

THE IMPORTANCE OF HABIT IN THE DIFFERENT LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS

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I've been puzzled by the importance attached to *habit* on the part of some foreign/second (F/S) language learning methods, and by the low profile it keeps in other approaches. In the present paper I'll try to find out whether habit is that important as audiolingual methods hold, or as irrelevant as mentalism claims. In order to reach my purpose I'll discuss habit in general; then the role it plays in Audiolingualism and in Mentalism. Finally I will draw some conclusions.

1. Habit and the learning process

Habit is said to be a permanent disposition created by the repetition of acts: such disposition causes us to always act in the same way (1). The definition tells how habit is formed (by the repetition of acts), but it does not state just how much repetition is necessary. Obviously the amount will vary from person to person and from one skill to the other.

The abilities carried out under the influence of habit are *habitual*, which entails a significant degree of spontaneity.

Habit has been of paramount importance in the learning process especially in traditional methods. Habit formation through repetition of the corresponding acts is a *conditio sine qua non* for the mastering of certain physical abilities for which theory is just one aspect. As for other more theoretical disciplines, we would hardly *learn* them with just an exposure, i.e., without the adequate repetition in order to commit them to memory. This procedure can be more or less painful, or pleasant, depending on the subject matter in question, the materials being used and the teacher conducting the work. At any rate, for all inventions of modern age no perfect substitution for human effort has been found as far as learning is concerned.

In the study of classical languages – Latin and Greek – by means of the grammar – translation method repetition, memorization and habit were of great importance. Although those languages were not meant for conversation, the student was expected to master them to the point of translating them with ease and swiftness. When the study of F/S languages was undertaken at the end of last century and later on no other approach was used than the traditional one (2).

2. Habit in audiolingual methods

World War I and the period thereafter brought about a renewed interest in international understanding and consequently in the study of foreign languages. That interest grew into an actual need in the Second World conflict. It made it necessary to learn the allies' as well as the enemies' language. However, the existing methods left much to be desired. Here is Bloomfield's opinion in this regard: "Our schools and colleges teach us very little about language, and what little they teach us is largely in error" (3).

If the idea one has of language determines the method one uses for its study (4), let's recall one of the structuralist tenets on the matter: "Language is a set of habits" (5). *Habit* is then explained in behaviorist terms: it is a normal result of a stimulus-response process. "Habit strength is a function of how many of the stimuli produced by a response possess how much of this so-called reinforcing potential. If this potential is extinguished or if stimuli (...) fail to occur (...), the habit will be obliterated" (6). In this way, once the first response is given, the reinforcement, i.e., the rewarding situation, will take over and further the process. If no obstacle is encountered the process will go on in a sort of snow-ball movement; thus the production of the right answer becomes a matter of routine, it turns into a *habit*.

In the behaviorists' opinion the "stimulus-response" theory accounts for all forms of language, included poetry and philosophy.

For those who think of language as a system of habits, learning it is just a matter of adopting the means geared towards the formation of such habit. That task is undertaken by drills and repetition. "Nearly all theories of learning give some importance to repetition. Repetition permits the reinforcement of patterns and their conversion into habits or skills" (7).

The audiolingual method did meet the needs it was confronted with. Its success is linked to historical circumstances of the interwar and afterwar period (8).

3. Habit in cognitive methods

In the late 50's and the decades thereafter Structuralism was challenged especially by Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar (TGC) and the principles supporting it. The idea of language as a mere set of habits and the explanation of habit as a fixed, automatic, unconscious neural connection or bond between some stimuli and the corresponding responses was regarded as an oversimplification – to say the least. Besides, considering the mind just as the “locus wherein the conversion of stimulus into response takes place amounted to depriving man of that very attribute *t h a t* makes him *rational*.”

Behaviorist conceptions of language were also vulnerable because of disregarding meaning and doing without the communicative aspect of language (9).

It is true that not everybody held to behaviorism in its radical form; nevertheless, the new theories called for a totally new approach – so at least claimed the new linguistic revolutionary impetus.

The rationalist theory does not consider language as a terminated, well-defined *corpus* or system whose acquisition is only a matter of imitation until a series of habits is formed; on the contrary, the emphasis is placed on the *creative aspect of language*. The TGG does recognize language as a rule-governed system: the rules are not only intricate, but also quite abstract. Learning a language involves internalizing the rules.

