

Piaget, Child Psychology and Teaching English Today

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Abstract: The theories regarding the psychology of children have a long history and their development has brought to the fore more and more interesting discoveries. They are also rather numerous and not all of them have stood the test of time. Some of the most enduring, well-known and influential in the field belong to the Swiss researcher, Jean Piaget. This article aims at underlining some of Piaget's ideas and at correlating them with the theories of teaching English as a foreign language to students of young ages.

Key words: Piaget, child psychology, teaching English

Jean Piaget's work on child psychology is fundamental to understanding the work of a teacher, particularly a teacher of young learners. As Harry Beilin says "No one affected developmental psychology more than Jean Piaget. From his earliest publications in the 1920s to the time of his death, the influence he exercised was extraordinary. His theory [...] has no rival in developmental psychology in scope and depth [...] The number of experiments conducted by Piaget and his colleagues [...] is unrivaled in the history of developmental psychology." ¹

While doing his research on the formation of concepts and intellectual operations, "to lay bare the operational mechanisms of thought"², Piaget distanced himself from the psychological methods of his time, more precisely the individual monograph and the testing method, and suggested a more adequate one, in his view: the clinical method.

In a few words, the method to follow in the study of children's representation of the world is this: observe the child naturally, note the child's utterances and questions, and then, inspired by these questions, interview other children directly; finally, return to pure observation in order to

¹Beilin, Harry, *Piaget's enduring contribution to developmental psychology*, *Developmental Psychology*, 1992, no. 28, pp. 191–204

²Piaget, Jean, *The language and thought of the child*. Neuchatel, Kegan Paul Trench Trubner, 1926

*verify the results of the previous interviewing. The method is thus a sort of shuttle between pure observation and interviewing, interviewing intended to increase the volume of data and direct observation intended to situate them in their spontaneous mental context. Thus, we avoid two problems: The results of observation only are too poor to allow an advanced analysis. The results of interviewing only are too much influenced by the questions and unintentional suggestions to allow an interpretation safe from any objection. On the other hand, the two methods combined will result in something solid, comparable to the clinical method in psychiatry.*³

Piaget greatly influenced the area of developmental psychology, despite what any of his detractors might say. The field owes the idea of children's cognitive development to him, as well as other valuable discoveries and concepts, such as assimilation and accommodation, egocentrism, conservation, hypothetical reasoning and deductive reasoning.

As Santrock argues,

*...along with William James and John Dewey, Piaget contributed to the current vision of children as active, constructive thinkers. Piaget was a genius when it came to observing children. His careful observations showed us inventive ways to discover how children act on and adapt to their world. His work revealed some important things to look for in cognitive development, such as the shift from preoperational to concrete operational thinking, and showed us how children need to make their experiences fit their schemas (cognitive frameworks) while simultaneously adapting their schemas to experiencing the real life.*⁴

Piaget discusses several processes relevant to the way children know and understand the world: through schemas, assimilation and accommodation, organization and equilibration.

³ Ibid.

⁴Santrock, W., John, *Educational Psychology*, 5th edit., McGraw Hill, New York, 2011, p. 44

Schemas refer to what develops in the brain of a child while trying to construct and understand the world - in other words, mental representations organizing the knowledge. Piaget argues that a very young child would be characterized by behavioral schemas (simple physical activities like grasping something or watching someone) whereas later on, mental schemas develop (meaning cognitive activities such as strategies for problem solving or the classification of objects). Adults of course have much more complex schemas of functioning in the world than children do.

Piaget's concepts of assimilation and accommodation explain the adaptation and use of these schemas in the case of children. The first one takes place as children increase their existing schemas by adding new information, while accommodation takes place as children change their existing schemas to adjust to this new information and to new experiences, as well. This is why providing good examples from the beginning and supporting them is so important in teaching young learners. For instance, in teaching English, one ought to pay attention to the way children internalize the pronunciation of certain troublesome words. Otherwise, once the young learner has acquired a bad habit, the effort needed to correct it might be doubled, both for the child and the teacher. That is why modeling and drilling are important in an EFL class.

The next step in Piaget's theory is the organization and ordering of thoughts and existing behaviors in a system. As children grow and develop, they continuously refine this inner organization. These adaptation processes enable the transition from one stage to another.

The equilibration process represents the movement of children between the different stages of thought. This mechanism is used by children in the case of an imbalance or a misunderstanding of the world. In the end, balance is ideally reached and the conflict is resolved by the child. This leads to cognitive developments and to new ways of thinking. Going through these four different stages of development, children change in the course of the processes described above and they acquire different, better ways of understanding the world.

