When Chomsky met Piaget at a conference in 1975 (the discussion is recorded in Piatelli-Palmarini 1980), one of the areas of greatest debate was how language relates to other mental activities and skills. Chomsky’s view, that the language faculty is separate from other mental faculties, has been highly influential. If language is not like other skills, then those interested in foreign language learning and teaching can only turn for inspiration to what we know about other forms of language learning. This is why so many recent ideas in our field have been based on first language acquisition studies.

This view has certainly been fruitful, but it has also closed many doors. Because of it, we have often ignored what is known about the acquisition of other non-linguistic skills—learning to play a musical instrument, or learning mathematics, or how to swim, or play chess.

But there have been voices in the wilderness. Herriot (1970) includes a useful discussion of language in skill terms. As for language learning, applied linguists’ accounts of it now often use concepts taken from general learning theories, suggesting that there are indeed common elements between language and general skill acquisition; McLaughlin et al. (1983) and Skehan (1998) are examples. In terms of language teaching, Levelt (1978) shows how skill theory can contribute, while Johnson (1996) provides a more detailed account.

There is no fully-fledged ‘skill-based approach’ to language teaching, but we can perhaps see the beginnings of one in the work where general learning theory concepts are applied to language learning. One such concept is automisation, the idea that things learned become more automatic through practice. Though this concept may sound behaviourist, it has survived attacks on behaviourism and made its way into more cognitive approaches to learning. Just below the surface in much discussion on automisation is the notion of task-based teaching; perhaps by grading the tasks we give learners we can slowly lead them towards automisation.

If there is no ‘skill-based approach’, there certainly exists a ‘skill-based frame of mind’. This makes you receptive to the idea that the skills literature may be useful to language teachers. You may then read books like Holding (1965) which, although it does not even mention language learning/teaching, discusses many relevant issues. For example, the debate about ‘whole versus part’ teaching may remind you
of language teaching syllabus design issues, and of the fluency/accuracy distinction.

The frame of mind may also lead you to ponder your own experiences learning non-linguistic skills. When you consider the role of practice in language teaching, for example (an issue of some contemporary interest), you may think about its role in your own acquisition of non-linguistic skills. Would those who de-emphasise its role in language learning, you may ask yourself, also do so in learning to play the violin? Can you imagine learning the violin without practising scales (a musical equivalent of ‘drills’)? Such thoughts may lead to the realisation that discussions with the maths teacher, the music instructor and the sports trainer may enlighten you as a language teacher—and vice versa, of course.

References

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