

A Consideration of Learners' Individual Differences in Classroom Language Teaching

Qin Leyu *

Abstract: Learners' individual differences pose a great challenge to language teachers and influence the way in which a foreign language is taught or learned. All the learners' differences may be directly or indirectly related to their success in foreign language learning. Now a lot of research work has been devoted to elucidating what kinds of learners' characteristics appear to be related to success in learning a foreign language and in what way they are related. We are therefore invited to consider the role of our students' personalities, motivation and cognitive styles in the classroom language teaching.

Introduction

Learners' individual differences pose a great challenge to language teachers and potentially influence the way in which a foreign language is learned. Language teaching will not be much easier, for all students are different. The number of instructional decisions will be greatly increased; teaching methods will be rather complicated; lesson designs will have to be modified; teachers will have to consider alternative procedures; teacher-student interaction will not probably be more uniform.

Look back on our own students. The following students are familiar types: the students eager to answer the teacher's questions, the students panicking at an examination, the students intolerant of noises while reading, the students asking irrelevant or even rude questions, the students quick to finish their assignments, the students very sensitive to others' errors, the students keeping at a task for a long time, the students "getting into others' shoes", the students sitting at the back quietly hoping neither to bother anyone else nor be bothered themselves.

The identification and classification of the different individual factors, however, proves to be problematic. The conspicuous difficulty is that it is not possible to directly observe qualities such as emotion, motivation, or attitudes. But it is not easy for language teachers to evaluate and utilize the results of those investigations. In the

* Department of Liberal Arts

paper we propose to discuss some significant learner differences, namely personality, motivation and cognitive style, and our primary concern is with the assessment and evaluation of their advantages and disadvantages in classroom language teaching. This paper is also based on the conviction that the classroom language teaching will improve, so long as language teachers persevere in pondering students characteristics in their day-to-day teaching.

1. Understanding Different Personality

What is personality? In Psychology, Child(1977) presented a number of diverse theories, purporting to define personality development and measurement. But Eysenck (1974), who also occupies a pivotal position in this field, elaborates a most comprehensive and objective approach to the study of personality. His theory, using dichotomies, identifies two general traits extrovert / introvert and neurotic / stable. However, linguistic researchers, such as Ellis (1985), prefer to call them anything from 'social style' to 'egocentric factors'. No matter how varied the identifications have been, personality study is largely concerned with attitudes, social behavior and emotional reactions. Let us look at some notable factors:

1) Extroversion and Introversion

Extroversion, and its counterpart, introversion, are potentially important factors in the learning of a foreign language. There is often a hypothesis that an extrovert learns more quickly and is more successful than an introvert. It has been suggested that extroverts find it easier to contact native speakers and therefore obtain more input. Such a view is popular. We usually tend to think of an extroverted student as a gregarious, outgoing person, and an introverted student, conversely, as a quiet and reserved person. This is most noticeable in the language classroom where the teacher likes talkative, outgoing students who participate freely in class discussions. On the other hand, introverts are often thought of as dull and slow.

Unfortunately, this prejudice has had a considerable influence on language teaching. In the classroom situation, where oral participation is highly valued, it is easy to view active participants with favor, and assume that their extroversion enlivens the atmosphere of the classroom teaching. But in my view, extroversion is important only in the general oral development of communicative competence, which requires face-to-face interaction. But introverts may also succeed, particularly in such skills as reading, writing and listening comprehension.

In view of extroversion and introversion, teachers' judgement criteria and attitudes must be taken into consideration. There is the case that some teachers tend to regard extroverts as a nuisance and attempt to keep them quiet. This obviously has something to do with the teachers' own attitudes towards the cultural norms and social values. So far, researches have not yet made it clear how effective are the methods which evoke extroversion and introversion. It needs to be judged fairly in our teaching practice. I would like to propose that we language teachers should consciously encourage a student to be extroverted, while at the same time being aware of the preferences between extroversion and introversion, which may vary from student to student, from moment to moment.

2) Self-esteem and Inhibition

Besides extroversion and introversion, some other specific traits are included under the 'personality factors'. These are self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking and anxiety. These personality traits are intricately interlocked with one another, and all together, play important roles in language learning. Language teachers ought to be aware of their effects. We will look briefly at the factors of self-esteem and inhibition, which may escape the teacher's attention.

Many researchers claim that no successful learning activity can be carried out without some self-esteem, self-confidence and knowledge of the ego. Coopersmith (1967) defines self-esteem as 'a personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that the individual holds towards himself'. Brown (1987) further describes this interpretation in three levels. One could argue that doing well in the language class is likely to enhance students' esteem. On the other hand it can also be argued that students who develop positive self-esteem feel better about themselves and their ability, and as a result they do better in language learning.

