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Field Independent/Dependent Learning Styles and L2 Acquisition

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Learning styles

Imagine you have just arrived in a foreign country whose language you neither speak nor read. You are at the airport and your contact person is not there to meet you. To make matters worse, your luggage is missing. It's 2 A.M. and airport staff are scarce, and those that are present don't speak English. What will you do? Your response to this question will depend largely on the "cognitive styles" you happen to bring to bear, your general predisposition toward processing new information or challenges in a particular way (Skehan: 1991). For instance, if you are "ambiguity tolerant," you will not get easily flustered by your unfortunate circumstances. If you are "reflective," you will exercise patience. If you are "field independent," you will be able to focus on the relevant details and not be distracted by unnecessary details (Brown: 1994).

The way we learn things in general and the particular approach we adopt when dealing with problems is said to depend on a somewhat mysterious link between personality and cognition; this link is referred to as cognitive style. When cognitive styles are related to an educational context, they are generally referred to as "learning styles," cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment (Keefe: 1979).

In theory, there exist as many learning styles as there are learners, and the practical implications of learning styles for teaching-learning interaction are numerous. Nevertheless, only a few of the possible number of styles have received the attention of L2 researchers in recent years; one of the most well-researched areas is "field independence" (FI) or "field dependence" (FD). FI/FD refers to how people perceive and memorize information (Chapelle: 1995).

Field independence and field dependence

FI hinges on the perceptual skill of "seeing the forest for the trees." A person who can easily recognize the hidden castle or human face in 3-D posters and a child who can spot the monkeys camouflaged within the trees and leaves of an exotic forest in coloring books tend toward a field independent style. The "field" may be perceptual or it may be abstract, such as a set of ideas, thoughts, or feelings from which the task is to perceive specific subsets. Field dependence is, conversely, the tendency to be 'dependent' on the total field so that the parts embedded within the field are not easily perceived, though that total field is perceived most clearly as a unified whole (Brown: 1994).

There are advantages and disadvantages to FI and FD learning styles and both are important for L2 learning. The FI learner excels in classroom learning which involves analysis, attention to details, and mastering of exercises, drills, and other focused activities. The FD learner, by contrast, seems to achieve a higher degree of success in everyday language situations beyond the constraints of the classroom; tasks requiring interpersonal communication skills.

Listed below are the principal characteristics of the two cognitive styles and the implications of each for L2 learning (Ellis 1993; based on Hawkey: 1982).
Field independence | Field dependence
---|---
1. Impersonal orientation  
i.e. reliance on internal frame of reference in processing information | 1. Personal orientation  
i.e. reliance on external frame of reference in processing information
2. Analytic  
i.e. perceives a field in terms of its component parts; parts are distinguished from background | 2. Holistic  
i.e. perceives field as a whole; parts are fused with background
3. Independent  
i.e. sense of separate identity | 3. Dependent  
i.e. the self view is derived from others
4. Socially sensitive  
i.e. greater skill in interpersonal/social relationships | 4. Not so socially aware  
i.e. less skilled in interpersonal/social relationships

**FI/FD Checklist**

Students can enhance their learning power by being aware of style areas in which they feel less comfortable—and by working on the development of these—thus, providing avenues to foster their intellectual growth (Eliason in Kang: 1999). Similarly, teachers can identify strong style patterns in their classes and make effective use of such information by devising lesson plans which accommodate individual learning style preferences. The writer has created the following learning styles checklist to enable EFL teachers to gauge their learners' tendencies towards FI/FD. Although this kind of assessment is not comprehensive, it does indicate students' preferred general learning styles. Learners whose responses tend toward the right-hand side of the list, indicate a preference for FD, conversely, those who check more on the left show a preference for FI.

**FIELD INDEPENDENT/DEPENDENT CHECKLIST**

Instructions to L2 learners: Check one box in each item that best describes you. Boxes A and E would indicate that the sentence is very much like you. Boxes B and D would indicate that the sentence is more or less like you. Box C would indicate that you have no particular inclination one way or the other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I have no problem concentrating amid noise and confusion.</td>
<td>I need a quiet environment in order to concentrate well.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I enjoy analysing grammar structures</td>
<td>I find grammar analysis tedious and boring.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I feel I must understand every word of what I read or hear.</td>
<td>I don't mind reading or listening in the L2 without understanding every single word as long as I 'catch' the main idea.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I think classroom study is the key to effective language learning.</td>
<td>I think communication is the key to effective language learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I prefer working alone to working with other people.</td>
<td>I really enjoy working with other people in pairs or groups.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Receiving feedback from other</td>
<td>I find feedback useful as a means of...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
people really doesn't affect my learning at all.
understanding my problem areas.

