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Plateau of EFL Learning: A Psycholinguistic and Pedagogical Study

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14.0 Introduction

It is estimated (Hou, 1987) that there are more than fifty million people studying English in China. But how many of them have eventually mastered the English language as a communicative means? Why do most of the students feel it harder and harder to learn English as their learning goes on? They may have learned English for several years, but at last they have to give up simply because they do not see any progress in learning. What hinders them from progressing constantly and achieve the ability to communicate with other people using English? Are they intellectually retarded for foreign language learning? All these questions can be placed under this heading: plateau of EFL (English as a foreign language) learning.

Plateau of learning is a terminology of educational psychology. It describes such a phenomenon that in the process of learning a new skill, the learner, “in spite of efforts and practice, makes no perceptible progress” (Collins et al. 1973: 157). On the learning curve, “big improvements come very quickly; then the rate of improvement slows right down to almost nothing” (Rowntree, 1981: 153).

This phenomenon is commonly observed in EFL learning. An EFL learner of average intelligence usually does not have much difficulty in the early stage of learning. Because of curiosity and assumption that he can make an immediate use of what he is learning to communicate with English-speaking people, the learner is highly motivated at the early stages of learning. He imitates, memorizes and practices

all the input from the teacher and the textbook. Though mechanically to a great extent, he does try hard to learn. On the other hand, as all the input of the English language is absolutely new to the learner, it is stimulating and easy to remember. Entwistle (1983) notices that when stimuli are new to the learner, the learner is more motivated to learn and memorize them. So most of EFL learners can have a good start in learning no matter what teaching approaches are used. Schleifer (1985) has had the same observation. However, as the learning process goes on, the learner finds it harder and harder to take in new language data. The teacher also finds that his input, no matter how much he tries to make it interesting, is no longer as easily as it used to be taken in by the learners. The students are more and more discouraged by the fact that their ambition of mastering English as a means of communication turns out to be a false assumption. They find that they know a lot about the English language, but they can hardly say they know English.

It is during this period of time that many EFL learners suffer great anxiety and eventually give up their efforts to learn the English language. Later on, for one reason or other, they have to start learning English again. They soon meet the same problem. As this circle rolls over again and again, they fail to be able to acquire a real competence to communicate by means of English, even if they may have studied English for more than ten years.

This chapter aims to probe into the causes to plateau of EFL learning, and suggest remedial strategies accordingly. The study follows a psycholinguistic and pedagogical line of inquiry, making reference to recent researches on language acquisition processes as the theory, and the EFL teaching and learning practice in China as the source of examples. This chapter will first discuss the symptoms of plateau of EFL learning by presenting both behavioral and psychological evidence. In light of the theoretical survey in the earlier chapters, it will probe into the causes to plateau of EFL learning in three aspects: the learning conditions, the teaching-learning process, and the learner characteristics. The learners being discussed are, in the main, the university students of English, but the range of the discussion reaches the whole EFL pedagogy in China. This chapter also aims to suggest some practical strategies that

can be adopted by both EFL teachers and learners to deal with their individual problems of plateau of EFL learning.

14.1 Diagnosing plateau of EFL learning

In the first six chapters, we have reviewed the developing understanding of the nature of language and language learning, and described the process of foreign language acquisition in light of recent researches in this field. All the theoretical discussion provides a psycholinguistic and pedagogical insight into foreign language learning which enables us to diagnose the symptoms of plateau of EFL learning, probe into the causes to it, and suggest remedial strategies to overcome it.

There are two ways of diagnosing plateau of EFL learning. One is to examine the outcomes of EFL learners by using standardized tests to measure their achievement in English language proficiency. An achievement curve will be obtained. The other is to observe the performance of EFL learners at any time in the learning process. The former helps to review the overall situations of EFL teaching and learning while the latter offers opportunities for the teacher to see the problems of EFL learners both in behavior and in psychology.

