

Analysis of the Views of Language Learning on PEP Senior High School Textbooks (2019) :A Case Study of “Unit 1, Teenage Life” of Compulsory Book 1

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Abstract: The psychology of language learning, as a classic issue that reveals the laws of language learning and manifests the underlying logic of language learning, owns a very important position in language acquisition and teaching. The current research on the language learning view is mainly focused on the analysis of English textbooks. However, there is little research involved in the analysis of the language learning view of the widely used high school English textbooks published by the People's Education Press. In order to deepen the understanding of language learning perspectives, maximize the practical value of PEP high school English textbooks, and improve the English learning effects of high school students, this research took the language learning theories as the research topic and “Unit 1, Teenage Life” of Book 1 as a case study of explore the manifestation of the language learning view of the high school English textbook (2019) of the People's Education Press (PEP). Specifically, this research attempts to answer the following two research questions: 1. Which language learning views do PEP senior high school English textbooks (2019) reveal, taking “Unit 1, Teenage Life” of compulsory book 1 as a study case? And to what extent are the language learning views revealed? 2. How are the language learning views revealed through the exercises?

In order to answer the above questions, this research adopts a simple qualitative research method. Through careful observation and in-depth analysis of all language knowledge related exercises in this unit, the research results are obtained. The four main language learning views were all revealed in the exercises correspondent to language knowledge acquisition; of the four language learning theories, the cognitive theory was the most adopted one whereas the behaviorism was the least.

This study provides some empirical support for the study of language learning theories reflected in English textbooks, and bestows important implications for teaching and research of English language in China.

Keywords: View of language learning; PEP high school English textbooks; Textbook analysis

1. Introduction

As a major branch of linguistics, Applied Linguistics can be divided into broad sense and narrow sense. The broad sense of applied linguistics refers to the research on various practical problems related to language, and the narrow sense of applied linguistics refers to the research on native language, second language and foreign language teaching, which is equivalent to the research of language teaching methodology. The study of language teaching is inseparable from the answers to three core questions: First, what is language? Second, how do people learn languages? Third, how can we help people to learn languages? (Roger T. Bell, 1981) These three questions are intertwined and form a progressive relation, that is, language views will lead to correspondent language learning views, and thus give rise to the certain views of language teaching. Among these three issues, the language learning view is the central link, transcending the description and analysis of the language itself, and embodies the realization of the intrinsic value of the language with human beings as the carrier. Language teaching methods are also extended and developed on the basis of language learning, helping to solve problems in the process of language learning from a teaching perspective. Therefore, the language learning psychology has naturally become the most worthy of in-depth discussion and exploration of the three major issues.

In teaching, the core knowledge of students' learning is displayed in textbooks, and teachers' implementation of teaching activities is also based on textbooks. Therefore, the rationality of textbook compilation affects the learning effect of students and the teaching quality of teachers to a certain extent, and attention to and research on textbooks is also particularly important.

The senior high school stage is a key stage of quality education in China, which determines the basic level of citizens' intellectual foundation of natural science and culture. As one of the main disciplines, English is highly valued from the national strategic level, and the selection of high school English textbooks is therefore critical and cautious. At present, in accordance with the spirit of General High School English Curriculum Standards (2017), the high school English textbooks from Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP) and from People's Education Press (PEP) have become two outstanding representatives. In comparison, the PEP textbook covers a wider range of topic content, and the topic distribution is more balanced; in terms of grammar, it is more comprehensive, systematic, and regular; and regarding vocabulary, the PEP version has a larger vocabulary than the FLTRP version, as well as the presentation of words is more conducive to students' learning. Therefore, the teaching materials of PEP version are being adopted more and more nationwide.

At present, the analysis of the PEP version of high school English textbooks (2019) is various, mainly focusing on cultural awareness, thinking quality, and language skills, while the classic issue of language learning is not sufficiently involved. This paper will focus on the analysis of the language learning views in the PEP version of high school English textbooks (2019), and analyze the compilation ideas and teaching purposes of PEP version of high school English textbooks from the perspective of the underlying logic of language learning, so as to provide high school teachers and students reference material to better understand and apply this series of textbooks, and ultimately achieve a ideal teaching and learning effect.

2. Literature Review

Main views on language learning

There are four main views on language learning that are profound in the field of Linguistics, i.e. the behaviorist theory, the cognitive theory, the constructivist theory, and the socio-constructivist theory.

