Introduction

Second language acquisition is a highly cumulative process. Regardless of the motivation level of the learner, language learning will take a long time. This is attributable to the fact that language is a complex system of sounds, words, syntactic structures and ways of expressing meaning. To learn a new language is to acquire another prism through which one sees the world and exchanges information and thoughts with others.

Because a foreign language is learned in an environment where it is not the primary vehicle of daily interaction, students must do more than merely rely on classroom instruction (Oxford, 1990). Given that the target language (TL) is significantly different from L1 (mother tongue), language learners have to re-order their thought patterns and modes of speech to conform to the idiom of the new language. This is a cognitive process that calls for a tremendous amount of diligent practice.

This paper addresses seven habits of highly effective language learners. It discusses instructional strategies that have proven effective in the teaching of foreign languages the world over. Our ultimate goal is to provide foreign language learners with useful tips that have transformed language apprenticeship from a harrowing experience
to a gleeful ride toward communicative proficiency. The pedagogical paradigms discussed here would equip foreign language instructors with the savvy needed to face the onerous task of teaching adult learners whose attitudes toward learning are distinct from those of adolescent learners. Assumptions regarding second language acquisition abound. For this reason, I will share with readers one such assumption for the purpose of generating critical thoughts on what it means to be a good language learner:

“Yes! You can learn a foreign language. Learning a foreign language is not difficult. It is a natural process in all societies. A billion plus Chinese and Arabs learned the two hardest languages in the world. They did that under adverse weather conditions, rampant pestilence, wars, hunger, no Defense Language Institute, no assessment and selection, and no entertaining technology” (Reaction from an anonymous foreign language instructor to a student who complains about feeling lost all the time during her language course).

What’s wrong with this picture? What underlying assumptions could be made from these statements? What do foreign language instructors need to know about pedagogy, andragogy, and the characteristics of language learners? Here are some points for discussion stemming from these questions:

- Pedagogy is distinct from Andragogy
- L1 acquisition and L2 acquisition do not necessarily constitute a continuum
- Postponed application of knowledge for child learners is different from immediacy of application of knowledge for adult learners
- Acquaintance with students’ preferred learning styles is a vital pedagogical tool
- Knowledge of students’ interests and reservoir of experience is crucial for instructed second language learning

These concepts call for further elucidation. Andragogy is the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1984, 1990). It is based on cardinal assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners who differ from adolescent or child learners. Adult learners seek to know the reason for learning new material. As persons mature, their self-concepts move from being dependent personalities toward one of being self-directing human beings. They accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning. Adults’ readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly toward the developmental tasks of their social roles. Their
perspective on time changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to
immediacy of application. As a general rule, adults are more impatient than adolescent
learners in the pursuit of learning objectives.

Pedagogy is child-focused instruction. Children are known to be natural language
learners, for very good reasons. They have learned their mother tongue with relative
ease. They have no inhibitions. They are risk takers. There are linguistic and
psychological theories that explain children’s seemingly effortless second-language
acquisition ability (Gass and Selinker, 2008; Omaggio, 1993). We will not get to the
crux of these theories at this juncture. Suffice it to say that knowledge of the
characteristics of learners provides useful insights into how language learning occurs.
Effective language teachers take cognizance of the differences in the developmental
levels and individual characteristics of the students they teach. Understanding the
principles of child development and the characteristics of good language learners can
provide teachers with the skills necessary for establishing a continuum between L1 and
L2 acquisition.

Successful language teachers know that students come to the classroom with a wealth of
knowledge. In addition to cultural information, there are other kinds of knowledge that
students bring to the language classroom, not least of which is mastery of the grammar
and morphology of their mother tongue(s). Knowledge of students’ reservoir of prior
knowledge, and personal learning habits can be very useful for language instructors in
the planning of learning tasks as the following discussion will illustrate.

1. Learner Autonomy

Effective learners tend to be self-directed (autonomous) actors in the language learning
process (Benson, 2000). They assume responsibility for their own learning, by deciding
what, where, and how they learn. Autonomous learners do not depend on instructors
for the creation of knowledge; rather they assume responsibility for their own learning.
There are three levels of learner autonomy: psychological, methodological and
motivational. Adults are intrinsically motivated to learn. Put differently, they are
motivated by internal incentives and curiosity, rather than external rewards. The term
‘motivation’ is a complex term. Whether we view it as instinct, humanism, behaviorism,
cognition or socio-education the fact remains that ‘motivation’ is one of the basic
aspects of the human mind, and most teachers agree that it plays a critical role in
determining achievement and underachievement in any given learning situation (Dornyei, 1994, 2006). Motivation is the key to successful language learning.

