The Relationship Between Learning Styles and the Academic Performance of Learning English as a Second Language

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the relationships between learning styles and English as a second language academic performance in non-native and native language environments. The paper discusses learning English in non-native and native language environments, respectively. Non-native language environments are mainly categorized into passive learning. This refers to learning in a traditional structured classroom and self-regulated learning, which is about learning English through self-regulation. Then, the learning styles and experiences of immigrant children and international students in native language environments will be discussed. Through this analysis, the paper highlights the advantages and disadvantages inherent in each learning approach and style. The findings underscore the complexity of English as a second language acquisition across different settings, shedding light on the nuanced factors shaping language proficiency. In sum, this research provides valuable insights into the intricate interplay of learning styles and English as a second language performance, contributing to a deeper understanding of language learning dynamics.

Keywords: English as a Second Language, non-native language environments, immigrant children, international students

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, one of the most popular topics in English-education field has been various learning styles for learning English as a second language. Throughout the years, many different learning styles have been developed. Basically, according to the environment, the methods of learning English are categorized into learning in non-native and native environments. According to the learning form, the methods can be categorized into learning from school and self-study. The theory of self-regulated study is a good example of the existing English-learning strategies. However, the previous studies focus on describing a single learning style. Overall, there is a research gap on the characteristics and differences between different learning styles. Such a gap can negatively affect the subsequent exploration and evaluation of learning styles for English learners and educators. Thus, this paper will study the differences and the impacts through review and analysis. If the gap is filled, there will be a large progress in the development and improvement of more styles in English-learning.

2. Learning English in a Non-Native Environment

Many English language learners are not immersed in their native language environment [1]. By contrast, they learn English in non-English speaking countries. In China, for example, English plays a significant role as one of the three main subjects (i.e., Chinese, English, and math) in China's compulsory elementary education [1]. Many Chinese students are exposed to English from elementary school, and some children are even from kindergarten [1]. From the foundations of the alphabet in English to listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar, English educators and learners in non-English speaking environments have established various learning methods. Then, this paper will explore the impact and effectiveness of the two main learning styles.

2.1. Passive Learning: Learning English in a Traditional Structured Class

In non-English-speaking countries, the traditional way of learning English is to learn English in a pre-setting school program. In the traditional English classroom, the English teacher faces one or more students and uses teaching tools, textbooks, etc., to impart knowledge in a teacher-centered class [2]. The students sit in the classroom, listening and taking notes. In the classroom, students can ask questions and discuss with the teacher, but most of the time, it is dominated by the teacher unilaterally imparting knowledge to the students. After a stage of teaching, the teacher will test the results of teaching with tests and exams. Given that, in most cases, students passively accept the teacher's teaching and knowledge input, this thesis defines such a teaching method as passive learning. This way of learning is characterized by convenience and efficiency. The task of arranging the course composition is carried out by the teacher, so the student only needs to concentrate on the content of the study and complete the task according to the teacher's requirements, which can save students time and effort. Lai analyzed interviews with 11 undergraduate students studying English in Hong Kong, which showed that learning in the classroom allowed students to focus more on the content and that some students found learning outside the classroom more distracting [3]. Respondents believe that classroom instruction serves the function of inspiring metacognition and can provide a solid foundation for language learning [3].

However, a structured class, which is dominated by the teacher's teaching, will still have some shortcomings. Compared with independent learning, structured class is not inspiring enough for students' initiative. Teachers will arrange all the syllabus and teaching contents before the class, and students only need to sit in the classroom and follow the pace of the teacher to learn. Students lose the need to actively plan their learning and explore their language knowledge outside the classroom. Also, due to the inertia that inevitably arises in the learning process, structured classes can make students less active. According to Chenchen Liu, Sarah Sands-Meyer, and Jacques Audran, the motivation index of students in traditional classes is always lower than in experimental classes supported by other self-motivating elements [4]. In addition, structured class lacks practice. Students rarely can practice the language with other people, especially native speakers. Communication is a critical part of foreign language learning. However, students sitting in the classroom lack communication activities. According to the experimental result, compared to self-regulated study method, the structured class has a less noticeable effect on increasing students' feelings of self-efficacy[4]. According to Bandura's definition, self-efficacy is "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute a course of action required to attain designated types of performances"[5]. With a higher degree of self-efficacy, students can feel more confident and satisfied with their study achievements after finishing the class, continuously boosting their motivation to study. When students get self-encouragement, they will be more likely to stay motivated to achieve more goals in language learning. However, staying in a structured class has a weak impact on their self-efficacy [4]. On the contrary, simply receiving information from teachers may even have

a negative impact on increasing self-efficacy. When students learn passively, they may doubt the goals and meaning of their learning because they are not satisfied with the pace of learning and the way they are taught, and thus, they may further question what they have previously achieved. At this point, students' self-confidence and self-efficacy in the learning process may decline. This has a very negative impact on further learning afterward.