14.1.1 Standardized tests

In March, 1982, the English Faculty of the Foreign Language Department of Nanjing University conducted a TOFEL simulated test to 185 English majors of their own faculty, varying from Grade One to Grade Four. The average score of each grade is as follows:

Item Average Score Grade	Listening comprehension	Grammar and structure	Vocabulary/ reading comprehension	Total
Grade 4	47.89	57.92	52.43	527.6
Grade 3	45.15	57.68	49.95	508.08

Grade 2	44.26	55.85	46.63	493.44
Grade 1	40.51	54.15	41.53	453.10

Table 14.1 (Source: Yue and Chen 1985)

From Table 14.1, we find that after three years of learning (or studying) English as their major, the students of Grade 4 has got an average score 18% higher in listening comprehension, 5.1% higher in grammar and structure, 26.5% higher in vocabulary and reading comprehension, and 16.4% higher in total than that of Grade 1. The difference between Grade 3 and Grade 2 is even smaller. The average score of Grade 3 is only 2% higher in listening comprehension, 3.26% higher in grammar and structure, 7.12% higher in vocabulary and reading comprehension, and 2.97% higher in total than that of Grade 2. Obviously, such a rate of development in language proficiency is not at all admirable.

In 1984, presided by Professor Li Xiaju of Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute, a test to measure the English proficiency levels was conducted among graduating students of English major from 11 Chinese universities and colleges. Instead of indirectly measuring the students' language proficiency through formal linguistic items as in TOEFL, the test was designed as a criterion-referenced performance test, the criterion being whether the students can and how well they can perform in English a set of tasks which English-major graduates are expected to be able to do. A report of this test was published in 1985 (Li, 1985). According to the report, the mean score was 59.55. In other words, the candidates, on the average, were able to do only 59.55% of what an English-major graduating student was supposed to be able to do in English. The median score was 60.06, that is, only half of the total candidates were able to do 60.06% of what they were supposed to be able to do in English. Take the increase rate of vocabulary for example. The plateau was even more apparent. During the first two years of University studies, the candidates' vocabulary increased by 1500 words on the average each year; but in the later two years, their vocabulary increased only by 250 words on average each year. The two tests both show that the plateau of EFL learning of English majors is most apparent during the period of time between the early stage and the advanced

stage of English learning.

A research on the language proficiency of English-as-non-major graduates of Shanghai Jiaotong University presents a similar result (Chen et al. 1984). 1709 graduates were investigated. Under the question “ When did you acquire a reading proficiency for practical use?”, only 30.89% of them answered that they had acquired the proficiency after four years’ study in the university; 38.99% acquired it during five years after graduation; 30.12% has not yet so far obtained a reading proficiency for practical use. Their listening and speaking proficiency was even worse. More than 75% of the investigated graduates said that they had not acquired an ability to communicate effectively in English even within their own specialized fields.

14.1.2 Classroom observation

Standardized tests measure the general outcomes of a group of learners. The educational administrators tend to use the statistics from the tests to evaluate the current EFL education Policies and curriculum, review the teaching materials and strategies, and collect data for future innovations. Nevertheless, standardized tests are not so easy a way of diagnosing plateau of EFL learning for any single teacher of English. It is suggested that classroom observation should be equally effective for a teacher to diagnose the plateau of his students’ English learning. In fact, it is even more convenient in practice. Griffin(1978:77) points out: “Diagnosis does not necessarily involve using any standardized tests of reading or any other skills. It is a looking at the child’s problems rather than any specific set of tests to be carried out¹⁾. It is true, so far as a single teacher of English is concerned.

Plateau of EFL learning can be observed both in the behavior and the psychology of learners. In behavior, the learners do not make active response to the teacher’s instructions as they used to do. They often complain that English is too difficult to learn, and they say they cannot remember new words. They often delay handing in exercise books. They become more reluctant to join in listening-speaking activities.

Their stress (not necessarily interest) of learning shifts to reading and writing activities conducted individually.

In psychology, the learners seem to have a tendency of rejection against new linguistic input. New words, patterns and usage are no longer as stimulating as before. Recall of new language data becomes a great burden. What have been learned in class can hardly enter long-term memory (Tulving, 1972). Moreover, the learners can not apply their language knowledge automatically to performance. Although they have done a lot of pattern drills and read repeatedly the dialogues in the textbooks, they still do not have the ability to use the patterns spontaneously and unconsciously to communicate. Their language knowledge remains to be monitoring the utterance all the time instead of making creative production. The language knowledge, for the most part, stays at the conscious and cognitive level; it is not efficiently transformed into language competence, forming an unconscious communicative ability.