What are the pedagogical implications of the foregoing postulations? How could language instructors utilize this information profitably in the classroom? We deem it necessary for foreign language instructors to consider the option of involving learners in the design of learning tasks, definition of content, and the selection of methods to be used for evaluating outcomes of learning. Language instructors must never lose sight of the fact that adult learners are contributors to the creation of knowledge. Ipso facto, they should be involved in the planning and evaluation of learning outcomes. Learner autonomy could be problematic at times given that it requires teachers and learners to trade roles, as it were. Some teachers may feel threatened by the likelihood of losing power in the classroom. The remedy to this sort of problem is to acknowledge the fact that working in tandem with students in the conception of learner-centered tasks is not tantamount to losing one’s position as the authority figure in the classroom. Rather, it should be viewed as a collaborative endeavor intended to empower learners and render teaching student-oriented and interactive (Brown, 1994).

2. Identifying the purpose of learning tasks

Effective language learners tend to identify the purpose, classification and demands of learning tasks (Bloom, 1956). Bloom elucidates these concepts as follows: Task purpose is the motivation for carrying out the learning task. Task classification defines the kinds of learning tasks to be performed. Task demand refers to strategies to be used to accomplish the task. It should be noted that task analysis is a highly individualized procedure that may vary from learner to learner. Bloom’s taxonomy (see image below) sheds ample light on how these concepts correlate in the language learning process.

Bloom came up with this pyramid that describes six levels within the cognitive domain. It shows how learners process learning material, from the simple recall of facts at the lowest level, through increasingly more complex and abstract mental levels, to the highest order which is classified as evaluation. Knowledge deals with remembering; Comprehension is accomplished through an interpretive process or describing learning material in one’s own words; application is synonymous with problem-solving; analysis is analogous to breaking down knowledge into component parts; synthesis enables the learner to combine separate bodies of knowledge to form a whole; at the
level of evaluation the language learner forms opinions or judgments about the material s/he is processing. This pyramid sums up what is generally referred to as Bloom’s Taxonomy.

What are the pedagogical implications of using Bloom’s Taxonomy in the foreign language classroom? In other words, how could instructors put this knowledge into profitable use during the language course? In our opinion, targeted instruction would help learners select appropriate strategies for performing specific learning tasks at different cognitive levels. At the elementary stage of the language course, instructors could start off with lower-order thinking (LOTS) tasks that require recall of information and then proceed to higher-order thinking (HOTS) tasks as learners become more and more comfortable and better equipped with the linguistic wherewithal to handle more cognitively demanding tasks. Instructors should design learning tasks that require learners to go from mere recall of information to more cognitively demanding tasks such as analysis and evaluation of knowledge.

3. Learning the target language in context

Good language learners seek to acquire linguistic competency simultaneously with cultural competency (Finkbeiner, 2008), the more so because linguistic competency is a function of cultural competency. Put differently, an inseparable part of acquiring linguistic competency is an awareness of the target language culture. Linguistic competency is generally complemented by target culture competency in the learning process. What does this mean for instructors of foreign languages? What pedagogical implications do these facts harbor for these teachers? We suggest that learning tasks be created to reflect a wide range of motivations, cultural diversities, and final learning objectives (FLO’s). Final Learning objectives include: proficiency (traditional language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing), performance (operational abilities); area studies (knowledge of culture, society, people, politics, etc) and ancillary (miscellaneous) abilities. Individual and cultural diversities influence language learning decisions and choices. [i]

4. Knowledge of one’s preferred learning style(s)

Good language learners know what kind of learning style works best for them. A learning style is one’s consistent way of responding to and using stimuli in the context of learning. Stylistic preferences are usually presented in the form of bipolar opposites
(Reid, 1998) as seen below:

- Active---Reflective
- Sensing---Intuitive
- Visual---Verbal
- Sequential---Global

Learning styles could be defined as those educational conditions under which a student is most predisposed to learn. Stylistic preferences are not really concerned with "what" learners learn, but rather "how" they prefer to learn. Learning styles are variable. Thus, good language learners know how to get out of their comfort zone and experiment with new styles of learning. There is a myriad of instruments that would help learners know what their learning styles are. Felder and Soloman Index of Learning Styles (1988) is one such instrument. It should be noted that the generality of language learners are unaware of their learning styles and if left to their own devices, would be unlikely to explore new ways of processing learning material.

