Introduction

Why a book on psychology for language teachers?

This book is the result of several years of collaboration between two colleagues from very different professional backgrounds; one of us comes from the field of applied linguistics while the other is an educational psychologist. Several years ago we began to explore, somewhat tentatively, a number of different areas of educational psychology and to consider the possible implications of these for language teachers. The initial results of this work generated for us a tremendous feeling of excitement and we began to realise its potential value to teachers of foreign languages. Out of this preliminary exploration grew an increasing number of lectures, seminars and conference papers as we tried out our ideas with professionals in different parts of the world.

To our surprise, the sense of discovery that this work had generated grew. The more we worked together with different groups of teachers around the world, the more our ideas took on new shapes and new meanings. After a while we found that we had aroused the interest of an increasing audience, many of whom encouraged us to put down our developing ideas in the form of a book.

Spurred on by the interest and encouragement of the teachers with whom we worked in various teaching contexts, we began to commit our ideas to paper. Thus this book was conceived, heralding the beginning of a lengthy process of incubation which was at times stormy, but always professionally stimulating and increasingly exciting.

As we wrote, our ideas continued to be reshaped, so that at the end of each chapter we felt the need to return to the previously completed chapters to revise and renew what we had written. This we have come to see as entirely appropriate, because it is an illustration in practice of exactly what we are writing about, the process of construction and reconstruction of meaning.

The literature on language teaching provides comprehensive accounts of different language teaching methodologies and is rich with ideas and techniques for teaching a language. However, what has become increasingly clear to us is the fundamental importance to teachers of an understanding of

what is involved in the process of learning to inform and underpin our teaching of the language. Teachers' own conceptions of what is meant by learning, and what affects learning will influence everything that they do in the classroom. At the same time, in order to make informed decisions in their day-to-day teaching, teachers need to be consciously aware of what their beliefs about learning and teaching are. These two principles underlie much of the content and format of this book.

What this book is about

This is a book *about* psychology *for* language teachers. It is not a book about language teaching per se; there are numerous volumes on this topic already on the market. Nor is it a book of tips for teachers, or another book about second language acquisition. It is a text that is principally about psychology. It aims to provide language teachers with an introduction to a number of key issues and recent developments in psychology that will help them to understand better the ways in which their learners learn and which will provide a fund of knowledge from which to draw to inform their classroom practices. We shall, where appropriate, provide examples to illustrate the application of the ideas presented to foreign-language classrooms. However, at the same time we would not want to be prescriptive about how to put these theories into practice as what is most appropriate will differ from one situation to another, from one teacher to another and from one learner to another. It would also contradict one of our fundamental beliefs that teachers will make their own sense of the ideas and theories with which they are presented in ways that are personal to them.

This book is different from many books on educational psychology which generally aim to provide a comprehensive survey of different psychological theories. Instead we take one particular psychological approach which we apply to a number of different issues in learning and teaching, such as motivation or task design. In many respects this approach owes a great deal to the humanist tradition in its emphasis upon the whole person and on the affective aspects of learning. However, because of the particular value that we place on recent cognitive theories, our approach is essentially *constructivist*. As we shall explain in detail later in the book, we understand by this that each individual constructs his or her own reality and therefore learns different things in very different ways even when provided with what seem to be very similar learning experiences.

At the same time, we have to face up to the fact that learning does not occur in a vacuum. We therefore need a framework within which our particular psychological perspective can operate effectively. The framework we have chosen is that of *social interactionism*, which we believe encompasses

the key elements of learning and education. As we see it, babies are born into social worlds, come to develop a concept of self as a result of their social interactions with others, and increasingly employ language to make sense of that social world and to help them play an effective part within it. Thus, an understanding of the social factors which play a part in our increasing competence as language users is essential for all language teachers.

There are a number of different areas that are currently of interest to language teachers which are directly related to and draw upon the field of psychology. An example is the area of learner training, which looks at how learners can be helped to acquire appropriate strategies for learning languages. This in turn involves an understanding of the cognitive and metacognitive strategies that learners bring to any learning task. Another example is the complex issue of motivation: what motivates learners to learn a language. A deeper understanding of recent views about why people are motivated to learn and of theories of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can assist the language teacher to a deeper understanding of the motivation of his or her own learners.

This book, then, aims to provide language teachers with a background to a number of topics in educational psychology which will assist them in their day-to-day practice in teaching a language. In addition to this, the book also aims to equip teachers with a means of viewing the teaching and learning situations within which they work in an informed and analytical way.

