Understanding learning

- There are changing views about learning in general and languages in particular in contemporary education

- The learning theories that teachers hold implicitly or explicitly influence their teaching, learning and assessment practices

- Theories of learning have changed from behaviourism to cognitive and sociocultural theories. They have been described through acquisition and participation metaphors and it is recognised that both are needed

- Language, culture and learning together form the basis for the languages curriculum

Rationale for considering learning theories

In thinking about teaching, learning and assessing in languages education, it is essential for us to consider the understandings that we hold and the assumptions that we make about learning. This is because these understandings, be they implicit or explicit, influence our professional stance as language educators and our teaching, learning and assessment practices. Our understandings of learning are not simply acquired as knowledge that is put into practice; rather, they develop over time and in diverse contexts working with diverse students, based on ongoing experience and reflection.

In such an ongoing process, often 'dominant theories of the past continue to operate as the default framework affecting and driving current practices and perspectives' (Shepard, 2000:4). Thus, it is important to have a sense of past theories as well as more contemporary conceptualisations of learning as a basis for examining understandings and assumptions about how students learn. Teachers as social beings construct the world of teaching and learning according to their values and dispositions. As such, their biographies are central to what they see and how they interpret their world. As Shepard points out, changing conceptions of learning

are closely entwined with changing conceptions of curriculum and assessment. She observes that, at present, there is a mismatch between current views of learning on the one hand, and teaching and assessment practices on the other. This mismatch warrants further consideration in each particular context of teaching and learning.

Some teachers find engaging with theory to be of limited direct value and prefer to focus on practice. Theory versus practice dichotomies do not reflect current understandings as theory and practice are not seen as opposites. Contemporary understandings show that there is an important relationship between the two: a good theory can be immensely practical, just as excellent practice informs theory-making. It is learning theory that provides big picture understandings when teachers wish to reconsider and potentially change their practices.

Theories of learning

Behaviourism

Behaviourism, one of the most pervasive theories of learning in the 1940s and 1950s was based on stimulus-response associations. Its focus is on *observable* behaviour rather than thinking. Learning within this theory entails the accumulation of atomised bits of knowledge that are sequenced and ordered hierarchically. Each item of knowledge (called 'objectives' in curriculums and programs) is to be learned independently on the assumption that this makes learning more manageable. All the constituent parts of learning are to be mastered before proceeding to the next part (objective) in the hierarchy, gradually leading to a complex whole. In this theory, learning is seen as developing associations between stimuli and responses. Motivation involves positive reinforcement of the many small steps in learning and forming good habits. Development is seen as occurring through a series of required stages, in a step-by-step process.

The major concerns with this theory are that:

- learning is broken down into ever-smaller, analytic parts that are no longer integrated to form a whole
- learning entails much more than a response to a stimulus
- learning is task and context dependent.

Cognitive theories

The various cognitive theories, which challenged behaviourism, introduced the concept of a thinking mind. Learning within these theories is understood as a process of active construction whereby each individual makes sense of new information in his/her mind by mapping it onto his/her existing framework of knowledge and understanding. The incorporation of new knowledge leads to a restructuring of the individual's conceptual map. These theories also highlight the fact that learning is context-dependent – that is, 'situated' – and that new knowledge can only be taken in when connected to existing knowledge structures. In this sense, learning involves a process of making connections – reorganising unrelated bits of knowledge and experience into new patterns, integrated wholes. Students learn by relating new experiences to what they already know. Learning involves making new meanings which are generally expressed through language. In this way learning, language, meaning and thinking are closely related. Within this perspective, beyond the accumulation and restructuring of information, developing knowledge involves developing processes of self-monitoring and awareness that we refer to as metacognition.

Sociocultural theories

Whereas cognitive theories highlight thinking as it occurs *in the mind of the individual*, sociocultural theories consider the relationship between thinking and the social, cultural, historical and institutional context in which it occurs. The rediscovery of the work of Vygotsky (1978) has led to the understanding that learning and development are culturally embedded and socially supported or mediated processes. As Lantolf, one of the major researchers who has developed sociocultural theory in the field of applied linguistics, explains:

> Sociocultural theory holds that specifically human forms of mental activity arise in the interactions we enter into with other members of our culture and with the specific experiences we have with the artefacts produced by our ancestors and by our contemporaries. Rather than dichotomising the mental and the social, the theory insists on a seamless and dialectic relationship between these two domains. In other words, not only does our mental activity determine the nature of our social world, but this world of human relationships and artefacts also determines to a large extent how we regulate our mental processes.
>
> (Lantolf, 2000:79)

Learning according to this theory is developed through *social interaction* with more knowledgeable or more proficient others. This social process of interaction (through language, as well as other systems and tools such as gestures, narratives, technologies) *mediates* the construction of knowledge and leads to the individual's development of a framework for making sense of experience that is congruent with the cultural system in which the learner and learning are located. It is through this social and cultural process that students are socialised to act, communicate and 'be' in ways that are culturally appropriate to the groups in which they participate as members, and through which identities are formed.

