A Philosophy of Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

With the bombardment of new demands and technological changes upon students and educators associated with second language acquisition in this new millennium, it is necessary to adapt to these differing needs of society, and for one to be able to find inner peace. Due to the widely diverse aims and programs of the field, goals and values will remain unfocused until a clear image of our values and purposes is developed. Cultivating a workable philosophy will help allow those affected to meet the various challenges. Although wisdom in these matters is slow in coming and difficult to attain, arriving at a philosophy will benefit everyone involved in institutionalized programs. This paper will examine some of the philosophies of second language acquisition and their relationship to classical thought.

JAPE Journal readers, and others interested in the practical usage of English, will be able to ascertain the relationship of pragmatic thought to other major philosophies. Some of the following information may be incorporated to devise tools for development of problem-solving skills requisite to practical usage. Also, introspective analysis is possible by relating the concepts of philosophy to practical behavior, and thus determining the efficiency of progress toward goals.
1. Introduction

"Philosophy exists wherever thought brings men into an awareness of their existence . . . for no man thinks without philosophizing - truly or falsely, superficially or profoundly, hastily or slowly and thoroughly. In a world where standards prevail, where judgements are made, there is philosophy."¹

Since many learners and teachers of a second language are so busily engaged in focusing on the task at hand, they sometimes fail to realize that they are philosophers. It is not a necessity to maintain the attire, behavior, or rituals associated with the great lovers of wisdom, to be guided by rational and social principles. With assiduous study, reading, listening, observation, and discussions with those who are capable and experienced, it is possible to arrive at conclusions which may benefit everyone involved in the process of second language acquisition.

Since the middle of the last century, research and insights have increased dramatically. It is now easier than ever to find research pertaining to methods and theories pertaining to learning a language. But to find meaning and relevance in our work, our studies, and our lives, we must engage in some sort of philosophical inquiry.

2. Classical philosophies as language learning philosophies

Although there may be some overlapping and incongruity, there remains a correlation between classical philosophies and those in language acquisition: (see chart in appendix)
1) Idealism

It is feasible to imagine that if Plato had been an ESL instructor he might have constructed a classroom agenda in which students attained proper grammar, pronunciation, etc. by anamnesis and logically deducing correct answers consistent with the universally consistent Foms.²

Hegel, in an environment of dialectical change, could have created thesis-antithesis situations in which students could realize the facts about learning a foreign language.³

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and regrettably surviving to the present), authoritarian "grammarians," professing "correct" doctrine, have been able to incorporate snobbery to impose even unnatural speech patterns (often upon those in the community seeking validation of their positions of privilege) by making use of a singularly "proper" English.⁴

Twentieth century proponents of concepts related to idealism might be Van Ek and Alexander, with their notional functional approach.⁵

2) Realism

Aristotle, whose thoughts were engulfed in a scientific view of the world, recognized changes occurring with the privation (a lack foreign language ability), the subject (foreign language learner), and receiving the form (English, for example).⁶ John Locke distinguished intuitive, demonstrative, and sensitive knowledge. Intuition could be related to Brown's opinion that "good language learners are willing but accurate guessers."⁷ Demonstrative techniques using logic and reasonability in an ESL class are pervasive in most institutions of higher learning. And sensitive knowledge is affirmed by all interested in Total Physical Response or other methods of sensory-reinforcement.

Currently, there are various arguments that language acquisition is far more
complex than the contents within limitations defined by universal forms.8

3) Pragmatism

William James, who is credited with being a founder of pragmatism, considered a common sense belief true if, when acted upon, it did not lead to unpleasant surprises.9 As an ESL student of teacher, there would daily be a plethora of experiences to draw upon, in and out of classes.

John Dewey, the pragmatic theorist of education, encouraged the development of problem-solving skills.10 Such tasks are found at all levels of language acquisition, from the most basic ESL skills of a one-word greeting to the verbal discourse required in the STEP Test or the written arguments in the TOEFL Test of Written English.

