

## **Major Theories Underlying Assessment Practices in Language Classrooms**

### **Principales théories sous-jacentes aux pratiques d'évaluation dans les classes de langue**

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### **Abstract**

Assessment is one of the most critical components of education, and like any other aspect of language learning and teaching, assessment has been influenced by a number of theories. Each of these learning theories has resulted in considerable changes in the ways that assessment practices are viewed and carried out in the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning. Accordingly, this paper seeks to provide a concise outline of the major theories of learning and schools of thought that have had an influence on educational assessment practices in the context of second and foreign language learning and teaching. More specifically, the current paper discusses four major theories of learning namely behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism, and multiple intelligences. The paper aims also to explain how assessment practices in the context of second and foreign language teaching and learning have changed both in their focus and in their methods on the basis of these learning theories.

### **Key words:**

Assessment; learning theories; language teaching; language learning; EFL context

### **Résumé**

L'évaluation est l'une des composantes les plus critiques de l'éducation et, comme tout autre aspect de l'apprentissage et de l'enseignement des langues, l'évaluation a été influencée par un certain nombre de théories. Chacune de ces théories a entraîné des changements considérables dans la façon dont les pratiques d'évaluation sont perçues et réalisées dans le domaine de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage des langues secondes et étrangères. Par conséquent, le présent papier vise à décrire les principales théories de l'apprentissage et des écoles de pensée qui ont eu une influence sur les pratiques d'évaluation éducative dans le contexte de l'apprentissage et de l'enseignement des langues. Plus précisément, le présent document traite de quatre grandes théories de l'apprentissage, à savoir le behaviorisme, le cognitivisme, le constructivisme et les intelligences multiples. Le papier vise également à expliquer comment les pratiques d'évaluation ont changé à la fois dans l'orientation et les méthodes sur la base de ces théories.

### **Mots Clés:**

Evaluation ; théories ; enseignement des langues ; apprentissage des langues ; Anglais comme langue étrangère

## Introduction

Harasim (2017) defines a learning theory as “an explanation for why something occurs or how it occurs...a learning theory helps us to understand both how knowledge is created and how people learn” (p. 4). As such, theories of learning are very critical and beneficial for educational practitioners in many ways. It is through the knowledge provided by early theorists that education practitioners today enhance their teaching practices and hence improve learning. In other words, a thorough understanding of the basic principles of learning theories allows educational practitioners to reflect on their teaching practices and to improve them for effective learning.

Assessment which is a major component of language teaching and learning has undergone several changes owing to the different theories and schools of thought. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to answer the following question: In what ways have theories of learning influenced assessment practices in the context of second and foreign language learning?

To answer the question, this paper describes four major theories of learning and how assessment practices in language classrooms have been built based on principles of these theories. The objectives of this paper are, thus, twofold. First, the paper clarifies the main tenets of the major theoretical frameworks that guided the field of language teaching and learning arguing that improvements in assessment practices requires a thorough understanding of theories of learning and their underpinnings. Second, it shows how development in the principles of learning theories have impacted assessment practices throughout history.

## 1. Behaviorism

The first half of the 20th century was dominated by the behaviorist view which continued to influence language classroom practices for several years. Behaviorism is based on the premise that learning is a matter of change in observable behavior. Such behavioral changes result from individuals' responses to 'stimuli' or events that occur in the environment. This view posits that learning is developed through associations between stimulus and behavior, and that any behavior is shaped through reinforcement. Reinforcement which is positive results in an increase in the behavior while negative reinforcement results in a decrease in the behavior (Skinner 1931). Learners are, thus, regarded as “nothing more than simple mediators between

behavior and the environment” (Skinner, 1931, p. 428). Under this view, the learner is given a passive role that requires him/her to simply receive knowledge in small individual bits and follow instructions. Teaching and learning from a behaviorist perspective are, thus, based on the following assumptions:

1. Learning occurs by accumulating atomized bits of knowledge;
2. Learning is tightly sequential and hierarchical
3. Transfer is limited, so each objective must be explicitly taught;
4. Tests are isomorphic with learning (test=learning);
5. Motivation is external and based on positive reinforcement of many small steps (Shepard, 2000, p. 5).

