A Discussion of Three Overarching Theories in Second Language Learning

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Language teaching is a complex and dynamic process, involving teachers’ pedagogy and students’ learning strategies. Accordingly, it is extremely essential for teachers to consider the principles of second language learning on which the effective teaching can be based. Brown (2010) proposed 12 essential factors of second language learning, which fall into three categories: cognitive, affective, and linguistic principles. This paper elaborates three factors of second language learning, namely, intrinsic motivation principle, self-confidence, and language-culture connection. Based on analysis and discussion, the author puts forward some suggestions about classroom teaching for the purpose of improving the quality of language teaching and making students’ language learning more effective.

Keywords: learning motivation, self-confidence, language-culture connection, teaching principles

Introduction

It is well acknowledged that an effective English teaching classroom should be guided by the systematic and scientific teaching principles, therefore, how well the teaching principles contribute to great teaching results is the main concern in academic field. Besides, it is widely accepted that individual differences cannot be ignored in the process of second language learning since the differences could be huge potentials for learners in second language acquisition. In the academic field, scholars have reached a consensus about factors of the most important individual difference; they are age, gender, learning motivation, background, anticipation, nationalities, learning strategies, personality, and anxiety etc. What factors should be taken into consideration in this paper are motivation, self-confidence as well as language culture connection. As a second language learner, one should master the theoretical basis of second language learning and then connect it with practices in real life for the purpose of improving language learning abilities. The following is the discussions of these three factors.

A Discussion of Three Principles

Intrinsic Motivation

One of the most intractable problem in second language learning and teaching classroom has been identifying as the construct of motivation. It is widely accepted by researchers and teachers that motivation
makes a huge contribution to success or failure of learning a second language. But the answer to the definition of motivation is different from person to person. Dornyei (1998) pointed out that motivation theories in general seek to explain no less than the fundamental question of why humans behave as they do, and therefore it would be naive to assume any simple and straightforward answer. Indeed, every different psychological perspective on human behaviour is associated with a different theory of motivation and, thus, in general psychology it is not the lack but rather the abundance of motivation theories which confuses the scene.

Intrinsic motivation involves the formative development, reflecting the natural human propensity to learn and assimilate (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Gardner (1985) further divided motivation into integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation refers to the pleasant process of learning new things for the purpose of achieving satisfaction or understanding the meaning. As the saying goes, “Tell me, I’ll forget; teach me, I’ll know; involve me, I’ll learn” can best define the essentially important role of integrative motivation in language learning. With intrinsic motivation, if none of that were there, students would still do it. “Involve” the learners requires students to study actively and initially rather than doing the task passively. When a student takes a initiative to learn, achievements he/she acquired are invaluable. Instrumental motivation is a kind of impetus in which people are forced to learn second language for special purposes, such as employment, getting promotion, or going abroad. In this sense, they are willing to pay more efforts to achieve their goal and get huge sense of accomplishment. Methods like pressure, reward, and punishment can enhance or reduce their instrumental motivation. If the students are motivated, they will establish their confidence and dare to study by themselves. However, under Chinese education background, English teaching in junior and senior high schools is still requested students to take compulsory courses to prepare university entrance examination, in addition, college students often study English just for good credits or well-paid jobs in the fierce job markets, which leads to the situation that most students take language studies more frequently for instrumental reasons than intrinsic motivation. There is no deny that second language learners have strong motivation to learn a language for the sake of achieving their targets no matter what kind of motivation they hold. What’s more, it has been acknowledged that both integrative and instrumental motivation are key elements in the successful learning of second language. Brown (2010) made the point that both integrative and instrumental motivation are not necessarily mutually exclusive; actually they are inseparable. Learners shouldn’t believe that only one of motivation is enough when learning a second language but to choose a combination of both. All in all, students’ intrinsic motivation needs to cultivate by practices and stimulate by using a variety of external means. In the end, students’ interests of learning are aroused in the process of joy and successful learning, so as to form a stable intrinsic motivation.

