Personality types and learning strategies: A relation defining the didactic route in second language teaching / learning

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Abstract: This paper aims at exploring the relation between personality types and learning strategies and how a successful match of these could build on the way learners learn a second language. For this reason, it indicatively analyzes the learning features attributed to a particular type of learner personality identified with the author, namely the Extravert Sensing Feeling Perceiving learner, as determined by the Myers Brigg's personality type indicator. Then, it attempts to provide a justified theoretical context of what kind of learning strategies would most appropriately cater for such a learner. Finally, it presents two representative activities of how an ESFP learner could be treated or trained how to treat himself/herself in the process of second language learning.

Key words: personality type, learner, learning strategies, extravert, sensing, feeling, perceiving

Introduction

The identification of a student's learning style has been found to be of paramount importance in the process of second language learning, since it is one of the factors that indicates the strategies (Oxford, 2003) that need to be used by the teacher and -by extension-by the student himself/herself, which are expected to lead the latter to a desirable learning outcome. The notion of strategies refers to the decisions that are made (Cornett, 1983), the "learning path" that is deliberately (Griffiths, 2008; Oxford, 2011; Cohen, 2014) followed and is inextricably linked with a certain number of parameters. As mentioned above, one of those is the student's learning style, which is related to certain personality traits, as in the current case are determined by the Myers Brigg's personality type indicator (Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, & Hammer, 1998) which is based on Jung's (1971) theory. According to this theory, people can be characterized by their preference for one of the two dimensions in three pairs of dichotomies. More specifically, the three dichotomies he proposed are: 1. Extraversion-Introversion: This dichotomy signifies the source and orientation of energy expression. An extravert derives energy from the external world and similarly directs his/her energy to it, whereas an introvert displays an internal source and direction of energy. 2. Sensing-Intuition: It represents the method through which somebody perceives information. A sensing person basically relies on and believes in what he/she receives from the external world, whereas an

intuitive person mainly relies on his/her "sixth sense" and believes in what is dictated by his/her inner or imaginative world. 3. Thinking-Feeling: This dichotomy indicates the way in which someone processes information. A thinking person abides by logic, whereas a feeling person, as a rule, makes decisions by following his/her emotions, based on a humanistic perception of life. Isabel Briggs Myers, influenced by Jung while researching and practicing his theory, additionally proposed a fourth dichotomy, namely Judging-Perceiving, which, in combination with the other three, determine a personality type. This final dichotomy represents the way in which a person applies the information he/she has processed. A judging person feels at ease when everything is decided in advance and is based on careful organization and adherence to it. On the other hand, a perceiving person is inclined to improvise or adopt alternative options of action.

1. The ESFP type of learner analysed

The Extravert Sensing Feeling Perceiving learner, reflecting the learning style of the author of this paper as the relevant Myers Brigg's test indicated, is one of the sixteen learning types that are formed by combining each one of our choices from the four dichotomies mentioned above. The personality traits of the ESFP learner are described as follows (Briggs-Myers & Myers, 1995).

1.1. Extravert

Extraverts focus on the external rather than the inner world and, thus, their energy originates from and is directed to the external world. Such people are sociable, enjoy being with others and make friends easily. Since they are in the company of other people most of the time, we could say that they do not have many opportunities for thorough reflection, so they often make quick and spontaneous decisions. It is obvious that, as learners, extraverts find pleasure and, therefore, learn more easily in activities that involve interaction with others, like whole class discussions, pair work or group work tasks e.t.c.

1.2. Sensing

Sensing people are "obsessed" with consistency and organization as far as their provision of information is concerned. Since their perception of information relies basically on the external world, they expect everything to be presented to them in a clear-cut, organized and spelled out way. They do not like surprises and prefer to know in advance what to expect. As we can understand, as learners, sensing types will be satisfied in a learning environment that provides them with a strict linear organization of activities, following a good lesson plan, in which everything such as the tasks instructions, as well as the goals and objectives of the lessons, is spelled out and explained in advance. Furthermore, sensing learners like being presented with

facts and not theory, pay attention to details and do not feel at ease when taking initiatives, but would rather be instructed by the teacher.

1.3. Feeling

Feeling types of people place human values and needs above all when making decisions. They disregard logic and consistency when they are not in tune with a humanistic approach of acting. Such people are characterized by empathy for others, that is, the ability to get "in other people's shoes", to deeply understand their feelings so as to adjust their behavior to the special circumstances that these feelings may cause. Feeling learners can play the role of peace makers in a class, especially in tense situations, and generally they can be very helpful during group work, as they always try to maintain a good spirit within a group, something that facilitates collaboration and interaction. All a feeling person asks, is an overt acknowledgement of his/her empathic and humane attitude.

