Different Learning Styles and Second Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on three variables of second language learners' learning styles, field independence and dependence, reflectivity and impulsivity, ambiguity tolerance and intolerance. They are among the significant factors that make the difference in success of second language acquisition. Language teachers must diversify language instruction as much as possible based upon the variety of learning styles represented among students so as to aid students to achieve proficiency in second language acquisition.

Keywords: *learning styles, second language acquisition, second language teaching*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the major conundrums in the second language acquisition(SLA) field is the question of differential success[1]. In past decades linguists have given a great deal of attention to trying to identify the factors that make the difference and to developing some kind of profile of what the "good language learner" is like. The variables that contribute to explain differential success among second language(SL) learners include language aptitude, social-psychological factors, personality, cognitive style, hemisphere specialization, learning strategies, and a few others.

Cognitive style is the different ways used by different individuals when learning things and the particular attaches they make on problems. When cognitive style specifically related to an educational context, where affective and physiological factors are intermingled, they are usually more generally referred to as learning styles. Keefe defines learning styles as "cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment."

Different learning styles make different effect on language learning, that is learners with different learning styles tend to take different manners in the process of learning language, and this will lead to different results finally. It is significant to study the differences of various learning styles. Such studies are helpful for language teachers to take appropriate teaching approaches according to different learners whose learning styles may quite different sometimes.

2. LEARNING STYLES

During recent decades, linguists have done lots of researches on the relationship between learning styles and second language learning and have made considerable fruits. However, different researchers make different classification of learning styles due to different research approaches and particular emphases. Generally speaking, the variables that contribute to individual differences are usually divided into three broad categories, which are cognitive, affective and personality variables. Cognitive relates to the mental makeup of the person. Affective relates to motivation and attitudes. Personality relates to characters like extroversion and introversion. This essay will discuss three groups of learning styles to which most attention has been paid by researchers.

2.1. Field Independence and Dependence

Field independence is the ability to perceive a particular, relevant item or factor in a "field" of distracting items. Field dependence is, conversely, the tendency to be dependent on the total field so that the parts embedded within the field are not easily perceived, though that total field is perceived more clearly as an unified whole.

Studies show that field independence is closely related to classroom learning that involves analysis, attention to details, and mastering of exercises, drills, and other focused activities. On the other hand, field-dependent persons will, by virtue of their empathy, social outreach, and perception of other people, be successful in learning the communicative aspects of a second language.

Naiman et al.(1978) gave a field independence test and found positive correlations between field independence and language-learning success[1]. H.D. Brown suggests that field independence may be important to classroom learning and to performance on paper-and-pencil tests; however, when it comes to untutored SLA, field dependence may be more beneficial[1]. Brown claims that field independence and dependence are not in complementary distribution within an individual. Some persons might be both highly field-dependent and highly field-independent as contests vary. In SL learning, it may be incorrect to assume that learners should be either field-independent or field-dependent. It is more likely that persons have general inclinations, but given certain contexts, can exercise a sufficient degree of an appropriate style. The burden on the learners is to invoke the appropriate style for the context. The burn on the teacher is to understand the preferred styles of each learner and to guide learning process with flexibility.

2.2. Reflectivity and Impulsivity

Impulsivity implies an approach in which a person makes a number of gambles on the basis of "hunches", with possible several successive gambles before a solution is achieved. Reflective thinkers tend to weigh all the considerations in a problem, work out all the loopholes, then, after extensive reflection, carefully venture a solution. Doron (1973) found that reflective students are slower but more accurate than impulsive students in reading. It may be that reflective students are typically quiet, retiring sort of person, introspective, fond of books rather than people. But when it comes to some other aspects of language learning, impulsive learners may demonstrate advantages. They engage in conversation a lot, exposing themselves to input and producing output, which are important for language learning. In another study inductive reasoning was found to be more effective with reflective persons (Kagan, Pearson and Welch 1966), suggesting that generally reflective persons could benefit more from inductive learning situation. Impulsive learners may go through a number of rapid transitions of semigrammatical stages of interlanguage. Although reflective persons tend to remain longer at a particular stage, they will make larger leaps from stage to stage.

2.3. Ambiguity Tolerance and Intolerance

The degrees to which people are cognitively willing to tolerate ideas and propositions that run counter to their belief system are quite different. Some people are "open-minded" in accepting views and facts that contradict their own ones. Others are more "closed-minded", tend to reject items that are contradictory or slightly incongruent with their existing system. Therefore, there comes ambiguity tolerance and intolerance.

