

# Instruction and Learning Styles & Strategies in Second Language Acquisition

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## 1. Introduction

During the last four decades, a growing realization on the relation of individual differences and language learning has awoken considerable awareness that personal cognitive abilities including intelligence, aptitude as well as emotion, motivation, in many aspects play a part in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Thus the instruction in language learning and teaching should be considered by teachers and scholars to match the students' variety of learning styles and strategies with regard to the categories of numerous cognitive features. In this paper, firstly, the Instructive language Learning based on the relevant theories and studies will be introduced and analyzed, and then the Learning Styles and Strategies will be discussed as well. Next, the similarities and distinctions of the two topics will be elaborated respectively as well as the link between the two. Lastly, further emphasis on the pedagogical implication and function will be addressed and explored.

## 2. Instructed Language Learning

### 2.1 Studies Based on Direct and Indirect Intervention

A number of studies have shown that the instruction can largely facilitate language learning in many levels of language, such as vocabulary, grammar, and functions (Ellis, 2005; Krashen, 1981; Long, 1983). According to Ellis (2005), the instruction in language learning refers to the intervention in the learning process, which can be

categorized into two types, direct intervention, and indirect intervention. Specifically, the two intervention taking place in White's (1988) Type A and Type B Curriculum indicate that the structural syllabus and an accuracy-oriented methodology in Type A, while a series of "tasks" and communicative conditions in Type B. Long (1991) further distinguishes the two approaches to "focus on forms" and "focus on form", which can be overall addressed as form-focused instruction (FFI). Similarly to White, the former one requires the approaches planned previously, and the latter one concentrates on "tasks" in activities or communications. Thus the aim of the direct intervention and indirect intervention can be simply interpreted as "skill-getting" and "skill getting" into "skill using" (Widdowson, 1998).

### 2.2 Ten Principles on Teaching Consideration

In order to facilitate language teaching for a basis of argument and reflection, Ellis (2005) provides another contribution, ten principles, designed in relation to teachers in different settings. Instruction in principle 1 ensures the learners to develop the rich repertoire of formulaic expression and the rule-based competence. Instruction in principle 2 ensures the learners to focus on meaning predominantly. Instruction in principle 3 ensures the learners to focus on form. Instruction in principle 4 promotes focusing on developing implicit knowledge of the second language without neglecting the explicit knowledge. Instruction in principle 5 promotes taking account of the learners' built-in syllabus. Instruction in principle 6 requires extensive second language input when instructs

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language learning. Instruction in principle 7 requires an opportunity for output when instructs language learning. Instruction in principle 8 centers on developing the second language proficiency in interaction. Instruction in principle 9 requires taking into account of the individual differences among the learners. Instruction in the principle 10 requires examining the learners' second language proficiency on both the free and controlled productions. Although the general principles draw on a large scale of theoretical perspectives, the constraints are apparently on focusing more on classroom settings and less on social contexts.

### 3. Learning Styles & Strategies in Language Acquisition

#### 3.1 Definition of Two Concepts

For many years there is a growing consensus that the two variables, learning styles and learning strategies, contribute to language success in numerous EFL and ESL researches (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990, 1995; Carrell et al, 1996; Littlemore 2001). The notion of style refers to the consistent and enduring characteristics of intellectual functioning as well as the type of personality that differentiates one from the other (Brown, 2007, p. 119). As for learning style, that includes affective, cognitive and physiological factors, which indicate the learner's perception, interaction, and response to the learning environment around them (Keefe, 1979). About the notion of strategy, that refers to a specific method of achieving a task or designing for manipulating certain information (Brown, 2007), and the learning strategy was also defined by Cohen (1998) to indicate the certain behavior and techniques that consciously selected by learners and may enhance the language learning.

#### 3.2 The Relationship Between Learning Styles and Learning Strategies

Generally, the level of awareness, intentionality, and stability differentiate the learning styles from the learning strategies (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Reid, 1998). Specifically, learning styles are internal traits and cannot be consciously perceived and used, learning strategies are on the contrary consciously used by the students to facilitate their learning as the external skills (Reid, 1998). Though distinction as they have, the two notions relate closely in terms of the affective and cognitive factors as the predictors of language proficiency (Li & Qin, 2006). Brown (2007) further asserted that learning strategy directly links with the innate learning style or other personal factors, and cannot operate by itself. With reference to the relationship

between the two terms, learners may prefer to know their learning styles in order to examine their prior learning strategies or explore a better one to adapt to the distinctive learning contexts. The teachers may also adopt the effective teaching methods to match the diversity of students, in regard to their different learning styles. Concerning about this, many instruments used to identify the learner's styles and strategies are provided by the scholars. Among those, Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) is the most widely used instrument, which encompasses 50 items divided into 6 categories and relevant strategies. In this sense, SILL may facilitate the learners to identify their preferences and adopt matching strategies.

