Language learning styles and strategies: An overview

Article · January 2001

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LANGUAGE LEARNING STYLES AND STRATEGIES:

AN OVERVIEW

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Introduction

Language learning styles and strategies are among the main factors that help determine how – and how well – our students learn a second or foreign language. A second language is a language studied in a setting where that language is the main vehicle of everyday communication and where abundant input exists in that language. A foreign language is a language studied in an environment where it is not the primary vehicle for daily interaction and where input in that language is restricted. Following the tradition in our field, the term "L2" is used to refer to either a second or a foreign language.

Learning styles are the general approaches – for example, global or analytic, auditory orvisual – that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject. These styles are "the overall patterns that give general direction to learning behavior" (Cornett, 1983, p. 9). "Learning style is the biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others" (Dunn & Griggs, 1988, p. 3). This paper explores the following aspects of learning style: sensory preferences, personality types, desired degree of generality, and biological differences.

Learning strategies are defined as "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques -- such as seeking out conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning" (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, p.

63). When the learner consciously chooses strategies that fit his or her learning style and the L2 task at hand, these strategies become a useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful self-regulation of learning. Learning strategies can be classified into six groups: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social.

I/Learning Styles

Learning styles are not dichotomous (black or white, present or absent). Learning styles generally operate on a continuum or on multiple, intersecting continua. For example, a person might be more extraverted than introverted, or more closure-oriented than open, or equally visual and auditory but with lesser kinesthetic and tactile involvement. Few if any people could be classified as having all or nothing in any of these categories (Ehrman, 1996).

I.1. Sensory Preferences

Sensory preferences can be broken down into four main areas: visual, auditory, kinesthetic (movement-oriented), and tactile (touch-oriented). Sensory preferences refer to the physical, perceptual learning channels with which the student is the most comfortable. Visual students like to read and obtain a great deal from visual stimulation. For them, lectures, conversations, and oral directions without any visual backup can be very confusing. In contrast, auditory students are comfortable without visual input and therefore enjoy and profit from unembellished lectures, conversations, and oral directions. They are excited by classroom interactions in role-plays and similar activities. They sometimes, however, have difficulty with written work. Kinesthetic and tactile students like lots of movement and enjoy working with tangible objects, collages, and flashcards. Sitting at a desk for very long is not for them; they prefer to have frequent breaks and move around the room.

I.2. Personality Types

Another style aspect that is important for L2 education is that of personality type, which

consists of four strands: extraverted vs. introverted; intuitive-random vs. sensing-sequential;

thinking vs. feeling; and closure-oriented/judging vs. open/perceiving.

- *Extraverted vs. Introverted*. By definition, extraverts gain their greatest energy from the external world. They want interaction with people and have many friendships, some deep and some not. In contrast, introverts derive their energy from the internal world, seeking solitude and tending to have just a few friendships, which are often very deep. Extraverts and introvertscan learn to work together with the help of the teacher. Enforcing time limits in the L2 classroom can keep extraverts' enthusiasm to a manageable level. Rotating the person in charge of leading L2 discussions gives introverts the opportunity to participate equally with extraverts.

- *Intuitive-Random vs. Sensing-Sequential.* Intuitive-random students think in abstract, futuristic, large-scale, and nonsequential ways. They like to create theories and new possibilities, often have sudden insights, and prefer to guide their own learning. In contrast, sensing-sequential learners are grounded in the here and now. They like facts rather than theories, want guidance and specific instruction from the teacher, and look for consistency. The key to teaching both intuitive-random and sensing-sequential learners is to offer variety and choice: sometimes a highly organized structure for sensing-sequential learners and at other times multiple options and enrichment activities for intuitive-random students.

- *Thinking vs. Feeling.* Thinking learners are oriented toward the stark truth, even if it hurts some people's feelings. They want to be viewed as competent and do not tend to offer praise easily – even though they might secretly desire to be praised themselves. Sometimes they seem detached. In comparison, feeling learners value other people in very personal ways. They show empathy and compassion through words, not just

behaviors, and say whatever is needed to smooth over difficult situations. Though they often wear their hearts on their sleeves, they want to be respected for personal contributions and hard work. L2 teachers can help thinking learners show greater overt compassion to their feeling classmates and can suggest that feeling learners might tone down their emotional expression while working with thinkinglearners.

-   ***Closure-oriented/Judging vs. Open/Perceiving***. Closure-oriented students want to reach judgments or completion quickly and want clarity as soon as possible. These students are serious, hardworking learners who like to be given written information and enjoy specific taskswith deadlines. In contrast, open learners want to stay available for continuously new perceptions and are therefore sometimes called "perceiving." They take L2 learning less seriously, treating it like a game to be enjoyed rather than a set of tasks to be completed. Open learners dislike deadlines; they want to have a good time and seem to soak up L2 information by osmosis rather than hard effort.