1.4. Perceiving

Perceiving people are adaptive and ready to improvise when it comes to the application of the information they have processed. They do not like to have everything organized and decided in advance; instead, they prefer to write their own story and definitely the "conclusion of the story", as they are open to new options of action. Perceiving learners hate deadlines and become frustrated when they are expected to engage in many activities which they find hard to complete. As they are inclined to improvise, they perceive the language lesson as a game.

2. Strategies catering for the ESFP learner

Taking into account the features of the ESFP learner, as analyzed above, the strategies that could be applied to this type of learner in order to alleviate him/her from negative feelings and make the lesson a stress relieving and enjoyable experience for him/her, might be the following, according to Oxford's (1990) taxonomy:

2.1. Memory strategies

Since sensing learners are not fond of theory, but prefer to be presented with facts and evidence, a memory strategy that can help such learners make mental relations and semantic associations is to provide them with schematic representations of the grammatical and lexical points intended to be taught. For instance, the teacher can juxtapose present perfect simple on the left and present perfect continuous on the right, making clear the formation and the use of the two tenses through examples that infer grammar rules. In the same way, he/she can visually juxtapose words with similar sounds or spelling but different meanings, or present any kind of schematic categorization of vocabulary in tables, charts, maps e.t.c. Another

memory strategy can be to provide illustrations together with verbal definitions, so as to reinforce the recall of vocabulary (Clark & Paivio, 1991). In addition, a strategy that can fit the perceiving learners' inclination to treat the language lesson as a game, is to trigger the remembrance of words through miming and gestures. This strategy is also compatible with the extravert learners' willingness to be demonstrative and expressive in front of other people.

2.2. Cognitive strategies

As sensing learners do not like theory, but facts, and are apt in focusing on details, the teacher can provide such learners with salient examples of the grammatical or lexical points he/she wishes to make and then let them deduce the rules from the given examples (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Harmer, 2001). Alternatively, he/she can give them a sheet juxtaposing certain grammar points (for instance two tenses) easily confused and assign them to find the differences in their use. In addition, since sensing learners wish to have the provided information sorted out in advance, a cognitive strategy when teaching reading or listening skills, is to raise expectations (Harmer, 2001) in them about what they are going to read or listen to, activating their previous knowledge (Koda, 2005) and thus letting them interact with the text (Psaltou-Joycey, 2010), so that their reading or listening is oriented towards a goal (e.g. the confirmation of their expectations). This helps such learners feel more confident and secure, alleviates them from tension and at the same time motivates them to read or listen for a purpose. Moreover, the teacher can explain unknown key words (Harmer, 2001) before these learners have to cope with a reading or listening text, in order to save them from being stressed out. Taking into account that learners as such like focusing on details, another strategy that a teacher can deploy in order to develop their reading and/or listening skills, is to give them specific questions in advance, which they then have to answer by finding specific information (Harmer, 2001) in a reading or listening text. Concerning writing skills, due to the sensing learners' reluctance to be presented with theoretical material and their preference for specific facts and data, the teacher can provide these learners with a model composition of any kind (essay, e-mail, report, article e.t.c.) and let them discover the type and format of such a piece of writing, the way paragraphs are developed, how ideas are linked according to their meaning (expressing addition, opposition e.t.c.), the way formality and informality are stated and in which contexts or cases e.t.c. As a task, the teacher can give these students a piece of writing with deliberate mistakes (e.g. regarding the appropriacy of written speech and its match with a particular type of writing) and assign them to spot them and correct them (Grivas Publications, 1987). Indicatively, they can be given an e-mail addressing the suggested principal of their school, including some parts written very informally and asked to spot the parts which do not match with the text's level of formality and rewrite them in the proper way. Concerning the traits of the perceiving learners, the teacher can have such learners read or listen to the beginning of a story and then allow them to continue the story themselves. Since perceiving learners like improvising, this task would motivate them to read or listen to the provided information carefully in order to give this reading or listening their

own final interpretation. Alternatively, learners as such can be given a number of pictures in order to be inspired to write a story by improvising and using their imagination.

2.3. Social strategies

For extraverts, social interaction plays a pivotal role in their language learning endeavors. Extraverts take great pleasure in activities that embed social interaction, like group and pair work, role play or simulations. Thus, this type of learners are likely to enjoy being trained in how to communicate with other people effectively and appropriately in varied social occasions, practicing language functions and generally the language which is most appropriate for a specific context. The teacher can set a theme and a related context, for example an incident taking place in a restaurant, in a school classroom e.t.c. and ask these learners to act out the relevant dialogue. Alternatively, he/she can invite them to work in groups in order to find a solution to a certain problem. For instance, they can be assigned to answer a letter presented in an agony column (Harmer, 2001) of a magazine, offering advice on a particular problem. The groups will have to read the problem stated in the letter, discuss any possible solutions of it and then write a response to the supposed worried magazine reader. Social interaction can also be promoted through collaborative writing, for instance by giving the learners the beginning of a story in pairs and assigning each member of each pair to continue the story in turn, having a set time limit at their disposal. When a member of each pair finishes his/her part, the other member continues. Extraverts, and especially extravert feeling learners, can be very helpful in group work tasks, as they can act as ice-breakers or prompters facilitating and promoting discussions or collaborative work in groups. However, what the teacher should not ignore, is to balance the amount of oral participation between extraverts and introverts, since the former are by nature more spontaneous and talkative than the latter and therefore prone to dominate in discussions.

