Language Learning Strategies and Research Problems with Individual Differences

Magdalena Pospieszyńska-Wojtkowiak[1]

Abstract

Personality involves both innate individual properties which are conditioned by age, intelligence, aptitude, personality type and other individual features such as attitudes, motivation and strategies. Learning and communication strategies have been found to play an important role in the process of language acquisition by accounting significantly for variation in language learners' achievement. Assessment of learning styles can give teachers an overview of the strategies that students are likely to use in the process of language acquisition. So far, no-one has ever given an answer which style is the best or which style guarantees success in language learning.

1. Introduction

Evaluating individual features, we should not only mention such characteristics as personality traits, cognitive and affective variables or learning styles but also certain acquired properties - like learning or communication strategies, which are being shaped via the whole scholastic life of an individual. Personality involves both innate individual properties which are conditioned by age, intelligence, aptitude, personality type and other individual characteristics such as attitudes, motivation and strategies.

2. Strategies

The notion of learning and communication strategies is widely presented in the works of such Polish FL methodologists as e.g. Droździał-Szelest [4], Zybert [22] and [23] and it will only be sketched here how affective and cognitive factors influence strategy choice. To introduce the notion of learning strategies the author will quote Droździał-Szelest [4], who wrote that language learning strategies are steps taken by learner to aid them in the process of acquiring a foreign language.[4]. Indeed, nowadays the concept of language learning strategies is regarded to be the key issue in the whole process of language learning and communicating. Inhibited, anxious, reflective and introverted students will rather rely on reduction strategies, meaning that they will be producing utterances within the acquired system of language only to avoid making mistakes. On the other hand, impulsive, extraverted risk-takers having high self-esteem, will strive for getting their messages across and will use the achievement strategies since their main goal is communication in a foreign language. Similarly, field-dependent learners who get easily into verbal contact with other people may use achievement strategies due to their "greater communicative competence, greater conversational resourcefulness and greater negotiation skills" [17. However, on all measures of language proficiency, it is field-independent learners who achieve better scores, which can be explained by the fact that they "have greater analytic and cognitive restructuring capabilities, which in terms of language learning means resistance to fossilization" [4], (cf. Hansen and Stansfield [9], Stansfield and Hansen [18]). Field-independent learners are more likely to employ strategies such as analysing, restructuring, hypothesis-testing and inferencing - strategies which are of central importance in second language learning" [4] (cf. Prokop [14]). Students prefer different strategies just as they learn employing different styles.

3. Learning styles

Assessment of learning styles can give teachers an overview of the strategies that students are likely to use in the process of language acquisition (cf. O'Malley and Chamot [10] and Ellis [6]). Willing [21] distinguished four general learning styles of individuals, on the basis of both cognitive and affective factors, and associated particular features and learning strategies that can be identified with these general styles (see Table 1 below):

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[1] State University of Applied Sciences in Konin, Poland

Table 1: General types of learners according to Willing [21]

Learner's style	Associated characteristics
CONCRETE LEARNER	people oriented; spontaneous; imaginative; emotional; dislikes routinized learning; prefers kinaesthetic modality
ANALYTICAL LEARNER	hypothetical-deductive reasoning; object-oriented; independent; dislikes failure; prefers logical, didactic presentation
COMMUNICATIVE LEARNER	fairly independent; highly adaptable and flexible; responsive to facts that do not fit; prefers social learning and a communicative approach; enjoys taking decisions
AUTHORITY-ORIENTED LEARNER	reliant on other people; needs teacher's directions and explanations; likes a structured learning environment; intolerant of facts that do not fit; prefers a sequential progression; dislikes discovery learning

Another typology divides learners into norm-oriented as opposed to communicative-oriented. Norm-oriented students would rather master grammatical competence before speaking, they would prefer to 'acquire' the structures before using them in communicative settings. Yet another typology differentiates between studial and experiential learners. Studial learners are rule- or norm-oriented students who progress steadily mastering one item at a time; experiential learners, first of all, try to master fluency over accuracy. Researchers distinguish also planners, who, via sequential progression, plan their production stage; and correctors, who are experiential learners focusing on spontaneous fluency (cf. Ellis [5] and Seliger [16]). On the basis of what is presented in Table 1 and the learning styles presented above, the present author made the following links between the depicted styles and individual factors. The associations are presented in Figure 1 below.

Concrete learning style ------ learners:
- extraverted
- impulsive
- risk-takers
- experiential

Analytical learning style ------- learners:
- introverted
- studial
- reflective
- low self-esteem

Communicative learning style ------- learners:
- receptive
- risk-takers
- communicative-oriented
- impulsive
- correctors
- tolerant of ambiguities

