



## Research article

# Reimagining Classroom Control through Bertrand Russell and Behaviorist Theories in ELT

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## Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between Bertrand Russell's philosophy of education and behaviorist learning theories in order to reassess classroom discipline and English language teaching in the contemporary educational context. Although debates concerning freedom and control in education and their implications for language pedagogy have been longstanding, the potential compatibility between Russell's educational ideals and behaviorist principles remains underexplored. The study juxtaposes the ideas of Thorndike, Pavlov, and Skinner, particularly conditioning, reinforcement, and habit formation with Russell's emphasis on autonomy, rational inquiry, ethical responsibility, and self-discipline. The analysis demonstrates that, despite their differing assumptions regarding learner agency and the purposes of education, both traditions recognize the importance of structured learning environments that foster intellectual and behavioral development. The paper argues that behaviorist techniques can be employed to support Russellian educational goals such as critical thinking, learner autonomy, and democratic citizenship. Consequently, the study proposes a model of "disciplined freedom" that integrates structured guidance with independent inquiry, offering a balanced framework for classroom management and English language teaching in the modern educational landscape.

**Keywords:** Bertrand Russell; education and discipline; behaviourism; Pavlov; Skinner; Thorndike; classroom management; disciplined freedom; moral education; student autonomy; teaching practices.

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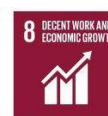
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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The Tension that Lasts: Freedom and Control in Education

The freedom-control paradox of education is one of the oldest philosophical and practical issues of education (Lewis & Sugai, 2017). The central issue of this tension is the following: how can teachers produce learners who are disciplined and free at the same time, who are able to regulate themselves, and are free in their thinking? This question is especially acute in today's educational settings, where educators have to strike a balance between the demands to achieve measurable results, behavioral obedience, creative expression, and critical thinking (Febrianti, 2025). The educational philosophy developed by Russell, which is best expressed in his treatise "*On Education, Especially in Early Childhood* (1926)," serves as a unique answer to this dilemma. The educational thinking of Russell also focusses on the connection between education and the social system and the significance of free thinking (Saeed and Sabir, 2025). He distinguishes between two kinds of education according to the differences in age and considers them as moral education and intellectual education, and claims that according to Russell, education is considered as one of the main instruments of social progress (Saeed & Sabir, 2025). According to Russell, not only the interests of the state or current power systems should be at work in education but also the task of education should educate people to think critically and independently (Saeed & Sabir, 2025).

Contrary, the learning theories of behaviourists which were developed as a result of the experimental researches of Ivan Pavlov, Edward Thorndike and B.F Skinner suggest an entirely different approach (Juhary, 2006). The behaviorist theory of learning has its basis on the assumption that learning leads to observable behavior changes that are caused by external stimuli (Nuha & Fithriyah, 2025). Although some of the recent theories are concerned with mental processes, Behaviorism remains useful in organizing the instructional strategies, particularly in areas where quantifiable results are of paramount importance (Nuha & Fithriyah, 2025). The basic principles of the behaviorist theory, as it is discussed with references to the works of such prominent theorists as Watson, Pavlov, and Skinner, reveal how their theories, which are classical and operant conditioning, find their way to teaching methods of reinforcement and control of behavior (Nuha & Fithriyah, 2025).

Teaching in the modern schools requires more than just the delivery of academic material; the educators have to deal with students with major learning and behavioral disabilities, have to teach in neighborhoods that cannot afford schools, and work in conditions that are rather counterproductive to learning (Lewis and Sugai, 2017). These challenges affect the schools, neighborhoods, and families differently, and the philosophical combination of freedom and control has become especially pressing in the context of the present-day practice (Lewis & Sugai, 2017).

## **1.2 Historical Background: Scientific Psychology and Progressive Education**

The educational philosophy of Russell came into being at a time when there was a heated debate concerning educational reform in early twentieth-century Britain and America (Madigan, 1993). The progressive education trend was inspired by philosophers like John Dewey and opposed the old authoritarian methods where rote memorization, corporal punishment, and blind obedience were the main focus (Madigan, 1993). At the same time, scientific psychology was also asserting itself as a field, with behaviourism boasting of objective, empirical underpinnings to the study of learning (Juhary, 2006). There are numerous common characteristics of Russell and Dewey in terms of their philosophical approach: an interactionist view, an admiration of scientific method, an interest in social issues, and a distrust of dogmas, most notably religious dogmas (Madigan, 1993). They were both passionate advocates of education in which children would learn through doing, and aroused by this, both started questioning the necessity of any kind of authority in the classroom except for the discipline of the subject matter per se (Madigan, 1993). Yet, there were major disparities that pitted them against each other, especially on how truth should be and the overall goals of education (Madigan, 1993).

