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Innovative trends in teaching the young

Abstract: When discussing innovative trends in language teaching in the context of the nowadays' changing social and educational context, one must also take into consideration the titans of learning theories, the psychology studies, the research on motivation and try to understand, drawing on these, what makes a student 'tick' when it comes to learning. This paper aims at presenting the work of several important researchers in the field of learning theories, whose ideas have shaped the educational world and have shown what teachers could do to help their students and what learners themselves may try in order to motivate themselves. These theories apply either exclusively to language learning or to learning in general and can be adapted to language acquisition.

Keywords: education, learning theories, language acquisition, students, teachers

When discussing innovative trends in language teaching in the context of the nowadays' changing social and educational context, one must also take into consideration the titans of learning theories, the psychology studies, the research on motivation and try to understand, drawing on these, what makes a student 'tick' when it comes to learning. This paper aims at presenting the work of several important researchers in the field of learning theories, whose ideas have shaped the educational world and have shown what teachers could do to help their students and what learners themselves may try in order to motivate themselves. These theories apply either exclusively to language learning or to learning in general and can be also adapted to language acquisition.

First of all, psychology studies scientifically the behavior and mental processes of learners, educational psychologyis that particular field of psychology studying the teaching and learning processes taking place in an educational context. There are several main figures contributing to the development of educational psychology and we will refer to the important work of three authors in particular: William James,

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John Dewey, and E. L. Torndike, all three pioneers of the nineteenth century educational psychology.

In his lectures dedicated to teachers (1842-1910), William James argued that only hands-on experience in a teaching environment can help one understand the process of teaching and learning as such, no laboratory experiments being relevant enough in this respect. One of his main recommendations was to start teaching from a point just beyond the child's level of knowledge, in order to stretch the child's mind and understanding. In this respect his theoretical observations resemble those of Skinner who recommended the immersion of students into learning contexts slightly higher than their current level, thus raising the level of language acquisition. Skinner's view, related to Torndike's ideas, shaped the educational psychology by the middle of the twentieth century. The behavioral approach aims at precisely determining the best conditions for learning and language acquisition. Skinner argued that the mental processes as understood by psychologists like William James and John Dewey were not observable and scientific enough and he pleaded for a more controlled learning process. In the 1950s Skinner devised the idea of *programmed learning*, involving a gradual teaching process along a series of reinforcements of the learner's behavior towards a final learning goal.

> „Behaviorismis the view that behavior should be explained by observable experiences, not by mental processes. For the behaviorist, behavior is everything that we do, both verbal and nonverbal, that can be directly seen or heard: a child creating a poster, a teacher explaining something to a child, one student picking on another student, and so on.Mental processesare defined by psychologists as the thoughts, feelings, and motives that each of us experiences but that cannot be observed by others. Although we cannot directly see thoughts, feelings, and motives, they are no less real. Mental processes include children thinking about ways to create the best poster, a teacher feeling good about children's efforts, and children's inner motivation to control their behavior. For the behaviorist, these thoughts, feelings, and motives are not appropriate subject matter for a science of behavior because they cannot be directly observed" (Santrock 2011, 218).

John Dewey represented a genuine driving force in the practical application of psychology or teaching. He set up the first major educational psychology laboratory in the United States, where he managed to do a lot of innovative work. The significant ideas of Dewey shaped the way the process of learning is regarded today: he viewed the

learner as an active one, learning by doing rather than by passively assimilating knowledge. This represented a major breakthrough in the field. Today, the communicative approach, much popular today in the language schools around the world, places great emphasis on creating educational contexts resembling real life situations, so that students can acquire languages in a dynamic, creative manner - such as simulating actual contexts to be encountered in day to day life: greeting and meeting new people, making friends, managing in a new city, going shopping, having a normal conversation with a new person, exchanging useful information and so on. Furthermore, apart from pushing for a democratic education to all young learners, Dewey argued in favor of an education focusing on the learners as a whole and emphasizing the learner's adaptation to the environment, very much in line with the modern tendencies of language acquisition in real life contexts as highlighted above. Dewey reasoned that students should not be just narrowly educated in academic topics but should learn how to think and adapt to a world outside school. He especially thought that learners should learn how to be reflective problem solvers (Santrock 2011, 44).

