakers”. In other words, under the guidance of an exams-oriented model, it would be hard for students to make an effective output. Also, teachers should give chances to students so that they are allowed to speak more. Although it is not certain to guarantee that every student could make effective output, at least they could learn the language from a different perspective. Therefore, English teaching methods should be based on students’ actual needs and abilities but not always to urge students to dash forward to achieve the common goal of course.

5. Conclusion

People may acquire universal grammar. However, according to Chomsky's theory, universal grammar could be considered as an organ. Like other biological organs which gradually will become weaker and weaker in the human body, universal grammar is also the same as them. Naturally, language should receive nurturing. The equal collaboration of nature and nurture could contribute to the language itself. Based on this, English teachers should not only pay attention to students' linguistic gifts but also provide adequate input with students to help and encourage them to create an effective output.

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