Psychology affects behavior; behavior reacts on psychology. The mutual impact forms a vicious circle. The learners feel more and more anxious in their learning, and eventually lose their confidence and determination. Their motivation of learning English is much affected, and thus declines.

In recent years, affective and personality factors in language learning have received more and more emphasis in research (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Oller, 1981; Stern, 1983: 176-190). Gardner (1979) sees in attitudes and motivation a principal cause of more or less successful foreign language learning. Guiora (1972) has suggested the concept of 'language ego', by which he means the 'Personal image' which a learner develops about himself in the process of his language development. Just as a child acquires a 'body image', every individual acquires his language ego. In the childhood, the language ego is fluid and its boundaries are not rigid. That is why a young child adopts a new language, a new accent, and a new dialect more easily than an adult. As the individual grows, the language ego becomes less flexible and loses its permeability. The language ego is a defensive barrier, psychologically protecting the identity and dignity of the individual. An EFL learner on plateau of learning has a strong language ego. It arouses frustration, depression, anxiety and embarrassment in

the learner and hinders him from taking in new language data offered by the teacher. The more depression and anxiety the learner has, the less input he will be able to take in (Brown, 1987: 101-9). When a learner is evidently in this situation, he is regarded as entering the period of EFL learning plateau.

When a learner is thought to be on plateau of learning, Rivlin (1969) has suggested two ways of probing into the causes. One is to examine the intrinsic changes of the learner, including his interest, motivation and attitudes. The other way is to search for the extrinsic affections, which include the change of learning environment (e.g. teachers or schools) and the level of difficulty of the subject that the learner is learning. As a general guideline in dealing with the plateau of learning, Rivlin's suggestions are helpful. However, to diagnose the causes of EFL teaching and learning in specific learning settings. Hallahan and Kauffman (1976:197) point out : "To a great extent, how the teacher views the process of language acquisition will influence how he goes about teaching language to the child". And further on, it will influence the outcomes of the teaching and learning.

14.2 Causes to plateau of EFL learning

When Littlewood (1984) analyzes the factors accounting for different learning efficiencies of EFL learners, he has identified three categories of factors: the learners' motivation, their opportunities for learning, and their ability to learn. According to the framework of factors determining foreign language learning process (see 2.1), he has obviously focused on learner characteristics, which is only one of the four categories of factors that contribute to the outcomes of foreign language learning. Since plateau of EFL learning at Chinese tertiary colleges is so widely observed, since the problem is so serious and complicated, it would be more effective to look at the problem in a widened perspective of three dimensions: learning conditions, learning process, and learner characteristics. For the fourth category of factors, the social context, as indicated in the framework, is apparently beyond the range of the capability of foreign language pedagogists.

As a matter of fact, the social context for EFL learning has never been so positive

in China as now. The open-door policy has activated foreign trade, foreign investment, foreign tourism, and foreign exchanges in almost all fields such as culture, education, science, technology, economics, politics, etc. English, as a university-degree subject course, is most welcome and emphasized by students. Just in contrast with this positive social climate for EFL learning and its high demand for effective EFL teaching, the plateau of EFL learning seems so strikingly conspicuous and pressing.

14.2.1 The learning conditions

As the framework indicates, learning process is the central switch that directly determines the outcomes of EFL learning. But learning process is influenced to a great extent by the learning settings and social context in which it takes place. The EFL learning process in China is thus related to the characteristics of Chinese EFL learning conditions, which can be summarized as follows:

1. The students in question are Chinese. Their mother tongue, the Chinese language, is quite different from the English language. Chinese college students of English are always affected in varying degrees by interference from unconscious habits and preconceived notions of their mother tongue. For instance, the various tenses in English can hardly find exact parallel in Chinese. There are no inflections of verb in Chinese no matter whether the action is taking place at present or took place two days ago. In Chinese, adverbials of time are used to indicate when the action takes place while the verbs remain in the same form. Chinese college students tend to use Chinese to acquire new knowledge of various disciplines and think of all their problems, because their Chinese is much more effective than the English language which they are learning but still handicapped in. It is widely noticed that many English majors read Chinese translations of American or British literature and Chinese literary criticisms on it in order to accomplish their assignments instead of reading the original English version. They don't have much to blame for because being college students they have to learn as much and as effectively as they can. When their English language proficiency cannot serve this purpose, they naturally turn to their first language, Chinese, for help.

