HOW TO LEARN A LANGUAGE

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A number of personality characteristics have been proposed as likely to affectsecond language learning, but it has not been easy to confirm in empirical studies. As with other research investigating the effects of individualcharacteristics on second language learning, studies of a similar personalitytrait produce different results. For example, it is often argued that an extroverted person is well suited to language learning but research does not alwayssupport this conclusion. Although some studies have found that success inlanguage learning is correlated with learners' scores on questionnaires measuring characteristics associated with extroversion such as assertiveness andadventurousness, others have found that many successful language learnerswould not get high scores on measures of extroversion. Lily Wong Fillmore(1979) observed that, in certain learning situations, the quiet observantlearner may have greater success.

Another aspect of personality that has been studied is inhibition. It hasbeen suggested that inhibition discourages risk-taking, which is necessary for progress in language learning. This is often considered to be a particularproblem for adolescents, who are more self-conscious than younger learners. In a series of studies in the 1970s, Alexander Guiora and his colleagues(1972) found support for the claim that inhibition is a negative force, atleast for second language pronunciation performance. One study involvedan analysis of the effects of small doses of alcohol, known for its ability toreduce inhibition, on pronunciation. Study participants who drank smallamounts of alcohol did better on pronunciation tests than those who did notdrink any. While results such as these are interesting, they may have moreto do with performance than with learning. We may also note, in passing,that when larger doses of alcohol were administered, pronunciation rapidlydeteriorated!

Learner anxiety—feelings of worry, nervousness, and stress that many students experience when learning a second language—has been extensivelyinvestigated. For a long time, researchers thought of anxiety as a permanent feature of a learners personality. In fact, the majority of languageanxiety scales like the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz,Horwitz, and Cope 1986) measure anxiety in this way. So, for example, students are assumed to be anxious' if they 'strongly agree' with statements suchas 'I become nervous when I have to speak in the second language classroom'.However, such questionnaire responses do not take account of the possibilitythat anxiety can be temporary and context-specific.

Other researchers investigating learner anxiety in second language classroomssee anxiety as dynamic and dependent on particular situations and circumstances. This permits distinctions to be made between for example, feelinganxious when giving an oral presentation in front of the whole class but notwhen interacting with peers in group work.

Whatever the context, anxietycan interfere with the learning process. Peter MacIntyre (1995) argues that'because nervous students are focused on both the task at hand and theirreactions to it... [they] will not learn as quickly as relaxed students' .

Of course, it has also been argued that not all anxiety is bad and that a certainamount of tension can have a positive effect and even facilitate learning.Experiencing anxiety before a test or an oral presentation can provide theright combination of motivation and focus to succeed. Because anxiety isoften considered to be a negative term, some researchers have chosen to useother terms they consider to be more neutral. In a study of young adultslearning French in an intensive summer programme, Guy Spielmann andMary Radnofsky (2001) used the term 'tension'. They found that tension, asexperienced by the learners in their study, was perceived as both beneficialand detrimental and that it was also related to the learners' social interactionsinside and outside the classroom.

A learner's willingness to communicate (WTC) has also been related toanxiety. We have all experienced occasions when we tried to avoid communicating in a second language. WTC may change with the number of peoplepresent, the topic of conversation, the formality of the circumstances, andeven with whether we feel tired or energetic at a given moment. A colleaguein Canada, who works in the area of second language learning and speaksseveral languages, recently confessed that he avoided the corner store in hisneighbourhood because the proprietor always spoke French to him. He recognized the proprietors efforts to help him improve his skills in this newlanguage, and was grateful for it, but, as he told us with embarrassment, itwas just easier to go to the store where he could use English.

Risk – Taking

A Risk-taking principle interrelated with the last two is the importance of gettinglearners to take calculated risks in attempting to use language—both productivelyand receptively. The previous two principles, if satisfied, lay the groundwork forrisk-taking. If learners recognize their own ego fragility and develop the firm beliefthat, yes, they can indeed do it, then they arc ready to take those necessary risks.They are ready to try out their newly acquired language, to use it for meaningful purposes, to ask questions, and to assert themselves.

