

ASPECTS OF CLASSROOM LANGUAGE LEARNING BEHAVIOUR

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1. Introduction

In a foreign language classroom, like in any other classroom or interactional situation, individuals differ in their behaviour. In fact, it often happens that the ways in which people act or approach tasks are puzzling to observers. This is also true of language learners, whose learning behaviour often prompts teachers to wonder about it and to speculate why it is so. A simple answer might be that different behaviours are determined by a variety of factors, among which the most crucial ones are the learners' personality traits and their attitudes towards learning objectives. If this is so, it seems clear that in order to make teaching effective, teachers need to understand their students' actions. In result, understanding the ways in which learners learn will enhance classroom practices, which will ultimately make learning more effective. It is assumed here that plausible answers to teachers' queries may come from two sources: applied linguistics and educational psychology. This paper first intends to look at some psychological variables that influence learner behaviour and then attempts to consider their implications for practical, pedagogical purposes.

2. Learning behaviour

Learning behaviour can be characterized as a particular form of human conduct or activity. Behaviour is actions in general, while **classroom language learning behaviour**, the phrase used in the title, is concerned specifically with the actions performed by learners during a language class. A vital problem with understanding classroom learning behaviour is that the concept concerns issues that are both explicit and hidden. The visible portion of learning behaviour includes overt aspects of learner behaviour, such as turn-taking, attention, strategy use, etc. However, most of it seems to

be under the surface, and it is these hidden aspects of learning behaviour that are equally, if not more, important in classroom language learning. Teachers, unquestionably, need considerable insights into them.

Two important areas of learning behaviour can be distinguished. The first one, which draws mainly on contributions from psycholinguistics and general psychology, relates to *individual behaviour*. It includes such issues as personality traits, attitudes, motivation, perception, memory, etc. The other area, the knowledge of which is based predominantly on findings from sociolinguistics and social psychology, is concerned with *group behaviour*. It embraces such aspects as norms, roles, solidarity, and conflict that take place between the participants involved. It is important to emphasize that the behaviour of a group of learners is not to be understood by merely summing up the actions of the individuals in the group. The reason for this seems simple: in a group setting individuals act differently than they do when they act alone; while acting in a group its members may engage in behaviour that they might not even conceive of while acting individually. Thus, because in a classroom learners are both individuals and members of a group, they should be examined at the two levels.

Since language learning in a classroom is realized through interaction between the participants of a learning situation it is, evidently, a social event. Language learners, among other things, increasingly (with their developing competence) make use of the target language to make sense of the environment and to play a successful part in the social world around them. For this reason it is necessary for teachers to be well informed about the social factors which are involved in developing learners' competence as users of a foreign language.

It has to be assumed that a better understanding of classroom language learning behaviour will simultaneously result in more effective classroom management. If we accept the claim that the principal role of the foreign language teacher is to support the learner in the process of language acquisition, i.e. to help him make the best use of his learning potential, it will be clear that the teacher has to be a successful manager. The principal goals of the study of classroom language learning behaviour should be, therefore, to explain and to predict learner behaviour. The teacher needs this ability just to manage the learners' learning behaviour rationally. His success, and simultaneously theirs, will depend, on the one hand, on his understanding of why his students engage in certain activities rather than in others and on his ability to predict how they will respond to various actions that he might take, on the other.

3. Individual learning behaviour

Before group learning behaviour is looked into, it will be worth looking into individual learning behaviour first. It is generally accepted that learning is affected by a number of variables of which the most decisive ones in determining language learning behaviour are the following: learners' personality, attitudes, and motivation (cf. Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Ellis, 1994)

3.1. Personality

A person can be described in such general terms as *ambitious, quiet, aggressive, shy, passive, sociable, introverted/extroverted*, etc. In other words, a person is categorized in terms of *personality traits*. Therefore the term **personality** refers to a combination of psychological features that characterize an individual. Clearly, the personality of a given individual is a unique combination of the psychological traits that are referred to in the description of the individual person.

One's personality can be identified according to a number of measures. One of the most commonly known personality assessment tests is the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*. On the basis of the answers to questions how one feels or acts in various situations an individual is put at one or the other end of four dimensions which determine that he is one or the other type:

- *social interaction* – **extrovert or introvert**;
- *preference for gathering data* – a **sensing or intuitive** type;
- *preference for decision making* – a **feeling or thinking** type;
- *style of making decisions* – a **perceptive or judgemental** type.

Combinations of these preferences yield sixteen personality types. For example, the INFJ type (introvert, intuitive, feeling, judgemental) is described as conscientious and concerned for others – he succeeds by perseverance, originality, and the desire to do what is required (Briggs-Myers, 1980).