Edward L. Torndike (1874–1949), was another pioneer in the field of educational psychology, focusing on assessment and measurement and promoting the scientific study of teaching processes, aiming at developing the young learners' reasoning skills. He strongly believed in the influence of behaviorism on education. Authors describe behaviorism as the relationship between stimulus and response (Watson, 1930), such as being thirsty and drinking water as a response to this thirst. Some reactions produce good results, other produce bad ones – but the ones with positive outcomes are likely to be repeated in time. This law of effect was described by Torndike by the example of a cat closed in a box, away from its food – by trial and error, it will attempt to get to its food and only the actions that were helpful in this respect will be remembered for the future. The same, he claims, happens with education, and teachers should retain those stimuli that generated positive outcomes in their students. He also claimed that the law of practice is only working if practice is linked to satisfaction.

The behaviorist approach to learning and language acquisition led way to further research and developments in educational psychology, the other main approach being the cognitive approach, that came to revolutionize its forerunner, which neglected the needs and aims of educators themselves. In opposing the behaviorist perspective, Benjamin Bloom discussed the taxonomy of cognitive skills, as one of the three domains he identified: mental aptitudes (knowledge), affective aptitudes

(emotional development or emotional growth) and psychomotor aptitudes (abilities). Today they are well-known in their short form, too: to know, to be able to and to want to. All these are important stages of the educational process. The best well-known of these categories is the cognitive domain. The cognitive revolution was already well set in the 1980s and was welcomed with enthusiasm. So the second half of the twentieth century saw an emphasis on the cognitive aspects of learning as pinned down by researchers like James and Dewey.

> „Cognition means 'thought' and psychology became more cognitive, or began focusing more on thought, in the last part of the twentieth century. The cognitive emphasis continues today and is the basis for numerous approaches to learning. […] four main cognitive approaches to learning: social cognitive; information processing; cognitive constructivist; and social constructivist" (Santrock 2011, 219).

Bloom's team identified six major cognitive processes, the first one being the simplest and the higher one in the hierarchy the most complex, and they should be mastered one by one, including the previous before moving on to the next. Thus, Bloom discussed the stages of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. In the nineties, some researchers like Anderson and Krathwohl went on to modify the famous taxonomy of Bloom, modifying the six categories from nouns to verbs (action oriented), rearranging them and also developing a knowledge matrix of processes and levels. Thus, following the same order, the cognitive actions in their view are: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating.

Further on, Santrock defined and described five main approaches to learning, as identified by the theory of educational psychology: the first one is, as mentioned above, the behaviorist one, as elaborated by Skinner, emphasizing experiences, in particular reinforcement and punishment in shaping the learning processes and behavior. The social cognitive approach puts emphasis on interaction of behavior, environment and learner (cognitive) factors as determinants of learning. The information-processing approach places emphasis on how learners process information through attention, memory, thinking, and other cognitive processes. Piaget cornered the fourth approach, the Cognitive Constructivist one, which emphasizes the learner's cognitive construction of knowledge and understanding. The fifth approach is called Social Constructivist and puts emphasis on the collaboration with others so asto produce knowledge and understanding.

In order to apply the principles of Piaget in real life teaching, the educator should consider a constructivist approach, meaning, from the point of view of Piaget's theory, to create more opportunities for children to be active and to seek solutions for themselves. Piaget opposed the teaching methods that treat children as passive receptacles, the idea behind the theory being that one learns best by making discoveries, reflecting on them, and discussing them, rather than blindly imitating the teacher or learning by heart. The Montessori Method of teaching, quite popular nowadays in numerous countries across the globe, shares the same view, of allowing children to learn by experimenting themselves. A second aspect to be considered by teachers following Piaget's theory is to facilitate rather than teach directly. Santrock claims that effective teachers design situations that allow students to learn by doing.These educational contexts promote students' thinking and discovery. Teachers listen, watch, and question students to help them gain better understanding. They ask relevant questions to stimulate students' thinking and ask them to explain their answers (Santrock 2011, 90), the main idea being for the teacher to be able to create classroom situations that facilitate students' learning.