This principle strikes at the heart of educational philosophy. Many instructional contexts around the world do not encourage risk-taking; instead theyencourage correctness, right answers, and withholding "guesses" until one is sure tobe correct. Most educational research shows the opposite to be more conducive tolong-term retention and intrinsic motivation. How can your classrooms reflect thePrinciple of Risk-Taking?

1. Create an atmosphere in the classroom that encourages students to try outlanguage, to venture a response, and not to wait for someone else to volunteerlanguage.

2.Provide reasonable challenges in your techniques—make them neither tooeasy nor too hard.

3.Help your students to understand what calculated risk-taking is, lest some feelthat they must blurt out any old response.

4.Respond to students' risky attempts with positive affirmation, praising them fortrying while at the same time warmly but firmly attending to their language.

In the last chapter we saw that one of the prominent characteristics of good language learners, according to Rubin and Thompson (1982), was the ability to make intelligent guesses. Impulsivity was also described as a style that could have positive effects on language success. And we have just seen that inhibitions, or building defenses around our egos, can be a detriment. These factors suggest that risk-taking is an important characteristic of suc¬cessful learning of a second language. Learners have to be able to gamble a bit, to be willing to try out hunches about the language and take the risk of being wrong.

Beebe (1983: 40) described some of the negative ramifications that foster fear of risk-taking both in the classroom and in natural settings.

In the classroom, these ramifications might include a bad grade in the course, a fail on the exam, a reproach from the teacher, a smirk from a classmate, punishment or embarrassment imposed by one¬self. Outside the classroom, individuals learning a second lan¬guage face other negative consequences if they make mistakes. They fear looking ridiculous; they fear the frustration coming from a listener's blank look, showing that they have failed to communicate; they fear the danger of not being able to take care of themselves; they fear the alienation of not being able to com¬municate and thereby get close to other human beings. Perhaps worst of all, they fear a loss of identity.

The classroom antidote to such fears, according to Dufeu (1994: 89-90), is to establish an adequate affective framework so that learners "feel comfortable as they take their first public steps in the strange world of a foreign language. To achieve this, one has to create a climate of acceptance that will stimulate self-confidence, and encourage participants to experi¬ment and to discover the target language, allowing themselves to take risks without feeling embarrassed."

On a continuum ranging from high to low risk-taking, we may be tempted to assume with Ely (1986) that high risk-taking will yield positive results in second language learning; however, such is not usually the case. Beebe (1983: 41) cited a study which claimed that "persons with a high motivation to achieve are ....moderate, not high, risk-takers. These indi¬viduals like to be in control and like to depend on skill. They do not take wild, frivolous risks or enter into no-win situations." Successful second lan¬guage learners appear to fit the same paradigm. A learner might be too bold in blurting out meaningless verbal garbage that no one can quite understand, while success lies in an optimum point where calculated guesses are ventured. As Rubin (1994) noted, successful language learned make willing and accurate guesses.

Risk-taking variation seems to be a factor in a number of issues in second language acquisition and pedagogy. The silent student in the classroom is one who is unwilling to appear foolish when mistakes are made. Self-esteem seems to be closely connected to a risk-taking factor: when those foolish mistakes are made, a person with high global self-esteem is not daunted by the possible consequences of being laughed at. Beebe (1983) noted that fossilization, or the relatively permanent incorporation of certain patterns of error, may be due to a lack of willingness to take risks. It is "safe" to stay within patterns that accomplish the desired function eventhough there may be some errors in those patterns. The implications for teaching are important. In a few uncommon cases, overly high risk-takers,

as they dominate the classroom with wild gambles, may need to be "tamed" a bit by theteacher. But most of the time our problem as teachers will be to encourage students to guess somewhat more willingly than the usual student is prone to do, and to value them as persons for those risks that they take.