Although the above categorization is widely recognized and popular, it, nevertheless, lacks evidence that might support its validity. To make up for this deficiency the so-called *big-five model*, which is a five-factor model of personality, has been proposed (John, 1990). This model includes the following traits:

- extroversion – the degree to which a person is sociable, talkative, and assertive;
- agreeableness – the degree to which a person is good-natured, co-operative, and trusting;
- conscientiousness – the degree to which a person is responsible, dependable, persistent, and achievement oriented;
- emotional stability – the degree to which a person is calm, enthusiastic, and secure (positive) or tense, nervous, depressed, and insecure (negative);
- openness to experience – the degree to which a person is imaginative, intellectual, and artistically sensitive.

Not all of these personality traits can be related directly to the foreign language learning situation. Nevertheless, findings from research on individual differences in second language acquisition have unambiguously documented that there exist clear links between personality factors the learning behaviour, which, ultimately, determines the learning outcomes (cf. Skehan, 1989; Ellis, 1994). Thus, extroverted learners easily

engage in interaction with interlocutors – this ensures oral practice and communicative effectiveness; agreeableness – particularly cooperativeness and trust – reflects empathy; conscientiousness – especially persistency and achievement orientation – enhances motivation; emotional stability prevents anxiety and strengthens self-esteem; finally, openness to experience promotes receptivity and risk-taking.

Understanding the five specific personality traits is important to the teacher in that they are highly reliable dimensions that help explain and predict individual learning behaviour. With respect to this issue the following are worth looking at: *locus of control, self-esteem, self-monitoring, risk propensity*.

Locus of control is described as the degree to which a person believes he is a master of his own actions: one person may be convinced that all he does depends entirely on him as he is able to take all things into his hands; another person succumbs to circumstances. In the first case the locus of control is *internal*: the person believes he is able to control his own destiny; in the second case it is *external*: the person believes he is controlled by outside forces. This has tremendous consequences for learning: the internal locus of control determines that the learner is able to be autonomous – he takes responsibility for his own learning; the external locus of control decides that the learner is dependent on others, particularly on the teacher. The teacher's understanding of which kind of locus governs the learner will help him decide whether and how much work he can delegate to the learner himself.

Self-esteem is the feeling of self-worth a person possesses or the degree to which an individual likes or dislikes himself. It provides interesting insights into learning behaviour – “Self-esteem signifies the desire to be evaluated positively” (Lyons, 1998: 337). This means that self-esteem is directly related to expectation of success. Learners with high self-esteem believe that they possess the ability they need to succeed and are ready to take more risks at vocabulary or grammar rule selection than are learners with low self-esteem. A well-known fact is that learners with high self-esteem are less susceptible to external influence or dependent on receiving positive evaluations from others. As a result, they do not necessarily seek approval from others and are more likely to attend to those whom they respect than to those they do not (Zybert, 1999). Self-esteem correlates highly with satisfaction as well: the sense of achievement increases the degree of self-esteem and also strengthens motivation for further learning effort.

Self-monitoring is a personality trait that refers to an individual's capability to adjust his behaviour to situational factors. This general trait is not to be confused with what the same term stands for in Levelt's psycholinguistic model for speech production, in which it is “the final stage of speech production, after conceptualisation, formulation, and articulation, when we edit our messages and correct any errors” (Scovel, 1998: 129). With regard to language learning, self-monitoring can be seen rather as a learning strategy. According to Rubin (1975), good language learners monitor both their own performance and the speech of others. A significant body of evidence from studies shows that good language learners are aware of their own progress and keep in mind a record of what they have learned (Oxford, 1990).

Risk-taking is the individual's propensity to assume or avoid taking chances. Rubin (1975) has noted that good language learners are willing to guess, to use words or

structures they are not sure about, even if they feel that they may appear foolish; in order to achieve communicative goals they are keen on making use of whatever knowledge of the target language they have at their disposal. SLA findings show a positive correlation between risk-taking and voluntary classroom participation (Ellis, 1994). Good teachers, therefore, encourage learners to take risks, though within reasonable limits. Moderate, not high, risk-takers are considered the best language learners (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991).

3.2. Attitudes

Attitudes are evaluative thoughts and feelings, either favourable or negative, concerning people, objects, or events. With regard to foreign language learning they are reflections of a whole gamut of the learner's opinions and viewpoints about the target language itself, the teacher, the teaching method and aids, the materials, etc.