Another aspect to be considered is the student's knowledge and level of thinking, in other words, the set of pre-existing knowledge of the learners and the fact that they probably have their own, specific ideas. Patience is a crucial factor in interpreting what a student is saying and in responding on the same level as the student's. Asking students to do something for which they are not ready will not promote cognitive development. It will only cause frustration.

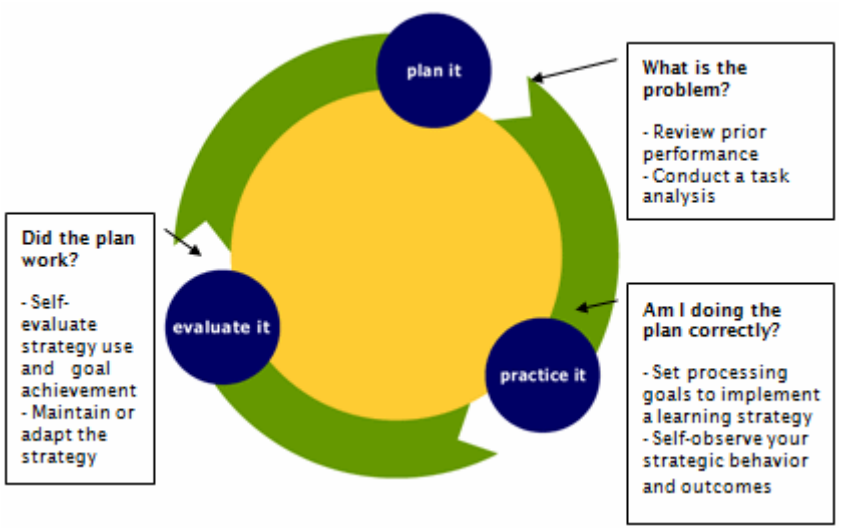
The widely used communicative teaching method mentioned above can take the form of a teaching certificate of language, such as the CELTA from Cambridgefunctions in the same line and this is the way most language schools around the world approach language teaching, be it general language knowledge or specific language learning.

Among the factors that fosters learning, from the very young ages to adulthood, is a teaching setting that resembles a situation of exploration and discovery. In other words, a teaching atmosphere that emphasizes students' own exploration and innovation, where structure is flexible and the teacher is more of a facilitator and an observer rather than a master of the entire educational process. At the same time, such a teaching approach follows the students' interests and natural inclinations in order to determine the course of learning. Also, a favourable teaching setting should not be short of games and fun activities, the ones that teach without students even being aware of the teaching process.

In a Darts (Doncaster Community Arts) study from 2007 (Crook 2008, 14-18), just one of the many studies and pieces of research available across the world, the authors concluded, after a 14 weeks teaching program that aimed to determine the importance of learning through enjoyment, that the more enthusiastic the students, the more focused they are and the more they enjoy the learning:

> „While working on a task in non-ordinary circumstances, young learners tended to give themselves more positive judgments regarding enjoyment, engagement and achievement than they did when learning within ordinary circumstances. [...] Brain research indicates that within the creative process, we call upon more parts of the brain than in routine actions... Our research parallels such findings from neurological studies and would indicate the need and value of bringing the non-ordinary into the ordinary whenever possible. Doing so gives the best possible conditions for enjoyment, engagement and achievement" (Crook 2008, 29).

Barry Zimmerman, professor at the City University of New York has extensively researched the way learners regulate their attitudes and behaviors, particularly in the learning process. In his view, as learners move towards higher schooling systems, they are expected to assume greater and greater responsibility for their own learning. However, this does not always happen, as numerous learners lack the metacognitive skills needed in the process. What Zimmerman argues is that in order to achieve success, both students and teachers should make use of a metacognitive model to guide their learning and instruction, including careful planning, evaluation and adjustment of thoughts and actions. The SRL theory developed by Zimmerman states that students should be engaged more in their learning process in order to become more responsible for their own learning process and improve their achievements. The SRL model that he developed consists of three main cycles: planning, practice and evaluation. In the graph below are highlighted the main characteristics of the three cycles and three examples of important questions to ask in each of the phases.



