The Theory - Practice Dichotomy in Indian Business Communication Classrooms: A Critical Outlook

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Abstract

Business Communication is one of the crucial courses which is introduced in the curricula of MBA (Master of Business Administration) programme in all Indian professional colleges. It is specifically aimed to enhance the learner's communicative abilities that are critical for successful professional career. In the wake of changing paradigms in Business Communication domain, effective teaching–learning strategies have become decisive to ensure qualitative standards. Hence, the current paper is a vigorous discussion on two significant theories and their relevance to the Business English classroom in the 21st century. It undergoes a study of the application, utility and relevance of the themes in Business Communication classrooms in the professional colleges under Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University Ananthapur and Sri Venkateswara University etc. in Andhra Pradesh. Further, the comparisons and limitations of the above-mentioned theories have also been examined in the context of Business Communication skills.

Keywords: Behaviorism, Structuralism, Business Communication, Instructional Strategies

1.0. Introduction

In the wake of thrust on English language, ELT methods / approaches are well familiar and have gained greater relevance and significance in the case of second language pedagogy. Irrespective of reputation and location, English language teachers are adopting suitable methods and spiral strategies in English classroom in tune with the current needs. These methods / approaches may vary according the region, institution, course, learner, teacher etc. but the ultimate aim of every instructor is to apply the chosen method successfully in the language classroom to enhance learner's communicative competence. Nevertheless, whatever the method/approach that is being adopted, there must be a theory behind it. These theories are the primary basis for the evolution of methods and approaches that are universally applicable to all the subjects, categories and all the levels (primary to tertiary) of learners in any region and institution. However, to the most extent, these theories are very closely connected to the second language learning and lead to the formulation of practical linguistic approaches and realistic learning strategies for classroom practice.

1.1. Behaviorism Theory

Behaviorism is an American School of Psychology which was popular during 1950's and 60's. Major proponent of this theory is B.F. Skinner, who expounded the major tenets of behaviorism through his book "Verbal Behavior" in 1957. Consequently, this approach received considerable trust from the world of education and particularly linguists who had drawn language centered methods to learn/teach first and second languages.

Considering this theory from second language learning point of view, it says language learning is a behavioral, and not a mental phenomenon. The process of learning a language is

equated with the learning process of animals. And every learner starts learning with clean slates where language habits will be impressed on them. Further, behaviorists viewed the entire language learning as a simple mechanism of stimulus-response. Wilga Rivers, (1968) has rightly said: "the behaviorist theory of stimulus-response learning, particularly as developed in the operant condition of Skinner, considers all learning to be the establishment of habits as a result of reinforcement and reward".

Their theory of language learning can be briefed with the following major assumptions–
- The learner imitates the sounds and patterns which he/she hears around him/her.
- Language learning is just a process of mechanical habit formation through repetition.
- All learning is an establishment of habits as the result of reinforcement and reward.
- Language learning is a linear, incremental and additive process.
- Learner's verbal behavior can be conditioned or shaped.

Briefly, language learning/acquisition is the chain of stimulus-response activities in which the imitation, repetition/drilling, conditioning, reward and reinforcement plays a significant role in the actual classroom. No theory is complete unless it facilitates accomplishments learner objectives. So, it is intended to examine the behaviorist theory in Business Communication classroom for tertiary learners.

1.1.1. Behaviorist Principles in Business Communication Classroom

The application of behaviorist postulates in Business Communication classroom is partially successful as the target learners are adults. The first principle, 'imitation' cannot be applied for business communication learners as they are mostly competent to contemplate and comprehend the semantic and syntactic structure of language. And the second one, 'drilling' is also not applicable to the target learners as they can use all the parts of brain unlike children. However, to some extent, it is applicable to teach (by using audio-lingual method) some of the aspects like speech sounds, stress, rhythm and intonation for a group of learners whose innate phonetic ability is low and those from extremely rural locations with vernacular medium background.