2.2. Self-regulated Study: Learning English with the Means of Self-regulation

According to the theory of Zimmermann, self-regulated learning involves students' meta-cognition, motivation, and behaviors during their learning process [6]. These students spontaneously make learning plans and motivate themselves. Also, they monitor themselves and assess the results.

The process of self-regulated learning emphasizes student autonomy and self-discipline. Unlike traditional classrooms, many of the duties of the traditional teacher are taken on by the students themselves. For example, students seldom follow a syllabus the teacher sets; they must develop their own study plans. But if they encounter any difficulty, they could ask the teacher for help, during which the teacher plays the role of an assistant to assist their learning. Also, as mentioned above, in the traditional classroom, the teacher would test and supervise the students. Still, in the case of self-regulated learning, the students would be monitoring their learning and would be responsible for themselves. These activities hone students' self-planning skills. When developing a study plan, students need to consider their personal abilities, learning goals, time constraints, and other factors. This tests a student's overall qualities, not just the ability to listen, read, and write. In coordinating their study program, students will experience more activities other than studying. This will provide students with valuable experience when they enter the community and start working in the future.

In the experiment designed by Mücahit Öztürk and Ünal Çakıroğlu, compared to traditional class without self-regulated pattern, the class equipped with a self-regulated system is different with the addition of online discussion [7]. Students were encouraged to share their learning experiences and reflections with each other as well. In the classroom, students in self-regulated programs do not simply participate in traditional classroom activities but rather in collaborative activities with worksheets. This way of learning fully stimulates students' initiative and motivation and makes students, not behavior, the main body of the classroom. At the same time, the discussions in the online course bring students closer to each other. The sharing of experiences and feelings allows students to find peers and resonate with their own experiences. As a result, students are less afraid of learning difficulties and more motivated to learn. Sharing experiences also enhances students' self-efficacy as they become more confident in expressing their ideas and learning. Overall, self-regulated is a student-centered learning style with greater student involvement. By comparison, traditional classrooms are teacher-centered. A student-centered orientation leads to a much higher level of student engagement. It also creates a student-to-student bond and progresses together in communication.

According to the experiments conducted by Mücahit Öztürk and Ünal Çakıroğlu, the flipped class in which students follow the pattern of self-regulated study has positive effects in increasing students' scores in various English skills, including writing, reading, and other interactive learning skills [7]. However, it is worth noting that students' listening skills do not reflect a very objective improvement in comparison [6]. It can be concluded from the analysis that goal setting and pre-class planning during self-regulated courses are of great use in improving students' reading scores. Students can set up their own learning goals and schedules with the help of their tutors before the course and have a clearer understanding of the process afterward. A clear study plan can reduce students' fear of subsequent study and make learning more organized. Regarding writing skills, self-regulated stimulated collaborative learning, and peer student encouragement played a very important role [7]. One particular aspect of self-regulated that can be seen is the focus on student-to-student relationships.

In traditional classrooms, student-to-student interaction is often neglected. Or the relationship between students is dominated by competition. However, self-regulated courses encourage students to support and cooperate with each other. This is groundbreaking and very positive.

3. Learning English in a Native Environment

In the previous section, the focus was on learners acquiring a second foreign language within a non-native learning environment. In this part, this paper will introduce learning a second foreign language in a native language environment. This phenomenon can be influenced by factors, including the varying levels of educational foundations acquired in their motherland and the extent of exposure to their second language when they go abroad to English countries. Additionally, the presence of English spoken at home by parents is another contributing aspect. This paper specifically excludes these conditions from its scope of discussion.

3.1. Immigrant Children in Native Environment

Immigrant children usually refer to people who have migrated from one country to another and settled in a new country with their families [8]. The range of "migrant children" is very broad, covering all ages, from infants to adolescents and even young adults who moved with their parents. The situation of young adult immigrants and international students is similar, so the situation of adult immigrants will not be discussed in this section.

