

Helping Teachers Understand Learning Processes in Large Classes

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A major impetus to the development of learner-centered language teaching came with the advent of communicative language teaching. The enhancement of the role of the learner in the language learning process has compelled both classroom researchers and curriculum developers to focus their attention on the process of learning. Since learning cannot be empirically observed in action, the necessary indirectness of such attention has, in turn, encouraged teachers as well as researchers to take the issue to the learners themselves.

All English departments in Egyptian universities face the problem of dealing with large numbers of students, a reality that will remain with us in the foreseeable future. Teachers are faced with the dilemma of dealing with large numbers of students while attempting to develop linguistic and academic skills. In most cases teachers do not have the time or the training to assess their students' learning process and they need support and help.

Teachers use a number of resources in their teaching, but are sometimes frustrated because the activities they introduce are not met with enthusiasm on the part of the students. There is an obvious need for a better understanding of our learners so that teachers will more aware of the dynamics they are dealing with.

The following tools were used to provide a profile of learners in the Egyptian setting:

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Rebecca Oxford, 1990.

Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSP), Joy Reid, 1985.

Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale, Christopher M. Ely, 1995.

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Right/ Left Brain Dominance Test, adapted from E. Torrance, 1987.

The study described below was done with first year students in the English department of the Faculty of Education. The goal of using these tools with students is to provide teachers with an educated insight into their students and a bases on which to plan future activities and teaching materials. It should be mentioned here that the students in the sample are considered to be among the highest academic achievers in the system and their high grades in English ensure acceptance in the English department. In spite of this, a lot can be done to help make them more competent learners.

In response to the SILL the Egyptian learners rank very high on the memory strategies, not surprising given the educational system they have followed. Affective and social strategies rank very low on the scale and this certainly suggests that both areas need a fair amount of strategy training.

The responses to the Perceptual Learning Style questionnaire revealed that both the male and female students prefer a haptic (kinesthetic & tactile) learning style. They agreed that group learning is a negative learning style preference and expressed a great preference for individual learning. A point worth noting is that auditory learning style ranked fourth in the list of preferences, rather surprising, considering that in the Egyptian educational context teachers usually resort to lecturing in their teaching. This seems to suggest that there is a significant teaching/learning mismatch. It has been pointed out that learning styles and teaching styles can be developed and expanded; moreover, learning styles appear to shift and even change with age and environment.

Several studies have indicated that ambiguity tolerance is positively related to L2 success. It is claimed that the students who have a high intolerance of ambiguity may have a great deal of difficulty dealing with the ambiguity in the second language classroom. Other studies found that the correlations between ambiguity tolerance and end of semester scores were significantly positive. The Tolerance of Ambiguity questionnaire indicated that among the Egyptian students in the study there is a high intolerance of ambiguity, some 70% falling within the range that indicates intolerance of ambiguity, leaving a minority of the sample who are ambiguity tolerant. This suggests that the learners need to be trained to be more tolerant of ambiguity to achieve better performance in English.

The results of the brain hemispheric specialization revealed that 80% of the Egyptian sample are definitely left hemisphere dominant. The left

hemisphere is view as oriented toward logical, analytical, linear information. It has been found that activities associated with both the right and left hemispheres are equally necessary to reach advanced levels of proficiency in language study.

Teachers fully realize that they cannot achieve all they want in the limited time they have with their students. Thus there is a need to encourage learner autonomy by making our students better learners; this is a goal that requires a good understanding of our students so that we can stretch their present capabilities and assign them tasks that will produce effective results.

The purpose of the present study is to offer the teachers a profile of a set of students; this knowledge can guide the selection and implementation of effective instructional methods and materials. Additionally, through identifying students' learning processes, teachers can use this understanding as an instructional strength upon which to build the motivation and trust so necessary with students facing the risk taking inherent in foreign language learning.

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