



The Impact of Field Independence and Integrative Motivation on Language Achievement

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How to cite this paper: Shan, Y.M. (2024) The Impact of Field Independence and Integrative Motivation on Language Achievement. *Open Access Library Journal*, 11: e12561.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1112561>

Received: November 4, 2024

Accepted: December 3, 2024

Published: December 6, 2024

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Abstract

This article examines the intricate relationship between cognitive styles, field independence and integrative motivation, in the context of language learning achievement. Through deploying the narrative inquiry, this study collects the interview data from an experienced teacher who has engaged in English teaching. It mainly found that field-independent students excel in analyzing and breaking down complex information which enables them to process linguistic structures effectively. However, their tendency for self-reliance may limit their collaborative skills, which potentially hinders opportunities for language output. Conversely, integrative motivation drives learners to engage deeply in classroom activities, which enhances their language proficiency. By recognizing and addressing the strengths and weaknesses of these cognitive traits, teachers can tailor their teaching strategies to maximize student engagement and success in language learning.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Field Independence, Integrative Motivation, Language Learning

1. Introduction

Rubin and Thompson [1] contend that in the process of language acquisition, the individual learner stands as the key determinant. Defining a proficient language learner involves considering multiple factors, such as aptitude, motivation, and opportunity, which are identified as crucial variables influencing each other in

complex ways that contribute to effective learning. To be specific, a learner endowed with high motivation and aptitude but lacking adequate opportunities to use the language may encounter challenges in language acquisition. Similarly, minimal motivation or poor learning skills can severely impede academic achievement. Conversely, an individual with various learning skills and opportunities might fail to learn successfully due to insufficient motivation. Among these variables, motivation is viewed as an important factor in second language acquisition since it significantly impacts language learners' success [2].

2. The Evidence for the Notion of the Good Language Learner

Field independence and integrative motivation are psychological constructs, which can significantly influence a learner's success in achieving high levels of proficiency in language learning [3]. This section will present and critically examine two key pieces of evidence from the second-language acquisition literature, namely field independence and integrative motivation, to explore the characteristics of good language learners.

2.1. Field Independence

The cognitive style factors, such as field independence and field dependence, have been linked to success in language learning [4]. Importantly, field independence is viewed as a cognitive trait characterized by an individual's ability to perceive objects independently of their surrounding context [2]. As Kim and Lee [5] described, field independence reflects an individual's ability to focus on specific details and separate relevant from irrelevant information. According to Johnson [6], field-independent learners excel at extracting things from the context and isolating specific elements from their surrounding context, rather than viewing them as integral parts of a larger whole.

Field independence has been found to have a significant relationship with second language acquisition (SLA). Researchers [5] [7] suggest that individuals who are field-independent tend to perform better in language learning. Specifically, it found that field independence was positively associated with foreign language learning aptitude and creativity, which contribute to learner's learning outcomes [7].

Learners who are field-independent tend to excel in language learning because they can learn analytically. This means they have the capacity to break down a situation into its individual elements and identify those that are essential for decision-making. As Dörnyei & Skehan [8] put it, field-independent learners are more likely to dissect information into its constituent parts and distinguish what is important from what is not. Namely, field-independent learners could simplify the language input by extracting important and useful components from the information they received. According to Ellis and Shintani's [9] finding that simplified language input facilitates language comprehension, it can be inferred that field-independent learners may contribute significantly to language acquisition.

This is because they are able to analyze and break down complex linguistic structures into simpler components, and make it easier for them to understand and process the input provided. Skehan [10] claims that “it is possible to relate the field independent construct to an input-processing dimension...and it will be advantageous to devote attention to features which help meaning to be recovered”. In this respect, it could be assumed that the field independent individuals benefit from information processing.

While field-independent learners may exhibit advantages in language learning, it is important to note that they also possess weaknesses. Field-independent learners are known for their self-reliance, which means they prefer to learn and solve problems independently rather than seeking help or communicating with others. As Skehan [10] noted, this trait can lead to less effective relationships with others, which may reduce exposure to language output. According to Friedmann and Kondo’s [11] statements, language output plays a crucial role in facilitating learners’ comprehension, production, and, ultimately, their overall proficiency in second language learning. However, field-independent learners are “likely to be aloof and not oriented towards people, with the result that their relationships with others are less likely to be effective” [10]. That is to say, the self-reliant nature of field-independent learners might reduce the exposure of language output and thus might impede language acquisition to some extent.

2.2. Integrative Motivation

The hypothesis suggests that affective factors like attitude and motivation have a significant correlation with language learning success. Dörnyei [12] pointed out that motivation refers to the direction and intensity of human behavior.