A typical modern advocate could be Widdowson who stated that "Communicative competence is . . . a set of strategies or creative procedures for realizing the value of linguistic elements in contexts in use. . . "11

4) Existentialism

Jean Paul Sartre, the leading advocate of existentialism, espoused freedom and personal responsibility. In all aspects of life, including learning a language, we all have the freedom of choice, despite the circumstances, which we can transcend.12 Thus, regardless of the quality of facilities, curriculum, and materials, our success as teachers and students lies ultimately in ourselves.

Karl Jaspers primarily hoped to assist individuals in self-discovery and insight.13 It is imaginable that in his ESL class there would be no grammar lessons; students would probably be provided with little more than good examples of natural language.

Among modern linguists, Bruner, Clinchy, Baldwin, and Schumann all support
incorporating intuition in methods of learning foreign languages. In Brown's book of strategies for learning language, nearly every chapter could validate the ideals of existentialism, starting with "taking charge of your own learning." 

Stephen Krashen's Natural Approach seems almost dependent upon the viability of the precepts of existentialism, providing that the teacher prepares proper input.

3. A Brief Historical Perspective of Several Philosophers Concerned With Language and Thoughts

Xenophanes (560-475 B.C.) wrote:

Yes, and if oxen and horses or lions had hands and could paint with their hands, and produce works of art as men do, horses would paint the forms of their gods like horses, and make their bodies in the image of their several kinds. . .

A similar opinion is found in the writings of Fritz Mauthner (1849-1923), "if Aristotle had spoken Chinese or Dacotan, he would have had to adopt an entirely different logic or at any rate an entirely different theory of categories." Related to these ideas is the hypothesis advocated by Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and Benjamin Whorf (1897-1941), the "principle of linguistic relativity," that syntax influences understanding of reality and behavior. This rationale is not unlike that of Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), whose "examination of the language in which we express our ideas often resulted in a rephrasing of this language to bring out what he considered its correct logic."
4. Diversity of Opinion

Not all philosophers or linguists are quite so unanimous in their opinions as those in the above example. Even the concept of "academic" has shifted from its original meaning of Plato's school to implying "skepticism" by Cicero and Hume, then in the nineteenth century, "irrelevance" of "impracticality." Perhaps many of us today would consider it to mean something more akin to "scholarly learning."

In recent decades, an especially controversial topic among deep thinkers goes right down to the roots of how language learning occurs. B.F. Skinner suggested that learning was exclusively due to the environment. Noam Chomsky argued for innate mental capabilities, with deep structures underlying the surface structures. Bertand Russell, and other empiricists, consider knowledge to be built on a logical construction from the basic data of our experiences.

One method of reconciling the various theories can be found in the concept of continuum, "the variable nature of truth as it hangs precariously between two polar opposites . . . truth is neither unitary or unidimensional . . . definitions and extended definitions are never simple. Just as a photographer captures many facets of the same mountain by circling around it, truth presents itself to us in many forms, and sometimes these forms seem to conflict."

5. Conclusion

Most institutions of higher education in the U.S. dealing with preparatory courses include the philosophy of education. However, there seems to be a paucity of information directly related to the philosophy of language acquisition.

Socrates proposed his famous directive, "Know thyself." Koichi Tohei, a founder of aikido, used to start his seminars by saying, "If you want to walk south, walk
south. Don't say you want to go south, then walk another direction." If we are to avoid conflicts between our ideas and actions, and efficiently put our ideas into practice, we must find a clear course to pursue. Becoming aware of some philosophies will provide a basis for paths which we may choose to take, both as learners and as instructors.

It is hoped that this paper will provide a basis for those interested in focusing their energies as students and teachers of language acquisition, and inspire more research in the field.

Notes

5. Van Ek, J. A. And Alexander, L. G., Threshold Level English (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1975)
6. Graham, Daniel, p. 42
9. Thiel, Udo, in Dictionary of Philosophy, p. 319
10. Ryan Alan, in Dictionary of Philosophy, p. 139
12. Solomon, Robert, in Dictionary of Philosophy, p. 500


19. Mautner, Thomas, in *Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 600

20. White, Alan, in *Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 494

21. Mautner, Thomas, in *Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 3

22. ibid, p. 94

23. White, Alan, in *Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 496
