

Foreign Language is Learned Instead of being Taught

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Abstract : Foreign language (FL) learning and teaching have been investigated in large since the last century, wherein the majority of scholars are concerned with such issues as how learners master a foreign language, what specific elements influence the learning process, or what kinds of pedagogics greatly facilitate FL attainment, etc. This article, nevertheless, focuses on the efficacy of formal instruction or teaching in FL learning based on some strong evidences and findings. By exploring the matter, it is hoped that the mechanism of FL learning can be better interpreted and applied into future studies and practices.

Keywords : Foreign Language; Foreign Language Learning; Foreign Language Teaching; Efficacy

1. Introduction

It is generally believed that language is often used as a kind of tool for people to communicate with each other. Consequently, it is of great importance to master FL result from a variety of purposes, such as traveling around the world, doing businesses with foreigners, and so forth. Since the 20th century, there have been a large volume of researches to explore issues regarding FL learning, thus followed by corresponding teaching. One of the hot topics in this field is whether or not teaching is valuable in FL learning. Not a few scholars (e.g., Fathman 1975) discover that there is no dramatic disparity among FL learners under the condition of formal instruction or informal setting, and even some of them conclude that teaching cannot enhance learning; However, others cast doubt on their empirical results and believe that teaching does play an indispensable role in learning (e.g., Long 1983). Up to now, the debate has been far from ending. By reviewing the development of theories of FL learning and teaching, parsing the above question at large length, and finally drawing a conclusion in terms of some strong evidences, this article intends to provide different dimensions of perspectives for people interested in the issue.

2. Studies of FL learning and teaching

2.1 Studies of FL learning

Research into FL learning initially came from an elaborate investigation of language in particular “inter language” which meant learners’ knowledge of FL differed from native speakers in the target countries and was easily interfered by acquired mother tongue (Spolsky 1989: 31). Until the 1960s, Corder (1967) put forward the concept of “learner’s errors”, which shifted scholars’ attention from language to learner. Later on, an increasing number of the examination of learners’ characteristics, together with the factors influencing FL learning outcomes and the measurement of language proficiency, continued to proliferate. All in all, a forest of studies on FL acquisition enables us to further dissect how people acquire a non-native language, wherein more emphases in this part will be put on some typical hypotheses of FL learning by Krashen, Swain and Schumann subsequently.

To begin with, Krashen’s monitor model (1982) consists of five hypotheses: acquisition-learning distinction, the natural order

hypothesis, the input hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis. To be specific, the first hypothesis draws a clear line between acquisition and learning, while the second hypothesis assumes that similar to native language, FL is attained within a natural context. The third hypothesis highlights the importance of comprehensible input, and a well-known term “ $i+1$ ” is also proposed. The fourth hypothesis mainly depicts the function of learners’ errors, yet the final hypothesis keeps a close eye on learners’ emotions. In brief, Krashen underlines the great significance of comprehensible input and small effect of teaching on FL learning, whereas some of his claims are criticized for not providing strong evidences, misinterpreting the diversities of acquisition and learning, and ignoring some other essential items in FL learning.

By criticizing Krashen’s hypothesis, Swain (1985) comes up with the output hypothesis in which she claims although it is essential for learners to receive plenty of comprehensible inputs, it is still not enough to ensure their proficiency can approximate to native speakers. In her opinion, there are three communicative competences central to language outcomes which, however, are not better interpreted than those of Bachman (1990). What’s more, even though Swain takes output into careful account other than input, she seems to forget to clarify the dual significance of these two items in FL learning, which in contrast is elaborately presented by interaction model. After interaction model, more and more scholars notice the impact of the external factors on FL learning, and an example comes from Schumann’s acculturation model.

The term “acculturation”, proposed by Schumann (1986), refers to learners’ thoughts to integrate with the target language group under two variables: society and affect. On the one hand, in the social dimension there are seven factors involved in FL learning, such as social dominant patterns, integration strategies, and cultural similarity. On the other, in the affective dimension, language shock, cultural shock, motivation, and ego-permeability are thought to take effects. Moreover, he notes that FL can be learned without instruction because learners have independent capacity of learning. In short, Schumann sheds light on the relationship between acculturation and FL acquisition from the perspective of socio-psychology, but there are still some obstacles to confirm the degree of their effects, and more importantly he tends to exaggerate the function of society for FL learners. Other hypotheses of FL learning such as socio-educational model and preference model are also well-known in recent years. All of them point to a fact that the studies of FL learning incline to pay more attention to learners’ internal and external factors.