The concept of attitudes can be looked at as including three components: affect, cognition, and behaviour. The affective component of an attitude is its emotional part; it might be reflected in a learner's statement, such as: “I like English”. The cognitive component contains opinions, beliefs, knowledge, or information one holds about the affected component. The statement: “I like English because it is easy to learn” contains an opinion that illustrates cognition. The behavioural component refers to an intention or actual behaviour toward something or someone. The learner's behaviour may, ultimately, be the outcome of the other two components, which can be manifested, e.g., in regular class attendance and seeking extra input.

Looking at attitudes as a multi-componential factor both clarifies the concept and shows its complex character. Nevertheless, the term *attitude* is ordinarily used with reference to the affective component only. This is extremely important because attitude normally combines with motivation for learning, which results in better outcomes. For example, it is a well known fact that learners learn more eagerly when they like their teachers (positive affective attitude), but do not exhibit enthusiasm for, or even avoid, learning if they do not like them (negative affective attitude). Some researchers consider attitude as a component of motivation (e.g., Skehan, 1989).

3.3. Motivation

Motivation directly affects the learning outcomes. Therefore it is one of those areas of contemporary research that is of particular interest to both psychologists and language teachers. Understanding the current views about why learners are motivated to learn can guide language teachers in assessing their own learners and in promoting positive attitudes to language learning. Accounts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation indicate clearly that both types can be of equally high value for learning outcomes, depending on the learning setting (e.g., cf. Skehan, 1989). Intrinsic motivation is understood as the learner's desire to engage himself in a learning activity because it is enjoyable in itself, while the extrinsic motivation is dictated by certain goals that the learner is eager to achieve. Since learners attach great value to the learning outcomes, it seems undeniable

that it is motivation that drives them to get involved in learning activities. The teacher's role, then, is to arouse, sustain, and strengthen his learners' motivational potential. This can be achieved by setting reasonable learning goals that are feasible to the learners in a given group. In doing so, involving the learners themselves in setting the learning tasks jointly will also create a highly positive group learning environment as the goals that have been set together become common in the group.

4. Group learning behaviour

As mentioned earlier in the text, group behaviour relates to such aspects of human conduct as: norms, roles, solidarity, and conflict between members of a group. The group setting often triggers specific behaviour or actions that its members undertake to accomplish the common needs they share (or do not undertake, if they do not share them).

4.1. Learning tasks

Group learning behaviour can be considered in terms of tasks that are set for learners in a foreign language classroom. The contemporary theory of second language acquisition and findings from relevant research clearly indicate that language competence develops through meaningful communication in the target language. This means that second language acquisition occurs principally through interaction between participants. Interaction involves learners' attempts to convey intended meanings in the target language for purposeful communication. They realise this mainly through negotiation of meaning (i.e., mutual attempts of the participants to overcome difficulties in understanding discourse made by means of verbal modifications such as requests for clarification or comprehension checks). In a group of learners who work collectively on a task, collaboration and mutual understanding are necessary for a common goal to be accomplished successfully (incidentally, pair-work is also group work). Group work is thus viewed as an activity that requires of its members engaging in a cognitive process: it is needless to say that its ultimate outcome is an increase of L2 competence.

In connection with the above argument it seems necessary to mention that tasks are usually viewed as consisting of a number of elements. The elements that are identified to constitute a task vary depending on the perspective adopted for the analysis. All the same, there is one thing that different perspectives have in common – they repeatedly emphasise the interactive nature of tasks. For example, Legutke and Thomas (1991) view tasks as part of an interactive learning process. They distinguish three principal elements of a task: the individual, the group, and the theme. With regard to group dimension, Legutke and Thomas claim that language learning that happens in a group framework necessarily involves interaction; moreover, any interaction that is generated by tasks is affected by group processes, among which the major ones are group anxieties, rejections, taboos, power, goals, and competition. The interactive dimension is also conspicuous in Nunan's stance on tasks. According to him, tasks consist mainly of input data and activities (or procedures), and also of goals, roles of teachers, roles of

learners, and setting (Nunan, 1989; 1993). It seems obvious that all these elements play important roles in the learning process as they affect one another characteristically in a dynamic way.

If tasks generate interactions, they should be of particular interest to teachers. This is so because different types of tasks spur different types of interaction in terms of both quality and quantity. Therefore, teachers should be able to design and assign specific tasks to learners with regard to the specific pedagogical objectives of the language class. The great learning value of tasks lies in the fact that they require learners to cooperate. Since co-operation is an interactive event, learners have to get involved in performing the task not only cognitively but also emotionally and socially – this is indispensable, if they are to make sense of it and carry it out successfully. Thus the learning behaviour in a group is specific and significantly different from learning in other environments or contexts.