Meanwhile, the behaviorist movement was revolutionizing psychology using experimental studies (Juhary, 2006). The basis of modern behaviorism can be traced to the work of Pavlov, Watson and Skinner. The common belief shared by these scientists is that humans, like animals, are creatures whose behavior can be shaped through repetitive conditioning whereby some form of acts is rewarded, and others are punished (Juhary, 2006). Incorporating these concepts in human learning, Skinner proposed that learners learn effectively by use of drill and practice; they have to repeat the same subject until they are well trained (Juhary, 2006). The philosophies of education of different cultural epistemes reveal the works of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Fröbel, John Dewey, Miguel de Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset, Paul Natorp, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget and Bertrand Russell (Author, 2025). These varied philosophers influenced arguments about the right trade-off between discipline and autonomy in education, with each assuming their own unique visions on the ways in which discipline and autonomy could be balanced (Author, 2025).

## **1.3 Rationale and Scope**

In this paper, the relationship between the educational philosophy of Bertrand Russell and the behaviorists learning theories will be examined in a philosophical and practical aspect, with a focus on their application in classroom discipline and English language teaching. It first explores the idea of education in which Russell sees a process of developing autonomy, rational inquiry, self-discipline, and moral responsibility. It then looks at the key principles of behaviorism as developed by Pavlov, Thorndike and Skinner, the principles of conditioning, reinforcement, habit formation, and environmental control. The study then examines these views in comparison in order to see where they agree and disagree. Their implications for classroom management and language pedagogy are given special attention. This is particularly significant for language teachers who have to provide structured development of skills while allowing learner autonomy and

communicativeness. The paper suggests that behaviorist approaches and Russell's educational ideals do not have to be mutually exclusive but can be effectively combined to help with effective teaching, critical thinking, moral education, and responsible learner independence in today's classrooms.

## **2. Philosophy of Education and Discipline by Bertrand Russell**

### **2.1 The Critique of Russell of Educational Extremes in "On Education: Especially in Early Childhood (1926)" and "Education and Discipline" (1935)**

The philosophy of education that Russell developed was as a result of his critical observation of two prevailing approaches that were dominant but flawed regarding child-rearing and education. On the one end was the authoritarian tradition, with its strict obedience, corporal punishment, its fear-based discipline, systemic stifling of natural curiosity, vitality of children. This method viewed children as blank slates on which to pour knowledge or savage animals to be domesticated using force. On the other end, Russell watched an emergence of laissez faire tactics that, in the rejection of the authoritarian tactics, common sense and organization were usually foregone. These methods were shaped by romantic ideas of childhood innocence, which presupposed the way of child development, the predetermined appearance of positive traits without any kind of adult interference. This laissez-faire extreme was just as problematic to Russell who saw the need of children to be directed, structured, and given proper boundaries to enable them to mature their abilities.

Russell rejected both extremes of the issue and postulated that a real education must not be based upon unthinking obedience, nor on anarchic freedom. Russell has an educative philosophy where he places significant importance on free thinking as a key ingredient to the appropriate schooling (Saeed and Sabir, 2025). But this liberty should be developed by proper kinds of discipline--not discipline in the sense of external moulding by the use of coercion, but discipline in the sense of inner training into inner resources of self-control, of rational choice, and of moral judgment. The most prevalent and the only reason that leads to the removal of the disabled staff, students, and family members is problem behavior (Lewis and Sugai, 2017). This fact highlights the study implications of the real-life discipline strategies that develop a true sense of self-regulation, as opposed to compliance (Lewis and Sugai, 2017).

### **2.2 The Dual Aims: Vitality and Intelligence**

(Russell, 1926, pp, 34-36) identified four basic things that education ought to develop: "A community of men and women possessing vitality, courage, sensitiveness, and intelligence, in the highest degree that education can produce, would be very different from anything that has hitherto existed." Vitality involves physical health, emotions, curiosity, spontaneity and the ability to feel joy and innovative interaction with the world. Intelligence refers to the process of accumulating knowledge, rather than simply learning, but it entails the ability to think critically, reason logically, have a scientific temper, and to analyze beliefs and assumptions (Hitchcock,

2002). According to Russell, education is considered to be one of the key instruments of social development (Saeed & Sabir, 2025). Russell philosophy of education endorses the view of an educational system that would promote moral responsibility and intellectual liberty, which would ultimately help in developing human character and a thriving and fair world (Saeed & Sabir, 2025). This two-fold focus on vitality and intelligence evidences Russell being in stark opposition to the purpose utilitarian or vocational-only conceptualization of education in his pursuit of a more humanistic ideal (Saeed & Sabir, 2025). Development of vitality needs learning environments that foster and not hobble the natural energy and interest of children. Classical authoritarianism education, Russell said, destroys the vibrancy by its fear, punishment, and restraint. Children grow shy, nervous and emotionally retarded. The intelligence development, on the other hand, involves a systematic instruction in logical thought, exposure to alternative ideas, and a disposition towards autonomous research as opposed to passive obedience of authority (Hitchcock, 2002).

Recent studies prove that positive emotions and intrinsic motivation are strongly connected in the context of language learning (Printer, 2023). Pedagogical methods that give much credence to vitality and intelligence can uphold positive motivational and emotional development in students (Printer, 2023). This independent character of the co-created learning experiences leads to a higher feeling of language competence and, at the same time, creates a great bond within the classroom (Printer, 2023).