And one of the important principles of this theory is 'conditioning'. Both the classical and operant conditioning are not applicable to the target learners due to the age factor. Lastly, 'reinforcement' is the only positive aspect to teach speaking, writing and grammar skills with the input modifications. For instance, in first stage, a teacher can teach present perfect tense with a stimulus of tense structure (S+HAVE/HAS+V_3+O) and a meaningful sentence as an example. In later stages, teachers can reinforce the learners to speak and write negative, question and different sentences with slight input modification. The constituent is that grammatical knowledge of the learners varies owing to their educational background and the majority learners are not competent due to regional medium background and other reasons. In such cases this learning strategy will be successfully applicable. And even today, most of the language teachers in professional colleges located in rural areas are dealing with basics of grammar for management students. Besides grammar, this principle can also be used to enhance the speaking and writing skills of business students.

Table.1. Behaviorist Principles in Communication Classroom

S. No.	Postulates		Stimulus/Input instruction	Response /Output
1	Imitation		**Listening**: Not Applicable	-------
			Speaking: Not Applicable	
			Reading: Not Applicable	
			Writing Not Applicable	
2	Drilling/Repetition		**Listening**: through Audio-lingual method learner hears the recorded model word/dialogue and repeats each one. (This is because for most of the learners are from vernacular medium in the selected region)	Correct Pronunciation
			Speaking: Teacher gives a couple of dialogs and asks to play roles or practice repeatedly till their performance become habitual and automatic.	Spoken exposure/confi dently delivering the dialogues on stage
			Reading: Not Applicable	-----
			Writing: Not Applicable	-----
			Vocabulary:	
3	Conditioning	Classic (natural stimulus)	**L-S-R-W:** Not Applicable	-----
		Operant (punishment/reward)	**L-S-R-W:** Not Applicable	------
4	Reinforcement		**Listening:** Not Applicable	
			Speaking: can elicit the oral responses in the form of sentences by following the given grammatical structure	Speaking skills
			Reading: Not Applicable	
			Writing: can ask the learners to write the sentences as per the given structure	Writing skills
			Grammar: learner will learn the rules of the various aspects of grammar	LSRW

To sum up the behavioristic theory in relation to business communication classroom, the stimulus – response mechanism and habit formation conceit more purposeful and useful to the lower level learners for second language acquisition but not the tertiary level. The passive techniques of repetition and reinforcement are applicable to a couple of aspects in specific simulations (such as

while teaching phonetics and dealing with vernacular medium learners in rural areas etc.) but not to all the business communication classrooms.

1.2. Cognitive Theory

Chomsky is one of the major exponents of cognitive theory. It focuses on the role of the human mind and its capacity in forming insights. It emphasizes the active mental process of learning rather the passive strategies of repetition and reinforcement. According to Mergel (1998) "cognitivism is a cognitivist theory that based on thought process behind the behavior. It means that the theory occurs inside the learners mind consciously. Moreover, it focuses on how people think, how people understand, and how people know."

In cognitivist point of view, brain is the sole source of human knowledge (Neurology) in which one can store, process and retrieve the knowledge (computer). This theory believes that every child is born with an inbuilt language learning mechanism through which learner can re-create linguistic knowledge instantly (artificial intelligence). Therefore, according to cognitivists, language learning is not simply memorizing an infinite number of sentences but learning a finite set of rules which enables to form own sentences. And the best feature of this theory is continuous testing of linguistic hypothesis where wrong hypothesis will be rejected and the correct ones will be retained. The major principles involved in this theory are Sensation, Perception, Attention, and Encoding.

1.2.1. Cognitive Principles in Business Communication Classroom

To apply the cognitive principles in communication classroom, it is felt easier to go by activity for better understand. Some of the familiar and common activities from selected the institutes of A.P have been preferred for observation. The following table shows the suitability of cognitive principles in communicative classroom. A few illustrations are described here under.