2.4. Affective strategies

Strategies of this kind are intended to alleviate students from anxiety and stress about their language class and make them be positively disposed towards it. Since sensing learners feel more confident and stress relieved when having everything organized and spelled out in advance, the teacher can take the following actions: Firstly, it is advisable to make an organized, linearly structured lesson plan, which he/she will consistently follow. Also, it will be of much help to explain exactly what is going to take place in the class and in which order at the beginning of every lesson. In addition, giving clear instructions before the implementation of each activity and even explaining what the general goal of the lesson is and what the specific objectives of the required tasks are, are particularly helpful for this type of learners, especially in cases where this information is not easily comprehensible. What is more, the teacher can assist his/her students in developing good feelings towards their second language class, by occasionally allowing them to decide upon the content of the activities they

are expected to deal with (Oxford, 2003), after discussing about what makes them happy in their second language lessons. Taking into account the traits of perceiving learners, who like improvising and not having things pre-decided when it comes to the application of the processed information, the teacher can from time to time provide them with different options to choose. Indicatively, he/she can give these students several composition topics or tasks to select for homework or sometimes ask them to propose what kind of follow-up activities they would like to have in class, so as to consolidate what they have learned. As perceiving learners do not like deadlines and feel confused and frustrated when engaged in many activities which they find hard to complete, at first the teacher should try not to overload his/her classes with too many different activities, but to focus on just a couple of them, without time limits. Gradually, after training his/her students (through the metacognitive strategies that will be referred to below) to organize their time, he/she can involve more activities in their English lessons, progressively timing them a bit more strictly. Finally, the teacher can maintain a positive atmosphere in class by encouraging the feeling and extravert learners to play the role of prompters or ice-breakers in cases when their "less ready" or introverted classmates are shy and/or reluctant to talk.

2.5. Metacognitive strategies

Regarding metacognitive strategies, the teacher can explain to the perceiving learners that the organization of time plays an important role, because a bad management of it can not only lead to students' failure (in exam situations, submissions of assignments e.t.c), but also to practical difficulties in their everyday lives, like being late at school/work, missing the bus e.t.c. He/She can advise these learners to keep time when studying, for example when writing a composition or an assignment, starting from a more extensive duration and gradually reducing it, till they finally reach the expected time limit. This technique can also be applied in class.

2.6. Compensating strategies

Extravert learners can be very willing to be trained in how to negotiate meaning, that is asking for and giving clarifications (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) about something that is not very clear. Such a negotiation of meaning can involve body language, paraphrasing, giving examples, replacing unknown words with synonyms or kindly interrupting the interlocutor and asking for a restructuring of the used utterance (McLaughlin, 1990). Similarly, feeling learners are likely to engage in all the aforementioned approaches with pleasure in order to help their classmates understand the meanings/messages which are not comprehensible to them. Finally, perceiving learners will like the idea of guessing the meaning of words they are not familiar with from the context of a reading or listening text (Harmer, 2001; Oxford, 2003).

3. Proposed activities for the ESFP learner based on the strategies discussed

(drawing on Psaltou-Joycey & Gavriilidou , 2015, for the outline of activities)

3.1. Activity 1

Name of activity: "Stop bullying right now!"

Type of activity: Role play

Strategies included:

-Affective strategy

Objective: To help students feel comfortable in their school environment.

- Social strategy

Objective: To develop cooperation and authentic interaction among the learners while practicing the new language

-Cognitive strategy

Objectives:

1. To provide practice in speaking by adopting a role in a real-like situation

2. To teach the use of modal verbs in affirmative and negative form

3. To teach the imperative and negative imperative in direct and reported speech

4. To provide practice in writing an article (as a follow-up activity for homework).

Skills practiced:

-Speaking

-Writing

(productive skills)

Grammar practiced:

-Modal verbs

-Imperative and negative imperative in direct and reported speech

Level: Upper intermediate (3rd grade junior high school)