2. They are learning English in China, where the linguistic environment cannot compare with that in an English-speaking country. This is the crucial difference between English as a Second Language (ESL) learning and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Take Singapore for example. For the majority of the population English is not their mother tongue. Their mother tongue is either Malay, Tamil, or Chinese. But English is, in Singapore, not only one of the four official languages, but also the most commonly used working language in trade, education, administration, tourism, transportation and industry. Singapore schools take English as the first language and teaching medium for all subjects except second languages such as Malay, Tamil, and Chinese. People can read English newspapers and periodicals; they can watch English TV programs; they can see English movies and listen to English radio programs at any time they want. In fact, English has become the most commonly used language as a communicative means. Thus a Singapore learner of English does not have to depend on formal English teaching at school. He can, more or less, sooner or later, acquire naturally and unconsciously English language competence even if he does not go to school, just similar to native speakers who acquire their mother tongue. What is more significant to second language learners is that they have an immediate communicative need for English. What they have learned can be immediately put into genuine social communication. But in China, there is not such a sociolinguistic environment. There is no natural input of the English language, nor an environment in which the learners can put their learned English knowledge into genuine communication. Thus they have to depend entirely on the formal linguistic environment, i.e., the English language classroom, where they receive English input and practice with their learned English knowledge (see 2.2; Krashen, 1981).

3. The Chinese college learners of English are no longer young children, learning elementary spoken English, although they are also eager to improve their listening and speaking proficiencies. They all have a good cognitive ability, and have more or less formed their own learning styles. They are greedy for new knowledge. They tend to take every subject as knowledge learning. Interested in everything about

the English language, they study all aspects of English intensively, including grammar, vocabulary, structures, idioms, and even phonetics. It is not a joke that they know more about English than they know English. It is not only true of the learners of English. It is also true, more or less, of the teachers of English in China. Once at college, I was taught by a professor who could not speak a single sentence in English but could explain English grammar very explicitly and teach translation very inspiringly. He read all his instructions in class instead of speaking!

To sum up, the EFL learning conditions in China are not so positive. The mother tongue of the learner is different from English and thus often hinders the learner to build up an unconscious and spontaneous monitoring system over the language performance in English. Out of the language habits associated with the mother tongue, the learner naturally tends to seek knowledge of various subjects using Chinese rather than English. So their language performance in English is much reduced, but adequate language performance is the critical switch for the internalization of language knowledge into language competence (see 2.3). Lacking an informal linguistic environment, the learner has to depend entirely on the language classroom. He does not have ample linguistic input of 'i+1' level associated with communicative needs, nor enough opportunities to use the language knowledge he has learned in class for true communication. Then the learner tends to learn English as a subject of knowledge. This tendency fits his learning style for he is good at cognitive learning. On the one hand, the language knowledge is exploded; on the other hand, the communicative competence forms slowly. In other words, the inadequate language performance can not timely 'digest' or internalize the language knowledge that pours in every day from books and teachers. The linguistic knowledge, then, stays in the cognitive domain at conscious level, but does not 'sink' into the unconscious level, that is, the domain of language competence. Therefore, we are not too bold to conclude that the identified three characteristics of learning conditions for EFL learning in China all contribute to the plateau of EFL learning in Chinese EFL pedagogy at the tertiary level.

14.2.2 The teaching-learning process

Language learning conditions influence language learning process. The characteristics of Chinese EFL learning conditions have determined what processes EFL learning might be in China. It is true that for every individual learner of English, the processes may vary greatly. But an overall summarization of the general process of EFL learning in China is still quite possible and necessary because we not only have national curriculum, syllabus and recommended teaching materials (for example, textbooks), we have also followed a rather similar approach to English teaching all over the country. The situation is scarcely changed even at the present time. The wide similarities in our EFL pedagogical practice account for the universality of EFL learning plateau in China. It is reasonable, then, to presume that in the process of Chinese EFL teaching and learning lie crucial causes to the plateau of EFL learning in China.