Who this book is for

This book is intended for teachers of a foreign language at primary, secondary or tertiary levels. The principles discussed are applicable to teachers of English as a foreign language, modern language teachers, or those involved in teaching any language whether in the UK or overseas. It is intended that it should be usable by teachers from a range of teaching contexts and cultural backgrounds.

The book will also be of interest to teacher trainers and anyone involved in teaching psychological aspects of language learning and teaching. Those involved in the management of teaching or teacher training organisations, such as head teachers or inspectors, whether in the UK or overseas, should also find this book of value. It will provide a source of information about such issues as establishing in the school an environment which is conducive to learning, the relationships between teachers and learners, and, most importantly, will help the reader to formulate his or her own view of what the process of educating is all about.

In addition, it is hoped that anyone involved in the education of children who is interested in language might find this book of interest. Whilst we

believe that the issues which we raise are of particular relevance to language teachers, it seems very clear to us also that their implications stretch far wider.

Overview of the book

Chapters 1 and 2 provide a brief introduction to the discipline of educational psychology and set the context in which this subject has grown. Important influences on the development of psychological ideas and theories related to the process of education will be described, and the relevance of these ideas to teaching and learning a foreign language will be discussed.

Following this, we present the interactionist perspective that will be adopted in this book. Four key aspects of the teaching/learning situation are identified; the *teacher*, the *learner*, the *task* and the *learning context*. These are seen as interacting with each other in a dynamic way. The rest of the book is organised around these four themes.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on what the *teacher* brings to the teaching/learning situation. In Chapter 3 teachers' views and perceptions of learning are discussed, while Chapter 4 considers what teachers can do to promote and facilitate learning in their learners. Chapters 5 to 7 consider what the *learner* brings to the teaching/learning situation. In these three chapters various themes that are pertinent to learners are discussed: the learner as an individual, motivation and how learners deal with the process of learning. Chapter 8 looks at *tasks*: the place of the task as the manifestation of teachers' beliefs and the interface between teacher and learners. Chapter 9 then deals with the broader issue of the *context* in which the learning takes place. Finally, Chapter 10 pulls together the issues discussed in the book.

1 An introduction to educational psychology: behaviourism and cognitive psychology

1.1 Introduction

The process of education is one of the most important and complex of all human endeavours. A popular notion is that education is something carried out by one person, a teacher, standing in front of a class and transmitting information to a group of learners who are all willing and able to absorb it. This view, however, simplifies what is a highly complex process involving an intricate interplay between the learning process itself, the teacher's intentions and actions, the individual personalities of the learners, their culture and background, the learning environment and a host of other variables. The successful educator must be one who understands the complexities of the teaching-learning process and can draw upon this knowledge to act in ways which empower learners both within and beyond the classroom situation.

This is as true for the language teacher as for the teacher of any other subject. As we explained in the introduction, this book aims to provide a coherent psychological framework that will help language teachers to make connections between these different aspects of the learning process and to make informed decisions about what to do in their classrooms based on a psychological theory. In order to do so, we shall adopt one particular approach to psychology which we will develop throughout the book so that different aspects of language learning can be viewed from a coherent perspective. The approach we shall take is that of *social constructivism*, which will be explained fully in Chapter 2. In each of the subsequent chapters we shall consider the application of this model to different aspects of the language learning and teaching process. We do acknowledge that helpful insights can also be gained from an examination of other psychological viewpoints. However, these insights will be re-examined within the overarching framework which takes into account the social context of learning experiences and the ways in which individuals make sense of those experiences in such contexts.

Thus, instead of taking the view that different aspects of language

teaching are better treated by different psychological approaches (Brown 1994:88–9), for example, the learning of vocabulary uses information-processing, the learning of structures is behaviourist, learner-training is cognitive, we consider that our fundamental philosophy of the educational process must be able to accommodate these different aspects of learning if it is to be coherent.

In the first two chapters of this book we provide an overview of the discipline of educational psychology. Some major schools of thought in psychology are presented as well as the influence that each of these has had on language teaching methodology. The present chapter examines two important approaches to psychology: behaviourism and cognitive psychology. Significant features of each of these approaches that will be of value to language teachers will be highlighted and some of their implications for language classrooms will be drawn.

1.2 Educational psychology

Educational psychology has been defined in many different ways. One such definition offered by Kaplan (1990) describes it as the application of psychology to education by focussing on the development, evaluation and application of theories and principles of learning and instruction that can enhance lifelong learning. Although this is a paraphrase of a widely recognised definition prepared by the American Psychological Association, it is a description which has its limitations as well as its strengths. What we certainly aim to offer in this book is a theoretical framework from which principles of learning and instruction can be drawn and evaluated. We shall also be making a case for the importance of learning throughout the lifespan.

