Focus on the Learner

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Abstract:
Language teaching is often discussed from the point of view of the teacher. Some of the ways in which teachers beliefs, goals, attitudes, and decisions influence how they approach of teaching have already been examined by many people. However, while learning is the goal of teaching, it is not necessarily the mirror image of teaching. Learners, too, bring to learning their own beliefs, goals, attitudes, and decisions, which in turn influence how they approach their learning. This thesis examines some of the contributions learners bring to learning by exploring learners’ beliefs about teaching and learning, the influence of cognitive styles, and the role of learner strategies.

Differences between teachers’ and learners’ beliefs can sometimes lead to a mismatch between their assumptions about what is useful to focus on in a language lesson. For example, a teacher may teach a reading lesson with the purpose of developing extensive reading skills, while the students may think of the activity as an opportunity for intensive reading, building up their knowledge of vocabulary and idoms.

Language learners might value some language learning strategies which the teacher may try to discourage. For example, students from a culture where rote learning and memorization are widely used may think that these are useful strategies in learning English. However, their teacher may come from a culture where such strategies are not valued and may try to discourage their use by learners.

For some learners, a native-like pronunciation may not be considered an important goal, since they will use English mainly to speak with other nonnative speakers of English. For other students, however, acquiring a native-like accent in English may be a high priority.

Some of the views learners hold about language learning and language teaching can be related to differences of what is referred to as cognitive style or learning style.

The current interest in learners strategies in second language teaching highlights ways in which teachers and learners can be collaboratively engaged in developing effective approaches to learning. Both are viewed as sharing the task of facilitating learning by finding how learners can learn more effectively.

Introduction:
Language teaching is often discussed from the point of view of the teacher. Some of the ways in which teachers beliefs, goals, attitudes, and decisions influence how they approach their teaching have already been examined by many people. However, while learning is the goal of teaching, it is not necessarily the mirror image of teaching. Learners, too, bring to learning their own beliefs, not necessarily the mirror image of teaching. Learners, too, bring to learning their own beliefs, goals,
attitudes, and decisions, which in turn influence how they approach their learning. This thesis examines some of the contributions learners bring to learning by exploring learners’ beliefs about teaching and learning, the influence of cognitive styles, and the role of learner strategies.

**Learner belief system**

Many models of second language acquisition attribute a central role to learner beliefs (e.g., Bialystok 1978; Naiman et al. 1978). Learners’ beliefs are influenced by the social context of learning and can influence both their attitude toward the language itself as well as toward language learning in general (Tumposky 1991). Learners’ belief systems cover a wide range of issues and can influence learners’ motivation to learn, their expectations about language learning, their perceptions about what is easy or difficult about a language, as well as the kind of learning strategies they favor.

1. **Beliefs about the four language skills**

Learners’ beliefs about language may be reflected in specific assumptions about the nature of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For example:

*You need to know a lot of idioms to be good in speaking English.*
*The best way to improve listening is by watching television.*
*It is a waste of time for me to read magazines in English because of the vocabulary.*

Differences between teachers’ and learners’ beliefs can sometimes lead to a mismatch between their assumptions about what is useful to focus on in a language lesson. For example, a teacher may teach a reading lesson with the purpose of developing extensive reading skills, while the students may think of the activity as an opportunity for intensive reading, building up their knowledge of vocabulary and idioms.

2. **Beliefs about language learning**

Students bring to the classroom very specific assumptions about how to learn a language and about the kinds of activities and approaches they believe to be useful. For example:

*The best way to learn a language is to have a good language environment.*
*It's not useful to try and remember grammar rules.*
*You need to practice every day to improve your English.*

Language learners might value some language learning strategies which the teacher may try to discourage. For example, students from a culture where rote learning and memorization are widely used may think that these are useful strategies in learning English. However, their teacher may come from a culture where such strategies are not valued and may try to discourage their use by learners.

3. **Beliefs about goals**

Learners may have very different goals for language learning.

*I just want to be able to make myself understood.*
*I’d like to be able to write well in English.*
I’m not interested in learning to read, only to speak.

For some learners, a native-like pronunciation may not be considered an important goal, since they will use English mainly to speak with other nonnative speakers of English. For other students, however, acquiring a native-like accent in English may be a high priority.