The SRL Model[1]

The learning process starts from a very young age and for young learners, and in the case of young learners, things are obviously a little different, as for them self-regulation is a process of learning.

> „Children are oblivious to the feelings and needs of others. You might see them push a child away from a desired toy or be confused why a child cries when he is hit. When children have tantrums, hit out of frustration, can't calm down from excitement, or ignore the feelings of others, it is useful to take a closer look to see if they are missing one or more key skills of self-regulation" (Bilmes 2013).

Self-regulation refers to the sum of complex processes which allow children to respond properly to their environment, helping them to learn to evaluate what they perceive through their four senses and compare the new information to the previous one, already familiar to them.

The process of moving from intentional to automatic regulation is called internalization. Some regulated functions, such as greeting others appropriately or following a sequence to solve a math problem, always require intentional effort. It is not surprising then that research has found that young children who engage in intentional self-regulation learn more and go further in their education (Blair and Diamond 2008, 899-911).

As the theory of emotional intelligences puts it, emotional skills are not innate - innate is the capacity of learning them. Self-regulation

[1] Graph retrieved from http://learningandtheadolescentmind.org/people_04.html

plays an important role in this direction and perhaps one of the first skills to be taught to learners from their first years in school is to identify the feelings, both in themselves and their peers, and to associate these feelings to real events, thus learning the notion of consequences. Educators play an important part in this: they may help the young learners to identify their own emotions and their association to their body and also explain them why these emotions occur and that they are not permanent, in fact.

The self-regulating process in the case of young learners is not at all an isolated skill: children use their experiences in order to obtain information useful for regulating their behavior, their emotions, even their thoughts, as Blair and Diamond point out (Blair and Diamond 2008, 899-911).

Babies, for example, use their experience of being sung lullabies to understand it is time to relax and fall asleep. Later on, in school, very young children use of the instructions of their educators in order to gradually regulate their behavior in the environment of the kindergarten or the school: waiting for their turn, be respectful to their peers, control their occasional bursts of emotion. As Blair and Diamond point out: „Emotional and cognitive self-regulation are not separate, distinct skills. Rather, thinking affects emotions and emotions affect cognitive development"' (Blair and Diamond 2008, 899-911).

A very important aspect is for children to learn and to be helped to regulate efficiently their apprehension towards school; if children feel discouraged or unease, they will not get involved in class activities and ultimately they will not learn well enough. This is why the teacher should create a class environment as comfortable as possible. Besides teachers' own empathy and knowledge in how to handle young learners, there are a number of things to be kept in mind. For instance, class routines can prove immensely helpful: young learners benefit from becoming familiar to rules and the class situations. Routines represent the regular procedures, common to all lessons, creating a sense of structure, rhythm and flow to the teaching process. Some routines have to do with the management of the class, such as checking attendance at the beginning of the class, organizing the seating around the room or singing a 'Hello' and a 'Good-bye' song. Other routines concern the teaching process per se: teaching games that are common to each lesson, checking homework, recycling vocabulary, having a simple routine for each day of the week, establishing a class calendar and so on. Research has shown that experienced teachers tend to use approximately ten routines in their class and these are well selected, efficient and feel natural. Skillful teachers learn in time that some routines are better than others and they select

those they find are working the best, adapting them to different groups of learners, depending on size, age, level or other circumstances. Stories may also add a great deal to creating a comfortable class atmosphere, as they bring repetition, rhythm and make us of familiar characters that children like and ultimately learn from. However, routines are helpful in all teaching environments, even at adult age and at higher levels of language learning, as they create a sense of security and offer that sense of familiarity to each lesson: students know what to expect and they perform their duties easier and better.