There are mainly two types of motivation, namely, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Johnson [6] defines an individual with integrative motivation as someone who is driven to learn a foreign language out of curiosity for the culture or desire to become more integrated within the target-language society. It has been suggested that there is a link between integrative motivation and the characteristics of a good language learner. In Gardner’s [13] study, she found a consistent correlation between integrative motivation and language achievement. Learners with integrative motivation tend to put forth more effort towards their language learning goals due to their enthusiasm. The aspirations and desires that motivated individuals possess can ignite a passion for learning, which ultimately encourages learners to strive towards their learning goals. According to researchers’ statements [14] [15], students who are driven by integrative motivation tend to actively engage in classroom interactions, which leads to better language outcomes compared to less involved and passive learners. As Ellis [1] states, “learners with integrative motivation are more active in class and are less likely to drop out”. Thus, it could be noted that the higher the integrative motivation, the more evident these classroom behaviours are. As Horwitz, Cekaite and Vasilaki [16] noted, integrative motivation can positively influence language outcomes and

academic achievement. According to Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, success in second language acquisition relies heavily on the learner's emotional state. A lack of integrative motivation may prevent the learners from utilizing language input effectively, which potentially hinders progress in language learning.

However, we cannot make a conclusion that one who has integrative motivation must be a good language learner.

Firstly, integrative motivation is not the sole factor influencing second language achievement. According to Gardner [13], instrumental motivation can also contribute to successful learning. Instrumentally motivated learners are often driven by the desire to gain benefits from language acquisition, such as a better job, social esteem, and other personal goals. For example, in several Gardner's [13] studies, instrumental motivation appears to be much more powerful in other contexts where learners have little or no interest in the target language culture and have few or no opportunities to interact with its members. Secondly, distinguishing between integrative and instrumental motivation can be challenging, as learners from different social contexts may interpret motivation in various ways. For instance, Gardner [13] interviewed Lukmani, who categorized the motivation of "travel abroad" as instrumental, while Burstall viewed "travel to France" as integrative. This ambiguity arises because individuals in different situations hold differing perspectives. Consequently, linking integrative motivation to language achievement may be misleading due to the varying categorizations of motivations. Finally, it is found that motivation is inherently dynamic. It may be misguided to conclude that having integrative motivation directly leads to successful language learning. Dörnyei and Skehan [8] claim that motivation is not static; Rather, it is linked to constantly changing and evolving mental processes. Consequently, both internal factors, such as a decrease in self-confidence related to language learning, and external factors, such as receiving lower exam scores, can significantly influence learners' learning motivation as well as their language achievement.

3. Research Method

This study deployed a qualitative research method, narrative inquiry, which focuses on understanding and interpreting individual's experiences through personal stories. As Clandinin and Connelly [17] described, narrative inquiry is a method of understanding individual's experiences through exploring the stories that people share. Furthermore, Chase [18] stated that narrative inquiry allows researchers to explore the individual's experiences and contributes to revealing how personal stories are shaped by specific social context. Also, Huber and Clandinin [19] mentioned that conducting narrative inquiry enable researchers to examine complex phenomena which cannot be explored through quantitative measures. Last but not the least, the narrative inquiry enriches researchers' understanding of the ways in which stories are formed and the insights they provide regarding individuals' experiences [20].

The participant purposively selected in this research is an English teacher who

works at a public middle school in rural area in China. The selection of this teacher as a subject for the study is justified by two primary reasons. Firstly, her substantial tenure, exceeding ten years, could afford an abundance of rich data regarding students' motivation and learning patterns. Secondly, as a seasoned language instructor, the participant's insights have the potential to yield practical recommendations for teaching.

In the narrative inquiry, data is primarily collected through interviews, which encourages participants to share their experiences and perceptions. As researchers described, interview enables the researchers to gather rich, in-depth, and contextual data [21] [22].

4. Results

4.1. How Field Independence Influences Learning Outcomes

There are three major findings related to field-independent learners and their learning outcomes. First, it found that field-independent individuals tend to rely on internal references when processing information. The participant noted that Field-independent students tend to perform better since they always adopt an analytical approach to language learning. They are capable of extracting key elements from extensive information. These learners not only perceive situations holistically but also possess the ability to break them down into manageable components.

This finding is in accordance with the statement that the field-independent inclination is conceived to be beneficial for the development of cognitive restructuring abilities [23].

However, the findings suggested that one cannot assert that field-independent learners are necessarily good language learners. The participating teacher stated,

I observed that these independent students tend to process information on their own rather than interacting or communicating with other learners. My interpretation is that this characteristic of field independence may create a barrier between external information and individual's inner needs. In other words, if an independent student's comprehension is incorrect, can they identify the issues in their understanding without discussing it with others?

This echoes the statement that field-independent learners are generally less sensitive to external social cues and tend to maintain psychological distance from others [24]. Furthermore, the findings align with the statement that self-reliance tends to foster a more impersonal orientation in field-independent individuals [25]. Thus, to some degree, self-reliance in language learning may reduce opportunities for language use and impair language acquisition.