Anyway, students' self-esteem can be an important aspect in understanding how they deal with learning tasks. They believe they cannot perform well in a certain activity, so they avoid it. Because they avoid it, they fail to get practice in the activity and do not perform well when they are asked to respond in class. In the language teaching process, the teacher plays an important role in influencing the learners' self-esteem. The teacher's negative attitude toward a student may give rise to a loss of self-esteem and thence to poor performance. On the other hand, if the student with low self-esteem is positively encouraged and highly motivated by means of accomplishing something or achieving a potential success in language learning, he or she will eventually build self-confidence, and be more likely to feel motivated to continue to try and work hard to develop their language proficiency. In turn, their improvement in

language proficiency will be conducive to raising their self-esteem. Then language teachers ought to try to establish the most positive learning environment and design learning objectives according to students abilities. Some teachers succeed because they give due attention to both linguistic goals and the individuality of their students.

Closely related to and in some cases subsumed under self-esteem is inhibition. Inhibition is also a perplexing problem in language teaching. There is a hypothesis that inhibitions, the defenses which the student places between himself and others, can prevent him from communicating in a foreign language. Mistakes, for instance, may pose both internal and external threats, which inhibit the student from language learning. As a matter of fact, anyone who learns a foreign language is acutely aware of the possibility of making mistakes. If we never venture to speak until we are absolutely certain of its correctness, we will never communicate. What language teachers ought to do is to alert their students to the inevitability, or even value, of making mistakes. Knowing that they can learn through making mistakes, students may remove their inhibitions, and get more language exposure.

As we have already seen, personality factors contribute in a way to the success of language learning. Unfortunately, In the field of English teaching in China, little emphasis has been laid on the study of personality factors, and many English teachers totally ignore their effects. It would be emphatically important that understanding the differences of students' personality and taking them into consideration in the classroom procedures can definitely improve students' learning and the teachers' teaching.

2. Boosting Motivation

Motivation is the most frequently used term for explaining success or failure in virtually any complex task. It is easy to claim that a motivated learner will do better in language learning. This is of course no groundless, for countless studies and experiments have shown that motivation is a key to success in language learning. But what does it mean to say that someone is motivated? How do you create, boost, and maintain motivation?

The question of motivation is not likely to arise in a natural setting. A planned situation such as the classroom, however, presents very different problem. An element of choice is involved in attending class, listening to the teacher, participating in activities and in doing assignments. The amount of exposure which one receives and the amount of attention and effort which one may devote to learning can obviously be influenced by one's motivation. Disliking a teacher, for example, could adversely affect

language learning unless it is balanced by enough motivation.

A student's motivation for learning a foreign language can be diverse: (a) passing an examination ,(b)its use in one's job ,on holiday or on a long visit abroad,(c)compulsory learning as required by the education system,(d) the desire to know more about the culture and values of the foreign language, and to meet with the native speakers,(e) the hope to pursue graduate studies abroad and so on .A distinction is usually drawn between the two different types of motivation instrumental ,as represented by the first three, and integrative ,as represented by the last two.

When we talk about reasons for learning ,we should not neglect their close relation to attitudes. An integrative learner is likely to hold very sympathetic attitudes towards the culture of the foreign language and its speakers. He may prepare to take over some of its values. He will probably see great value in being able to speak the language and have access to a different culture. At the other end of the scale will be the learners whose attitudes are highly ethnocentric. He will probably show hostility towards the people who speak the foreign language and towards their values. Thus it is considered that integratively motivated learners are usually the most successful. However, some researchers claim that integrative motivation is not absolutely essential for successful foreign language learning.

On the whole, motivation is a very complicated phenomenon, being affected by many factors. Different researchers have different ways to examine them. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that motivation either instrumental or integrative, is a crucial force which determines success or failure in English language teaching. The following items might be proposed to account for the motivation in Chinese ELT:

- a) The student takes no interest in learning English language .
- b) He thinks that he has no aptitude for English ,so learning English is difficult. He has no confidence .
- c) He thinks that English has little to do with his future career; he is even hostile to the culture of English -speaking world.
- d) The methodology employed by the teacher is not as successful as planned; the physical conditions for language learning are extremely poor.

It is the teacher who ought to take it upon himself to motivate his students who lack motivation. If the students are highly motivated to learn a foreign language, they need to be shown that hard work will lead to success. As to how to boost students' motivation, knowing them about their personality ,their attitudes ,their interest, their emotion ,their learning strategies and so on is of the first importance.