Self-Confidence

Krashen (1982) put forward the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which held that emotional factors directly affect second language acquisition by filtering language input and thus hindering or accelerating language acquisition. Krashen (1982) considered personal factors are associated with language learning outcomes. Especially, self-confidence is the most important among them. It is self-confidence that lays great psychological foundation for one’s success. Undoubtedly, self-confidence plays an active role in the successful learning of a language, which has been widely accepted by researchers. Students who have strong confidence believed in her
or his own capability to finish tasks. In other word, they strongly believe that “I can do it!”. Clement (1994, p. 418) in his thesis “Motivation, Self-Confidence, and Group Cohesion in the Foreign Language Classroom” illustrated that “the student brings into the classroom a level of self-confidence related to extra-curricular experiences with the language, the quality and quantity of which would then influence classroom behavior and achievement”. Accordingly, being active in class means believing that one is able to use English to communicate outside classroom. In addition, high self-confidence students are characterized as they are willing to take more risks in learning, not afraid to make mistakes, overcome the setbacks in learning, and dare to come up with their own opinions and problems. Therefore, they have more opportunities to practice language, since they are so brave to communicate in a foreign environment that language proficiency is improved accordingly. In this process, they obtain expected outcomes and gain great confidence, thus forming a series of positive chain reaction. A male student in my class, had a poor English foundation, but was full of confidence. When it came to classroom activities, he was actively involved in every time. Through the practice of a semester, his communicative competence was improved greatly. In fact, his confidence contributes a lot to his success. Therefore, we can see how important the self-confidence is in the process of learning.

Language-Culture Connection

This principle aims to explore the complex interconnection between language and culture. The introduction of culture into language classes is necessary not only because this way can increase student’s interest toward language but also can help them use language in a more effective and appropriate way. Cultural difference is the main obstacle students confronted when they study English, therefore, having a basic understanding of differences between Chinese and western culture can greatly improve their English level. On the other hand, at present, teachers are so concerned with achievements and exam-oriented education system, since English is taking an increasing proportion in education. *National English Curriculum Standards for Common Senior High School* (2017) (Ministry of Education, 2017) made it clear that the key competency at senior high levels in English involves language competence, cultural awareness, quality of thinking, and learning ability, which proves the importance of understanding the differences of western and Chinese culture, while Chinese and English culture are different in geographical environment, social development, history, world view, values, social customs, different ways of thinking, and so on.

Language and culture are inherently interdependent on each other, developing with the evolution of the society. According to Hu Zhuanglin (2011), language is a means of verbal communication. It is instrumental in communicating by speaking or writing which is a purposeful act. It is always believed that language is a major ingredient and backbone of culture as well as an effective tool for conveying information, which is instinctively integrated with culture. Language plays an unique and paramount role in developing, elaborating, and transmitting culture, and language enables us to store meanings and experience to facilitate communication. Indeed, there is no possible to clearly make point out the connection between language and culture.

Learning a language, you also learn a complex system of cultural customs, values, and ways of thinking. As a second language learner, we should pay attention to learn more knowledge about the culture, customs, and traditions of the target language. For example, when we talk about the greeting in English, some of the greetings in Chinese can be translated into English directly like “Hello and Good morning”, but not all Chinese greetings
can be translated directly. “Have you eaten something this morning?” is absolutely cannot used to greet people. The students with which learner adapt to a new cultural environment will affect the success of language acquisition. After the understanding of English culture to some extent teachers could assist students to know the cultural differences and similarities. Teachers could attract students’ attention, meanwhile guide and help students better transition from Chinese cultural context to English hence it contributes to better English learning.

**Some Suggestions for Improvement of Language Learning**

After discussing the meaning and importance of the two principles, we can therefore move on to the classroom applications of these principles respectively. It’s quite clear that both intrinsic motivation and language-culture connection are important factors in L2 learning, which should be utilized appropriately.