The behaviorist theory of language learning was initiated by behavioral psychologist Skinner, who applied Watson and Raynor's theory of conditioning to the way humans acquire language (Harmer, 1983). Based on their experiments, Watson and Raynor formulated a stimulus-response theory of psychology. In this theory all complex forms of behavior — motions, habits, and such — are seen as composed of simple muscular and glandular elements that can be observed and measured. They claimed that emotional reactions are learned in much the same way as other skills. Their key point of the theory of conditioning is that 'you can train an animal to do anything (within reason) if you follow a certain procedure which has three major stages, stimulus, response, and reinforcement' (Harmer, 1983:30). Based on the theory of conditioning, Skinner suggested that language is also a form of behavior. It can be learned the same way as an animal is trained to respond to stimuli. This theory of learning is referred to as behaviorism, which was adopted for some time by the language teaching profession, particularly in the U.S. One influential result is the audio-lingual method, which involves endless 'listen and repeat' drilling activities. The idea of this method is that language is learned by constant repetition and the reinforcement of the teacher. Mistakes were immediately corrected, and correct utterances were immediately praised. In addition, behaviorist theory encourages acquiring habits initially by imitation. Good response elicits a reward while bad response evokes a punishment. Habit is reinforced: if stimulus recurs often, the response becomes automatic. Overall, learning occurs by imitation, constant practice, and habit formation.

The term cognitivism is often used loosely to describe methods in which students are asked to think rather than simply repeat. It seems to be largely the result of Noam Chomsky's reaction to Skinner's behaviorist theory, which led to the revival of structural linguistics. The key point of Chomsky's theory is reflected in his most famous question: if all languages is a learned behaviour, how can a child produce a sentence that has never been said by others before. According to Chomsky, language is not a form of behaviour, it is an intricate rule-based system and a large part of language acquisition is the learning of this system. There are a finite number of grammatical rules in the system and with a knowledge of these an infinite number of sentences can be produced. A language learner acquires language competence which enables him to produce language. Though Chomsky's theory is not directly applied in language teaching, it has had a great impact on the profession. One influential idea is that students should be allowed to create their own sentences based on their understanding of certain rules. This idea is clearly in opposition to the audio-lingual method.

The constructivist theory believes that learning is a process in which the learner constructs meaning based on his/her own experiences and what he/she already knows. Although constructivist theory was not developed for the understanding of language

learning, it is widely applicable to learning in general. It is believed that education is used to develop the mind, not just to rote recall what is learned. John Dewey provided a foundation for constructivism. He believed that teaching should be built based on what learners already knew and engage learners in learning activities. Teachers need to design environments and interact with learners to foster inventive, creative, critical learners. Therefore, teachers must balance an understanding of the habits, characteristics as well as personalities of individual learners with an understanding of the means of arousing learners' interests and curiosity for learning (Archambault, 1964).

Similar to constructivist theory, socio-constructivist theory represented by Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes interaction and engagement with the target language in a social context based on the concept of 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD) and scaffolding. In other words, learning is best achieved through dynamic interaction between the teacher and the learner and between learners. With the teacher's scaffolding through questions and explanations, or with a more capable peers' support, the learner can move to a higher level of understanding and extend his/her skills and knowledge to the fullest potential.

3. Methodology

The research is a simple qualitative one and a textbook analysis. It took language learning views revealed in PEP senior high school English textbooks (2019) as research object, and formed a case study of "Unit 1, Teenage Life" of compulsory book 1. Through observing and examining the exercises in Unit 1, this paper attempts to answer the following two research questions:

1. Which language learning views do PEP senior high school English textbooks (2019) reveal, taking "Unit 1, Teenage Life" of compulsory book 1 as a study case? And to what extent are the language learning views revealed?
2. How are the language learning views revealed through the exercises?

According to National English Curriculum Standards for General High School (2017), the content of compulsory high school English courses includes six parts: topic context, discourse type, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills and learning strategies. The language learning views discussed in this article is mainly aimed at the learning of language knowledge which is consist of five aspects: phonetic and phonological knowledge, lexical knowledge, grammatical knowledge, discourse knowledge, and pragmatic knowledge. This paper will analyze the views of language learning embodied in the target unit just from those five aspects.

4. Results and Discussion

There are 14 exercises in total that are closely related to the five aspects mentioned above. The answer to the first research question is that the four main language learning theories are all revealed in the 14 exercises. Table 1 shows the number of exercises revealing the four language learning views in terms of the five aspects of language knowledge.