What are the essential characteristics of Chinese EFL teaching and learning? Many Chinese EFL professors and guest professors from abroad have studied the question. Hou (1987) summarized the methodology used in Chinese EFL teaching as:

1. Reading-grammar-translation approach
2. Knowledge-imparting process
3. Intensive reading
4. Teacher-centered approach
5. Learning from textbooks.

Of the five characteristics, ‘intensive reading’ most effectively represents the characteristics of the EFL teaching methodology in China. All the other characteristics can be regarded as deriving from it.

The Intensive Reading (IR) was originally no more than a reading course. The idea of IR came from Russian foreign language pedagogy in the 1950s as a reaction to American audiolingualism. But later on a philosophy of foreign language pedagogy was developed from it, and gradually it became the predominant approach to foreign language teaching and learning in China. Many Chinese EFL teachers and researchers, no matter they support it or attack it, have admitted that IR is a unique foreign language teaching approach that Chinese EFL pedagogy has contributed to the world

(Yue and Chen, 1985). Michael Short, director of the Institute for English Language Education, University of Lancaster, who had been a teacher at Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, also regarded intensive reading as a well-developed approach to EFL teaching although he attacked it severely (Short, 1984). David Crook (1982) shared the similar view. Therefore, a subtle analysis of the IR approach certainly helps to understand the process of EFL learning in China, and thus helps us penetrate into the formation of plateau of EFL learning.

The National Curriculum of English Major at Basic Stage of Tertiary Level (Revised version, 1980) states that the primary task of Intensive Reading is ‘to cultivate in learners a precisely-mastered and freely-used linguistic competence of the target language and its corresponding skills’. The recommended teaching strategies are, for Grade One, ‘giving priority to listening and speaking, focusing on sentence patterns, and developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills comprehensively’; for Grade Two, the recommended teaching strategies are ‘focusing on texts and taking oral as well as written work for reinforcement’. According to the primary task, the textbooks and teaching strategies of IR, we can conclude that IR is in reality a synthesized course that aims to develop listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation altogether. Its essence is not ‘reading’, but ‘intensive’ (Yue and Chen, 1985). Thus IR has presented such an EFL pedagogical philosophy that EFL learners should:

1. make intensive studies of English Language forms, grammar, vocabulary, structures, and patterns using both their cognitive ability and mechanical memory so as to achieve the knowledge of the English language;
2. associate with their mother tongue in meaning by means of translation, or find equivalents in the mother tongue (That is why IR teachers insist that learners should look up dictionaries for every useful new word and expression to make sure its meaning, usage and collocation);
3. internalize the formal as well as semantic knowledge of the English language and eventually form, hopefully, the unconscious habits of using English for communication.

Here is a typical episode of an IR lesson. The teacher is explaining the text. When the learners come across the new phrasal verb ‘look forward to’, the teacher picks it up out of the text and tries to explain it clearly.

Step 1. The teacher made clear its meaning by paraphrasing it in English as ‘hope or expect’, or by giving a Chinese equivalent to it.

Step 2. The teacher analyzed its structure. ‘Look’ is an intransitive verb; ‘forward’ is an adverb. The teacher especially pointed out that the ‘to’ here is not an infinitive ‘to’. The teacher tended to do so based on the assumption that the students may be confused about preposition ‘to’ or infinitive ‘to’, and thus make up a wrong sentence like ‘I am looking forward to go swimming tomorrow’. In order to make clear its usage, the teacher, then, compared the collocations between ‘expected to do’ and ‘look forward to (doing) something’.

Step 3. Having explained explicitly the phrasal verb in terms of meaning, form, structure, collocation, and even rhetorical color, the teacher illustrated its usage by quoting a number of sentences consisting of this phrasal verb either from dictionaries or works of art written by native speakers.

Step 4. For the reinforcement exercises, the teacher wrote a few Chinese sentences on the blackboard and asked the students to translate them into English using the phrasal verb they learned just now.