Humans' mental activities are seen in a deeper, transcendent perspective: hence Chomsky's criticism: “The essential weakness in structuralist and behaviorist approaches to those topics is the faith in the shallowness of explanations, the belief that the mind must be simpler in its structure than any known physical organ” (10).

The use of drills, the insistence on repetition and the acquisition of automatization by means of habit formation are earnestly questioned. Drilling and repetition as such would not achieve the very end they are meant for. Granted the creative aspect of language manifested in the “infinite use of finite means”, the language learners should be drilled on an infinite number of structures in order to learn language, which is impossible.

The followers of Mentalism took then to explaining the language learning/acquiring process, as well as devising a language teaching method consonant with their principles. Here we find the explanation consisting of filter, organizer and monitor, plus the secondary external factors influencing them (11). The *environment* is one of those factors that plays a significant role. “Apparently natural exposure to the new language triggers the subconscious acquisition of communication skills in that language” (12).

A good command of the target language entails a spontaneous, unconscious or “monitor-free” use of it. Now, how is it achieved? The explanation comprises the following steps:

“(a) The discovery of the underlying structure of the language by means of inductive and deductive inferences, guided by (i) inner grammatical universals and (ii) sample linguistic data which are sentences and semisentences; b) the automatization of the phonological surface transformations of this underlying knowledge through practice” (13). Step (a) alone would be insufficient; now step (b) can only take place after the knowledge of the structure has been acquired, since “practicing sentence patterns whose structure is not yet understood would seem to be useless” (id).

4. Some obvious conclusions

The importance Audiolingualism attaches to habit in S/F language study is unquestionable (6), in accordance with the conception of language as a set of habits. The process towards habit formation is explained in behaviorist terms. Now, if that learning is to be meaningful it has to grow out of the behaviorist schemes and enter the creative domain, or else the learner wouldn’t achieve the versatility needed in every language use.

Mentalism, on the other hand, criticizes the tenets of audiolingualism because – it is claimed – they fail to account for the complexity of language and of the mechanisms involved in learning/acquiring it. The approaches inspired in this theory advocate a living contact with the target language on the part of the student so as to trigger the “language acquisition” abilities. One question we can’t help asking is: “is natural exposure to the target language sufficient to bring about the acquisition of the language in question? A certain amount of practice – habit formation – seems to be indispensable, otherwise how could that subconscious, spontaneous, monitor-free use of the language be achieved?

At present Mentalism-inspired methods enjoy more popularity (14); in fact, the communicative approaches so in vogue nowadays draw heavily on rationalist elements.

I am more in favor of Mentalism and mentalism-based approaches; however I don’t think we can utterly rule out all structuralist elements. A good command of any language calls for a habit-like use of it. But let us recall that language is much more than a habit, and that there are far better means towards the formation of that habit than those proposed by orthodox Structuralism.

NOTES

- 1 Traditional Ethics defines virtue in terms of *habit*, i.e., “a good habit”, whereas vice is also a habit, but a bad one.
- 2 Cfr. Bowen, D., et al. *TESOL: Techniques and Procedures*, Newbury House Publishers, Inc. Rowley, Massachussets, 1985, p. 34.
- 3 Stern, H.M., *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 99.
- 4 Cfr. Baufit, C.J. and Johnson, K., (1979), *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*, Oxford University Press, p.2. Stern, 1. c., especially p. 152.
- 5 Cfr. Dwen, D., 1. c., p. 35.
- 6 Rivers, W., *The Psychologist and the Foreign Language Teacher*, University of Chicago Press, 1954, p. 35.
- 7 Mackey, W.F., *Language Teaching Analysis*, Longman, 1965, p. 152.
- 8 A list of those unique circumstances is found in BOWEN, 1. o., p. 35, note 3.
- 9 “This response kind of learning makes no pretense of being communication” (Brooks, 1960), quoted by Rivers, 1. c., p. 31.
- 10 Chomsky, N., *Language and Mind*, 1968, p. 21.
- 11 Krashen-Burt-Dulay, *Language Two*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 6.
- 12 Id., *ibid.*, pp. 15.
- 13 Jacobovits, L., *Foreign Language Learning*, Newbury House Publishers, Rowley, Massachussets, 1978, p. 25.
- 14 Cfr. Stern, 1. c. p. 169.