

HOW A SECOND LANGUAGE IS LEARNED: SOME SUGGESTIONS BASED ON A CASE STUDY

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Introduction

Learning a language is an amazing feat, especially learning a foreign language (FL). Many theories have been proposed to account for FL acquisition. In this article, I illustrate the difficulties in learning a foreign language based on a case study of three Chinese students and give some suggestions of teaching and learning strategies that worked for them.

Case introduction

My case studies are three Chinese students who are related. The eldest is 15, her brother is 13, and the youngest brother is 10. They were born in Thailand, but they were brought up in Hong Kong, so their native language is Chinese in terms of language proficiency. All three learn Thai in school as well. However, learning English and Thai are two different situations, as I found out.

Case analysis

Since they wanted to study English, I began my first lesson by asking the three children some questions in order to find out more about their level of English, their language needs and level of motivation. The following sections relate to the questions I asked them.

Do they know about the language they are learning?

I felt that before my students learnt English, they needed to know what English is. Maybe many people think it is of no use to know about the language they are learning. After all, English is English; it is an international language. There are two terms which are commonly used to refer to the use of English as an international language: 'English' and 'Englishes'. I was, however, keen for my students to know about Englishes rather than just English. I felt that if my students knew about different Englishes, then they could change some common inaccurate views about learning English, such as native speakers are the best teachers. How can we change this

particular misconception? We have to let our students know about the language they are going to learn. Not everyone will agree with me, but I strongly believe that English (especially British English and American English) is just one of the many languages of the world. Its history and other political reasons have given English an important position as a lingua franca but it is still simply a language for communication. So the use of other Englishes should be acknowledged and respected. A good learner should be aware of and appreciate different Englishes. However, how do we make our learners become aware of the existence of other Englishes? I suggest that one way is through literature, such as short poems and short stories, etc. In fact, for my three students, I taught them one poem every Friday, and taught them how to appreciate the language that different authors use. After all, the most important aim of knowing about English is to equip learners with the ability to know when to use certain varieties in particular situations. I would also suggest that teachers themselves should develop such an awareness first.

Are they clear about their language needs?

This question is related to a needs analysis. It has been suggested (Knowles, 1990: 213) that 'a learning need is a gap between where a learner is now and where he wants to be with regard to a particular set of competences'. In language learning, some students may have quite a good idea about where they are and what exactly they want to learn. Others may only have a vague idea of what they want to learn in the language, but may not know what is involved in this learning process. So a needs analysis may be useful in order to find out what students want to learn and what they need to do with the language. From my point of view, it is necessary for students to know their language needs and why they are learning the language. For my three students, I suggested to them to first consider their needs and goals for learning English. My three students said they wanted to know everything there was to know about English, including speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. Based on their needs, it would seem appropriate that they received formal and detailed instruction in the language. In my opinion, a needs analysis is good for both students and teachers. Students can be clear about what they are doing, and whether they are progressing. The teacher can prepare a lesson plan to help her students achieve their goals and needs. The next section gives some suggestions for lesson preparation.

How to choose learning materials?

Some people think that choosing learning materials is the duty of the teacher. In most cases, this is true. In my case however, I decided to let my students choose the materials they were interested in, so that they could enjoy studying it. I did give

them some suggestions about how to choose suitable materials. First, the coursebook should not in any sense cut the students off from their first language (L1) nor imply that they should not be relating the L1 to the second language (L2). My suggestion is that the coursebook should at best make occasional comparisons between languages: L1 and L2. The coursebook *Lifelines* satisfied this aim. It provided rich information about various cultures around the world and was visually colorful. My three Chinese students liked the activities in it very much. Furthermore, there were exercises in every unit of this set of books which served to remind learners to compare the different usages in English with their L1. Most importantly however was that since I am Chinese, I was able to use my L1 to explain any difficult concepts in Chinese to my students when they were confused.

How do we learn?

We have succeeded in our preparations up to this point: the students know their language needs, and a suitable coursebook has been chosen. The next important step then is to suggest various learning strategies for my Chinese students. Much research has shown that many factors affect the rate of FL learning and every student has her or his individual learning style. Palmer says 'when person A speaks, I realize that the method that works for him would not work for me, for it is not grounded in who I am' (Palmer, 1998:147, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 182). As a teacher, I would give my students different suggestions based on their individual personalities. Research has shown that there are seven factors that affect SL learning: intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation and attitudes, learner preferences, learner beliefs and age (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). In my students' cases, I provided learning strategies that corresponded to their individual personalities and ages.

Personality

It has often been viewed that an extroverted person is well suited to language learning. It was very fortunate that my three students are extroverted learners. But they are still different in many minor respects. The elder sister is very patient and careful in learning; she likes to learn about different cultures and reads literature as well. As she is a **Field-independent** learner, I suggested that she do some extensive reading and write diaries and poems in English. In fact, she does write many beautiful poems and articles. The elder brother is the exact opposite of his sister. He is a little lazy and impatient. He is a **Field-dependent** learner. Therefore I suggested that he learn in a group with his peers, and also assigned him group rather than individual assignments. My youngest student has a poor knowledge of English. He struggles to keep up with his sister and brother. However, as he is still very young, I advised him not to be too anxious and to make his own study time-table. What was interesting, I found, was that since he is extremely confident and competitive, it was easy

to motivate him to study and encourage him to compete with his brother. I asked him to write some short easy poems and later praised him to let him know when he improved.