Time allocated: Whole class session

Description of activity

- Preparation/instruction

After the students have read a text about bullying and after being involved in a whole class discussion concerning what they should do in a bullying situation (in the previous class), the teacher assigns them to act out a role play of a supposed bullying incident taking place at their school. She/He gives explicit instructions on the implementation and the content of the activity. Specifically, he/she explains that the students are going to be divided in groups of three. One member of the group is going to be the bully, the other the bullying victim and the third a student who accidentally happens to be present before the bullying incident in question and decides to stand up for the bullying victim and support him/her (this role is chosen for the feeling learner). The students have recently been taught the use of modal verbs and the formation of the imperative and negative imperative in direct and reported speech. The teacher reminds them of the aforementioned grammar points by writing some examples on the board, eliciting the answers from them. He/She explains that these grammar items are expected to be used in their role play. The students will have 15 minutes at their disposal to rehearse their dialogue within their groups and the rest of the session to present their role play to the whole class. In the end, they will have to decide which group performed the best role play.

- Practice/scaffolding

While practicing their roles, the teacher walks around in class adopting the role of prompter and facilitator in cases when the groups run out of ideas, face problems in communication or find it difficult to apply the expected grammar. When ready, all groups in turn present their role play to their classmates.

-Evaluation

After each group perform their role play to the whole class, they get feedback by their peers and the teacher, and when all groups have finished with their presentations, the class chooses the best performance.

- Extension

As a follow up activity for homework, the teacher assigns the students to write an article for their school magazine, giving advice to younger students on what they should do in a bullying situation. (The students have already been taught how to write an article and have worked on a given model article.)

3.2. Activity 2

Name of activity: "Help me!"

Type of activity: Group work task

Strategies included:

-Social strategy

Objective: To develop cooperation and authentic interaction based on problem solving

-Feeling strategy

Objective: To develop positive feelings towards the English class by using English to help someone in need.

-Cognitive strategy

Objective: To integrate the four skills via authentic material and authentic interaction.

Level: B1-B2 (1st grade senior high school)

Time allocated: Whole session

Skills practiced: All (integration of four skills).

Description of activity:

- Preparation/instruction

The teacher divides the class in groups of four. He/She gives each group an authentic letter from an English magazine's agony column, in which a reader of this magazine asks for advice on a particular problem. The teacher gives clear instructions that the groups have to read the problem carefully, discuss the nature of the problem within their group and then write a collaborative text providing a solution/answer to the problem.

- Practice/scaffolding

While working in groups, the teacher walks around the class, providing guidance and assistance when needed.

- Evaluation

In the end, the class chooses the best solution proposed, after the groups have read what they have written aloud and provided feedback to each other.

Alternatively, the teacher assigns a different problem to each group and in the end all groups get feedback from their classmates whether they have tackled the problem successfully and properly.

A different version of this activity can be the following: The teacher divides the class in groups of four. He/She explains that they have to collaborate in order to write a problem for an agony column of a magazine. All groups need to make up a problem by discussing and write it on a piece of paper. Then, the teacher randomly distributes the written "problems" to the groups, provided that no group get their own paper. Then, the groups have to collaborate again, in order to read the problem written by their classmates, discuss it as a group and provide a collaborative written answer. (Both the problems and the answers can be serious or humorous.)

4. Justification of the actions taken in the proposed activities

As far as the traits of the sensing learners are concerned, the teacher gives clear instructions on the implementation and the content of the activities, respecting the learners' need for organization, explicitness and consistency. Also, in the first activity, he/she presents examples of the required language on the board and does not theorize, taking into consideration that learners as such prefer facts to theory.

Regarding the traits of the extravert learners, the teacher provides them with activities which are compatible with their sociability, their ease to interact and their most probable pleasure and contentment to perform in front of people (in the first activity).

Concerning the feeling learners, they are given the chance to express their humane emotions and on the other hand to publicly receive their peers' acknowledgement and praise. In the first activity these learners are assigned a role which matches with their ability to empathize. Thus, they are expected to put their heart and soul into the role because they would possibly display the same attitude in their real life. In the second activity, again the feeling learners are offered the opportunity to provide assistance to someone in need and this is likely to motivate them to deal with the required task with pleasure.

Finally, coming to the perceiving learners, the teacher gives them the chance to improvise and treat the lesson like a game, while unconsciously practicing grammar elements and already taught language in the first activity, as well as an integration of skills in the second activity. He/She does not overload these learners with too many different tasks but lets them focus on one task for the time being (till they are trained to organize their time better in order to cope with more mingled tasks in the future).

Conclusion

In sum, it is reasonable that, since learners are not identical entities, the learning paths to follow are not the same for everyone. The learners' personality characteristics constitute an important factor that determines to a great extent the strategies to be used, in other words the courses of action that need to be taken in order for them to be led to the desirable goal, namely second language learning. The careful selection of learning strategies will not only substantially facilitate the conquest of the aforementioned goal, but it will also turn the learning process - the journey towards the learning destination - into an enjoyable experience.

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