Table.2. Cognitive Principles in Communication Classroom

S. No.	Activity	Stimulus (Input)	Response (Output)	Applied Cognitive Principle	Skills Practiced
1.	Role-Play	Stimulu-1 (Giving situation)	Response-1 (Preparation of script and enacting on stage)	Sensation Encoding Attention	Listening Speaking Writing
2.	Personal Interview	Stimulus-2 (Asking various questions)	Response-2 (Answering to the Questions)	Encoding Sensation Attention Perception	Listening Speaking

Noticing the role-play task for business students, the facilitator with timely intrinsic motivation has given situation as a stimulus to each pair and asks them to prepare script to enact on stage. Having observed this activity, the student-pairs, based on their imagination with the prior knowledge of real-life context, prepared a conversation. Further, during the performance, the encoding and decoding takes place with their strategic investment and keen attention. At times, some pairs failed to deliver, but managed with proximately relevant sentences with their automaticity (artificial intelligence). Throughout this task, learners have practiced several language skills like writing, speaking and listening to enhance their communicative levels. Hence, the following

Stimulus-I and Response-I illustrates how the matured learners have applied the cognitive principles in conversation.

Examining the second task i.e. Personal Interview in business communication classroom, the learner's sensation and perception played a vital role in encoding the stimulus by the interviewer. Teacher as an interviewer has asked different questions as a stimulus such as regarding their personal, academic, career, employment, company and salary etc. learners with utmost attentiveness, have framed the answers instantly using their artificial intelligence and responded well. It is clear that, learners practiced listening and speaking skills applying the implicit cognitive principles of sensation, perception, attention and encoding successfully. The following sample Stimulus-2 and Response-2 illustrates how learners applied the cognitive principles.

The classroom observation has continued for all the other activities and almost every aspect has executed perfectly

1.3. Limitations of Cognitive Theory in Relation to Communication Classroom

Cognitive theory is both language-centered and learner-centered through which second language pedagogy have taken a new dimension where exactly behaviorism fell short of producing positive effects with in the complex context of English classroom. It is one of the key theories of second language learning that happens inside the learner's mind. Besides, the implementations of selected principles in the business communication classroom are fully successful for tertiary learners except a few limitations. Though most of the objections to behaviorism have been carefully modified by the cognitivists, there are some drawbacks such as 1. Heterogeneity - through which the principles may work in one class and may not in other classes, 2. Learner Autonomy – as the theory is rule-based, learners with matured mind may lose their autonomy of expression, 3. Communicative Barriers – various barriers like linguistic, physical, mental and behavioral etc. become an obstacle during the interaction, and finally 4. There is no chance of applying previous knowledge in language learning though they can apply.

Subsequently, constructive theory advances certain limitation of both cognitive and behavioristic theory. It emphasized that, learners' mind is not a blank slate or empty vessel and constructions of new understandings takes place by the rich array of previous experiences, skills and beliefs. The ways individuals make meaning out of instruction with the influence of prior knowledge and beliefs can be seen perfectly in business communication classroom. So, comparatively, the greatest contribution of constructivism to the second language learning is the shift in emphasis from knowledge as a product to knowledge as a process.

1.4. Summing Up

In business English classroom, theories are the invisible driving forces of teaching and learning process in all the cases. Though the behaviorist theory is partially successful for post graduate learners, it is equally applicable for lower grade learners. The dichotomy between theory and practice can be seen in the case of behaviorist theory. On the other hand, cognitive theory is well suitable in the same context though some dichotomy and a few limitations are apparent. But constructivists can overcome these limitations and made the language learning more understandable. Hence, behind every successful second language communicative classroom, there is a theory and its principles. Irrespective of region, institution and target level, consciously/unconsciously, abstractly/concretely language practitioners are following some theories in second language

pedagogical transition. However, it all depends on the teachers and the way they employ various techniques in the classroom.

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