

PSYCHOLOGY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

Editor: Matt Tittle (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

Putting Psychology into Practice for Language Learners and Teachers

Madeline E. Ehrman Foreign Service Institute

Mainstream psychology has played a key role in theories of learning and teaching. Second language acquisition has adapted a variety of models from cognitive, humanistic, and educational psychology. There is even a small body of work that uses concepts from clinical psychology. Among these are cognitive styles, especially field independence; language aptitude studies; approaches based on humanistic philosophies such as Counseling-Learning; exploitation of general educational psychology for learning strategies, motivation and learner autonomy; and exploration of ego boundaries and defensive style to language learning (e.g., Curran, 1972; Ehrman, 1998; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998; Leaver, 1997; Oxford, 1990; Williams & Burden, 1997).

Most of these sources in general psychology have offered hypotheses for research that is well documented in the SLA literature. However, relatively few of these research projects have resulted in systematic applications to language learning.

Various interventions such as methodologies (e.g., Community Language Learning, strategies workshops, student grouping by learning preference) have been tried but none with so much success that it has taken over the field. Instead, each research finding, each new instrument and the constructs it represents, contributes to an increasingly flexible toolbox for teachers, program managers, and, ideally, for learners. The drawback to this situation is that it depends almost entirely on the sophistication and flexibility of the user. The following describes an attempt to institutionalize research findings to add to the flexibility of the sophisticated but provide support for teachers and learners who need it. (A more complete description is available in Ehrman, 2001.)

At the US State Department's Foreign Service Institute (FSI), over 60 languages are taught to members of the foreign affairs community and their adult family members who are preparing for an overseas tour of duty. Instruction is intensive, long-term (24-88 weeks depending on the difficulty of the language for English speakers), and focused on ability to communicate effectively at levels needed for diplomatic functioning.

FSI has had a history of adopting methodologies and theories like the ones listed above but finding that they fail to become established. For example, I attempted a learning strategies workshop for students but found that a) their needs were so different that we could not reach everyone; and b) the information was provided outside the classroom and thus was often unavailable when needed. Something different was needed, and I decided not to oppose the differences among learners, but to make use of it.

For this purpose, I undertook a multiyear research project sponsored by FSI aimed at establishment of individual learner profiles during the 1990's. The project tried and discarded a variety of constructs and measurement instruments. As more and more students participated in the research project, some of their teachers asked us to provide special consultation to them and students who were having particular difficulty. By the mid-90's, we had an established set of instruments and interpretations that we could use with any student, and so began to offer diagnostics and an individual session to receive interpretation to all incoming students, on a voluntary basis. With strong support from FSI management, the initiative has spread to the entire School of Language Studies, and most incoming students and their teachers participate in Language Learning Consultation Service (LCS) activities.

Students take a set of diagnostic instruments, usually on their first day, receive a group explanation of what the instruments mean, and then can sign up for individual interpretation sessions. Individual sessions examine the results of the diagnostics in the light of the student's validation of them and the student's current and past language learning experience. The affective domain is a key element in these discussions and may override the cognitive factors, for example, when a student presents with extreme anxiety about learning, class dynamics, or the very high-stakes end-of-training test. The diagnostics include:

We see this program as a route to increasing learner autonomy, as learners gain more self-knowledge and can apply it to managing their own learning, and as teachers expand their perception of their role to include enhancing learner self-regulation and building true partnerships with their students.

The Learning Consultation Service has developed into a systematic application of insights from cognitive, humanistic, clinical, education, organizational, and even Skinnerian psychology. It builds on the understanding that every student is different from all the others, but at the same time, the differences fall into a limited set of functional categories that permit 'shortcuts' when designing interventions for those individuals.

The intensity, length of training, and high stakes of FSI language training justify this kind of resource investment. Other institutions and programs may be able to establish more limited interventions. In any event, new programs probably work best with small beginnings, as this one did.

Although what we do is shaped by FSI's context, some of the concepts might well work for other teaching and learning settings. For example, teaching staff at a university might begin with one model, and selected staff would learn to interpret and apply it to real individual situations. Others would learn to understand the model and be able to use it in discussions with colleagues and students, as well as apply some of the insights to just-in-time interventions.

REFERENCES:

- Briggs Myers, Isabel, Mary H. McCaulley, Naomi L. Quenk, and Allen L. Hammer (1998). *A Guide to the Development and Use of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, Third Edition*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press. Carroll, John & Sapon, Stanley M. (1959). *Modern Language Aptitude Test*. New York: Psychological Corporation.
- Curran, Charles A. (1972). *Counseling learning*. New York: Grune and Stratton.
- Ehrman, Madeline E. (1996d). *Understanding second language learning difficulties: Looking beneath the surface*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ehrman, M. E. (1998b). The learning alliance: Conscious and unconscious aspects of the second language teacher's role. *System* 26(1), 93-106.
- Ehrman, M. E. (2001). Bringing learning strategies to the learner: The FSI language learning consultation service. In J.E. Alatis and A. Tan (Eds.), *Language in our time: Bilingual education and official English, Ebonics and standard English, immigration and the Unz Initiative* (pp. 41-58). Washington DC: Georgetown University.
- Ehrman, Madeline E. and Dörnyei, Zoltán (1998a). *Interpersonal dynamics in second language education: The visible and invisible classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ehrman, Madeline E. and Betty Lou Leaver (forthcoming). "Development of a profile approach to learning style diagnosis." Unpublished manuscript.
- Hartmann, Ernest (1991). *Boundaries in the mind: A new psychology of personality*. New York: Basic.
- Leaver, B. L. (1998). *Teaching the whole class: Fifth Ed.* Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt. Oxford, Rebecca L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. New York: Newbury House.
- Williams, Marion, & Burden, Robert L. (1997). *Psychology for language teachers: A social constructivist approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

This column is intended to promote a dialogue for teachers of Slavic languages regarding the psychological aspect of language learning.

Submissions for future editions of this column should be addressed to

Valery Belyanin vbelynin@gmail.com