However, the cognitive elements in learning styles are rather complex, though the inventory may aid the students in many respects, the teachers should responsibly guide the students to utilize the strategies in practice. Personally, according to the size of the students (40-50) of one class, and it's common in Chinese colleges/universities or in other developing countries, the instrument can facilitate the students to know themselves, but not easy for teachers to concern all the different styles the students exposed when they ponder over which teaching methods should be used or avoided through the teaching procedure.

### 4. Distinctions and Relation Between Instruction and Learning Styles & Strategies

As analyzed above, the apparent distinction between the instruction and learning styles and strategies have been indicated in the concepts, the prior one focuses on the outside intervention in the process of language learning, whereas the other one means the learners' innate characteristics and the adopting learning methods based on the innate factors. Though different as they are, they both derive from the consideration of cognitive elements in language learning and aims at improving the language proficiency. Especially, Wenden(1985) firstly asserted that the learner "autonomy" should be one of the most vital aims of language teaching. Cohen (1998) also used the term of styles and strategies-bases (SSBI) instruction to emphasize the link between the style and strategy. Moreover, Chamot (2005) concluded that if comparing with asking students to use some strategies, the explicit instruction is far more effective and can foster metacognition as well as the ability to know their thinking and learning processes. One area of language learner strategies start with Rubin (1975), and he pointed out that a good language learner can also teach us. While the students may benefit from the

teacher's instruction to foster their learning strategies, the teachers, if mindful of students' needs and variations, can also benefit from the good learner strategies and successful learning across different cultures and contexts. Therefore, it is necessary to further discuss the pedagogical implication pertaining to the two themes.

## 5. Incorporating SBI/SSBI into the Classroom (Pedagogical Implication)

### 5.1 Identifying the Students' Learning Styles and Strategies

Teachers in China seldom explore the individual's style and strategy before they launch a new teaching phase, partly because of the large size of students in the class, but for most, lacking the awareness of the function towards this field plays a part. Teacher-Centered teaching methods are dominant in class for decades, and the root-learning methods are also doggedly employed by the students to date. Traditionally, all these are influenced by Chinese ideology and custom, but in terms of the SLA, it needs other more consideration of the students' diversity and the way to increase not decrease the interest of language learning. Cohen (2010) asserted that the learner should know their learning style preference and learning strategies and the relation between them before they start their language learning trajectory. The SILL questionnaire or other instruments can be introduced to our students, and teachers can also discuss the result of such style questionnaires with further suggestion or instruction. I personally support this action as Brown (2007) pointed that the awareness of one's learning styles and strategies does not merely refer to the classroom learning, which may extend beyond the classroom and contribute to the lifelong learning of our students.

### 5.2 Effective Instruction in Specific Domain

Among numerous studies on comparing the effectiveness of explicit and implicit instruction, as examined in Norris and Ortega's (2001) meta-analysis, the explicit instruction is proved to be more effective. As mentioned above, a good language learner's strategies may provide the implication to teachers with regard to the relevant teaching methods. In order to explore the effects of strategy instruction in various skill areas, a number of studies pertaining to the specific domain, listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar, are recommended in Cohen (2010). Taking listening and reading, for example, Cohen organized the Harris and Grenfell's (2008) study that a quasi-experimental study involving 120 samples from 12-13 years old who were deployed

into experimental and controlled classes with French lessons. After 9 months, the students in the experimental classes incorporating strategy instruction were proved to be more advanced than the controlled classes without the instruction input. The result of this study identified that all students regardless of their bilingual status or gender and prior attainment or attitude could benefit from the explicit strategy instruction. Another recommended study is about the willingness of ESL students in Singapore with reading instruction (Zhang, 2008). This 2-month quasi-experimental study involves classroom activities, within which 99 college-bound ESL students with average 18 ages were conducted with a social constructivist approach. Then the result of this study showed that the experimental students benefit from the strategy-based instructional instruction in their comprehension improvement. Generally, more studies proved that the teachers' instruction played a role in students' language learning.

### 5.3 Some Implication from Ellis's 10 Principles

Ellis's 10 principles concern a variety of settings, in which some opinions correspond to my situations and provide me with significant guidance. First, compared with the explicit knowledge, the implicit knowledge is unconsciously held and it is can only be verbalized when it is made explicit. But as many researchers' views, the implicit knowledge should be emphasized as the ultimate goal in teachers' instruction, for this type of knowledge underlies the confidence and fluency in communication. Second, drawing the experience of L1 acquisition, the child achieved full language competence by massive amounts of language input between 2-5 years. This is powerful evidence to language teachers that we should ensure the L2 to become a medium in class and try to create adequate opportunities to make students exposed in language atmosphere. Last, combining with the language input, the output should also be concerned for the improvement of second language proficiency. Chinese students used to complain that they have rare opportunities to use English and the fast language attrition makes them frustrated. This implies the teachers that lacking oral interaction and conversation will make the L2 ability the students have acquired declines fast. So far, plentiful studies showed, effectively, the instruction contributes to the language learning, the more significant consideration, therefore, is the right and matching type of instruction which a mindful teacher should adopt.

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