**Suggestions for Intrinsic Motivation**

As to intrinsic motivation, firstly, as a teacher, one should make students realize the importance of English in the modern social life and lead students to observe and find the facts. Make sure that students know that society is in great need of the people with good English, and they must understand “who has grasped English, who has got a necessary skill to serve the human society”. And the learning motivation is activated to learn this language (Yu, 2017). Secondly, teachers can create a relaxing and encouraging atmosphere in English classes. Nowadays the new idea and new methods sprung up like mushrooms in the academic classroom; English teachers should put more emphasizes on creating an ideal environment for language using rather than just had plenty full of plans. Only in this way can L2 learners grasp the language by practicing in a relatively real situation so that students can express their opinions and not feel embarrassed when they make mistakes. A successful class does not merely mean how much a teacher has taught, but also means how often and how much his students have practiced and how much they have learned. So it is very important and necessary for an English teacher to create an learning environments in which students play a leading role. Thirdly, Teachers should spare their efforts to create conditions, making students experience the feeling of success and establish learning confidence. He Jianqiang has made a questionnaire to survey 400 seventh grade students in China about what reason causes foreign language learners to lose learning motivation; he found out motivation is at the top list. He believed that what these students need most is reward and encouragement. As a result, teachers should give more positive feedback and tolerance to students. Giving encouragement and praise can help to enhance their motivation of learning. Students are guided to set short-term goals, so that they can make progress regularly and learn English willingly with full of enjoyment. Last but not the least, design the activities for the whole class. Good classroom activities can motivate students most, so teachers should design situation dialogues and games elaborately before class and make the students speak as much as they can. And discussions and debates are very helpful to the students on the macro level. Their motivation may become stronger by what they have seen and what they have done. Teachers can also afford them materials to give full scope to creativity by using it.

**Suggestions for Self-Confidence**

According to the affective filter hypothesis, when a language learner lacks confidence, motivation, and holds antipathy, the psychological barrier will be strengthened, which makes the emotion filtered. The more the affective filter is, the less input is allowed to absorbed by learners. Therefore, in the process of teaching, teachers
should take students’ individual differences into consideration and develop their potentials. For example, for students who excel in listening and speaking, teachers should provide appropriate opportunities to show themselves in the classroom. But for students who are weak in oral English, the teacher can play their strength in other areas (grammar, vocabulary) in order to enhance confidence and improve self-image. Teachers’ feedback, comments to students, as well as teaching method employed have an impact on students’ self-confidence. It is better to develop learners ability according to their characteristics and specialties, help them improve self-image, reduce anxiety, and enhance self-confidence. In addition, the teacher should respect students and make them confident with inspiring emotion. Sukhomlinsky once said:

> the more we go into students’ inner world and experience their thoughts and feelings, the more we come to realize a truth: when we affect students’ inner world, we should no damage the most sensitive part of their heart--people’s self esteem. (1983, p. 21)

In classroom, the teachers should not consider their dignity and authority first, strain the classroom atmosphere, and lower the efficiency of teaching. Relevant experiments have approved that as the age is older and grade is higher, learning outcomes are poorer and produce reverse psychology after being criticized. As a result, the teachers should learn more art of teaching and help students to build self-confidence in learning and life.

**Suggestions for Language-Culture Connection**

In language teaching, cultivating students’ cross-cultural awareness is the important means of mastering language and obtaining useful information. It is a fundamental channel for students to learn politics, economy, history, religion, and customs, but is an important task of English learning and means as well. In the process of teaching, English teachers should not only introduce cultural background knowledge to students in classes, but also deal with cultural factors puzzling students. Compared to the difference between English and Chinese, we come to realize that there are some similarities existing among different speech communities. Therefore, the commonality and regularity between these two languages can be taught to students, making students constantly find the common place in English and Chinese. In addition, English teachers can properly arrange native language reading training to improve native language reading skills and enrich English cultural background knowledge. Since Chinese is very important for foreign language learning, teachers should make the best use of the function of positive transfer of native language. What’s more, English teachers should formulate feasible reading teaching programs to exert learner’s potential. During the teaching process, the warming-up activities with abundant cultural backgrounds will motivate greatly the students’ enthusiasm into learning the further tasks.

**Conclusion**

This paper has illustrated some learning theories and some suggestions about the applications of intrinsic motivation, self-confidence, and language-culture connection in second language classroom, which influence powerfully the language learning. Several implications can be derived from the above discussion. Obvious implications are that the teacher should try to inspire the students’ intrinsic motivation by creating a relaxing and encouraging atmosphere and the teacher should take students’ individual differences into account in order to develop their potentials. The stimulation of intrinsic motivation can cultivate students’ self-learning abilities. In the long term, students’ interest in learning can be aroused and pay more efforts to learning. Besides, the
improvement of self-confidence not only can stimulate students motivation for learning but also develop their personal potentials. Finally, the reinforcement of language-culture connection can promote students knowledge background of different cultures and thus improve their understanding of cultures. In this teaching practice of foreign language, teachers should help students to make full use of positive transfer of mother tongue to learn language.

Reference