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NEW VISTAS IN ELT:
EMPOWERING ENGINEERS FOR EMPLOYMENT

Selected Papers Presented in the Seminar Held on
17th And 18th April2015

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Learner Autonomy from the Perspective of a Language Teacher

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Abstract

The present paper aims at bridging the gap between the traditional teaching methods and the current learning trends. It proposes that the language teachers may have to help the language learners identify their own learning styles and strategies, to make them independent learners. In the process, the paper lists the popular learning style models and language learning strategies, and some of the difficulties faced by the second language learners. The

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940 15:7 July 2015**   **108**

paper suggests that by nurturing learner autonomy the present problems in language learning can be effectively addressed.

Key words: language learning styles, language learning strategies, learner autonomy.

Introduction

The present paper aims at bridging the gap between the traditional teaching methods and the current learning trends. It proposes that the language teachers may have to help the language learners identify their own learning styles and strategies, to make them independent learners. In the process, the paper lists the popular learning style models and language learning strategies, and some of the difficulties faced by the second language learners. The paper suggests that by nurturing learner autonomy the present problems in language learning can be effectively addressed.

In the context of changing global scenario, there are many desirable and undesirable changes taking place in every sphere of life including the field of education. It is true in the field of English language teaching and learning in engineering institutions in Tamil Nadu also. Education should prepare the learners for life and work. It can be made clear that:

1. All students are capable of learning, just at different levels and
2. Traditional teaching methods do not adequately take individual student mastery and achievement rates into account.

In this context, the present paper tries to help bridge the gap mentioned above by making the language teachers and language learners understand the learning process better, which in turn could reinforce the language learning, resulting in the learners gaining better language proficiency. In a way it can be said that in spite of the recent advances in the field of technology, human resource in the classroom can never be matched or replaced because of many major reasons like economy, personal concern and consistent regular updates and so on.

Objectives

The main objective of the paper is to bring out the importance of the role of the learner in the process of language learning. And it also tries to prove that using inventory

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questionnaires of learning styles and language learning strategies, language teachers can collect and analyse observable (and researchable) behaviours of the learners and promote self-organized, self-regulated learning in the language classroom more effectively.

Facts of Language Learning

It is a fact that the learners today do not stop with mere classroom learning. They use a wide range of media for learning the language outside the classroom as well. Some prefer to learn by watching a TV program or video available on internet. A few of them learn by listening closely and a few others try to imitate and speak like the person they admire in the video and a few more try to write like the model they have recently read. The study suggests steps to find out which one of these various forms of media attracts most of the learners alike and tries to bring the same to the classroom teaching as a teaching aid. It is believed that such an attempt would surely make classroom teaching more interesting and effective. In order to find out the preferences of the learners, a reliable questionnaire is very essential.

Learning Styles

A detailed survey was undertaken to find out what has already been done in a similar situation elsewhere and how they have identified the preferred learning styles of the learners. The researchers and scholars in this field have used a number of learning styles inventory questionnaires though many of them were not designed for the purpose of identifying language learning styles. However, these questionnaires have been used by the researchers with a view to read the minds of the learners and explore the process of learning. The recent researches in the area of language learning use the reliable and time tested research tools to observe and record the language learners' preferences of language learning for further analysis and eventually the findings lead to the emergence of a few universal patterns of language learning. The following is a brief list of learning style models (Graf, 2007) and their inventors:

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S. No.	Learning Style Models	Inventors
1	Personality Types	Myers – Briggs
2	Serialist / Holist / Versatilist Model	Pask
3	Deep, Surface and Strategic Learning Approach	Entwistle
4	Three bipolar dimension Model	Grasha - Riechmann
5	Cognitive style and brain lateralization Learning Style Model	Dunn and Dunn
6	Mind Styles Model	Gregorc
7	Experiential Learning Style Model	Kolb
8	Learning Style Model	Honey and Mumford
9	Whole Brain Model	Herrmann
10	Learning Style Model	Felder-Silverman
11	Perceptual Learning Styles	Reid

Though learning styles indicate the preferred styles of language learning, the specific strategies used for the same have to be identified to make sure whether the particular learner has chosen a suitable strategy that matches the person's preferred style of learning. Similarly, for identifying the strategies used frequently by the learners there are a number of strategy inventory questionnaires. The following is a list of types of language learning strategies (Hismanoglu, Vol. VI, No. 8) and their inventors:

S. No.	Types of Language Learning Strategies	Inventors
1	Three types of Language Learning Strategies	O'Malley et al. – 1985
2	Direct and Indirect Strategies – I	Wenden and Rubin – 1987
3	Direct and Indirect Strategies – II	Oxford – 1990

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4	Five groups of learning strategies	Stern – 1992

Variables and Constants

The study suggests that the learner's personal perception about one's own learning styles and strategies used for language learning to be assumed as <u>variables</u> and all the other factors like curriculum, syllabus, infrastructure, human resource and the methods of teaching / delivery / facilitation to be assumed as <u>constants</u>.