However, what this definition lacks is a recognition that there is a fundamental difference between learning and education. Learning is certainly part of the process of education, but to be truly educative it must give a broader value and meaning to the learner's life. It must be concerned with educating the whole person. To do this it must meet important criteria which will be elucidated further within this book. One consequence of failing to make the distinction between learning and education is that many learning activities which take place in schools are not necessarily educative: they lack a real value to the life of the learner. Teachers may function extremely well as instructors and generate a great deal of learning of a particular nature in their learners, but unless this process is truly educative, then what has been learned is likely to be of limited worth. Within the field of language teaching, for example, many language tasks have little personal interest or

relevance to the learners and have limited educational significance beyond the task itself. This is an issue to which we shall return in detail in Chapter 4, when we shall consider how teachers can give value to the activities they set, and in Chapter 8 when we discuss the design of tasks.

We also believe that as part of the process of education, teachers themselves should maintain a continuous process of personal reflection, within which they become aware of the personal and cultural values and beliefs that underpin their own and other people's actions. Only by raising their awareness in this way can teachers come to understand fully their own implicit educational theories and the ways in which such theories influence their professional practice. It should help them to understand also why and how their teaching may or may not lead to worthwhile learning. The importance for teachers of engaging in personal reflection on their practice is discussed further in Chapter 3.

1.3 Approaches to educational psychology

Just as in all other areas of knowledge, educational psychology theory has passed through a number of changes and fashions in its comparatively brief history. Some of these fashions have had a greater impact upon educational practice than others, and it is clear that one or two have had a particular influence over approaches to language teaching. An understanding of how these theories emerged and connected or conflicted with each other should enable the reader to evaluate their respective contributions to language teaching and to place the perspective taken in this book within a meaningful context.

Back in the late nineteenth century, the fledgling discipline of psychology was particularly keen to establish itself as a science on a par with the natural sciences. This led to the adoption of the so-called 'scientific method' as a means of gathering data about human behaviour. It also led to a conflict between those who saw the legitimate area of study as what went on in the human psyche (thoughts and emotions) and those who saw the only way forward as a concentration upon observable behaviour. An examination of the history of psychology makes it clear that the followers of each of these different approaches held sway in different countries such that it was impossible to refer to a 'world view' of psychology.

In the rest of this chapter we shall examine two major psychological approaches. We start with the positivist school and one of its main offshoots, behaviourism, and the influence this has had on language teaching. We then discuss cognitive psychology and the way different developments in this field have left their mark on language teaching.

1.4 The positivist school

Psychology as a discipline of study grew directly out of philosophy. However, many of the pioneers of this fledgling subject in the last decades of the nineteenth century saw the path to acceptance and respectability as lying with the natural sciences. Thus, in seeking to bring scientific rigour to its methods of enquiry, early psychologists abandoned their focus on the human mind in their attempts to understand and predict human behaviour. Instead, they sought to find the principles of human learning by investigating the behaviour of animals lower down the biological hierarchy of the animal kingdom, under rigorously defined conditions. This led to an adherence to an experimental methodology which is part of a philosophical form of enquiry known as 'logical positivism'. Basically, this approach begins with the premise that knowledge and facts exist within the real world and can be discovered by setting up experiments in which conditions are carefully controlled and where hypotheses are set up and tested.

It led in turn to the dominance of a view of psychology which could accept only empirical data as evidence that a phenomenon was occurring, and which rejected anything which could not be seen and/or measured as unscientific. Thus, for many years the predominant view in Western psychology was that efforts should be concentrated upon trying to understand how organisms lower down the hierarchy learned to perform simple tasks; for example, how rats learned their way through mazes to obtain food. It was assumed that the lessons learned from this could then be fairly easily applied to higher-order human learning. The thoughts and feelings of humans were considered to be inaccessible to proper scientific investigation within this paradigm, and, therefore, were not investigated.

1.4.1 Behaviourism

Behaviourism is an approach to psychology that has its roots within positivism, and which has had a profound influence on language teaching throughout the world. This approach arose out of the ideas of early learning theorists who attempted to explain all learning in terms of some form of *conditioning*. The most well-known example is that of the Russian Pavlov who demonstrated with dogs and other animals that a response (e.g. salivation) generated by one stimulus (e.g. food) could be produced by introducing a second stimulus (e.g. a bell) at the same time. This came to be known as S–R (Stimulus–Response) theory or *classical conditioning*.

