

Psychology And Language Teaching

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Over the years a considerable amount has been written about the methodology of language teaching. We have seen changes in language teaching methods from grammar translation to structural approaches, followed by functional, notional and communicative approaches. However, I will argue that, whatever method is followed, what is far more important is having a basic understanding of the psychology of language learners and teaching languages.

This is, of course, a vast topic, and one I attempted to tackle in the book 'Psychology for Language Teachers' (Williams and Burden, 1997). I felt that as language teachers we needed to understand more deeply the perspective of the learner, and thus I decided to investigate the field of Educational Psychology to see what light it could shed. I had a number of key questions in mind:

- What do we mean by learning?
- How do learners learn languages?
- What strategies do they use?
- What motivates learners to learn a language, and how can I influence their motivation?
- What aspects of the classroom environment affect learning?
- What sense do learners make of their successes and failures in learning?
- What can teachers do to help learners to learn most effectively?

In order to understand what is meant by learning it is important to make a distinction between learning as a mere transmission of knowledge, and learning as an individual construction of knowledge, known as constructivism. Learners make their own sense of the world in ways that are personally meaningful to them. They map new information onto old, and re-shape their understanding so that it is personally significant. However, this takes place within a social context; thus we can refer to a social constructivist approach to learning. It is this approach which underpins all of my own work.

The question of motivation leads us into what is meant by the term motivation. If we take a social constructivist approach, then we believe that motivation is concerned with learners making their own sense of the learning situation, and making their own decisions about their actions. We therefore reject the use of rewards and punishment, which are teacher-centred, and argue instead for enabling learners to make their own decisions about action.

This involves teaching learners to think; building up and developing their cognitive skills. Learners can be taught to think through the various curricular subjects (see Burden and Williams, 1998). However language teachers are in a strong position to design tasks for their learners which develop both language and cognitive skills, i.e. require thinking.

In considering what teachers can do to help learners to learn, I have been very much influenced by the powerful model of mediation proposed by the Israeli psychologist, Reuven Feuerstein. Feuerstein proposes 12 ways in which a teacher can mediate, all of which can be applied to the language classroom. Basically, teachers should convey clearly to learners what they need to do, why they should do it, and how it will be beneficial to their future development. In response, learners need to 'reciprocate' this intention so that they approach the task in a focussed and self-

directed way. Teachers also need to build up learners' confidence, teach them the strategies they need to learn the language, and develop feelings of belonging and individuality. Thus teachers are scaffolding learners towards becoming self-directed individuals who can function within a society. This considerably expands the role of the teacher, but at the same time can be an extremely rewarding experience for teachers.

Williams, M. and Burden, R. (1997) Psychology for language Teachers: a social constructivist approach. Cambridge: CUP.

Burden, R. and Williams, M. (1998) Thinking Through the Curriculum. London: Routledge.