These stages of Piaget's theory are in close connection to the age of the child and imply different means of thinking. They are: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational and

formal operational. In relation to the age, these stages were divided by Piaget into four categories:

1. Sensorimotor stage (birth to age 2)
2. Pre-operational stage (from age 2 to age 7)
3. Concrete operational stage (from age 7 to age 11)
4. Formal operational stage (age 11+ - adolescence and adulthood).

During the first stage, the infant constructs the understanding of the world by coordinating sensory experiences with physical actions, moving from instinctual actions to the beginning of symbolic thought. During the second state, the child begins to represent the world with words and images which reflect increased symbolic thinking and go beyond the connection of sensory information and physical action. In the third stage, the child begins to reason logically about concrete events and classify objects into different sets, whereas in the fourth and final stage, the adolescent reasons in a more abstract, idealistic and logical manner.

The constructivist theory implies that children learn by building information upon previous knowledge, hence the name of the theory. Piaget's discoveries go in line with this perspective on the learning process and have greatly influenced the teaching world, still continuing to do so. Today, there are even computer learning programs based on the theories of Piaget: Seymour Papert, a student of Piaget, developed a learning tool using the computer based on Piaget's view, called Logo. According to Papert's official site, this led to the creation of an "environment that empowers students to create and share interactive games, perform mathematical experiments, explore science simulations and write multimedia stories."⁵

In order to apply the principles of Piaget in real life education, particularly the teaching of young learners, the teacher should take into consideration the constructivist approach. This would mean, from the point of view of Piaget's theories, creating more class opportunities for children to be active and to seek solutions by themselves. Piaget argued against the teaching

⁵<http://www.papert.org/>

methods that treat children as passive receptacles, his theory being that a child learns best by making discoveries, by reflecting on them and by discussing them, rather than blindly imitating the teacher or learning by heart.

The Montessori Method of teaching, quite popular nowadays in numerous countries, shares the same view of allowing children to learn by experimenting themselves. A second aspect to be considered by teachers in line with Piaget's theory is to facilitate rather than teach directly. This is also what the Cambridge CELTA method emphasizes, too: the need for the teacher to become more of a mediator in the learning processes. Researchers like John Santrock also claim that effective teachers design situations that allow students to learn by doing. Such situations promote students' thinking and discovery. Teachers listen, watch, and question students to help them gain a better understanding of the notions in question. They ask relevant questions to stimulate students' thinking and encourage them to explain their answers, the main idea being for the teacher to be able to create classroom situations that facilitate students' learning.

Another aspect worthy of consideration is the child's knowledge and level of thinking - in other words, the set of pre-existing knowledge of the young learner and the fact that they probably have their own particular ideas, very different from those of adults. Therefore, a teacher should show enough patience in order to interpret what a student is saying and should respond on the same level as the student's. For instance, when teaching English to young learners, a teacher ought to be patient and allow enough time to children for internalizing the language taught. He or she should also pay attention to adapting the level of the teaching to the age of the students and their capacities. One would never ask a six-year-old to write an argumentative essay, just as an 18-year-old might be reluctant to sing the alphabet or mime actions in front of the whole class. "Asking the children to do something for which they are not ready will not promote cognitive development. It will merely frustrate the children."⁶

The communicative teaching approach, such as the above mentioned CELTA YLE method, functions similarly: for example, for a lesson introducing new vocabulary, be it in the form of a text, or of a listening piece, or a storytelling, the new words are always carefully pre-taught so

⁶Santrock, W., John, *Educational Psychology*, 5th edit., McGraw Hill, New York, 2011, p. 128

that students would benefit most from the lesson afterwards. Simply putting the children in direct contact with a text, even a very appealing one, without the right tools at hand, will rather block the learning process instead of encouraging it.

When Piaget was travelling in the United States, he was often confronted with what he came to call “the American question”. This referred to the way a child can reach a higher cognitive stage as early as possible. Piaget, however, considered that children’s learning should occur naturally and he rejected over-achievement, as he considered there is a maturity level to be considered, as well. This contrasts with old specialist views prescribing an immersion of the child into a learning environment slightly above their level, an approach favouring learning almost as a survival method *per se*. Nowadays, the schooling system sometimes tends to encourage this over-achievement, burdening the students from an early age. In this respect, one should remember that learning in an enjoyable way is the best for young learners. In this respect, another thing that favours learning, particularly at young ages, is a classroom resembling a setting of exploration and discovery. In other words, a teaching atmosphere that emphasizes students’ own exploration and discovery, where the structure is flexible and the teacher is more of a facilitator and an observer rather than a master of the class. At the same time, such a teaching approach follows the students’ interests and natural inclinations in order to determine the course of learning. And last but not least, such a classroom should not be short of games and fun activities, the ones that teach without students being aware of the teaching process. This should be the natural way of teaching everywhere. It definitely is a teaching approach that makes the best of Piaget’s theories.

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