4.2. Learning conditions and environments

It seems reasonable to assume that within the communicative perspective foreign language learning is considered to be a process resulting from interactions that take place in a particular social context. It follows that the character of the interactions which occur during a language class determine or, at the very least, have some effect on how individual learners go about learning the language. This line of reasoning is based on the conviction that interactions between participants trigger particular patterns of their learning behaviour and that they also establish a specific classroom atmosphere.

Current accounts of language learning processes which explain them in terms of interactions stress the significance of the learning ambience in which the learning takes place. Different kinds of ambience have different effects on both individual learners and on groups of learners – some are more conducive to learning than others. Therefore understanding a given learning environment can simply help explain why and how learners learn.

On the other hand, the accounts highlight the dynamic nature of the environmental factors that are involved in the learning processes. Since members of a group of learners enter various relationships with one another (and with the teacher) the factors may strongly affect the character of the interactions between the members and ultimately determine the learning conditions. Clearly, it is a positive atmosphere that is conducive to learning, not a negative one. Teaching experience leads one to assert that classroom atmosphere is established through the learners' feedback to the teaching itself and to the course content. Evidently, a negative learning atmosphere originates, more often than not, in the traditional, teacher-centred and test-dependent classes, as they seem to be responsible for building it. Nevertheless, a positive classroom atmosphere and the learners' eagerness to learn may not be sufficient for generating optimal and effective interactions. This is so because groups often include learners who are attentive, while others may be "absent". They are the ones who are, for example, less able, tired, or even bored.

The learning environment that the learners experience is another factor connected with the issue of classroom language learning behaviour. The learning environment in the classroom may be of three kinds: individualistic, competitive, or co-operative. The first one is disregarded here as irrelevant to the topic. Concerning the learning situation can be additionally complicated by the fact that learner groups usually include both females and males – gender differences can often substantially determine learning preferences, including mutual attitudes and relationships (Graham, 1997).

The form of classroom organisation that puts emphasis on competition usually favours only those learners who do well – this frequently puts the remaining ones under severe stress. In fact, competition can be a source of anxiety, which can be of two kinds: facilitating and debilitating (cf. Ellis, 1994: 480 ff). Facilitating anxiety motivates the learner to “fight” the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approval behaviour. Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, demotivates the learner, keeps him away from the new learning task; in other words, it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behaviour. Competitiveness, thus, can be the driving force for worry to those learners whose nature is non-competitive. Truly, the success of a few frequently works against the others. In consequence, a classroom learning situation can develop in which some learners avoid voluntary interaction out of fear of making errors. This situation can further work to the detriment of the non-competitors in that it leads to debilitating their self-esteem.

In the co-operative format learners develop self-confidence – they feel that they can rely on others whenever they are seeking help. The sense of group solidarity, which is established through solving tasks jointly, largely affects individual learners’ views of their own abilities, as well as creates feelings of satisfaction. On this ground a reasonable assumption can be made to the effect that group success helps to build up the self-esteem of those members of the group who have a rather poor image of themselves. What is more, a co-operative environment increases learners’ motivation for interactive work in the classroom: the successful learners develop a sense of moral obligation to help the poor ones who, in return for help, feel obliged to reward the former ones with exhibiting greater effort to work harder. The learning atmosphere in a co-operative group can, therefore, enhance language learning; it stands in sharp contrast with egoistic attitudes that are very likely to develop in a competitive environment.

A different kind of environmental factor that is often involved in group learning is the physical environment in which language learning takes place. Regrettably, it has been little investigated with relation to language learning outcomes, but there is no denying that it has considerable influence on learners. Individuals react differently to the physical environmental conditions, such as the seating arrangement and furniture, acoustics and outside noise, lighting, temperature, etc. Also individual preferences with respect to timing (the time of day – morning, late afternoon, or evening; pauses in the course of learning, etc.) do affect the overall learning atmosphere within the group. However, it seems worth noting that in reality it is not so much the physical features of the learning environment as the learners’ very perceptions and interpretations of the environment that determine their learning behaviour in the classroom. The differential responses of individuals to factors as those mentioned above may lead to group

disagreement with respect to their expectations. The situation is likely to result in overall classroom anxiety and impoverished learning.

5. Summary

In this article we have attempted to discuss some aspects of the classroom (i.e., group) language learning behaviour which differs in a number of ways from viewing learners as individuals. It is claimed that in a language classroom a positive learning environment can be established and that it is highly conducive to achieving lasting effects. This conclusion is drawn from psychological research and the findings that show that individuals who get involved in collective work may develop a sense of responsibility for the joint effort. Ultimately, all this enhances language learning and ensures positive learning results.

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