Of what benefit is knowledge of students’ preferred learning styles? How could this information be utilized profitably by language instructors? Instructors should create an interface between learning styles and teaching styles in order to maximize learning opportunities for students. Varying teaching styles to accommodate different learning styles in the language classroom would certainly pay off. Learners should be informed that knowledge of learning styles increases self-awareness; they should be encouraged to get out of their zone of comfort from time to time and adopt a different learning style if the first one doesn’t work. Learners should be urged to engage in style stretching so as to incorporate approaches to learning they have tended to resist in the past.

5. Evaluating one’s own learning progress

Good language learners constantly evaluate learning progress by tracking down causes of problems and coming to grips with challenges they encounter in the learning process (Anderson, 2008). Students should be required to generate individualized learning plans and portfolios that measure the progress they are making in the language course. These individual learning plans would serve as roadmaps that provide learners with some direction to follow as they grapple with language apprenticeship. What pedagogical implications do these ideas harbor for language instructors?

How could this information be utilized profitably by instructors and students? We
opine that instructors form the habit of periodically reviewing students’ individualized learning plans in portfolios developed by students themselves. The onus is on instructors to help learners attain the goals they set for themselves during the initial stages of the language course. Using these documents during advising/counseling sessions would enable teachers to measure the amount of progress students are making. It would also make it possible for them to provide remedial help to students whenever the need arises.

6. Good language learners are critical thinkers

Critical thinking results in purposeful, reasoned, and goal-oriented learning. Learners who continually reflect upon the learning process become better prepared to make conscious decisions about their learning (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). Adult learners are prone to the kind of learning that gets them involved in solving problems, formulating inferences and calculating likelihoods. What are the pedagogical implications for language instruction? How could this knowledge be integrated into curriculum design to help students learn better? Instructors should foster critical thinking in the language classroom by designing task-or problem-centered rather than content-centered curricula. Meta-cognition is a big term in language pedagogy; students have to be taught to think about thinking in the learning process.

7. Effective language learners tend to avoid the error trap in the learning process.

There is a clear distinction between mistakes (performance slips), and errors (evidence of learner’s incomplete language system), also called inter-language (Gass & Selinker, 2008). These researchers urge language instructors to make error analysis an integral part of instruction. As the nomenclature suggests, it is the type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make in producing TL, unlike contrastive analysis which focuses on errors made by instructors. This has weighty pedagogical implications for language instruction given that instructors could tap into these concepts in a bid to render teaching relevant to learners.

Instructors need to create an expectation of positive feedback for learners to profit from the effects of error correction. Gass and Selinker (2008:102) suggest that “Errors should be taken as red flags; they provide windows onto a system that is, evidence of the state of a learner’s knowledge of the L2.” Errors are not to be viewed solely as a
product of imperfect learning; rather they should be perceived as indications of learners’ attempt to figure out some system, that is, to impose regularity on the language they are exposed to. As such, errors are evidence of an underlying rule-governed system. Learners, on the other hand, should accept the fact that they will make mistakes in the language learning process. In sum, the practice of error correction should be used judiciously; it should be restricted to errors that are related to the pedagogic intent of the particular learning task. The decision to effect error correction or not should be linked to the focus of the learning event in which the error occurs. Roberts (1995) concludes that for corrective feedback to be effective, learners must both notice and understand the nature of the correction.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the truth of the matter is that the best teachers and the best-structured language programs cannot possibly teach students everything they need to know to function as linguists. Succeeding as linguists depends on learners going beyond what teachers and programs offer them in the classroom. As this study lucidly illustrates, effective language learning is deemed to be a three-pronged enterprise involving trained teachers, well-structured programs and learners who know themselves well enough to be entrusted with the critical responsibility of directing their own learning.

Notes

[i] Adapted from notes on: Area Studies Content Area Final Learning Objectives for Basic Courses at DLLFLC, August 14, 2006.

Bibliography


(ed.) *Attention and Awareness in Foreign Language Learning* (pp.163-182).