Another important attitude that teachers could employ to help learners regulate their emotions even from a very early age, is encouragement. Encouragement is the fuel of a good learning attitude at all ages and it should be used at all times.For example, children experience better emotional regulation when they replace the feelings of not being good enough with the feeling of being ready to try one more time a certain activity. The same is valid for adult learners: the feeling of failure could and should be replaced with an attitude of attempting the task until accomplished. Ida Rose Florez asserts that: „Regulating anxiety and thinking helps children persist in challenging activities, which increases their opportunities to practice the skills required for an activity. Conversely, when children regulate uncomfortable emotions, they can relax and focus on learning cognitive skills" (Florez 2011, 46-48). To help this process, teachers should help students feel secure and content in the class by encouraging them and by allowing them to become independent. In order to do that, the teacher must prepare beforehand and have some class routines. Young students need to know what will happen in the lesson and also that the teacher is in charge and they can relax because of that. Another aspect that young learners enjoy is to be assigned small responsibilities in class, from completing the class calendar to sharpening the pencils or cleaning the board. In the language learning class, teachers should make sure that the functional language in class is the target language, at all times. In this case, class routines and responsibilities of the pupils become chances of practicing the language and involve both a responsibility for their own learning and for helping the others, as well. The physical surroundings also play a role in children's sense of comfort and ease. The class should be set up in as pleasant and familiar manner as possible, for example displaying children's work. Allowing young learners to use their hands has a calming effect on them and Total Physical Response activities are also very appealing to children, although a balance between stir and settle tasks

needs to be maintained at all times: not allowing the young learners to become bored, nor getting them over-excited and tired so they could continue to focus on the flow of the lesson.

Zimmerman states that children's intentional self-regulation predicts school success, even from a very early age (Zimmerman 1994, 3-24). He also shows that planning is of great help in developing their own self-regulating skills. For instance, they may plan their own games or they may learn gradually not to be aggressive with their peers. Moreover, self-regulation "monitors conditions to maintain optimal arousal for a given task [...]. Everyone experiences peaks and lows in levels of attention, emotion and motivation. As children develop, they learn that some activities require them to pay attention more [...] - attentional arousal" (Blair 2008, 899-911).

Learning to insist and not give up the challenging activities in class is one of the important aspects of self-regulation. In order to regulate their arousal levels, children learn to temper their excitement and then to control their emotions and behavior. The life skills acquired before the age of five will shape the future life of the child, therefore, the role of the young learners' teacher is far more important than one may think. Educators need to model good behavior and encourage the self-regulating processes from an early age.

As Bilmes (2013, 108-112) states, a child that has begun to achieve self-regulation will identify his own feelings and those of his or her peers, will realize that feelings are only temporary so they do not need to worry, will separate his or her feelings from the actions per se, will learn self-soothing and self-calming strategies and will learn to use speech rather than force to express themselves (Bilmes 2013, 108-112).

What teachers can do in order to support the learning of self-regulating skills, even in the language class and particularly with young children is to help children understand emotions, to respond to their emotions in a considerate and caring way, to listen to what they have to say in order to increase teacher-student communication, to name and validate their feelings - allowing them at the same time to feel the whole spectrum of emotions, to help children understand that feelings are responses and they are changeable, while at the same time searching what anger carries with it. Last but not at all least, a good educator should help children regulate their own emotions. Scaffolding their self-regulating skills with patience and good-will will help creating a natural connection of trust and empathy between the teacher and the students and between the students themselves. In his or her efforts, the foreign language teacher

can and should make use of all that is available: routines, a nice class atmosphere, listening and discussing with children, paying attention to them, asking help from the staff and from parents when needed etc.

However, once past that level, the young learner will become more confident, more open to the teaching process and the task of the teacher will become much easier. And to conclude in a positive manner, here is what author Paul Tough said about educating the young:

> „What matters most in a child's development, they say, is not how much information we can stuff into her brain in the first few years. What matters, instead, is whether we are able to help her develop a very different set of qualities, a list that includes persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit and self-confidence" (Tough 2014, 7).

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