Table 1. Overall descriptive results of the first research question

	Behaviorism	Cognitivism	Constructivism	Socio-constructivism
Phonetic and phonological knowledge	2	2	0	0
Lexical knowledge	0	2	3	0
Grammatical knowledge	0	3	1	0
Discourse knowledge	0	1	2	2
Pragmatic knowledge	0	1	1	1

Notes: The exercises counted overlappedly.

As Table 1 shows, the four main language learning theories were all found presence in the target exercises. Throughout the five aspects of language knowledge, behaviorism and socio-constructivism displayed less presence than the other two, i.e. cognitivism and

constructivism. Of all the language learning theories, cognitivism presented the highest frequency among the exercises.

Taking a particular perspective to each language learning theory, variations in how they were suggested through the exercises could be seen.

For behaviorism, it was only applied in acquiring phonetic and phonological knowledge, which demanded listening and repeating some syllabuses e.g. “vowel+consonant” combinations and the correspondent phonologically related words. However, this language learning theory didn’t gain more application in other aspects of language learning.

With regard to cognitivism, it was attached great importance to in each aspect of language learning, especially in acquiring grammatical knowledge. Compared to the applied knowledge such as discourse knowledge and pragmatic knowledge, cognitivism was more often used in learning the structural knowledge such as phonetic and phonological knowledge, lexical knowledge, and grammatical knowledge.

As to constructivism, it was more frequently applied in acquiring lexical knowledge. Though it was revealed in learning discourse, grammatical, and pragmatic knowledge as well, it failed to be of use to learning phonetic and phonological knowledge.

In terms of socio-constructivism, it was discovered only reflected in acquiring the applied knowledge such as discourse and pragmatic knowledge rather than the structural knowledge mentioned previously.

To explain the reasonability of the above findings, the maxims or characteristics of the four language learning theories should be born in mind.

Considering behaviorism, the exercises of pronunciation provided an obvious representation of audio-lingual method by “stimulus-response” logic.

Regarding cognitivism that was revealed in various exercises, the core of its application was to arouse students’ independent thinking, so as to analyze the given samples or examples through observing, inferring and deducing, and ultimately be able to understand the mechanisms within the language knowledge and apply them to real situations successfully. For instance, in a grammar exercise which provided the rules of construction of noun phrase, adjective phrase and adverb phrase, its requirement was that students should find and mark the phrases in the sentences that fit the categories, and then state their functions. It encouraged students to master the grammatical rules through their own mental activities, fostered their incentive and creativity, and activated their learning process in avoidance of mechanical repeating and reciting.

With regard to constructivism, the exercises of vocabulary and reading offered its evident application. It worked well in providing common sense, similar or relative experiences, real scenarios, etc. for students to relate to and reflect on themselves, so as to facilitate students’ understanding and acquisition of the target knowledge in contextual environment. For instance, in a vocabulary exercise whose requirement was to complete the sentences with the correct forms of the new words from the text, students were given vivid contexts throughout all the sentences, which eliminated the comprehension obstacles and helped students to make clear the fine shades of certain words. It turned out to be a useful and effective way of learning vocabulary.

As far as socio-constructivism is concerned, the reading and writing exercises that were involved with the theory called for peer discussion and review. Those exercises required communication and information sharing within community members and emphasized the role of interpersonal relationship. The theory applied in the reading exercises was inclined to facilitate students’ reading skill through ideas exchanging between partners, while it was apt to help students to examine and revise their writing in the writing exercise.

The above are the results and analysis of the research. However, it was undeniable that there may be subjective bias in the identification and distinction of the four language learning views revealed in each exercise, which may affect the reliability of the research result to some extent.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the research, it was found that the four main language learning views were all revealed in the exercises correspondent to language knowledge acquisition. Of the four language learning theories, the cognitive theory was the most adopted one whereas the behaviorism was the least. For the purpose of optimizing the learning effect, the four language learning theories were distributed to different exercises, which displayed a high consistency between the nature of the exercises and the teaching objectives of the textbook.

As a matter of fact, the findings of the research had their own limitations. For one thing, the sample size was too small, which was lack of universality when attempting to represent the circumstances of the series of the PEP high school English textbooks in that different books have different focuses. For another, the analysis of the language learning theories lacked

scientific research framework to which could be referred, thus a slight deviation of the research procedure was unavoidable to some extent.

It is welcomed that further research may draw upon the systematic analysis of the classic issues of language learning on the PEP high school English textbooks.

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