Accordingly, Assessment, under this approach, involves “making judgements about observable behaviours, and ascertaining whether or not the student can evidence the required behavior” Fautley and Savage (2008, p. 23). That is to say, the focus in this type of assessment is on examining learners’ mastery of knowledge or skills in isolation so as to determine to what extent the learner has met a particular instructional objective. With an emphasis on rote memorization of facts, completion, matching, multiple choice tests, true/false tests, and essay questions are the dominant assessment measurements used under this approach. Learning is, hence, measured by the number of correct answers that the learner has obtained on a test. If the learner passes the test they can move on to the next stage of learning, otherwise they will have to be re-taught and re-tested. As such, this view of assessment clearly values the final product over the learning process (Berry, 2008).

## 2. Cognitivism

This theory views learning as “an active process of mental construction and sense making” (Shepard, 2000, p. 6). Unlike the behaviourist view which emphasized passive accumulation of knowledge and basic skills, the cognitivist view considers the learner’s mind as a critical factor in the process of learning. Compared to the ways in which a computer processes information, human learning requires a process of choosing information, understanding it, as well as storing and retrieving it (Berry, 2008). This entails those learners are aware of what they are doing and employ appropriate cognitive strategies to manage their learning in accordance with the

assigned tasks. Cognitive theorists do acknowledge reinforcement as an important element in the learning process. Yet, they ascribe reinforcement feedback providing function rather than a motivator for behavior. The aim is to help learners in the process of developing skills and strategies for effective learning (Ashworth, et.al, 2004).

Cognitivism posits that individuals are unique in both their perceptions and learning styles. Therefore, it is important to examine the various ways in which learners conceptualize and structure their learning, and to identify differences in learning styles such as problem - solving strategies, , tempo (reflective to impulsive), and modality preference (aural, oral, kinesthetic and visual) (Madsen, 1981). Cognitivists also contend that the development of cognitive abilities is strengthened through social interactions. Accordingly, the importance of communication and performance in real life authentic contexts is highly desirable (Shepard, 2000).

This shift from a reproduction of knowledge to the use of mental processes to perform in more communicative and authentic tasks entails that assessment should no longer be limited to traditional methods such as multiple choice questions or correct answer selections. Rather, assessment methods should reflect the underlying thinking processes of the learner and assess his/her understanding, reasoning, critical thinking, and problem solving abilities (Grabin, 2007). Furthermore, assessment should be carried out through methods that encourage active participation and involvement on the part of learners. As Berry (2018) puts it, “learners will have to self-monitor, self-evaluate, and self-assess their learning during and after the learning process” (p. 11). That is to say, assessment under cognitivism aims at enabling learners to be autonomous and take responsibility for every step of their learning process and work towards improvement. Importantly, in order for assessment to cater for individual differences, learning styles, and learning strategies, varying assessment methods and techniques becomes a prerequisite.

### **3. Constructivism**

The main tenet of the constructivist view is that learners, themselves, construct knowledge from reflecting on their own experiences. This theory compares learners to scientists who conduct their experiments on a continuous basis, make hypotheses and work towards confirming them or otherwise in the process of knowledge seeking (Berry, 2008). Based on the premise that

learning occurs more easily and efficiently when learners actively participate in the construction of knowledge, constructivism, like Cognitivism, puts the learner at the center of the learning process. By drawing on their prior knowledge and building their own understanding, learners are in a better position to achieve success.

Therefore, teachers are required to use activities that tap on students' background knowledge and experiences and also create encouraging learning atmosphere in the classroom for learners to feel more at ease to express ideas and negotiate them and construct their own concepts (Grabin, 2007).

With the growing interest in the social aspect of learning, another element that is stressed by constructivists is social interaction. The construction of meaning is best achieved by interacting and negotiating with others on a constant basis. As Berry (2008) argues, "it is through interacting with others that children develop and readjust their own unique set of concepts" (p. 10). Similarly, learning is maximized when learners are allowed the chance to engage in meaningful interactions with the teacher or with their peers through group discussions and debates. However, the subject of interaction within the classroom should be within the limits of students' prior knowledge and experience. Constructivism in this sense is regarded as '*social constructivism*' which considers social interaction between people as the basis for knowledge construction. This is based on the work of Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, who introduced the concept of 'Zone of Proximal Development' or (ZPD) which is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). This means that children move to higher levels of development when they are helped by the people who are around them and who have more experience.