Advantages and disadvantages are present in each style. The person who is tolerant of ambiguity is free to entertain a number of innovative and creative possibilities and not be cognitively or affectively disturbed by ambiguity and uncertainty. In second language learning, many words and rules may be "contradictory" to the learners' native language, ambiguity tolerance is very necessary in the case of language learning. On the other hand excess tolerance may hamper a person efficiently subsuming necessary facts into their cognitive organizational structure. While, intolerance of ambiguity can guard against the wishy-washiness and close of avenues of hopeless of possibilities. But it can close the mind too soon sometimes, resulting in a rigid mind that is too narrow to create. Study found that learners with a high tolerance for ambiguity were slightly more successful on listening comprehension task but not on their imitation task.

3. INSIGHT FOR SL TEACHING

Learning style is a significant factor which must be considered in teaching process. In order to be successful, materials and methodologies should be able to accommodate different dimensions of personality and cognitive style.

3.1. Teachers should do with learners accordingly, on the basis of their different learning styles

Generally, two teaching approaches can be adopted. The first one is letting the learners operate naturally; what the teachers do is to bring into the advantage of learners' inherent learning styles. The other approach is that, through certain methods, teachers guide the learners to make some conversion of their learning styles to the opposite direction, in order to adapt to various learning situation and tasks.

A person's learning styles have relative stability and tendency. However, teachers can use various methods to cause some conversion in students' learning styles, as to make up the disadvantages of their original ones. For example, teachers can assign field-independent learners group tasks, requiring them to talk and cooperate with others consciously, introduce them to attend English-

corners or some foreign language clubs, and encourage them to participate in English speech competition, etc.. On the other hand, teachers can give field-dependent learners some assignments that require their independence. For example, a teacher may offer them some online study materials or courses which practice concentrated self-study. Teachers may also recommend a book for field-dependent learners to read and write a reading report, which is helpful for them to develop their in deductive reasoning ability.

3.2. Balance accuracy and fluency

In traditional teaching approach, accuracy was paid too much attention that fluency had always been ignored. This leads to a result that students' ability of communication is very underdeveloped. On the other hand, some modern teaching approaches stress the fluency of language. However, teachers tend to abandon accuracy in order to achieve fluency. As a result, students' speeches are full of mistakes.

Impulsive learners usually are active in classroom. They give answers immediately, fluently, but full of mistakes. Teachers should correct these mistakes frequently. To impulsive learners, it is the accuracy that should be emphasized. Reflective learners, conversely, are toneless in classroom. They will give answers only after reflection. Their answers are highly accurate, but lack fluency. To them, teachers should try to train the fluency and "ignore" some mistakes in their answers.

3.3. Deal with relationship between native language and target language

Learners with ambiguity tolerance have strong interest to explore new knowledge, but they tend to make a mistake of overgeneralization. Teachers must correct learners immediately, otherwise, they will use some language items wrongly on the basis of inapposite rules. In contrast, learners who are intolerant with ambiguity are too closed-minded. They are easy to be hinged by native language. In this case, teachers should enlarge the input of rules and cultural information of the target language, and encourage the learners to explore boldly and get rid of the interference of native language.

It is an important task for SL teachers to introduce interesting cultural background knowledge in various foreign cultures so that students' interest in foreign cultures will be aroused. It will help learners with ambiguity intolerance to become more open-minded. Meanwhile, teachers should not forget to carry out traditional native culture. Teachers need to offer opportunities for SL learners to compare different cultures and to enhance their critical thinking ability.

3.4. Give attention to student's personhood

The diversity of learning styles decides the variety of teaching approaches. Teachers adopt proper approaches to stimulate students' motivation, adjust their study attitudes, and complement their learning styles. Teachers are eager to apply these approached to help students overcome difficulties and confusions in their SL learning. However, whatever approaches have been adopted, teachers should never forget to communicate with students sincerely and face to face. Sometimes a warm-hearted talk with a student is more effective than any skillful or creative teaching approaches. Because every one has self-esteem, no successful cognitive or affective activity can be carried out without some degree of self-esteem. Talking with a student is a good way to show that a teacher really cares for him or her, thus the student will have a feeling of being respected as a worthy person, and is likely to establish confidence and interest in the course. A teacher really can have a positive and influential effect on both the linguistic performance and the emotional well-being of the students. Perhaps those "good" teachers succeeded because they gave optimal attention to linguistic goals as well as to the personhood of their students.

4. CONCLUSION

This essay treats variables of some learning styles in isolation. But we must remember that within any real live learners many more than one variables is present. These variables exist in different strength. Sometimes one will be so strong as to domain all the others. Sometimes they will be of equal strength and will "cancel each other out"[2].

Language teachers must diversify language instruction as much as possible based upon the variety of learning styles represented among one's students. On the other hand, learners should be exposed to the concept of learning styles and indeed should be given the opportunity to diagnose their own preferences, and yet also should be encouraged to diversify those preferences. Learning styles are not immutable and individuals can change in response to unique contextual demands[1]. Exposing students to different teaching styles may allow students to develop a versatility of learning styles which will aid them to achieve proficiency in SLA.

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