How to Deal with Learner Factors in Language Teaching

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There are many variables affecting the learner's second language learning, some related to their innate ability and some relying on their learning condition. Correctly designing the curriculum in accordance with these variables is very important in accelerating the learning, while unfit pedagogy and teaching strategy hinder the progress. Consequently, making a characteristic analysis of the learners could be very helpful for a teacher before starting language teaching.

Motivation and attitude are thought as essential factors to predict the success of learning for a long time, and are factors easiest to sense by the teacher. They provide primary impetus to initiate learning and later the driving force to sustain learning process (Oroujlou and Vahedi, 2011, p. 994). Usually, one with more positive motivation achieves better in language learning, but it is controversial which of the two is the premise of the other. Technically, the higher motivation could help the learner work hard, but also the success of learning will also enhance the motivation to learn (Patsy M. Lightbown and Spada, 2001). Motivation in learning a language has a distinction between integrative and instrumental (Gardner and Lambert, 1959). The former is for the learner who likes the culture and wants to get integrated with the community of the language, while the latter is for the one that wants to utilize the language only for special purposes. Although the learners integratively motivated usually achieve more successfully in language learning (Crookes and Schmidt, 1991), it doesn't mean the teacher should require all the students to follow the same way. If the student's attitude toward the language is only for academic reading, then the integrative motivation is demanding and frustrating. The attitude of learner toward the language is by and large influenced by many elements, such as the family, religion, teacher, peers, media, occupation, etc. So, in the classroom setting, it is important for teachers to correctly identify and help lead the learners' attitudes at first. Examples could be "it is helpful for career", "you could speak like Hugh Grant", or "that could make you more integrated". Both motivation and attitude are enduring, so an important work of teachers is to keep them positive, or at least not passive, in avoidance of tiredness and hatred of learning. Everchanging activities, an attractive classroom layout, friendly atmosphere, short-term goal setting, peer cooperation, timely accomplishment, etc. could all contribute to the positive motivation and attitude.

Other factors that the teachers can sense or make a survey prior to the teaching are personalities, preferences, and beliefs of the learners. These factors, generally thought as important in language learning, could help the teachers to design suitable methods for different learners. In a long term, being extrovert is regarded as an acceleration of successful learning, and people who are assertive and brave in taking risks of mistakes usually have a good achievement. Research does support some correlation between

second language acquisition and scores of extrovert measurement, but the results still show that many successful learners are also with low scores, which makes extroversion not a necessity of language learning. Other personalities have also been studied, such as self-confidence, empathy, dominance, talkativeness, and responsiveness (Patsy M. Lightbown and Spada, 2001, p. 33). Their relationships with language acquisition are not that straightforward, as research shows. The complex results, some researchers argue, is because the most variables of personality are only related to the acquisition of conversational skills rather than of literacy skills.

Partly related to personality, learner preferences and beliefs are largely interdependent concepts. People have different learning styles, some needing recitation, some listening, some oral practising, some watching TV… These preferences of learning are shaped by their personalities, habits, prior experiences, and beliefs as well. Suitable learning style facilitates the individual effect of learning. Making an aural learner recites the vocabulary helps little in memorizing, and instructing a hyperactive person to read mutely is inefficient too. To figure out the preference of the student is quite a challenging work for the teacher, since not all the students are cautious of their own preferred learning styles. Researchers are trying to find how to predict effective learner preference through cognitive style and personality. The distinction between field-independence and field-dependence are the variable to be tested, but it is still hard to get a clear conclusion which is better in language learning, because the results are only partial. Similar results appear in the personality related tests. As mentioned, learner's belief also helps shape their preference of learning. Nearly all learners, especially the mature ones, usually have a strong sense of belief how a language should been learnt efficiently (Patsy M. Lightbown and Spada, 2001, p. 35). These beliefs include the function of communication, roles of grammar and vocabulary, usage of materials, etc. How do people get their beliefs? Usually via prior learning experience. By trying different ways of learning, learners reflect the effective out of ineffective ones and develop their own insights of learning process. However, not all the learners manage to develop their correct beliefs. Once the belief is "correct", or say, best fits the learner, it has a facilitative effect on learning. Otherwise, an "incorrect", uninformed, or negative beliefs may lead to a reliance on less effective strategies, resulting in a negative attitude towards learning experiences, classroom anxiety, and negative self-concepts (Sadeghi, K., & Abdi, 2015, p. 107). It is an important but a tough task for a teacher to help the students develop their learning beliefs. The unified scientific strategies of learning may not fit all the student, thus a mixture of methods in classroom needed.

The age of starting the second language learning is also a learning belief mainly for the parents. More and more Chinese parents decide to give their children English training as early as possible. That parents do so are influenced by the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) that the optimal language learning period is before puberty after when the learner can hardly achieve perfect language ability (Lenneberg, 1967). Although this hypothesis is proposed during the study of the first language acquisition, many people