In the context of second and foreign language classrooms, group work activities that emphasize exchanging, comparing, contrasting, and discussing among students and the teacher are highly recommended in this respect as they play a pivotal role in enhancing learning. In this way, the classroom becomes a "social milieu of learning" (Dagar & yadav, 2016, p. 3) where learners construct their own meaning with the help of the teacher whose role becomes that of a facilitator, guide, and mentor.

Seven principles are listed to be underlying effective pedagogy within the constructivist view:

1. The emphasis is not on memorizing and reproducing knowledge, but not on using and transforming it.
2. Acquiring and using knowledge are not separate phases; rather, knowledge is learned by using it.
3. Knowledge is used especially to solve problems.
4. Stimulating students thinking activities and enhancing their meta-cognitive and self-regulative skills
5. Social interaction has a central role in the learning process.
6. Assessment of learning is embedded in the learning process.
7. Students themselves must be involved in the assessment of their learning (Dagar & Yadav, 2016, p. 2).

Accordingly, assessment associated with constructivism places more importance on the process of learning rather than on the end product. The objective is to understand what cognitive strategies the learner employs and what the learner can do with the knowledge and skills constructed to eventually decide on ways of helping learners learn. Cunningham (1998) argues that “the only form of assessment constructivists can enthusiastically support is personal communications with individual students” (p. 126). In this way, performance assessment in the form of presentations, role plays, and portfolios is the type of assessment mostly advocated by the constructivist view.

#### **4. Multiple Intelligences**

Another theory that has immensely influenced the field of language teaching and learning is the theory known as Multiple Intelligences (MI) which was developed by Gardner (1983). The theory posits that individuals are different in terms of the intelligences they possess. Specifically, nine broad types of intelligences are outlined:

1. Linguistic intelligence: being effective in using words both verbally and in writing as well as manipulating the syntactic, phonological, semantic and pragmatic aspect of words.
2. Logical -Mathematical-intelligence : effective reasoning and use of numerical patterns in domains such as accounting, statistics, mathematics, etc.

3. Musical intelligence: the capacity of being sensitive to a musical piece in terms of rhythm, pitch, timbre, melody, and tone.
  4. Visual-spatial intelligence: being able to visualize the world in an accurate manner and to be sensitive to elements such as color, shape, images, forms, and the relationships that might exist between them.
  5. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence: being skillful in controlling one's body and expressing one's self through body language and movement.
  6. Interpersonal intelligence: the ability to understand and respond effectively to others' feelings, moods, and motivations.
  7. Intrapersonal Intelligence : knowing one's inner self in terms of strengths and weaknesses in order to control one's self and adapt to different situations.
  8. Naturalist intelligence : the capacity to perceive and categorize animals and objects in the environment.
  9. Existential intelligence: the ability to ask questions about make sense of one's existence.
- (Fautley & Savage, 2008, pp.12-22)

Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences stresses the recognition of the multiple abilities and talents that learners possess. It is evident that learners are not the same; they come with myriads of differences in terms of backgrounds, abilities, experiences, learning styles and strategies, interests, intelligences, etc. Accordingly, teaching and assessment ought to be relevant to the learners' individual differences and multiple intelligences. These individual differences should be addressed and catered for equally using diverse approaches and methods of instruction and assessment. In the context of educational assessment, Grabin (2007) argues that "rather than question the degree of intelligence that each young child possesses (i.e. intelligence testing) a better consideration would be to examine the ways in which the child exhibits intelligence and to offer opportunities where he can successfully demonstrate his abilities" (p. 23). In other words, this framework views traditional tests as insufficient in assessing the varied capacities of learners. Learners should be given various opportunities to demonstrate their skills and capabilities, and the assessment tasks and materials used should be authentic and attractive to learners.