### **2.3 Moral Education: Character and Habits**

Russell divided education into two categories according to age-based differences: moral education and intellectual education (Saeed & Sabir, 2025). Moral education, especially in the early childhood stage, aims at building character, emotional controls, social abilities and moral sensitivities (Saeed and Sabir, 2025). This training is carried out mostly by fostering habits, environmental design and example, as opposed to being taught abstract moral values explicitly. Russell acknowledged that young children are taught moral things based on their experiences and not precept. Kindness, honesty, courage, and self-control are good habits that should be developed with the help of constant practice under good conditions. This bit of Russellian philosophy is surprisingly close to behaviorist interest in habit-making (Juhary, 2006), but Russell maintained that habits must be used to the service of autonomous character and not conformism.

Education about morals must nurture constructive rather than possessive impulses as Russell called them. Positive impulses entail building, collaboration, and giving towards the common good. The acquisitive, domineering, and competitive impulses are the possessive impulses. Authoritarian education, traditional as Russell opined, strengthens possessive impulses via competitive grading, punishment and hierarchical control. Constructive impulses should be developed in progressive education based on learning with peers, expression of creativity, and participation in democracy.

Behaviorist learning theory is implemented through the use of reinforcement, motivation, stimulus, and practice to bring about behavior change to students (Damayanti et al., 2023). As the behavior of students shifts positively, they get more incentives to learn and communicate and the

memory and tolerance of students improve (Damayanti et al., 2023). Nonetheless, Russell would argue that these behavior modifications must, eventually, be directed to the creation of self-motivated moral agency and not by conditioned responses alone.

#### **2.4 Intellectual Education: Rational Inquiry, Critical Thinking**

The more the child grows, intellectual education tends to take the center stage (Saeed and Sabir, 2025). Russell came up with certain attitudes needed to think critically and among them was the habits of thought in the judicial manner (Hitchcock, 2002). Some of the skills needed include the ability to have an opinion of oneself, the ability to seek unbiased solutions as well as the ability to make assumptions of questions (Hitchcock, 2002). Russell identified certain attitudes necessary for critical thinking. They were: (1) open-mindedness (holding beliefs tentatively in proportion to the evidence), (2) independence in inquiry (thinking for oneself and avoiding herd mentality), and (3) impartiality (weighing evidence fairly without bias) (Hitchcock, 2002). Of these was the "judicial habit of thought"—the capacity to examine the various viewpoints and to make reasonable judgments (Hare, 2001). The specific skills that are required are: (1) being able to form an opinion for oneself, (2) being able to find impartial solutions and (3) questioning assumptions (Hitchcock, 2002). Russell came up with constitutive attitudes of inquiry with intellect, such as realization of human fallibility, open-mindedness, denying that what we desire and wish to be the key to understanding the world and tentativeness in the extent to which we are certain of our beliefs related to the warrant that justifies them (Hitchcock, 2002).

This intellectual instruction is not possible under authoritarian procedures, where one is expected to accept what the teacher says, or under more permissive instructions, where there is no systematic direction. Rather, it should have teachers who model critical thinking, generate classroom settings that promote questioning and exploration, systematically teach logical reasoning and scientific inquiry and guard against indoctrination and give students the right intellectual challenges (Hitchcock, 2002). The insight that Russell focuses on judgment and critical analysis represents is that reasoning is not something that can be reduced to a machine formula that can be applied on a regular basis (Hitchcock, 2002). Students should be taught skills of making finer judgments, the ability to analyze the situation, and be able to assess it independently, instead of adhering to the set-out procedures (Hitchcock, 2002). The current studies on problem-based learning show that better results are achieved in the long-term retention, development and satisfaction of students and teachers (Strbel and Barneveld, 2009). These results are in line with Russell, who stressed that anyone needs to formulate authentic conceptualizations as opposed to superficial knowledge (Hitchcock, 2002).

Digital transformation in the context of higher education has also put the dilemma of preservation of critical thinking in the process of using technology (AbadSegura et al., 2020). The new technologies dictate changes that have to be accommodated while maintaining the intellectual virtues that Russell had highlighted, to manage the digital transformation in a sustainable fashion (AbadSegura et al., 2020). Sustainability is the most effective journal in the field, and studies there

focus on innovation, technology, and environmental technology as well as technological management (AbadSegura et al., 2020).

## **2.5 Discipline as Self-regulation and not Control**

The idea of discipline as generated by Russell is very different from both strict control and laissez-faire negligence. In the case of Russell, true discipline is the internalization of rational principles and the capacity to gain self-regulation abilities. This kind of discipline does not involve external control in itself but is only the framework and guidance needed to enable children to come up with their own abilities to choose rationally and act morally. Russell and Dewey ultimately believed that, according to the notorious saying of Hobbes, children are born inept with respect to society; education is needed to train them to acquire the social skills (Madigan, 1993). Nevertheless, this process must be carried out in conditions that promote progressive autonomy, and not intimidation-based adherence. Children must have clear boundaries, expectations and consequences of actions but in ways that allow the children to be able to see the reasons and not just to be enforced to subdue. Russell believes that reverence is one of the main moral and political values that are required to create the good society in politics and education (Malook, 2024). This reverence-oriented education model focuses on the respect to the child as a unique individual with the potential to achieve and at the same time, appropriate adult control and organization is observed (Malook, 2024). Educators are encouraged to treat every child as an individual who deserves respect and not as raw material that can be moulded so as to fit the predefined specifications (Malook, 2024).