Implications: Problems related to too much field independence

Cognitive tunnel vision limits learners with a strong FI tendency and prevents them from seeing the big picture. While they get "stuck" on unfamiliar vocabulary or ambiguous grammar structures, their FD counterparts will have already understood the gist of a written or spoken discourse--without, however, having caught the precise meaning of every word. Seen in this light, the FD learner has the advantage of overlooking problems in order to see the general configuration of a problem or idea. But how can FI learners be taught to ignore details or tolerate ambiguity when understanding the main idea of a reading or verbal discourse is more important--as is nearly always the case in real-life contexts? The following lesson plan provides an attempt at a solution to the the problem of excessive field independence.

Lesson plan

Reading strategy training (especially for field independent learners): Crossing Out Unfamiliar Items

This lesson plan has been devised to teach learners to develop the habit of forgoing unfamiliar items for main idea comprehension and may be used most effectively as a segment of a series of lessons, each structured around a specific reading strategy (eg, reading for gist, scanning for details, crossing out subordinate details, etc). Naturally, this lesson plan can have as its theme a variety of topics and is given here merely as a sample from which teachers might draw ideas: any number of topics can be substituted for the one given here. Teachers should choose a reading context they feel would be of general interest to their learners.

Learners/Skills Level: Adult ESL/EFL Students/Intermediate-Advanced

Preparation Time: 30 minutes

Approximate Class Time: 50 minutes - 1 hour

Main Focus Objectives: Build learner confidence as regards ability to understand difficult texts. Assist learners in adopting and using reading strategies which will boost their reading rate proficiency while increasing their overall reading comprehension.

Necessary Materials: Some basic visual props (eg, pages from an art magazine), news article related to lesson theme which is to be divided in half, photocopies for students, clock.

Incidental Objectives: Help field independent learners 'overlook' problem areas in order to focus on main idea. Increase learner interest in reading rate proficiency. Increase learner motivation to engage in L2 reading more often. Stimulate reflection on the sociolinguistic similarities/ differences between the native and target language cultures.

Warm-up Activity: The Blues
As a visual aid, the teacher may choose to walk quietly around the classroom holding up a few examples of art where shades of blue are particularly appealing or striking, such as in the the Impressionist work of Monet, or in Picasso's Blue Period. Another option is to read off a few lines of poetry and/or popular song lyrics that speak about the blues, such as "My love is blue," etc.

Teacher: "The blues. What does it mean to 'have the blues'? How do you feel when you've got the blues?" Elicits random responses.

"Do you know any other colloquial expressions in English that mean to feel sad?" (Possible responses may include "to be down in the mouth," "to be down in the dumps," etc.)

"What about in your native language? What expressions do you know?" Elicits a few examples. May elect to provide examples from another language (eg, Italian: Avere il morale sotto i piedi, Essere a terra, Etc.)

"You know, cultures differ in the ways they express the experience of feeling blue. They also differ in the ways they view and react to sadness. In some European countries and in the United States feeling sad is sometimes thought of as something negative, or even abnormal, and is often treated with prescription medicine. Is this the case in your country too? What do people usually do to get over feeling blue in your country? What do you do?" Elicits comments.

**Activity 1: Timed Reading**

Teacher hands out text: an excerpt from a recent magazine article (i.e, first half) on how different cultures respond to feeling blue.

"Read though the passage quickly, but not so fast that you miss the overall meaning. I'm going to time the reading and keep time on the board. Note how long it takes you to read and understand the text." Class reads the text while the teacher times the students.

**Activity 2: Crossing Out Unfamiliar Items**

"OK. Here is another passage from the same article. This time, while you read take your pencil and cross out all the unfamiliar words you encounter and continue reading. Again, write down how long it takes you to read through the passage." Class reads the second text while the teacher keeps time.

**Analysis**

"Was it possible to catch the main idea of the passage even without understanding all the vocabulary?" Elicits responses and directs the focus of the class discussion toward the possibility of reading texts without stopping to look up all the unfamiliar words in the dictionary.

"When and where might this way of reading be most useful?" Elicits responses, or provides answers if students produce none (eg: on the bus when time and/or resources are limited, etc).

"Notice how your time improved with the second reading. When you read difficult material in the future, instead of using your pencil to cross out unfamiliar words you can use your mind to cancel them...and get on with your reading! Now, this is really the key point of this reading strategy: that you develop the ability to focus on comprehension rather than allowing yourself to repeatedly get stuck on unfamiliar vocabulary and thereby lose the flow of the discourse."
Context Clues (Optional):

At this point, the teacher might wish to engage the class in identifying the specific "context clues" in the second passage which helped facilitate main idea reading comprehension. This is done in pairs or small groups. (If the students are not familiar with the concept of "context clues," this is an ideal opportunity to introduce them to this important reading strategy.)

Research Assignment

Students research a magazine, newspaper, or internet article in English related to the blues. This could include anything from the Black American Blues music tradition to Picasso's early artistic development, historical investigation into the Elisabethan origins of 'blues' expressions in English, or merely some learner reflections as to why the color blue might be so often associated with sad moods in colloquial English. After having read the article they've selected or reflected long enough, students next write a brief summary.

References