Authority-oriented learning style ------ learners:
- perceptive
- norm-oriented
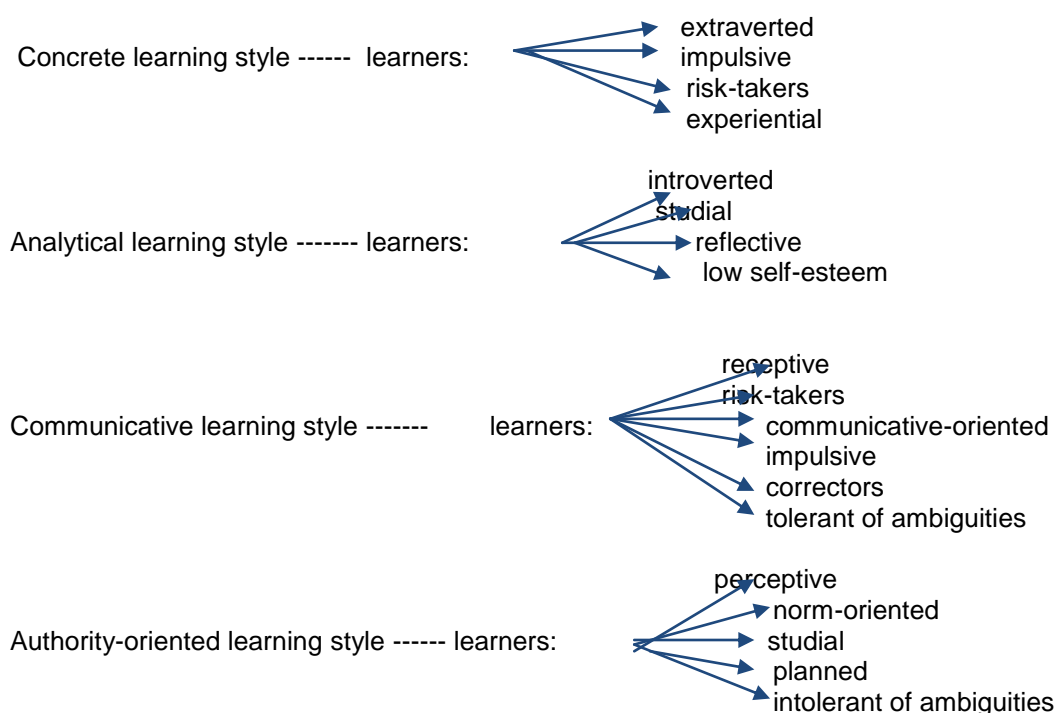- studial
- planned
- intolerant of ambiguities

Fig. 1   The associations between different learning styles

Some authors (Chastain [2] and Stern [19]) criticize the idea of individualized instruction, considering it as unrealistic and unattainable, since teaching a course individually is not viable, teachers should rather concentrate on the group, making necessary modifications for better and less apt students. The whole idea of individualized instruction may seem unreasonable as it would require a lot of additional work (e.g. preparing supplementary materials) for the teacher. Dakowska [3] is also sceptical about

this trend of individualization in teaching, as she notes: (...) we do not have to match individual learner characteristics with appropriate teaching techniques because language is learned and used through humanly universal verbal communication. Individualization can and should be implemented within the context of communication processes, which still enables the learners to exercise the right to communicate their own ideas, to learn how to learn (learning autonomy), seek self-discovery and self-actualization, as well as understanding new insights (…) [3].

4. Research problems with individual differences (IDs)

Different scholars propose competing divisions and taxonomies of individual differences, dividing them in diverse ways and providing various names and labels for the same concepts (Pawlak [13]). As Williams and Burden [20] note, the majority of research into the field of IDs is of psychometric tradition. Usually a ready-made test is used for such measurements. However, some researchers question the exact construct(s) we wish to measure – what we actually mean by e.g. 'intelligence', 'field-dependence', 'self-esteem' etc. These constructs need very precise definitions in order not to become the researcher's own concept of what the particular trait/ feature involves. Another problem is the number of IDs. Some select as many as 22, some 9 or 8 (Gradman and Hanania [7], Oxford and Ehrman [12], Skehan [17] – respectively). The existence of particular features are sometimes undermined and questioned by researchers. Griffiths and Sheen [8], for example, criticize the construct of field-in/dependence; whereas Oxford and Ehrman [12] prefer to differentiate between global and analytic learners instead of field-independent and field-dependent. The next problematic variable is motivation. Since it seems to be "context bound and amenable to change" (Williams and Burden [20]) motivation cannot be treated as a construct which is fixed or which can be possessed by learners more or less of. By the same token, it is similar to anxiety which is both situation and culture bound. A particular behaviour may be interpreted as anxious within one culture but as 'normal' within other cultures. Researchers have a similar problem with the notion of aptitude. So far, language aptitude has been measured by means of Modern Language Aptitude Test – MLAT (cf. Carol and Sapon [1], Rysiewicz [15]). The value of the results of MLAT may be questioned due to the fact that although the MLAT results discriminated well between very good or very poor language learners, it did not discriminate well among those 'in between' – who usually constituted the vast majority in such testing. As Williams and Burden [20] observe (...) this is, in fact, a significant weakness of all such standardised tests. What they tell us is that about two-thirds of any population will score within the average range of that text. [20]. What is even more, individual differences may result from biology, thus all differences and variations in L2 learning may be connected with such biological factors as biorhythms, sustenance, and location. Some L2 learners are morning people, while others do not want to start learning until the afternoon or evening. Sustenance refers to the need for food or drink while learning. Location involves the nature of the environment - temperature, lighting, sound, and even the firmness of the chairs." [11].

5. Conclusion

Different forms of assessment of learning styles can give the teacher an overview of the strategies/ styles the students are likely to use in the process of language acquisition, but so far, no-one has ever given an answer which style is better or which style guarantees success in the process of language learning, definitely, the more flexible the learner is the greater the possibility to be a successful language learner.

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