**Cognitive Styles**

Some of the views learners hold about language learning and language teaching can be related to differences of what is referred to as cognitive style or learning style. Cognitive styles have been defined as characteristic cognitive and physiological behaviors that “serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment” (Keefe 1979; cited in Willing 1988: 40). Cognitive styles can hence be thought of as predispositions to particular ways of approaching learning and are intimately related to personality types. Differences particular ways of approaching learning and are intimately related to personality types. Differences in people’s cognitive styles reflect the different ways people respond to learning situations. For examples:

a. Some people like to work independently, while others prefer working in group.

b. Some people like to spend a lot of time planning before they complete a task, while others spend little time planning and sort out problems that arise while they are completing a task.

c. Some people can focus on only one task at a time, while others seem to be able to do several different task at once.

d. Some people feel uncomfortable in situations where there is ambiguity or uncertainty, while others are able to handle situations where there is conflicting information and opinions.

e. When solving problems, some people are willing to take risks and to make guesses without worrying about the possibility of being wrong, while others try to avoid situations where there is such a risk.

f. Some people learn best when they use visual cues and write notes to help them remember, while others learn better through auditory learning, without writing notes.

Knowles (1982) suggests that differences of this kind reflect the cognitive styles of four different types of learners; who are characterized by the following learning styles.

**Concrete learning style** Learners with a concrete learning style use active and direct means of taking in and processing information. They are interested in information that has immediate value. They are curious, spontaneous, and willing to take risks. They like variety and a constant change of pace. They dislike routine learning and written work, and prefer verbal or visual experiences. They like to be entertained, and like to be physically involved in learning.

**Analytical learning style** Learners with an analytical style are independent, like to solve problems, and enjoy tracking down ideas and developing principles on their own. Such learners prefer a logical, systematic presentation of new learning material with opportunities for learners to follow up on their own. Analytical learners are serious, push themselves hard, and are vulnerable
Communicative learning style  Learners with a communicative learning style prefer a social approach to learning. They need personal feedback and interaction, and learn well from discussion and group activities. They thrive in a democratically run class.

Authority-oriented learning style  Learners with an authority-oriented style are said to be responsible and dependable. They like and need structure and sequential progression. They relate well to a traditional classroom. They prefer the teacher as an authority figure. They like to have clear instructions and to know exactly what they are doing; they are not comfortable with consensus-building discussion.

Learning strategies

Whereas cognitive styles can be thought of as relatively stable characteristics of learners which affect their general approach to learning, learning strategies are the specific procedures learners use with individual learning tasks. When confronted with a classroom learning task, such as reading a chapter of a book or preparing a written summary of a passage, the learner can choose several different ways of completing the task. Each of these choices or strategies offers particular advantages or disadvantages, and the use of an appropriate learning strategy can enhance success with the learning strategies and discourage the use of ineffective ones.

Oxford (1990:8) defines learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations.” She suggests that language learning strategies have the following features:

They contribute to the main goal, communicative competence.
They allow learners to become more self-directed.
They expand the role of teachers.
They are problem-oriented.
They are specific actions taken by the learner.
They involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive.
They support learning both directly and indirectly.
They are not always observable.
They are often conscious.
They can be taught.
They are flexible.
They are influenced by a variety of factors.

Through observing learners as they complete different language learning tasks and through having them introspect about strategies or writing about how they solve particular language learning problems, differences between effective and ineffective strategies can be identified. For example, in one study (Hosenfeld 1977), some of the differences between learners with high and low scores on a reading proficiency test were: High scorers tended to keep the meaning of the passage in
mind, read in broad phrases, skip unessential words, and guess meanings of unknown words from context; low scorers tended to lose the meaning of sentences as soon as they decoded them, read word by word or in short phrases, rarely skip words, and turn to the glossary when they encountered new words.

Studies of students completing writing tasks have likewise identified differences in the strategies used by skilled and unskilled writers (Heuring 1984; Lapp 1984). For example, before beginning to write, skilled writers tend to spend time thinking about the task and planning how they will approach it; they gather and organize information; and they use note taking, lists; and brainstorming to help generate ideas. On the other hand, unskilled writers tend to spend little time on planning; they may start off confused about the task; and they use few planning and organizing strategies (Richards 1990).

The current interest in learners strategies in second language teaching highlights ways in which teachers and learners can be collaboratively engaged in developing effective approaches to learning. Both are viewed as sharing the task of facilitating learning by finding how learners can learn more effectively.

**Bibliography**