The age of immigrant children plays an important role in language learning. Younger children tend to adapt to the new language environment more easily, and their language acquisition effectiveness is relatively high. In contrast, teenage immigrants may face greater challenges because they already have an established mother tongue and need more time and effort to master the new language. According to Johnson and Newport's research, there is no significant difference in proficiency between individuals who arrive before the age of 7 and native speakers. However, there is a decline in the maturation of ability from around 7 to 15 years of age, which reflects a universal biological process that is not specific to certain languages [9-11]. In early childhood, a child's brain is most capable of acquiring language. This is because neural connections are formed faster in early brain development, and the brain's ability to distinguish between phonological and grammatical rules is more acute. This allows young children to learn and master multiple languages more naturally. The people around the children whose language systems are not fully formed speak a new language, and their families speak their mother tongue at home. With the influence of two languages, they are unconsciously influenced and develop bilingual language skills, just as they learned their mother tongue. In their daily life, they can speak these two languages. Therefore, these children can be considered as bilinguals. They acquire both languages as first languages (2 L1s) [12].

Furthermore, some immigrant children may experience a gradual decline in their native language proficiency, with English becoming their primary means of communicating. This phenomenon is attributed to the influence of both school and society. To achieve effective communication, children frequently engage in interactions using English, reserving their mother tongue solely for familial exchanges. This pattern may cause these children with a developed language system to gradually move away from their mother tongue. As these children grow up and contact with society, the prominence of English gains ascendancy, potentially casting a negative effect on their proficiency in their mother tongue. Overall, this development trend can lead to significant changes in the language priorities of immigrant children, ultimately affecting their language development trajectory.

3.2. International Students in Native Environments

International students refer to individuals who travel to another country to receive education or academic research [13]. These new newcomers who have learned English foundation in L2 countries and go abroad for higher education L2 learning. Each year, many young students depart from their home countries to pursue higher education abroad. Most of these students originate from non-English-speaking nations in Asia, including China, Japan, and Indonesia [14]. However, these international students will encounter several challenges when they arrive in an English-speaking country. These challenges can include cultural adjustment, language barrier, and aloneness. Among these challenges, language difficulties in listening, speaking, reading, and writing are arguably the most significant and pressing issues affecting the social and academic experiences of international students [15]. They usually learn some basic knowledge about English in their home country. Still, this knowledge is usually relatively limited, so it is difficult to cover the four aspects of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Taking Chinese students as an example, they start to learn English from the third grade, which is usually around the age of 10. However, the primary motivation for learning English is often exam-oriented. Since English scores carry significant weight in entrance examinations throughout primary, middle, and high school, teaching tends to focus on technical aspects such as grammar and vocabulary rather than fully develop students' overall English proficiency as recommended by official curriculum guidelines. Despite their initial exposure to English, many international students find themselves inadequately prepared to navigate the demands of higher education in an English-speaking environment. This can lead to various challenges, including struggling to understand lectures, participate in class discussions, write academic papers, and communicate effectively with professors.

On the contrary, while international students may face a range of challenges when they arrive in an English-speaking country, after a period of study, they will find that learning English in an English-speaking country has many benefits that are not possible in a non-native language country. Firstly, being surrounded by English daily provides international students with a fully immersive language learning experience. This continuous exposure accelerates language acquisition and helps build an intuitive understanding of grammar, vocabulary, and colloquial expressions. In addition, learning a second language abroad involves more than just the language itself. It often relates to cultural differences and local customs. International students gain a richer understanding of cultural references, humor, and social norms, contributing to deeper language proficiency. Besides, international students become adept at their communication styles to accommodate different accents, dialects, and communication norms. This adaptability allows them to communicate effectively with people from different language backgrounds.

As a result, compared to students who learn English primarily within their home country, international students benefit from the unique combination of linguistic immersion and cultural integration of studying abroad. These advantages not only enrich their language skills but also contribute to their personal development and academic success.

4. Conclusion

In order to achieve effective English language learning, the selection of learning style has a significant impact on learners' performance and learning experience. In non-native language environments, traditional structured programs, while providing facilitation, promote passive learning and discourage self-efficacy and engagement. However, self-regulated learning empowers learners through autonomy, collaborative activities, and enhanced self-efficacy, enabling it to become a powerful tool for improving English ability. Conversely, learning English as a second language in a native English-speaking environment presents unique challenges and benefits. While immigrant children's language

performance is influenced by age and social factors, international students can benefit from immersive language exposure and cultural integration. By considering these different learning environments and styles, educators and learners can make informed choices to enhance the English as a second language learning journey, ultimately promoting language proficiency, cultural understanding, and personal growth.

Acknowledgements

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