**Mohammed Kheidar University, Biskra**

**Department of Letters and Foreign Languages**

**The Section of English**

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**Course:** Linguistics

**Theme Two:** Psycholinguistics

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**4. Language Learning Theories**

**4.1. Behaviourism**

Behaviourism stresses the notion of habit formation resulting from S-R-R: **stimuli** from the environment (such as linguistic input), **responses** to those stimuli, and **reinforcement** if the responses resulted in some desired outcome. Repeated S-R-R sequences are “learned” (i.e. strong stimulus-response pairings become “habits”). Learners respond to the stimulus (linguistic input), and reinforcement strengthens (i.e. habituates) the response; they imitate and repeat the language that they hear, and when they are reinforced for that response, learning occurs. This model formed the disciplinary framework for the Audio-lingual Method, an approach to language teaching which emphasized repetition and habit formation that was widely practiced in much of the world at least until the 1980s.

**4.1.1. Behaviourist Views of Language Acquisition**

Behaviourist learning theories posited principally by Skinner (1957) state that the fundamentals of language are essentially developed through **conditioning** and the formation of good language habits. Competence is achieved as the learner responds to stimuli (primarily the speech of caregivers) and receives feedback in the form of positive reinforcement or correction. In practical terms, it is an oral-situational approach where the child imitates and memorizes language used in context and along with specific behaviours. Errors made during language acquisition are viewed as bad habits that can be eliminated with sufficient amounts of rote learning and drilling. Thus the acquisition and understanding of grammar becomes an **inductive** process, rather than an **instinctive** one.

**4.2. Cognitivism**

The cognitivist revolution replaced behaviourism in 1960s as the dominant paradigm. Cognitivism focuses on the **inner mental activities** – opening the “black box" of the human mind is valuable and necessary for understanding how people learn. Mental processes such as thinking, memory, knowing, and problem-solving need to be explored. Knowledge can be seen as **schema** or symbolic mental constructions. Learning is defined as change in a learner’s schemata.

A response to [behaviourism](https://www.learning-theories.com/behaviorism.html), people are not “programmed animals" that merely respond to environmental stimuli; people are rational beings that require active participation in order to learn, and whose actions are a consequence of thinking. Changes in behaviour are observed, but only as an indication of what is occurring in the learner’s head. Cognitivism uses the metaphor of the mind as computer: information comes in, is being processed, and leads to certain outcomes.

Cognitive theories focus on the conceptualization of students’ learning processes and address the issues of how information is received, organized, stored, and retrieved by the mind. Learning is concerned not so much with what learners do, but with what they know and how they come to acquire it. Knowledge acquisition or language acquisition are described as **mental activities** that entail internal coding and structuring by the learner. The learner is viewed as a very **active** participant in the learning process.

**Behaviourism and Cognitivism**

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|  **Comparison among L. Theories** | **Behaviourism** | **Cognitivism** |
| **List of Key Theorists** | B.F.Skinner, Ivan Pavlov, Edward Thorndike, John B. Watson | Jean Piaget, Robert Gagne, Lev Vygotsky |
| **Role of Learners** | Learners are basicaljust Learners are basically **passive**, just responding to stimuli. | - Learners process, store and retrieve information for later use.- Creating associations and creating knowledge useful for living. The learner uses the information processing to transfer and assimilate new information. |
| **Role of Teachers** | - Instructor designs the learning environment.- Instructor shapes the child’s behaviour by positive/negative reinforcement.- Teacher presents the information and then students demonstrate that they understand the material.- Students are assessed primarily through tests. | - Instructor manages problem solving and structured search activities, especially with group learning strategies. - Instructor provides opportunities for students to connect new information to schema. |
| **Key Concepts** | **- Behaviourism** is a theory of animal and human learning that only focuses on objectively observable behaviours and discounts mental activities.- Behaviour theorists define **learning** as nothing more than the acquisition of **new behaviour.**- Experiments by behaviourists identify **conditioning** as a universal learning process.- There are two different types of conditioning, each yielding a different behavioural pattern:**1. Classic conditioning**: occurs when a natural reflex responds to a stimulus. The most popular example is Pavlov's observation that dogs salivate when they eat or even see food. Essentially, animals and people are biologically "wired" so that a certain stimulus will produce a specific response.**2. Behavioral or operant conditioning**: occurs when a response to a stimulus is reinforced. Basically, operant conditioning is a simple feedback system: If a reward or reinforcement follows the response to a stimulus, then the response becomes more probable in the future. For e.g. leading behaviourist B.F.Skinner used reinforcement techniques to teach- pigeons to dance and bowl a ball in a mini alley. | - **Cognitivism** focuses on the brain. How humans process and store information was very important in the process of learning.- **Schema**: An internal knowledge structure. New information is compared to existing cognitive structures called "schema". Schema may be combined, extended or altered to accommodate new information. |
| **How does Learning take place?** | - **For Skinner who is known for operant conditioning:**A stimulus is provided, a response is generated, consequence to the response is present, type of consequence is present and then reinforcement is provided which could be positive or negative.**- For Pavlov known for classical conditioning:** There is a spontaneous reaction that occurs automatically to a particular stimulus. To alter the natural relationship between a stimulus and a reaction was viewed as a major breakthrough in the study of behaviour. | **For Piaget**: - Human intelligence and biological organisms function in similar ways. They are both organized systems that constantly interact with the environment.- Knowledge is the interaction between the individual and the environment.- Cognitive development is the growth of logical thinking from infancy to adulthood. |