Behavior management needs to be a systems approach to proactive schoolwide management (Lewis and Sugai, 2017). Even 25.6% of eighth-grade students have said they had been physically fighting with peers and that fewer than half of school children feel safe in their schools (Lewis and Sugai, 2017). These figures render the empirical urgency of devising discipline strategies creating authentic self-regulation and prosocial conduct (Lewis and Sugai, 2017).

## **2.6 Practical Educational Experiments of Russell**

Russell did not just have a theoretical philosophy of education (Madigan, 1993). He co-established Beacon Hill School in 1927 along with his wife Dora and was an experimental school that was meant to support his ideals of education (Madigan, 1993). Beacon Hill School initially started with 12 boarders and 5 day scholars and Russell tried to implement his philosophy into practice (Madigan, 1993). The experiment at Beacon Hill showed the potential and difficult situation of the Russell approach (Madigan, 1993). Although the school had managed to promote intellectual curiosity, emotional well-being, and creativity in a significant number of students Russell faced practical challenges to reconcile between freedom and structure, group dynamics and individuals' differences in temperament and ability (Madigan, 1993). The freedom and intellectual stimulation worked well with some students and more structure and guidance were needed by others than the school originally offered (Madigan, 1993). Such practice experiences contributed to more complex descriptions of how discipline and freedom could be achieved in real education in the future in which Russell wrote about education (Madigan, 1993). Russell realized that the

application of abstract philosophical principles to the needs of single children, their developmental stages and situational factors had to be changed (Madigan, 1993). The experience also demonstrated difficulties associated with training teachers who can be effective in implementing progressive approaches (Madigan, 1993).

The recent studies of how to enhance the persistence of underrepresented minority students in STEM demonstrate the same complication in the implementation of the educational reforms (Estrada et al., 2016). The representatives of working groups state the necessity to monitor the achievements and setbacks on the institutional level and gather facts to assist in the explanation of current trends (Estrada et al., 2016). These conclusions indicate that Russell's practical wisdom on the disconnectivity between theory and practice is quite popular (Madigan, 1993). This more recent development on epistemic control in machine learning-based science (Ratti, 2026) also highlights the significance of preserving human judgment and understanding over solely relying on algorithmic outputs, which reiterates the point that Russell is making insisting on developing genuine understanding and not merely performance (Hitchcock, 2002).

## **2.7 Russell in Comparison with Dewey and Other Reformers**

The role of Russell, which was unique among other progressive educational thinkers, will be better understood with the help of a comparison (Madigan, 1993). Although Russell and Dewey adhered to the same principles of scientific method, democratic ideals, and dogmatism skepticism, there were some important differences between them (Madigan, 1993). To Dewey pragmatism implied the truth To Dewey, pragmatism implied that truth was what "would pay to believe in"—that truth is validated by its practical consequences and usefulness in experience (Dewey, 1907, *The Quest for Certainty*, Ch. 6). Russell, on the other hand, took the correspondence theory of truth as his definition: "A belief is true if there is a corresponding fact, and is false if there is no corresponding fact" (Russell, 1912, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Ch. 7, p. 128). was something that would be paid to believe in, but to Russell, the truth was the correspondence to the truth that would correspond to the reality, no matter how practical or useful it was (Madigan, 1993).

Truth for Bertrand Russell, the pursuit of knowledge was one of three passions which have ruled his life: "The longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind" (Russell, 1967, *Prologue*). In his essay "Am I an Atheist or an Agnostic?" he went on to emphasize: "Be scrupulously truthful, even if the truth is inconvenient" (Russell, 1951, p. 164). and intellectual scrupulousness were passions with Russell, i.e. irreplaceable constituents of serious philosophical and education research (Madigan, 1993). The powerful feeling of the tragic aspect of commonplace existence and irrelevance to the current human interests appeals to Russell as an essential part of the psychology of a serious philosopher (Madigan, 1993). This demand on the pursuit of truth as an end, and not as a means to other practical advantages, characterizes Russell approach as opposed to more instrumentalist educational philosophies (Madigan, 1993).

Educational philosophies of different cultural epistemes show works of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, John Dewey, Miguel de Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset, Paul Natorp, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, and Bertrand Russell (Author, 2025). All these philosophers presented

their own views on the balance between structure and freedom, between the development of an individual and his socialization, between cognitive and moral development (Author, 2025). The originality of Russell is in his synthesis of scientific rationalism and humanistic values, his opposition to the two extremes, and his vision of education as a key to the prosperity of individual and democratic society (Saeed and Sabir, 2025).

It was during the 19th and early 20th centuries that some of the most important schools, including empiricism and utilitarianism, were developed, which were later followed by pragmatism and the analytic school, which were introduced by William James, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others, who proposed the practical application of knowledge and words to enhance understanding (Zega, 2023). Russell, in his turn, developed his unique attitude to educational philosophy because it is in this intellectual environment (Russell, 2023).