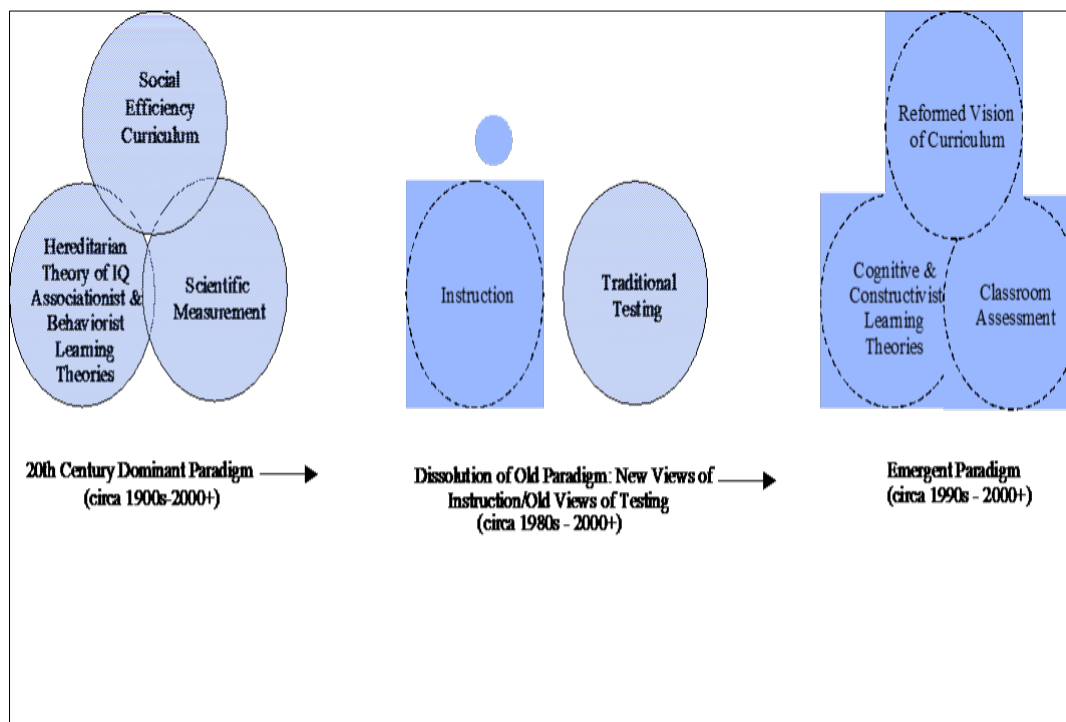
In sum, this theory posits that assessment is to be regarded as a part of the teaching and learning processes and not as an end product. More importantly, learners' abilities, under this framework, should be assessed in authentic contexts where learners are required to solve real-

life like problems to identify their strengths and weaknesses. The information gathered through this assessment would then inform teachers about their learners' areas of difficulty and hence encourage them to work jointly towards overcoming those difficulties (Almeida, et. al. , 2010). In summarizing the way assessment of learning should be carried out from a Multiple Intelligences perspective, Armstrong (1994, p. 115) states that the theory of Multiple Intelligences suggests,

a fundamental restructuring of the way in which educators assess their students' learning progress. It suggests a system that relies far less on formal standardized or norm-referenced tests and much more on authentic measures that are criterion-referenced, benchmarked or ipsative (i.e. that compare a student to his or her own past performances) (cited in Grabin, 2007 p. 23).

What the quote implies is that learning should be assessed using innovative methods and tools of assessment. This is with the aim of tracking learners' performance throughout the learning process and addressing the multiple intelligences of learners. Strictly speaking, learning theories have witnessed major changes in the way educational assessment is viewed and carried out throughout history. This shift is best summarized by Shepard (2000) in the following diagram.

**Figure 1.** An Historical Overview Illustrating how Changing Conceptions of Curriculum, Learning Theory and Measurement Explain the Current Incompatibility between New Views of Instruction and Traditional Views of Testing



Source: Shepard (2000, p. 5)

As shown in this historical timeline, early theories of learning (on the left) were influenced by 'scientific measurement' which is aligned with conventional curricula and views of learning. On the right, the timeline shows a move towards the constructivist and cognitive paradigms which suggested a reformed vision of curriculum where assessment is no longer confined to testing nor is it regarded as separate from the teaching and learning processes.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper discusses the major learning theories which guided educational assessment throughout history. Generally speaking, early theories of language learning viewed assessment as objective and occurs separately from its context with a focus on the product rather than the process of learning. Objections to these psychometric views resulted in the emergence of contemporary views which rejected the emphasis on objectivity and placed the individual learner at the center believing that “students are active constructors of their own knowledge; that learning is both individual and social; and those students are resources to be tapped, not obstacles to be overcome” (Wilson & Peterson, 2006, p. 7). As a result, interest grew in the move towards alternative approaches to learning in general and to assessment in particular. Thus, it is recommended that second and foreign language teachers are familiarized with the basic principles of the different schools of thought in order to reflect on their assessment practices and improve them for effective learning to take place.

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