Anxiety

Intricately intertwined with self-esteem and inhibition and risk-taking construct of anxiety plays an important affective role in second language acquisition. Even though we all know what anxiety is and we all have experienced feelings of anxiousness, anxiety is still not easy to define in a simple sentence. It is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry.

The research on anxiety suggests that, like self-esteem, anxiety can be experienced at various levels (Oxford 1999). At the deepest, or global, level, **trait** anxiety is a more permanent predisposition to be anxious. Some people are predictably and generally anxious about many things. At a more momentary, or situational level, **state** anxiety is experienced in relation to some particular event or act. As we learned in the case of self-esteem, then, it is important in a classroom for a teacher to try to determine whether a student's anxiety stems from a more global trait or whether it comes from a particular situation at the moment.

Trait anxiety, because of its global and somewhat ambiguously defined nature, has not proved to be useful in predicting second language achievement (Maclntyre & Gardner 1991c). However, recent research on *language anxiety*, as it has come to be known, focuses more specifically on the situational nature of state anxiety. Three components of foreign language anxiety have been identified (Horwitz et al. 1986; Maclntyre & Gardner 1989, 1991c) in order to break down the construct into researchable issues:

1. communication apprehension, arising from learners' inability to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas;

2. fear of negative social evaluation, arising from a learner's need to make a positive social impression on others; and

3. test anxiety, or apprehension over academic evaluation.

A decade of research (Maclntyre & Gardner 1988,1989,1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1994; Gardner & Maclntyre 1993b; Maclntyre, Noels, &Clement 1997; Horwitz & Young 1991; Young 1991; Phillips 1992; Ganschow et al. 1994; Ganschow & Sparks 1996;Vogely 1998; Oxford 1999) has now given us useful information on foreign language anxiety. Most of these studies conclude that "foreign language anxiety can be distinguished from other types of anxiety and that it can have a negative effect on the language learning process" (Maclntyre & Gardner 1991c: 112).

Yet another important insight to be applied to our understanding of anxiety lies in the distinction between **debilitative** and **facilitative** anxiety (Alpert and Haber I960, Scovel 1978), or what Oxford (1999) called "harmful" and "helpful" anxiety. We may be inclined to view' anxiety as a negative factor, something to be avoided at all costs. But the notion of facilitative anxiety is that some concern—some apprehension—over a task to be accomplished is a positive factor. Otherwise, a learner might be inclined to be "wishy-washy,"

lacking that facilitative tension that keeps one poised, alert, and just slightly unbalanced to the point that one cannot relax entirely. The feeling of nervousness before giving a public speech is, in experienced speakers, often a sign of facilitative anxiety, a symptom of just enough tension to get the job done.

Several studies have suggested the benefit of facilitative anxiety in learning foreign languages (Ehrman & Oxford 1995,Young 1992, Horwitt 1990). In Bailey's (1983) study of competitiveness and anxiety in second language learning, facilitative anxiety was one of the keys to success, closely related to competitiveness. I noted in Chapter 4 that Rogers's humanistic theory of learning promotes low anxiety among learners and a nondefensive posture where learners do not feel they are in competition with one another. Bailey found in her self-analysis, however, that while competitiveness sometimes hindered her progress (for example, the pressure to outdo her peers sometimes caused her to retreat even to the point of skipping class), at other times it motivated her to study harder (as in thecase of carrying out an intensive review of material in order to feel more at ease in oral work in the classroom). She explained the positive effects of competitiveness by means of the construct of facilitative anxiety.

So the next time your language students are anxious, you would do well to ask yourself if that anxiety is truly debilitative. It could well be that a little nervous tension in the process is a good thing. Once again, we M that a construct has an optimal point along its continuum: both too much and too little anxiety may hinder the process of successful second language learning.

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