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The learning styles and strategies of effective language learners

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a comparative investigation into the learning styles and strategies of effective and ineffective language learners. Subjects for the study were one hundred and ten undergraduate university students in Hong Kong. They were categorized as 'more effective' or 'less effective' learners, on the basis of their scores on a standardized public English examination administered at the end of secondary school. Subjects completed an online questionnaire through which data were collected on their learning strategy preferences as well as patterns of language practice and use. The study revealed key differences in learning strategy preferences, learning styles and patterns of language use. Implications of the study are presented and discussed.

Keywords: Learning styles; Learning strategies; Effective language learner; Less effective language learner; Tertiary

1. Introduction and overview

Over the last twenty years, there has been growing interest in incorporating a focus on learning strategies and learning-how-to-learn into language curricula. There is a general belief that such a focus helps students become more effective learners and facilitates the activation of a learner-centered philosophy (Nunan, 1988, 1995a,b). It is also believed that learners who have developed skills in learning-how-to-learn will be better able to exploit classroom learning opportunities effectively, and will be more adequately equipped to continue with language learning outside of the classroom.

Increasingly, the focus of university level instruction is on learning-how-to-learn rather than mastery of bodies of factual information. In a recent statement Professor Tsui Lap-Che, Vice Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong, and an eminent geneticist, stated that

> Learning is not about cramming in information. It is about learning by doing. It is about looking at issues in various ways and developing capacities, especially the ability to dig below the surface to reach the truth. … That is why our goal is to teach students to learn how to learn rather than merely passing information to them. (Tsui, 2006:1)

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Research into learning styles and strategies has focused on a wide variety of questions and issues. These include the relationship between learning strategy preferences and other learner characteristics such as educational level, ethnic background and first language; the issue of whether effective learners share certain style and strategy preferences; whether strategies can be explicitly taught, and, if so, whether strategy training actually makes a difference to second language acquisition; and whether effective learners share attitudes towards, and patterns of language practice and use outside of the classroom.

2. Background

We have divided our literature review into two sections. The first focuses on learning-how-to-learn, defining the key constructs 'learning styles' and 'learning strategies', and reviewing a selection of empirical studies into the impact of instruction in learning-how-to-learn on a range of key constructs including motivation, aptitude, application of strategies, and, ultimately language proficiency itself. The second part of the review investigates the notion of the 'effective' language learner.

2.1. Learning styles and strategies

Since the mid 1970s, there has been substantial growth in the literature on learning styles (e.g., Oxford, 1993; Oxford et al., 1992; Oxford and Anderson, 1995; Reid, 1987, 1995, 1998; Wintergerst et al., 2001, 2003), on learning strategies (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Cohen, 1998; Naiman et al., 1978; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990a, 1996; Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995; Oxford and Ehrman, 1995; Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Wenden and Rubin, 1987) and on the relationship between learning styles and strategies (e.g., Carson and Longhini, 2002; Ehrman et al., 2003; Ehrman and Oxford, 1990; Ely and Pease-Alvarez, 1996; Oxford, 1990b, 2001, 2003; Rossi-Le, 1995). In these studies, learning styles and strategies have been variously described and defined. 'Styles' is the more general term, being "an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills" (Kinsella, 1995, p. 171). These styles appear to be relatively stable and will be deployed by individuals regardless of the subject being studied or the skill being mastered. There are numerous ways of characterizing styles. Christison (2003) distinguishes between cognitive style (field dependent versus field independent, analytic versus global, reflective versus impulsive); sensory style (visual versus auditory versus tactile versus kinesthetic) and personality styles (tolerance of ambiguity, right brain versus left brain dominance).

In relation to language learning styles, Willing (1994) identified four major styles: communicative, analytical, authority-oriented and concrete. These styles were derived from learner strategy preferences, which, in Willing's data, clustered in the following ways.

Communicative: These learners were defined by the following learning strategies: they like to learn by watching, listening to native speakers, talking to friends in English, watching television in English, using English out of class, learning new words by hearing them, and learning by conversation.
Analytical: These learners like studying grammar, studying English books and newspapers, studying alone, finding their own mistakes, and working on problems set by the teacher.
Authority-oriented: The learners prefer the teacher to explain everything, having their own textbook, writing everything in a notebook, studying grammar, learning by reading, and learning new words by seeing them.
Concrete: These learners tend to like games, pictures, film, video, using cassettes, talking in pairs, and practicing English outside class.

Learning strategies are the specific mental and communicative procedures that learners employ in order to learn and use language (Chamot, 2005; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Every task and exercise will be underpinned by at least one strategy, although in most classrooms learners are unaware of these strategies. One of the hypotheses being tested by learning strategy researchers is that awareness and deployment of strategies will lead to more effective language acquisition (Macaro, 2001).

Weinstein and Mayer (1986) state that the goal of learning strategies is to "affect the learner's motivational or affective state, or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes, or integrates new knowledge" (p. 315). Learning strategies enable students to take more responsibilities of their own language learning and personal