THE STUDY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSE

Ding Mingti
Shenyang Pharmaceutical University

Abstract

Foreign language learning is hard work while the study on it is a complicated system engineering. It touches not only the problems of linguistics but those of sociology and culture as well. What is involved is not only the foreign language itself but also the emotional elements. Also it covers the macro plan and strategy along with concrete steps and skills. As the foreign language learners, they must undergo kinds of and series of psychological response. There must be a lot of difficulty problems even conflicts in the process of learning. Only when they correctly handle the contradictions, coordinate the relationship, make good use of the positive elements and abandon the negative ones, they will get the best result.

Key words
foreign language learning, psychological response

As it is well known, the study of foreign language learning mainly includes two major aspects: personal differentiation of the language learners, intelligence, language ability, personal character, way of cognition, etc., psychological process of Language acquisition.

1. Stages of foreign language learning

We have known that the language ability of ideal native speakers but what will happen when they begin to learn a foreign language? It is undoubtedly hard work and time-consuming process for the language learners who want to study a kind of language which is totally different from their native one and their purpose is to acquire the language ability as same as that of the native speakers. And it is much more difficult to do that in a non-integrative study environment. That process can be divided into 3 stages: beginning, learning and finishing. During the first stage the language learners know nothing about the foreign language at the beginning. If they are put into a pure foreign language environment, they cannot communicate with others because of the language barrier which made them have no difference with a deaf and dumb, even the blind. At the moment they are faced with both mental and psychological pressure. To them, everything of their native language is reasonable, natural and self-evident while many things of the foreign language make them feel unnatural, unreasonable, inadaptable. Even ridiculous and unacceptable. That is because their native language is the useful and reliable reference system for them to observe, understand and communicate with the outside world. Once they lose such a system, they will feel like a person who is lost his direction. The Language they hear is just noise to them and the signs of the road are meaningless to them.

To the beginners, especially the adult, they have acquire not only the language ability of their native language but also certain knowledge and experience about language and language learning during the process of language acquisition although this kind of knowledge of language comes usually subconsciously. Therefore, at the beginning of learning a foreign language, they must overcome the language barrier which exist between the native language and the foreign one. At the same time they have to build a set
of new language system on the basis of his ability and experience. People generally think that this process is linear. That is to say, it can be divided into several stages which go one after another. The first stage is the training of the form of language that focus on the form itself, e.g., the practice on mechanical skills and intonation, structure, etc. The second stage is the transition of the form. That is to express certain meaning with the trained form. Its focus is the meaning. Next stage is to apply the form automatically into real communication which includes the understanding and production of language. The last stage is to acquire the ability to use the language creatively. To Rivers and Templey, it is to separate learning from application. That is to say, only grasping the language form through mechanical training, when they may be put into communication. On the contrary, Stern thinks that from the very beginning, the language learning resembles every aspect of language ability such as communication and creativity. From the starting point, the language learner draws himself towards his native language ability with all those aspects developed simultaneously until he has the new set of language system internalized which gets to the ideal goal. That means to have acquired the language ability as same as that of the native speaker. During the process of knowing nothing about the foreign language to master it, there must have been a series of “approximate system” (Nemer, 1971) or “interlanguage” (Selinker, 1972) which is between the native language and the foreign one. Certain mistakes of some learners will be fixed into habit that is to form so-called “fossilization.” And it is hard for this kind of learners to make their foreign language level reach the ideal goal. Meanwhile, other good learners are able to find out the problems and mistakes occurred in their study so they can produce enough flexibility and persistence and modify their interlanguage consistently. As the result, they develop their foreign language system and draw closer to the ideal goal.