### **3. Learning Theory: Foundations and Principles of Behaviorists**

#### **3.1 The Genesis and the Foundations of Behaviorism**

The history of modern behaviorism can be traced to the contributions of Pavlov, Watson, and Skinner, who held the belief that, like animals, people are creatures whose behavior can be modeled through repetitive conditioning whereby acts of a type are reinforced and those that are punishable are the ones that are discouraged (Juhary, 2006). Such an antecedent commitment placed behaviorism in a radically empirical stance concerning the understanding of learning, one that simply avoided any reference to the internal state of the mind in favor of the observable stimulus-response relationships (Morris, 2013).

The behaviorist movement in psychology was a response to the introspectionist psychology that used subjective reports of mental experiences (Morris, 2013). The 1913 manifesto of John B. Watson titled *Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It* described psychology as a purely objective experimental branch of natural science that concerned prediction and control of behavior as opposed to studying consciousness (Morris, 2013). This focus on observable facts and objectivity made behaviorism in line with the scientific methodology that ruled other natural sciences (Morris, 2013). But since it is shown in the examination of machine learning systems by Ratti (2026) that assertions of pure objectivity often assume underlying theoretical commitments and value judgments, the same can be termed as the supposed objectivity of behaviorist psychology (Morris, 2013).

The behaviorist model of learning is focused on the assumption that learning leads to the observable behavioral change under the influence of external factors (Nuha & Fithriyah, 2025). Although recent schools of thought concentrate on the mental activities, behaviorism continues to be relevant in the organization of instructional strategies, particularly when quantifiable results are of more importance (Nuha and Fithriyah, 2025). The behaviorist perspective is still based on the premise that complex behaviors can be explained based on a systematic examination of stimulus-response relations and environmental contingencies (Nuha & Fithriyah, 2025).

The agreement between different authors is evident, as research that establishes new knowledge and develops theory to progress set conceptual ideas is the discovery (Nkhata et al., 2019). Research in the field of education is generally accepted to be a crucial part of knowledge formation, as it proves the hypothesis and reveals the connection with factors of education such as students studying, pedagogical practices, and classroom interactions (Nkhata et al., 2019). This scientific concept of education has benefited a lot on the contributions of behaviorist research (Juhary, 2006).

### **3.2 Classical Conditioning: Pavlov's Contributions**

Ivan Pavlov is a significant personality in the field of experimental psychology and helped in developing the theory of conditioned reflexes as the foundation to the understanding of the learning process based on the stimulus-response relationship (Ratnawati, 2026). The renowned experiments carried out by Pavlov with his dogs salivating proved that the neutral stimuli could be transformed to the unconditioned stimulus to give a conditioned response in case of continuous association (Ratnawati, 2026).

The classic conditioning theory proposed by Pavlov demonstrates the ability of a neutral stimulus to develop into a specific reaction (Zanetty et al., 2023). The fundamental paradigm includes the introduction of a neutral stimulus (bell) right before an unconditioned stimulus (food) that triggers an unconditioned response (salivation) on its own (Zanetty et al., 2023). By repeated pairing, the neutral stimulus turns into a conditioned stimulus, which can produce the conditioned response (salivation to the bell alone) (Zanetty et al., 2023).

The applicability of the Classical Conditioning theory by Ivan Pavlov shows the applicability of the principles of stimulus-response in behavioral psychology to influence the student response and habit formation (Mubarak et al., 2025). The theory proposed by Pavlov unveiled such important concepts as acquisition (learning phase), extinction (weakening of conditioned response when unconditioned stimulus is absent), generalization (reaction to similar stimuli), and discrimination (differences between different stimuli) (Mubarak et al., 2025). These theories present structures to comprehending the manner in which acquired associations develop, consolidate, loosen, and generalize in other circumstances (Mubarak et al., 2025).

In the teaching practice, the classical conditioning assists in understanding the emotional reaction to the learning conditions (Mubarak et al., 2025). Repeated failure and criticism in mathematics classes can also cause anxiety responses (conditioned response) in mathematics (conditioned stimulus) in students who can succeed in certain tasks that are even well beyond their abilities (Mubarak et al., 2025). When teachers learn about these processes of classical conditioning, they can design positive learning sessions that influence the establishment of positive emotional correlations instead of negative ones (Mubarak et al., 2025).

Recent studies of the interaction of emotions and motivation and willingness to communicate in language learning prove that the concept of learning the conditioned emotional responses has not lost its topical significance (Pavelescu, 2025). The interaction of the affective nature of anxiety

and enjoyment, motivation, and the desire to communicate is quite different in relation to different learners and situations (Pavelescu, 2025).

### **3.3 Thorndike's Connectionism and the Law of Effect**

The work by Edward L. Thorndike was a border between the initial research in the field of psychology and further advances in behaviourism (Ikhlas et al., 2025). The experiments conducted by Thorndike with cats through his puzzle box indicated that learning is associated with the formation of associations (bonds) between situations and responses (Ikhlas et al., 2025). The cats that had been introduced in puzzle boxes learned about escape behavior over a period of time by trial and error as time progressed, with successful responses being increasingly common (Ikhlas et al., 2025).