2.2 Studies of FL teaching

Generally speaking, FL teaching is mostly carried out in classrooms of schools or some formal institutions, so this kind of teaching can also be called as formal instruction. Since the emergence of the grammar-translation method, a large quantity of FL pedagogics, such as the grammar-translation method, the cognitive approach, and the communicative approach, has been put forward, and their shared objective is to help learners better and faster attain their target language.

First, the grammar-translation method is the first systematic pedagogy for FL, and its existence indicates that FL / FL teaching officially becomes an independent discipline. This method claims that FL should be instructed combined with mother tongue via abundant translation drills and explanation of grammar, so it takes no account of communicative competence or oral proficiency, rendering its classroom full of insipidity.

Second, the cognitive approach, whose core personages are Carroll and Bruner, concerns more about learners’ cognitive mechanism and comprehensive competence, so it underscores conscious and discovery learning, the rules of grammar, and the analysis on errors. Still, it contains some disadvantages, for instance, a lack of normative textbooks to match its theory.

Finally, the communicative approach attaches importance to meaning rather than form, communication instead of merely knowledge, language output together with learning interests of learners other than language input and teachers. Nevertheless, it is somehow difficult to apply into practice in reality with some problems that fail to be successfully coped with, such as what kind of assessment mechanism is appropriate to evaluate students’ competences, etc.

3. Question: Is FL learned or taught

As stated before, the issue of whether teaching is useful for learners to acquire FL is under heated discussion, because its inner mechanism is too complex to reach an agreement. Nonetheless, it is generally admitted that numerous variables especially learners’ personal factors affect FL learning. As stated by Spolsky (1989), more close attention to learners themselves should be given in the research of FL learning. All in all, with the support of some strong evidences presented below, this article tends to doubt the

significance of teaching for FL learners.

3.1 Some limitations of FL teaching

Krashen's monitor model hypothesizes that only informal learning entitles learners to achieve high proficiency of FL, attracting people's attention worldwide. Furthermore, Strevens (1988) mentions that the value of teaching in FL learning process is undemonstrated in fact. However, some researchers do discover that the effect of teaching is not significantly embodied in their experiments, and some even find it useless for FL learning because the latter hinges on learners themselves (e.g., Fathman 1975). Although several problems may be contained in these experiments, as Long (1983) doubts, their conclusions still need taking into prudent account with the question: what is the limitation of FL teaching?

For one thing, considering the development of teaching pedagogies for FL, it is typically the case that there is no easy way to select a desirable method to meet students' demands or interests and develop their comprehensive competence in the meantime. Therefore, it is inferred that the reason of the failure or dissatisfaction of these methodologies is not because they are imperfect all the time, but formal instruction itself is unable to cater to multifarious needs of FL learners. For another thing, some scholars postulate that implicit knowledge is acquired mainly by learners themselves, while explicit knowledge can be gained from classroom instruction, for the complexity of language system determines the necessary dedication with thousands of hours to language learning, which is unlikely to realize simply from classroom lessons (Ellis 2002). However, as we all know, of FL acquisition, learners must internalize knowledge in particular implicit knowledge so as to output the language effectively. In a consequence, the assistance formal instruction offers to FL learners is so limited that it probably is adverse to the process where explicit knowledge needs to be transformed into implicit counterpart. It may be a fact that in FL acquisition explicit knowledge learning cannot deviate from classroom instruction, but there exists a fact as well that not all students are able to command what teachers have instructed in a class under the same condition (Yi 2008). The reason of this phenomenon is due to a series of complicated variables taking part in learning process and outcome, such as teachers' teaching styles, learners' individual variations, the nature of learning materials, etc. What's more, it is impossible for teachers to care for all students' features and emotions within a same class synchronously. Thus, classroom instruction itself indeed has some shortcomings that appear to be intractable to deal with.