I.3. Desired Degree of Generality

This strand contrasts the learner who focuses on the main idea or big picture with the learner who concentrates on details. ***Global or holistic*** students like socially interactive, communicative events in which they can emphasize the main idea and avoid analysis of grammatical minutiae. They are comfortable even when not having all the information, and they feel free to guess from the context. ***Analytic*** students tend to concentrate on grammatical details and often avoid more free-flowing communicative activities. Because of their concern

for precision, analytic learners typically do not take the risks necessary for guessing from the context unless they are fairly sure of the accuracy of their guesses. The global student and the analytic student have much to learn from each other. A balance between generality and specificity is very useful for L2 learning.

I.4. Biological Differences

Differences in L2 learning style can also be related to biological factors, such as biorhythms, sustenance, and location. *Biorhythms* reveal the times of day when students feel good and perform their best. Some L2 learners are morning people, while others do not want to start learning until the afternoon, and still others are creatures of the evening, happily "pulling an all-nighter" when necessary. *Sustenance* refers to the need for food or drink while learning. Quite a number of L2 learners do not feel comfortable learning without a candy bar, a cup of coffee, or a soda in hand, but others are distracted from study by food and drink. *Location* involves the nature of the environment: temperature, lighting, sound, and even the firmness of the chairs. L2 students differ widely with regard to these environmental factors. The biological aspects of L2 learning style are often forgotten, but vigilant teachers can often make accommodations and compromises when needed.

<u>II∕Learning Strategies</u>

As seen earlier, L2 learning strategies are specific behaviors or thought processes that students use to enhance their own L2 learning. The word <u>strategy</u> comes from the ancient Greek word <u>strategia</u>, which means steps or actions taken for the purpose of winning a war. The warlike meaning of <u>strategia</u> has fortunately fallen away, but the control and goal-directedness remain in the modern version of the word (Oxford, 1990).

A given strategy is neither good nor bad; it is essentially neutral until the context of its use is thoroughly considered. What makes a strategy positive and helpful for a given learner? A strategy is useful if the following conditions are present: (a) the strategy relates well to the L2 task at hand, (b) the strategy fits the particular student's learning style preferences to one degree or another, and (c) the student employs the strategy effectively and links it with other relevant strategies. Strategies that fulfill these conditions "make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Learning strategies can also enable students to become more independent,autonomous, lifelong learners (Allwright, 1990; Little, 1991).

<u>Six Main Categories of L2 Learning Strategies</u>

<u>1. Cognitive strategies</u> enable the learner to manipulate the language material in direct ways, e.g., through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, outlining, reorganizing information to develop stronger schemas (knowledge structures), practicing in naturalistic settings, and practicing structures and sounds formally.

<u>2. Metacognitive strategies</u> (e.g., identifying one's own learning style preferences and needs, planning for an L2 task, gathering and organizing materials, arranging a study space and a schedule, monitoring mistakes, and evaluating task success, and evaluating the success of any type of learning strategy) are employed for managing the learning process overall.

3. Memory-related strategies help learners link one L2 item or concept with another but do not necessarily involve deep understanding. Various memory-related strategies enable learners to learn and retrieve information in an orderly string (e.g., acronyms), while other techniques create learning and retrieval via sounds (e.g., rhyming), images (e.g., a mental picture of the word itself or the meaning of the word), a combination of sounds and images (e.g., the keyword method), body movement (e.g., total physical response), mechanical means (e.g., flashcards), or location (e.g., on a page or blackboard) (see Oxford, 1990 for details and multiple examples).

4. Compensatory strategies (e.g., guessing from the context in listening and reading; using synonyms and "talking around" the missing word to aid speaking and writing; and strictly for speaking, using gestures or pause words) help the learner make up for missing knowledge.

5. Affective strategies, such as identifying one's mood and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself for good performance, and using deep breathing or positive self-talk, have been shown to be significantly related to L2 proficiency in research by Dreyer and Oxford (1996) among South African EFL learners and by Oxford and Ehrman (1995) among native English speakers learning foreign languages.

6. Social strategies (e.g., asking questions to get verification, asking for clarification of a confusing point, asking for help in doing a language task, talking with a native-speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms) help the learner work with others and understand the target culture as well as the language.

Implications for L2 Teaching

Attuning L2 Instruction and Strategy Instruction to Learners' Style Needs

The more that teachers know about their students' style preferences, the more effectively they can orient their L2 instruction, as well as the strategy teaching that can be interwoven into language instruction, matched to those style preferences. Some learners might

need instruction presented more visually, while others might require more auditory, kinesthetic, or tactile types of instruction. Without adequate knowledge about their individual students' style preferences, teachers cannot systematically provide the needed instructional variety.

<u>Remembering that No Single L2 Instructional Methodology Fits All Students</u>

Styles and strategies help determine a particular learner's ability and willingness to work within the framework of various instructional methodologies. It is foolhardy to think that a single L2 methodology could possibly fit an entire class filled with students who have a range of stylistic and strategic preferences. Instead of choosing a specific instructional methodology, L2 teachers would do better to employ a broad instructional approach, notably the best version of the communicative approach that contains a combined focus on form and fluency. Such an approach allows for deliberate, creative variety to meet the needs of all students in the class.

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