In this work, I would like to focus on the use of behaviorist learning theories in the works of Edward L. Thorndike, Ivan Pavlov, and B.F. Skinner (Ikhlas et al., 2025). The law of effect suggested by Thorndike states that the strengthening of the responses followed by the gratifying consequences and the weakening of the responses followed by the irritating consequences take place (Ikhlas et al., 2025). This theory paved the way to the future operant conditioning theory since it placed considerable emphasis on consequences in behavior development (Ikhlas et al., 2025).

Thorndike came up with another concept, which became known as the law of exercise in his book *Animal Intelligence: Experimental Studies* (Thorndike, 1911), claiming that the stimulus-response relationships are reinforced with repetition and frequency (Ikhlas et al., 2025). This legislation justified the use of drill and practice learning in learning, especially the skills that involve building fundamental skills needed automatically (Ikhlas et al., 2025). Thorndike however amended this law later on as he appreciated that simple repetition in the absence of feedback or reinforcement is ineffective as a learning process (Ikhlas et al., 2025).

The few-day shift to online learning synchronization in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the relevance of systematic principles of instructional design (Khalil et al., 2020). Online classes held in synchrony became acceptable when they had a clear structure, instant feedback, and sequencing, which are premises that can be found in the focus of Thorndike on practice with reinforcement (Khalil et al., 2020).

### **3.4 Operant Conditioning: Skinner's System Framework**

B.F. Skinner elaborated and generalized the principles of behaviorism (Skinner, 1968, p.15) based on his extensive theory of operant conditioning (Adhilah et al., 2025). The learning principles proposed by Skinner focus on reinforcement and shaping of behavior, which provide ways of enhancing learning performance and behavior in education (Adhilah et al., 2025). In contrast to the classical conditioning proposed by Pavlov, which considers the behavior of the respondents that occurs as a result of the stimuli, operant conditioning proposed by Skinner analyzes operant behaviors emitted by organisms and transformed by consequences (Adhilah et al., 2025).

Skinner identified various categories of consequences affecting the behavior (Adhilah et al., 2025):

*Positive Reinforcement.* The introduction of a pleasant stimulus after behavior leads to higher probability of repeated behavior (praise after giving a correct answer) (Adhilah et al., 2025)

*Negative reinforcement.* Withdrawal of unwanted stimulus after behavior, which enhances behavior (cancel quiz when students show to have mastered it) (Adhilah et al., 2025)

*Positive Punishment.* Introducing an unpleasant stimulus to the behavior, reducing the chances of repetition (disruption and reprimand) (Adhilah et al., 2025)

*Negative Punishment.* The elimination of desirable stimulation after an action, reduced the probability of that action happening again (loss of rights due to a violation of rules) (Adhilah et al., 2025)

Like the previous behaviorists, Skinner brings the concepts to human learning by proposing that learners learn by drill and practice, where a repetition of the process continually is required until the learner is well trained (Juhary, 2006). Skinner put a high value on positive reinforcement since the majority of the methods are effective and ethically correct behavior modification, citing that punishment has undesirable side effects such as anxiety, avoidance, and aggression (Adhilah et al., 2025).

By making use of the AI-established learning systems, it is possible to apply Skinnerian principles by creating low-anxiety and gamified environments that allow real-time feedback and systematic reinforcement (Imamah & Suryani, 2025). The studies show that AI systems based on theoretical frameworks can be successfully applied as an aid to the process of acquiring L2 in order to create a rich, interactive, and emotionally supportive environment grounded on the principles of behaviorism (Imamah & Suryani, 2025).

## **4. Russell versus Behaviorism: Points of Intersection and Heated Exchange**

### **4.1 Crossroads of Convergence: Form, Routine and Ordered Processing**

Although the philosophical differences between Russell and his educational philosophy and the theory of behaviorist learning seem poignant, there are several convergences between the two theories. The two styles acknowledge the need of order and planned direction in education. In the same way as the behaviorists point out the relevance of structured learning environments and repetitive patterns of reinforcements, Russell recognised that children need the right structures, limits and consistent expectations to grow their abilities (Nuha & Fithriyah, 2025).

Both Russell and behaviorists acknowledge the key role of the formation of habits in education. Russell realized that being alive and intelligent involves learning good habits, which consist of habits of thinking, habits of emotional control, habits of morality and habits of intellectual inquiry (Saeed and Sabir, 2025). The behaviorist learning theory involves the application of the theory of reinforcement, motivation, stimulus, and practice (Damayanti et al., 2023). On the same note, behaviorists theory assumes that learning essentially entails the development of habitual stimulus-response models through repetitive training with suitable reinforcement (Juhary, 2006).

Both methods also appreciate the use of systematic, scientific methods of education (Saeed and Sabir, 2025). Russell believed in scientific method and as such he valued empirical studies on learning, although he opposed limited interpretations (Madigan, 1993). Behaviorists based their theories on the use of experimental studies, trying to make education more scientific and evidence-based (Ikhlas et al., 2025). They both opposed the conventional authoritarian education, which relies upon unquestioning custom and religious dogma, and instead aimed to found educational practice or practice on systematic investigation (Madigan, 1993).