3.2 Learners' characteristics

Since we have known the limitations of formal instruction, it is essential to further go into learners' personal differences, as there must be certain kinds of individual factors involved in the learning process. Naiman et al (1996), for example, conducts an adult interview study and main classroom study to examine good learners' strategies, techniques and others in FL learning. The research shows that attitude, personality and cognitive style are tied up with the success of FL acquisition. Moreover, it reveals that no matter how old learners are, they all can analyze personal learning status even if some may have less objective judgments. As a result, individual features, particularly cognitive ones, make an appreciable difference to FL attainment. Therefore, this part will probe into students' characteristics from the aspects of learning style, learning strategy and anxiety to justify that FL learning relies on learners themselves rather than classroom teaching.

3.2.1 Learning style

Learning style, or cognitive style, as defined by Keefe (1979), refers to "a stable indicator of how learners perceive, interact with and, respond to the learning environment," suggesting that it contains cognitive, affective and physiological dimensions. A big amount of people finds the connection between cognitive or learning style and FL learning. For example, Castro & Peck (2005) access 99 American students' learning difficulties for Spanish on the analysis of their learning styles. It is successfully discovered that participants' preferred learning style can improve or hinder their success in FL attainment regardless of any particular learning difficulties. Besides, Noguera (2013) uses three instruments and a questionnaire to measure the learning styles of Spanish students who learn English as a second language (EFL) in Spain, and her finding shows a dramatic visual learning preference among subjects during learning English, demonstrating that the identification of learning style to match FL acquiring procedure is rather essential for learners.

3.2.2 Learning strategy

Oxford (1990: 8) defines learning strategy as "operation employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval and

use of information.” A great deal of research concentrates on different strategies employed by successful and unsuccessful learners in FL learning. For example, Heuring (1985) studies this issue on the revision strategy used in writing by the comparison of skilled and less skilled EFL learners. Results show that skilled writers can evaluate effectively the writing task via viewing revision as a compensatory role in the course of writing, but less skilled learners cannot. The above studies tend to reveal that unsuccessful learners are lack of good strategies to improve learning efficiency; nevertheless, Vann & Abraham (1990) object to such point of view because low-proficiency learners, in essence, are unable to choose right strategies making for corresponding learning tasks. All in all, lots of studies demonstrate that learning strategies used by learners significantly take effect in the process and outcome of FL acquisition.

3. 2. 3 Anxiety

Anxiety, a vital affective factor in FL learning, is claimed by Horwitz, E., Horwitz, M., & Cope (1986) that rather than a lack of language ability, FL learners with varying levels of language proficiency generate the feeling of anxiety usually in three certain sorts of situations: communication apprehension, test, and fear of negative evaluation. Numbers of currently relevant scholars reach a consensus that the relationship between anxiety and FL proficiency turns out to be negative. For example, Yan & Horwitz, E. (2008) examine how students’ anxiety operates together with other factors in affecting FL learning from learners’ perceptions. To their surprise, whatever subjects’ level of anxiety is, their comments are totally associated with listening and speaking in English, which indicates these two types of language skills closely connect to anxiety. These findings together prove that anxiety exerts a dramatic influence on FL learning.

4. Conclusion

The article first clarifies several concepts of FL and learning, then makes a retrospect of some important studies in FL learning and teaching, and at last discusses the issue of if teaching is necessary for FL learners by presenting two major evidences: The limitations of classroom teaching, and learners’ personal features such as learning style, learning strategy as well as anxiety. In brief, the above descriptions reveal that teaching (or formal instruction) is not very essential for FL learners to acquire the target languages. As a matter of fact, there are some other obvious evidences that are able to prove the assumption. For instance, with the development of technology in the information age and the gradual embodiment of the drawbacks of teaching (e.g., changeless time schedule and learning places), an increasing number of people seem to seek for more flexible ways to learn FL, like downloading useful online resources from some websites such as TED and MOOC, which allow EFL learners to extend their knowledge and strengthen some skills in English. It is also a case that some people prefer using apps installed in their mobile phones to acquire FL, because these apps are very convenient, accessible and able to coordinate their daily planning. Hence, there are so many methods to study FL in the modern era that formal instruction shows the tendency to be of less importance for FL learners, especially adults.

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