The strange thing about my three students was that although they were all beginners, their proficiency levels were also different. My problem was that they wanted to study together so I was faced with the dilemma of how I could counteract the imbalance among them. My solution was to allow them to study together, but I would provide more challenging activities for the better students. The advantage of this approach was that my better students could review previous knowledge about English culture, customs, etc, and help the weaker ones at the same time. An interesting episode happened at this stage which I thought was related to their personalities. Since they were all extroverts (they were very talkative in Chinese), I thought they would like speaking English. However, when I tried to encourage them to speak English, they seldom spoke. I felt worried and did not know what was wrong with them or if there was something wrong with my teaching method. At last I found the answer. They were undergoing a **Silent Period**. In this silent period, learners will keep silent until they feel they are prepared to speak. Recently, they have begun to speak!

Age

The relationship between a learner's age and her potential for success in second language acquisition is the subject of much lively debate. I was very interested in this aspect because in my case, my three students' ages were: 15, 13, and 10. It is quite interesting that there are two important views that co-exist with regard to the relationship between age and learning. One is from Patkowski whose research results indicated that:

The age of acquisition is a very important factor in setting limits on the development of native-like mastery of a second language and that this limitation does not apply only to accent. These results give added support to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which argues that there is a specific and limited time period (2-13) for language acquisition.

(Lightbown and Spada, 1999).

The other view is that some researchers think that older learners would have more advantage in learning a second language since they simply apply skills from their L1. I think that the critical period does exist. My youngest student, who is 10 is within the critical period. When we learnt the JAZZ CHANT which is used for pronunciation practice, he managed to achieve a pronunciation which was almost

similar with that in the cassette. My other two students were not as successful as him. The most amazing thing also was that he could remember English word usages unconsciously, which now makes me believe in Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG). Since the CHP and UG seemed to come into play for my youngest student, I suggested to him to 'learn the language, not about the language' (Rivers, 1964). This means just learning English automatically and unconsciously and not paying attention to errors, which will be corrected naturally and gradually. I personally think that it is just a matter of time before he masters English. On the other hand, his elder sister and brother's pronunciation is not as good as his, but they do have the advantage that their first language system is more mature. They are simply learning 'new forms for old conversational uses and ideas'. Thus my suggestion for them was to learn grammar through comparisons between Chinese and English in order to help them understand and use the target language better.

Learning strategies

If learners want to master a foreign language well, then knowing about learning strategies are important. I suggested to my students to improve five skills simultaneously. Usually we talk about four skills which include listening, speaking, reading and writing. But I suggested to my students that they master another skill - 'culture'. (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). The issue of learning strategies is quite a big and difficult topic to talk about, because they deal with many aspects and have been the subject of much debate. I would however, like to focus on the fifth skill- culture. In my opinion, to learn about the culture of a foreign language, my students can learn it through poems, Jazz Chants, etc, because language 'expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality' (Kramsch, 1998). However, learning about English culture does not mean you must embrace Western culture. I asked my students to remember 3 points: know about the culture, respect it and appreciate it objectively. I also want to focus my attention on one other strategy that can improve pronunciation skills in English, based on a true experience of observing Chinese English learners. My suggestion comes from *Crazy English*, which is a speaking approach and is very popular in China. The approach employs the *Muscle Training Approach* (MTA) which suggests that different languages own different pronunciation systems which use different mouth muscles. If you want to speak fluently and learn good pronunciation, you must train your mouth muscles, which means you have to accustom your mouth muscles to suit the second language. The crazy method of training is to ***say English as clearly as possible, as fast as possible, and as loudly as possible without a break***; the learning motto is '*don't be shy, just try*'. Larsen-Freeman (2001) said that teaching is not only about thinking and holding certain values, it is also action. For learning, I think the same principle holds true. Based on the above approach, I encouraged my students to speak English daily and told them not to fear loss of face when they made mistakes

Does the environment affect their FL learning?

The answer is 'yes'. I mentioned that my students also learnt Thai and English simultaneously in school. The difference is that when they learn Thai, they are surrounded completely by the language. However, when they learn English, they lack such an environment. How should they improve their English then? In this case, **intrinsic motivation** which comes from within the learner becomes quite important, as it means the learner sustains his/her motivation in learning English because he or she is really interested in the language. Since my students lacked a good environment for learning English, I advised them to keep on motivating and encouraging each other so as to create a conducive learning environment for themselves. I also suggested that they try to speak to foreigners in English, do a lot of extensive reading to enlarge their vocabulary, watch English programmes and listen to English songs.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have given different suggestions of how to learn English through my own experiences with my students. It is hoped that my case study would stimulate discussion among other teachers about various ELT issues that need to be taken into consideration when teaching EFL students.

Reference:

Larsen-Freeman, D (2000) *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching* Oxford: OUP.

Lightbown, P. and Spada, N. (1999) *How Languages are Learn*, Oxford: OUP.

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