In addition, they both understand that successful education needs definitions of expectations, consistency in responding to behavior, and proper organization. The denial of pure permissiveness by Russell is in line with behaviorist focus on environmental organization and systematic consequences (Nuha & Fithriyah, 2025). Although they have different conceptualizations of structure, Russell focusing on internalized rational principles (Hitchcock, 2002) and behaviorists focus on outside contingencies (Adhilah et al., 2025), they both believe that children require guidance but should not be given total freedom.

The evidence of converging around structure in modern studies of when Problem-Based Learning (PBL) should be most effective shows similar convergences (Strbel and Barneveld, 2009). Systematic structure together with active learning has been demonstrated by meta-analyses comparing PBL and conventional classrooms to yield better results in long-term retention and skill building (Strbel and Barneveld, 2009).

#### **4.2 Basic Tensions: Control, Mental States, and Educational Aims**

Nonetheless, in spite of these overlaps, underlying conflicts divide the philosophy of Russell and behaviorist methods. The most drastic distinction revolves around the end-level objectives of education (Saeed and Sabir, 2025). Although behaviorism does not take into account the internal thought and emotional processes, it offers effective resources to the educator that wants to promote discipline and performance (Nuha and Fithriyah, 2025). Nevertheless, according to Russell, this very emphasis on visible actions and outward control is one of the basic restrictions. The core of Russell education philosophy deals with development of internal attributes wherein he sees 4 essential elements of a good character: vitality (the joy of life), courage (independence from irrational fear), sensitiveness (affectiveness to appropriate things), and intelligence (curiosity, receptivity to knowledge) (Russell, 1926, p. 34–36). Russell believed that the purpose of education should be to result in people who can also think independently, challenge authority when necessary and make their own moral decisions (Saeed & Sabir, 2025). These abilities demand training of inner mental life rather than training of outer reactions (Hitchcock, 2002).

The conflict over control is of particular importance. Behaviorism anticipates the domination of the environment, and teachers are seen as designers of the learning environment, and they control student behavior systematically by manipulation of contingencies (Adhilah et al., 2025). Although Russell saw the necessity of an order, he insisted that discipline build a freedom of thought as opposed to compliance. It is the self-regulation and an independent decision, not responsive conditioning to external regulation. Russell specifically opposed the discipline based on fear and

stated that "Punishment is liable to increase fear, and therefore increase the motive to lie" (Russell, 1926, p. 135) and said it was damaging the children in terms of vitality and ability to develop morality independently. However, the methods of behaviorism, especially initial times, used punishment and negative reinforcement (Adhilah et al., 2025). The disagreements on the fear-based control are one of the most profound differences between the philosophy of Russell and the strong behaviorist methods.

The studies of crisis during second language learning and instruction illustrate that there are still continuous contradictions between behavioral and cognitive models of crisis (Lantolf et al., 2025). The discipline is subject to a similar crisis as that experienced by psychology practically since its beginning, as there are disputes over the preeminence of the influence of mental processes over overt behaviors (Lantolf et al., 2025).

### **4.3 The Issue of Fear and Punishment**

Another divergence by far regards the usage of punishment and fear in education. Classic behaviorism strategies tend to use punishment (positive punishment, introducing an unpleasant stimulus and negative punishment, eliminating a pleasurable stimulus) to inhibit unwanted behavior (Adhilah et al., 2025). In terms of behaviorists, punishment is a tool of behavior modification, neither good nor bad, but its suitability depends on the effectiveness in meeting behavioral goals (Adhilah et al., 2025). However, Russell specifically denied the use of punishment methods and stated that "Physical punishment I believe to be never right" and that "it generates cruelty and brutality" (Russell, 1926, p. 137). In addition, he cautioned that "Punishment is liable to increase fear, and therefore increase the motive to lie" (Russell, 1926, p. 135). He argued that fear-based discipline is destructive of vitality because it breeds anxiety and timidity and emotional constructability; disruptive of autonomous moral growth because it replaces fear of consequences with ethical knowledge; authoritarian, instead of democratic, relationships of power; short-term benefits in behavior but long-term psychological damage instead of long-term behavior change. Both Russell and Dewey interrogated the necessity to have authority in the classroom beyond the subject matter discipline itself (Madigan, 1993). This dismissal of unreasonable power and fear-induced subjugation indicates Russell's further dedication to education as liberation, but not domination (Saeed & Sabir, 2025). Although consequences are viewed as behavior management techniques by behaviorism (Adhilah et al., 2025), Russell regarded punitive methods as endemic and may result in compliance rather than actual development.

Nevertheless, this gap may be bridged by the current use of behaviorist principles, in which positive reinforcement tends to be more stressed than punishment (Nuha and Fithriyah, 2025). Skinner himself supported the claim that positive reinforcement is more effective and ethically correct compared to punishment (Adhilah et al., 2025). Classroom managerial practices based on behaviorist principles are usually focused on positive reinforcement of desirable behaviors but not the negative ones (Febrianti, 2025). The literature on anxiety in classrooms with the use of foreign languages proves the destructive impact of fear-based strategies (Lin, 2024). The fear in the language classrooms is especially directly linked with the expressive skills, and the friendly and

supportive classroom environments are proving to be essential in reducing the anxiety (Lin, 2024). These results are in accordance with Russell criticizing the impact of fear-based discipline which he argues turns pupils into "timid tyrants" and causes them to acquire a "horror of knowledge" (Russell, 1997, p. 4).