Variables	**Constants**
The learner's personal perception about one's own: • Language Learning Styles and • Strategies preferred and used for language learning	• Curriculum, • Syllabus, and • Infrastructure • Human resource and • The methods of teaching / delivery / facilitation

Now, by changing one of the variables the changes in the behavioural patterns of the learners may be observed and recorded. A close monitoring of these observable (and researchable) behaviours of the learners reveals the major, minor or neglected learning styles and most or least preferred language learning strategies. Grouping the learners into one of these categories further unveils interesting information regarding their general language proficiency and helps the researcher understand the underlying principles of their proficiency. Further research based on the learners' gender, background, exposure and similar external factors form the basis for a better plan of action.

Strategies Vs Styles

It should be noted that more than styles, the strategies used by the learners play an important role in the process of language learning. Meanwhile, the study does not favour any particular learning style or strategy as the best or the suitable one to be prescribed to other learners, it only attempts to show that some learners are comfortable with a set of learning styles and prefer to use a set of strategies. This knowledge about the learners, if identified by administering any one of these styles and strategies questionnaire, will promote both language teaching and learning in general and produce desirable results. As a facilitator, the

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teacher may examine the available facilities suitable for a set of learners and accordingly design modules suitable for them. The learners with the proper guidance can develop on their own, the art of self-governance to become independent learners and proficient users of the target language.

Problems of the Language Learners

One can feel the effect of the paradigm shift from the teacher to the learner in this era of information explosion. For an active smart learner, the classroom instructions just serve as a starting point for a journey in that direction. Here the learner is in a sort of well-protected environment where the learner enjoys the guidance and support of the teachers ensuring the development of accurate and appropriate usage of the items being learnt. But, today most of the independent learners, in order to have an edge over others, do use a number of latest media as tools for language learning. In fact these over-enthusiastic learners may miss the track completely and get totally engrossed in the particular media selected, because of lack of control or supervision.

Besides, the learner may have several unfavourable situations or problems like

- ✓ lack of exposure
- ✓ lack of self-interest
- ✓ lack of background knowledge
- ✓ lack of self-sustained motivation
- ✓ lack of opportunity to practice the language skills learned / acquired
- ✓ lack of recognition / nourishment or appreciation and / or
- ✓ lack of support, supervision / guidance / control.

Learner Autonomy

This study is based on the thought that 'Learner Autonomy' (Thanasoulas & Holec) is the only solution for all language learning problems. The cyclical nature of autonomous learning process involves different stages like identifying learning process, setting goals, planning learning, selecting resources, selecting strategies, practicing, monitoring progress, and assessment and revision based on self-reflection, self-motivation and

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interaction(Reinders). The autonomous learners could assume greater responsibility for and take charge of their own learning.

However, in order to make the learners assume greater control over their own learning, the teachers can step in at various stages into the cycle of learner autonomy. Particularly, it is important to help the learners become aware of and identify the styles and strategies that they already use, or could potentially use. But individual learners will always differ in their learning habits, interests, needs, and motivation and develop varying degrees of independence.

Conclusion

The impact of the changes caused by the outbreak of information explosion has an effect in turning even the art of language learning and teaching into a scientific one to some degree. Based on a few time-tested tools in the field of language learning data can be collected from the learners for further analysis and discover the styles of the learners and identify the strategies frequently preferred or used for language learning. The findings of the study may give a sort of deep insight into the minds of the language learners including the specific problems that they encounter during the process of language learning. Such information in turn may open up further venues of research to read the minds of the learners and finally making them proficient users of English.

Learning a language makes the learners ready to face life and work with confidence to accomplish their tasks more easily and effortlessly. As Language is life, more than subject knowledge, the knowledge of one's own language learning styles and strategies will surely make the learners feel more confident, feel better prepared to face the challenges of life and work. To achieve this end, language teachers can explore and use the available resources that may best suit the learners' preferred learning styles and strategies which in turn may help the learner become more independent or gain autonomy in learning.

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