Within sociocultural theories, development occurs twice: firstly in the process of social interaction (that is, on an *interpersonal* plane) and then within the mind of the individual (that is, on an *intrapersonal* plane). *Language is integral to learning in that it is the major means by which we make and share meanings with ourselves and with others, and by which we negotiate social relationships and social values.* It is language that makes it possible for people to objectify and conceptualise themselves in the world – to give names to experiences, and make sense of the environment, objects, experiences, events and interactions. In short, language is central to the process of conceiving meaning, which is integral to learning.

Sociocultural theory is concerned with the *development* of individuals over time. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is not fixed but dynamic and developmental. In this sense, the developmental focus is on an individual's *potential* abilities. An individual's learning potential depends fundamentally on mediation – that is, learning support or scaffolds that are made available. These scaffolds might include reminders, examples, models, graphics, illustrations, explanations, further questions and elaborations, as well as encouragement. They are designed to move the learning forward in the zone of proximal development. An individual's learning and achievement are mediated by supportive interactions with others. This interaction is fundamental to learning. To understand learners' learning and potential development, it's important to take into account both what they are able to do independently and what they can do, with others, in and through social interaction – what they are able to do at any particular time and what they continue to learn to do over time.

The cultural dimension of sociocultural theories of learning is highlighted by Gee.

> "A sociocultural approach places a premium on learners' experiences, social participation, use of mediating devices (tools and technologies), and position within various activity systems and communities of practice. The word 'culture' has taken on a wide variety of different meanings in different disciplines. Nonetheless, it is clear that as part and parcel of our early socialisation in life, we each learn ways of being in the world, of acting, and interacting, thinking and valuing and using language, objects and tools that critically shape our early sense of self. A situated/sociocultural perspective amounts to an argument that students learn new academic 'cultures' at school (new ways of acting, interacting, valuing and using language, objects and tools) and, as in the case of acquiring any new culture, the acquisition of these new cultures interacts formidably with learners' initial cultures."
> (Gee, 2008:100)

Thus the diverse cultural understanding and experiences that students bring are highly influential and need to be taken into account. The implication of this for us as a profession is that we need to enlarge our understanding of learners, recognise the extraordinary differences in their social and cultural life-worlds, experiences, motivations, aspirations, and incorporate this diversity into our teaching and learning.

Merged theories

While there is much debate within and among cognitive, constructivist and sociocultural theories, Shepard (2000:6), among others, maintains that it is some kind of combined or 'merged' theory that will end up being 'accepted as common wisdom and carried into practice'. Learning, then, is socially constructed, mediated through language and other tools that are congruent with the culture in which the learner and learning are situated, and develops over time. As Broadfoot says:

> " What we can and should do is … recognise that learners are first and foremost sentient beings and, hence, that the quality and scope of their learning is likely to be at least as closely related to their feelings and beliefs about it as it is to their intellectual capacity. "
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> (Broadfoot, 2005:138–139)

Students bring with them their own conceptions, misconceptions, understandings, experiences and feelings that shape their learning.

Acquisition and participation

Anna Sfard (1998) discusses learning theory through two metaphors: an acquisition metaphor and a participation metaphor. Learning within the acquisition metaphor involves the accumulation of a body of facts or items of knowledge that are abstracted and generalised. The process may involve either reception or development by construction, but the focus is on 'gaining ownership' (Sfard, 1998:5) or possession of something. Within the participation metaphor, learning involves participating within a community of more knowledgeable others to construct understanding. Participation takes place in the context of culture through social mediation. The focus within this metaphor is not on possession but on participation in various kinds of activities characteristic of a learning area as the learner gradually becomes a member of the subject community. Sfard highlights that 'each (metaphor) has something to offer that the other cannot provide' (Sfard, 1998:10).

Questions for reflection

1   How does your stance to language learning reflect your views on learning?

2   Where do your views on learning come from?

3   How are your views of learning evident in your teaching and assessment practice?

4   What are some implications of these learning theories for your own teaching?

5   Why do you think Sfard emphasises the merging of the two metaphors?

6   Are there dimensions of learning that are not captured by the acquisition and participation metaphors?