Furthermore ,language teachers are bound to know how to increase their students'

confidence coping with their learning tasks. A language teacher should have such qualities as: a good relationship with students, good knowledge of language learning and teaching theories, mastery of a range of strategies and techniques, and clear lesson aims and objectives. Teachers' qualities play a crucial part in boosting and enhancing students' motivation. Though we cannot say for certain whether motivation produces successful learning, or vice versa, 'good' language teachers always work uniquely and successfully.

3. Utilizing Favorable Cognitive Styles

Ellis(1985)states: 'Cognitive style is a term used to refer to the manner in which people perceive, conceptualize, organize, and recall information. Each person is considered to have a more or less consistent mode of cognitive functioning.' In the arduous task of learning a foreign language, a study of cognitive style brings very important variables to the fore. Cognitive styles can be narrowed down to two types worthy of attention.

1) Field Independence and Field dependence

In general psychological term, the field may be perceptual or it may be abstract in referring to a set of thoughts, ideas, or feelings. Brown(1987) states that the field-independent type is the ability to find "the hidden monkeys" in the tree the ability to perceive a particular, relevant item or factor in a field of distracting items, which in contrast, field dependence is the tendency to be dependent on the total field such that the parts embedded within the field are not easily perceived, though that total field is perceived more clearly as a unified whole.

Studies have shown that there are positive and negative characteristics to both field independence and field dependence. A field -independence style enables people to distinguish parts from a whole, to concentrate on something like reading a book in a noisy place. On the other hand, too much field dependence can force you to see only the parts and fail to see their relationship to a whole, "You can't see the forest for the trees", as the saying goes. In terms of language learning, many researchers have concluded that field independence is closely related to classroom learning that involves analysis, attention to details, mastery of exercises and drills, and other focal activities. It is thus assumed that field independence will lead to greater success in classroom learning, while field dependence is more favorable in the 'natural' language learning (face-to face communication), for field-dependence individuals are considered to be socially oriented. So they are apt to converse and communicate in a second

language acquisition environment.

In practical English teaching, the following characteristics have been noticeable: field-dependent students are more positively influenced by their teachers; they perform better on structured tasks than unstructured; they are distracted by unclear cues; and they are usually more empathic and perceptive of the feelings and thoughts of others. In contrast, field-independent students do better without teacher interference; they learn better with intrinsic motivation; they are good at finding patterns, organizing data to make generalizations and learning rules. It is possible to say that these characteristics are not totally related to the style of field independence-dependence, but it is necessary for us teachers to be conscious of these cognitive and affective factors in language teaching. What it would be claimed is that individual students can vary their utilization of field independence or field dependence, depending upon the context of learning. If a task requires field independence, individuals may invoke their field-independent style; if it requires field dependence, they may invoke a field-dependent style. The teacher's task is to understand the preferred style of each student and to encourage the appropriate style for the context.

2) Reflectivity and impulsiveness

Most teachers may have noticed that some students think long about a question or a problem before they respond, where other students respond almost immediately. Psychological studies have been conducted to determine the degree to which a person tends to make either a quick, gambling guess at an answer to problem or a slower, more calculated decision.

Kagan(1964)proposes a stylistic dimension called conceptual tempo, referring to the speed with which person makes a respond to their tasks and the number of errors they make in the response. Rapid responders ,who make a fair amount of errors ,are called impulsive. Slower responders ,who tend to make fewer errors .are called reflective. As Kagan explains, the impulsive reach decisions and report them quickly with little concern for accuracy. Others, of equal intelligence, are more concerned with accuracy and consequently take more time to reach a decision.

Reflectivity-impulsiveness has some important considerations for classroom language teaching. As far as seen, most Chinese teachers tend to judge mistakes too harshly. A reflective student may require patience from the teacher ,who must allow the students more time to struggle with responses. Overly reflective and impulsive students are both likely to have trouble in class. Brown (1987) examines some case studies and state that impulsive persons may go through a number of rapid transitions of semi-grammatical stages of interlanguage, while reflective persons tend to remain

longer at a particular stage with 'large 'leaps from stage to stage. Empirically ,it is believed that this is true. Language teachers ought to be aware that each learning style has its advantages and disadvantages. It all depends on how the teacher puts the styles into practice and utilizes favorable aspects.

Conclusion

The paper is to argue for the necessity of considering different individual factors. The language teachers' task is to understand all the differences and to take advantage of them. It is believed that the efficiency of language teaching and the proficiency of language learning in China can be greatly enhanced, so long as language teachers pay ample attention to learner differences in the teaching process.

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