#### **4.4 Autonomy vs Control: The General Philosophical dilemma**

The most basic conflict is the conflict between autonomy and control (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The assumption of behaviorism is that all behavior must be governed by contingencies of the environment; whether to control behavior is irrelevant, but how to organize contingencies in the most effective manner (Adhilah et al., 2025). Education entails the intentional nature of developing settings that influence desirable behaviors (Nuha & Fithriyah, 2025). The teachers are engineers of behavior that create contingencies that yield target results (Adhilah et al., 2025). Russell, on the other hand, puts autonomy as the primary goal of education (Saeed and Sabir, 2025). Russell (1997) believes that education is for civilization and that "a very great degree of freedom is the best way to attain it". He states that cooperative pupils "learn twice as fast and with half the fatigue" (p. 6). Freedom encourages initiative, impartiality, kindness, self-control and zest for life, so that many interpreters see their focus of education as being around autonomy.

Discipline is not aimed at getting us to give obedient reactions to outside control but at building an internal ability to regulate ourselves, have personal judgment and be able to make autonomous decisions. Russell believes in disciplines that will help foster freedom of mind and not compliance alone. Real education does not enslave; instead of enslaving, it makes people able to think about and make personal choices (Saeed and Sabir, 2025). Such a philosophical difference accounts for various anthropological assumptions. Behaviorism considers people a kind of organism in which behavior is predetermined by both past environmental events and the present contingencies (Morris, 2013). Russell considers humans as potentially independent agents who can reason and make moral judgments and act on their own (Saeed and Sabir, 2025). This potential autonomy can be followed and cultivated in education (as in the approach of Russell) or be considered as an illusion and special attention paid to behavioral control (behaviorist approach) .

Here too, productive synthesis may be possible. Autonomy is not an innate process; children are not born with self-regulation and independent judgment capabilities but rather, these capabilities have to be acquired through learning (Madigan, 1993). Organized order and properly established habits can bring a basis on which true independence can grow [242b]. The behaviorist methods may also act in the interests of Russell, provided they are used to create fundamental skills and self-control abilities that will facilitate further independent operations.

#### **4.5 Complementary Insights: In the Direction of Integration**

In spite of underlying tensions, the frameworks provide supplementary knowledge. Russell philosophy is the normative vision of what education is supposed to achieve eventually, whereas behaviorism is a method to reach a certain goal in a practical way. Russell puts forth the ends (autonomous, critical, ethical persons) (Saeed & Sabir, 2025); the means are behaviorism

(systematic reinforcement, ordered practice) and could be applied to these ends (Nuha and Fithriyah, 2025).

The literature review recognizes great convergences, particularly in the need for structure, routine and the shaping of habit, and profound tensions in the condition of fear-based control, the position of internal mental states, and eventual goals of education. This connotation implies that instead of considering the frameworks being entirely contrary, teachers could selectively adhere to behaviorist approaches but still retain Russellian ends of education. The point is: can behaviorist approaches work to the ends of Russell? Is it possible to use systematic reinforcement, structured practice and habit formation in ways that in the long run they support and not destroy critical thinking, moral autonomy and intellectual freedom? Modern studies of positive emotions and intrinsic motivation in language learning indicate that systematic order may have a positive effect on autonomous motivation when applied with the help of co-created learning opportunities that consider student agency (Printer, 2023). Such experiences have an independent character, which leads to a sense of ability and to the building of strong relationships in learning communities (Printer, 2023).

Such synthesis, disciplined freedom, is aware that order and freedom should not be antithetical, but may indeed be mutually reunifying when behaviorist methods are tactfully used to serve humanistic educational aims. Since modern science of scientific methodology starts to realize (Ratti, 2026) the necessity to preserve human control and judgment of the epistemic facet when using systematized, algorithmic methods, the same concept applies to the educational practice (Hitchcock, 2002). Further below, it is discussed how this model can be applied to modern classroom settings, especially to language education where the conflict between systematic skill acquisition and communicative autonomy is still especially acute (Huijun, Perez, 2025).

## **5. Conclusion**

The paper has explored this complicated association between the educational philosophy of Bertrand Russell, which stresses autonomy, critical thinking and moral development and behaviorist learning theories, which focus on systematic reinforcement, formation of habits, and observable behavior alteration. There are deep philosophical contradictions, especially between control and freedom, the states of mind and the behaviorally observable phenomena, and the ultimate goals of education, but there are also strong overlaps in structure, habits, and systematic strategies to propose opportunities for constructive synthesis. The suggested model of disciplined freedom illustrates that learning methods of behaviorism can be used to maintain Russellian educational goals when tactfully applied to instill basic competencies and incrementally develop learner autonomy. This synthesis is especially applicable to modern language teaching, where educators need to consider the combination of systematic development of skills and communicative competence and inner drive (Huijun & Perez, 2025). Empirical studies on the realizations of disciplined freedom in various educational settings should be done in the future,

exploring the ways systematic structure and progressive autonomy can be sequenced in the best way to meet humanistic educational objectives.

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