It was postulated that all human behaviour could be explained in terms of the way in which simple S–R connections were built up. In the USA for example, J. B. Watson was able to demonstrate how easy it is for phobias to arise out of a normally innocuous stimulus (e.g. a white rabbit) or an

event becoming associated with something unpleasant that occurred at the same time (e.g. a loud noise).

Part of the problem with early behaviourist theories was that they concentrated almost exclusively upon the nature of the incoming stimuli and the way that these could be altered to provoke different kinds of responses. However, this proved to be of limited value in accounting for the enormous range of human actions. Russian psychologists, most notably Luria and his followers, Vygotsky and Leontiev, came to acknowledge the importance of language within this process, although the political ideology under which they worked restricted the way in which they were able to develop and express their ideas. On the other side of the world, in the USA, meanwhile, a different route was taken by behaviourists, who began to focus much more on the nature and shaping of responses in the S–R chain, and the conditions under which stimulus–response relationships were formed.

1.4.2 B. F. Skinner

The founder of modern behaviourism is generally considered to be B. F. Skinner, who constructed a system of principles (he preferred not to call it a theory) to account for human behaviour in strictly observable terms (Skinner 1957, 1987). He also began with the premise that learning was the result of environmental rather than genetic factors. Skinner extended the possible application of principles of conditioning by introducing the notion of *operants*, i.e. the range of behaviours that organisms performed or were capable of performing. He also emphasised the importance of *reinforcement*. Behaviourist theory thus came to explain learning in terms of *operant conditioning*: an individual responds to a stimulus by behaving in a particular way. Whatever happens subsequently will affect the likelihood of that behaviour recurring. If the behaviour is reinforced (i.e. rewarded or punished) then the likelihood of that behaviour occurring on a subsequent occasion will be increased or decreased. In this way any range of behaviours could be gradually, and even rapidly, increased by reinforcing the behaviour required. In his early writing Skinner (1957) even argued that language development could be explained in this way, although this claim has been soundly refuted since then.

In subsequently turning his attention to education or, more specifically, instruction, Skinner argued that this could be improved considerably by the adoption of four simple procedures. He suggested that:

- teachers should make explicitly clear what is to be taught;
- tasks should be broken down into small, sequential steps;

- students should be encouraged to work at their own pace by means of individualised learning programmes;
- learning should be 'programmed' by incorporating the above procedures and providing immediate positive reinforcement based as nearly as possible on 100 per cent success.

Behaviourist views of learning were taken up widely by language teachers, and were a powerful influence on the development of the audio-lingual approach to language teaching. When this theory is applied to language learning, language is seen as a behaviour to be taught. Learners are given language tasks in small, sequential steps. A small part of the foreign language, such as a structural pattern, is presented as a *stimulus*, to which the learner *responds*, for example, by repetition or substitution. This is followed by *reinforcement* by the teacher, based on 100 per cent success. Learning a language is seen as acquiring a set of appropriate mechanical habits, and errors are frowned upon as reinforcing 'bad habits'. The role of the teacher is to develop in learners good language habits, which is done mainly by pattern drills, memorisation of dialogues or choral repetition of structural patterns. Explanation of rules is generally given when the language item has been well practised and the appropriate habit acquired.

An example can be found in Figure 1 below which shows an exercise from L. G. Alexander's (1968) coursebook for children, *Look, Listen and Learn*.

The exercise is designed to teach the structures *there's a . . .* and *there's some . . .* In this task the learners are required merely to repeat the stimulus sentences after the teacher, which they can do correctly without understanding the meaning of the utterances.

A second example is taken from a popular coursebook for adults, *Kernel Lessons Intermediate* (O'Neill *et al.* 1975). See Figure 2. This exercise uses a substitution drill where the teacher gives a prompt (e.g. 'the theatre at weekends') and the learners are required to complete the sentence (e.g. 'He often goes to the theatre at weekends'). Again, the exercise can be completed with fairly limited understanding of the meanings of the words.

It can be seen that audiolingualism does have a number of limitations. First, the role of the learners is a fairly passive one; they are merely directed to respond correctly to stimuli. There is little active engagement in analysing the language, or developing their own strategies to learn more effectively or initiating discussions or negotiating meanings. Second, there is little concern for what goes on inside the learners' heads, or the cognitive processes involved in learning something. Recent work in the area of learning strategies has shown us that conscious use of strategies can significantly enhance learning. This is a point that will be taken up in Chapter 7. Third,