2. Major problems of foreign language learners

During the transition from the native language to foreign language, the learners are faced with a series of problems. How to handle them will influence their psychological response and have direct relationship with their study? One of the major problems is the huge difference between their native language and the foreign one in position. The native language is the only reference system that is well known and accustomed by the learners, so it is in the leading position. However, the new reference system of the foreign language has not yet been built up and its position is not firm. Therefore, during the process of learning, the learners will not only feel hard to get rid of the reliability on the native language but also have to deal with different levels of interference from the native language. Another problem is the in-class teaching pays attention to the language form especially the traditional teaching methods on grammar and translation while the practical communication focus on the language function. The successful learners are usually able to pay attention to both form and function or at least put it into usage when they grasp the form. While the poor learners usually either neglect to use language or pay no attention to the form or use of language. Besides that, as far as study method is concerned, there is certain difference. We can both absorb the language system of a foreign language intuitively and study it consciously in the use of a language.

3. The psychological response of the learner

1. The style of learning. The successful learners often pay attention to finding out their favorite learning skill and draw lessons from others' valid study method so that they have a set of trade secret of how to learn a foreign economically and efficiently. Meanwhile, they have strong adaptability of the studying conditions and environment. To the opposite, the poor learners are lack of clear and deep understanding of the character of the duty and the problems occur in the process of the study. Even more, they have no definite and efficient study methods and show poor adaptability of the study environment. The successful learners are always taking a positive attitude towards study, they take the responsibility of their study, make goals and put their necks into study. On the contrary, the poor learners rely on the teachers too much and hold a negative even contradictory attitude towards learning.

2. The character of aim and plan. The successful learners have strong character of aim and plan in their learning. They are good at making plans for their studying activity which includes both the fast-sighted plan and the stages plan. They are able to modify their L system on the form according to the constantly changed emphasis so that they can make the system closer to the target language. Whereas the
poor learners are lack of the character of aim and plan. They are not good at looking for the rules and relationship among the items so what they have learnt is usually irrelevant items that cannot form a whole system in order.

3. The attitude towards the target L and native L. The successful learners take an open and relax attitude. First, they are able to comprehend the misunderstanding and setbacks which are brought out by the difference of L or culture and deal with them calmly. Second, they can understand the uncertainty of language. Generally speaking, the foreign L learners always believe there is only one answer that is definite not ambiguous uniqueness. They hope to find out all the one to one answers between the L they talk and hear and their native L correspondence. They can translate the foreign L into their native L easily. Translatability. Third, they can accept their positions as L learners and show their tolerance, friendliness and warmness to the new L and culture. They are able to change their mind from their native L and glad to imitate the new one.

4. The research on the meaning. The expression and understanding are the core of L communication. The successful learners are good at comprehending the meaning of L through context explanation. Translation and all the other possible methods not only the surface meaning but deep social and cultural connotation. In contrast, when the poor L learners try to understand the meaning of L, they usually have no ideas about the problems occurred in the process of study.

5. The application of L. The successful learners are capable of applying what they have learnt into practical usage. That is to realize the transition from the form of L to its function. Nemser, 1980 however, the poor learners regard it as the restored knowledge so they escape the practical communication. Needless to say to create the chance of practice. They always feel nervous, worried and less confident. Moreover, they are afraid to make mistakes and "lose their face". Once they have difficulty in communication or the result is not satisfied they will lose the patience and give up trying. Rubin once pointed out that "the successful learners usually have no misgivings for the purpose of communication. They are willing to appear foolishly in order to study and communicate. They are not afraid to make mistakes." Stern, 1980 And Nida has ever written that "generally speaking, before mastering a language, you must murder it first and part of the course of murdering must be started right now. " While Gudschinsky pointed out more frankly "if a student wants to keep his nobleness and self-respect and must wait to open his mouth without any mistakes then he is unable to learn to speak. On the contrary if he doesn't mind being embarrassed he still keep on speaking although sometimes feeling stupid, then he will find out people are always sympathetic and helpful though they are amazed at his mistakes." In a word if a person learns to speak in a foreign language he must open his mouth.

The reliability on the native language. The successful learners treat the level of foreign language as a solo reference system and put their thoughts into the foreign language context. Nevertheless, the poor learners dare not to leave the reference system of native language and hold on to that "stick." When learning a new word, they must add the Chinese meaning to the English one. As a result, it is hard for them to grasp the idiomatic foreign language.

References