also hold the idea as a common sense in the acquisition of second language. Whether there is critical period in SLA is still controversial. Many studies on the accents approve of the hypothesis that nearly all older learners inevitably have the non-nativelike accents. Patkowski's research shows the immigrants who start learning English before puberty homogeneously achieved nativelike success in speaking besides accents, whereas ones who learn English after puberty vary a lot, most of whom only achieve medium level compared to the native speakers (Patkowski, 1980). Johnson and Newport's finding on Chinese and Korean speakers' English morphological and syntactic judgements gets the similar results (Johnson and Newport, 1989). It seems that to fully master a second language we need to start learning as early as possible, in accordance with their studies. Nevertheless, there is also much research against CPH when the acquisition context is different. Most classroom-based studies manifest not enough correlation between early learning and final proficiency. Oppositely, mature learners, due to the developed cognition and analytical ability, usually make faster progress than children, especially in the grammatical and lexical components (Harley and Wang, 1997). In Cenoz's study, the learners start to be exposed to L2 at 11 constantly perform better than those who start at 4 or 8 (Cenoz, 2003). The age study by Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle of English speakers start learning Dutch in the Netherlands doesn't support the critical period hypothesis, either. Among their subjects, the fastest L2 acquisition happened in the group of 12-15 years while the slowest occurred in age 3. Moreover, there's no obvious difference among all ages, including adults, in the aspects of Dutch they found difficult and those they found easy, which refutes a special cognitive mechanism at a critical age. (Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978). In summary, age is a factor influencing L2 learning, but never a factor understood as a simple period deciding acquisition. Both old and young learners can achieve their own high-level proficiency, because the context of learning may also be the factor, with which we can attribute the reason of adult inferiority to "rarely get access to the same quantity and quality of language input that children receive in play settings" (Patsy M. Lightbown and Spada, 2001, p. 41).

Teachers rarely pay attention to learner's intelligence in their curriculum design, though nearly all researchers consider intelligence, as well as aptitude for language, as a very important factor in second language acquisition. Some teachers and learners even regard it as the decisive factor and blame the failure all to the lack of intelligence and aptitude. Nothing can be done to a genetically predestined factor, which probably explains why very few teachers deliberately exclude it in teaching. The main reason of such a thought is due to treating intelligence as a unitary cognition that can be reflected by IQ test. In fact, several empirical studies only manifest moderate correlation between the IQ and the language learning ability (Gardner and Lambert, 1972), and learners that are thought aptitudinal only get average score in the IQ test (Smith and Tsimpli, 1995). Though there are also studies that support the IQ predicting success of a learner, the correlation is only with reading and language usage, but not with listening comprehension and interpersonal communication (Genesee, 1976, p. 267). If we treat the intelligence as multidimensional rather than unitary, those results

can be easily understood. Gardner's multi-intelligence theory (1983) posits that individuals possess eight or more relatively autonomous intelligences, namely linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, musical intelligence, bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence, naturalistic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence (Davis *et al.*, 2011, p. 485). A person, however average one is, should be strong in a few of those, just as a solicitor probably strong of linguistic, logical-mathematical, and interpersonal intelligence, and a lyricist integrated linguistic with musical intelligence, but very rare people are strong in all. This theory has got more and more support in the classroom setting, the theory-based practices attributed to the success in attention to the school culture, readiness to use multiple intelligence, use of multiple intelligence as a tool for improved work quality, collaborations, opportunities for choice, and a role for the arts (Davis *et al.*, 2011, p. 497). Thus, the models of the language learning, if designed in accordance with individual strong aspects of the intelligence, will enhance the acquisition very much.

Starting with linguistic intelligence that is the ability of producing oral and written language, people may equal it to the aptitude for language learning. They, at least in second language acquisition, are different, for the former might only be a premise of the latter while not the guarantee. Learning to speak a language proficiently is a contextual situation that not only manipulates with exclusive linguistic knowledge, but there are other processes of communication, memorization, interaction, etc. From Skehan's perspective, an aptitude for language learning necessitates a good auditory ability and memory besides linguistic ability (Skehan, 1998). Therefore, a gifted poet or a debater who usually possesses high linguistic intelligence doesn't ensure him/herself a successful foreign language learner. In a sense, the role of linguistic intelligence may make the design of teaching model easier in a traditional way, such as grammar translation, not much else.

For the students high of logical-mathematical intelligence, problem solving tasks could be very helpful in the classroom since their strength is to calculate and summarize the principle from abstract materials. Students of musical intelligence are sensitive to apprehend the knowledge with music and rhythms, so the texts written in beats and materials taught by teacher in flowing pitches are easy to memorize by them. Outdoor learning or naturally arranged classroom for students of naturalist intelligence are a good environment where activities like categorizing with traits are a good choice of teaching method. Spatial intelligence affects the visual identification, students good at that usually better with visual materials than pure textual materials. Picture exhibition, video watching, and drawing are good ways for them. If one is kinaesthetically intelligent, the best learning process should take advantage of his or her movement, such as role play, hand puppet, and total physical response method. Interpersonal intelligent people are good at interaction, communication, and cooperation with peers, so communicative tasks and group work function best. Intrapersonal intelligent people are self-disciplined, for whom it is very important to cultivate their motivation and attitude. With both emotions shaped, teaching these students is relaxing, tasks such

as reading and reflection very helpful.

However, classroom teaching activities with single targets on intelligence are very unrealistic. As we have said, students are usually of several intelligences spontaneously, and furthermore, a class is a mixture of all kinds of students who need different types of activities. The idealistic approach of addressing each student with his/her intelligence-based activities is never applicable unless the students are separated before schooling strictly by the results of a multiple intelligences survey. In addition, such a separate way of teaching will block them from developing their weak aspects of intelligence, making it a bad approach. A proper way is to develop a balanced approach with integrated teaching activities covering all sorts of intelligences. In other words, teachers familiar with multiple intelligence can design their curriculums with integrative and everchanging tasks for the students to cope in the presence of challenge, helping students accomplish tasks and develop intelligence agreeably.

In conclusion, designing and delivering a language curriculum is never simple with many factors concerned. A comprehensive curriculum considering all the learner factors is very complicated, and even concerning all of these, the success of individual learner is still hard to predict. Other influential variables like classroom constraints and teacher cognition also play important roles in second language acquisition.