Secondly, field-dependent individuals exhibit advantages of their own in language learning when compared to field-independent learners. The teacher noted that in classroom teaching, field-dependent learners are sociable and prefer communicating with others. This interpersonal orientation not only enables them to focus on their peers' information but also enhances their competence in

understanding and interacting with others. These field-dependent learners enjoy collaborating and interacting, such as checking information, confirming details, and sharing knowledge.

As researchers [25] [26] indicated that, field-dependent individuals are strongly interested in others, sensitive to social cues, and tend to exhibit emotional openness. Therefore, it can be concluded that field-dependent learners tend to be more active than field-independent individuals, which allows them to have more opportunities to produce language and make them outperform field-independent learners in language learning.

In summary, understanding the characteristics of both field independence and field dependence offers valuable insights for teaching. As a language teacher, it is important to tailor the teaching approaches based on learners' cognitive styles. For field-independent learners, who are more self-reliant and analytically oriented, teachers should foster their interpersonal skills by providing opportunities for social interaction and encouraging them to engage in group discussions and collaborative tasks, rather than working independently. Conversely, teachers can help field-dependent learners, who rely more on external cues and context, by assigning individual projects and encouraging self-directed learning activities. Teacher can leverage the strengths of both cognitive styles, making language learning more effective for all students.

4.2. How Integrative Motivation Influences Learning Outcomes

Research findings suggest that both integrative motivation and instrumental motivation are correlated with language achievement and the concept of a good language learner.

Firstly, it is noted that learners with integrative motivation have higher interests in learning language as well as the culture of the target language. The participant stated that in the classroom, field-dependent learners tend to be more active and energetic when performing tasks and interacting with other students. These kinds of performances enable them to have more opportunities to communicate in the target language.

According to Swain's output hypothesis, second-language production can force learners to undertake language processing [27]. It can be assumed that the active interactions of these learners in the classroom will promote comprehension of input, which will be beneficial for second-language development.

Secondly, findings indicate that some students, despite lacking much interest in language learning, still put in considerable effort and achieve significant success. The teacher explained, this is because these students have instrumental motivation, such as passing examinations or achieving higher scores, which also inspires them to make efforts to learn.

The result is identical to the statement that learners with instrumental motivation tend to be effective in language learning due to their focus on practical goals [25] [28] [29].

Examining the relationship between motivation and effective language learning provides valuable insights for language teaching. Dörnyei [12] emphasizes that motivation is a key driving force in language learning. Understanding the importance of motivation enables teachers to realize that even highly talented individuals cannot achieve long-term goals without sufficient drive. Because of this critical characteristic, it is essential to explore techniques for enhancing learners' motivation. Firstly, generating intrinsic motivation should be a primary focus. Dörnyei [12] outlines a process model of second language motivation, highlighting that the choice and generating of motivation significantly influence the goals or tasks an individual will pursue. The interpretation is that without specific goals, learners may fail to see the value in the learning process and its outcomes, which ultimately leads to demotivation and reduced effort. Secondly, maintaining and protecting motivation is crucial because it is dynamic. Dörnyei [30] refers to this as executive motivation, which refers to sustaining the motivation to proceed with the tasks when the learners are distracted from language learning, such as anxiety about the tasks or irrelevant distractions from others. Thus, teachers should provide encouragement and support to inspire learners during classroom activities.

5. Conclusion

Field independence significantly influences how learners process and engage with their environment, particularly in the realm of language learning [31]. Findings indicate that field independence is positively correlated with language learning outcomes. These field-independent learners tend to excel in learning since they are adept at breaking down complex information into manageable components, which makes them more effective in language acquisition. Additionally, these learners often prefer individual work over collaborative activities due to their self-reliant nature [32]. This limitation might hinder the achievement in language learning to some extent. Thus, teachers should recognize these strengths and weakness, and develop strategies that cater to the unique needs of field-independent learners.

On the other hand, integrative motivation also plays a crucial role in enhancing language learning achievements. Research findings demonstrated that integratively motivated students tend to achieve higher levels of language proficiency, since this motivation fosters them to actively engage in in-class activities, which leads to deeper learning experiences. By recognizing and nurturing this type of motivation, teachers can create more effective and engaging learning environments that promote comprehensive language proficiency.

In summary, both field independence and integrative motivation play crucial roles in language learning. While this study's sample size may limit the generalizability of its findings, the results nonetheless offer valuable insights that can inform pedagogical practices. By understanding and leveraging these traits, teachers can create a more effective and inclusive learning environment which maximizes the potential of learners [32] [33].

Funding

This material is based upon work supported by the Project of Zhaoqing University “2024 *Baiqianwan Gongcheng*” under grant number BQW 202401.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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