Obviously, the process of the IR approach is closely related to the interpretation of the characteristics of EFL learning conditions in China. Since the students are Chinese, the teacher explains the meaning in Chinese; since they are adults, the lesson is knowledge-imparting; since there is not an informal linguistic environment, the teacher controls everything from initial input to reinforcement exercise. But it seems that the IR practitioner has too passively interpreted the characteristics of EFL learning conditions in China. They have emphasized the formal aspect too much, but overlooked other aspects that are at least as equally important as the formal one. Five categories of weakness that stem from the IR approach have been identified.

1. Small exposure to English. Since IR emphasizes ‘intensive study’ of the text and requires the learner to master precisely everything that has been taught about the

text, the teacher and the learner have to go through the text in a linear fashion, word by word, clause by clause in order that the learner may understand everything about the text in terms of both grammar and vocabulary. Following this fashion, the teacher may be only able to cover a very small piece of reading in one class period. So the learner's exposure to the English language is very limited in an IR lesson. Recent researches have found evidence to the assumption that those who are exposed much to the target language learn the language better than those who are not. "By immersing themselves in language they soak it up through the pores of their skin" (Short, 1984).

2. Language knowledge orientation. Although the IR approach aims theoretically at language competence, its practice leads to language knowledge. It spends so much time on studies of the form and usage of a single word or phrase by analysis and reinforcement that it hinders the learner to understand the text as a whole. In other words, the learner cannot see the wood for the trees. In this sense, the meaning is sacrificed for the formal understanding and memorization. In the example quoted above, we can see that the form and the grammatical explanation rather than the meaning and the actual use of it in communication are emphasized. The learner has been led to the knowledge about the phrasal verb, but not to using it for communicative need.

3. Isolation from the context. When language learning is regarded as knowledge imparting, the language is isolated from the lively communicative context. It becomes a dead specimen waiting for the teacher and student to analyze it and study it. The teacher acts at the center of the class, being a director of a group of researchers dissecting the language specimen. But the linguistic knowledge does not necessarily mean communicative competence (see 6.2). In fact, overuse of linguistic knowledge to monitor one's language performance only hinders the learner to acquire the spontaneous communicative competence (Krashen, 1981; 1983). For communicative competence can only be acquired in ample communicative interactions in English.

4. Improper linguistic input. Good linguistic input is characterized as comprehensible, authentic, interesting and relevant to communicative needs (see 6.1). But the recommended textbooks for IR are compiled in light of structuralism (see

12.2). Every text is intended to cover a certain range of English grammar, such as sentence patterns, tenses, voice etc., and a certain amount of vocabulary, including phrases, idioms and fixed expressions. Since the text for IR cannot be long, the language of the text has to be difficult. Otherwise the limited space of a single piece of reading will fail to cover the intended grammar and vocabulary. Take the textbook for College English Band Two for example, every single lesson contains, on the average, more than 100 new words. In other words, there are more than 30 new words on each page of the text, not including phrases, fixed expressions and idioms. The input is obviously against the principle of comprehensibility. The texts are mostly works of art. They may be interesting, but absolutely not relevant to the learner's communicative needs. With the highbrow language, the teacher can hardly create a communicative climate in the class. As a result, the learner turns to study the text as a subject of knowledge instead of learning it as a skill training or acquiring.

5. Ignorance of the learner's need. The freshmen of higher education have in general studied English in secondary schools for six years. By the time they go to college or university, they have already learned the basic grammar of the English language with a vocabulary of approximately 2000 (Li, 1985; Zheng, 1984). Their weakness is that they cannot use this linguistic knowledge to understand others and express themselves effectively in communicative interactions. Once they go to college, the first thing they want to do is to turn their linguistic knowledge into communicative competence. However, the IR approach still lays the emphasis on language knowledge of formal rules, pursuing an infinite accuracy in linguistic forms. Thus the learners' desire for the development of communicative competence has been ignored. Disappointed at the situation, the learner tends to have anxiety, depression and frustration in mind. These affective factors, conversely, hinders the learner to participate in communicative activities.

6. In a word, the IR approach has over emphasized a cognitive learning of the English knowledge and overlooked the language performance in a true communicative sense. It does not supply adequate opportunities for the learner to practice with their learned knowledge in communicative interactions. Its

reinforcement exercises lead to an understanding and memorization of learned knowledge, but not to the acquisition of communicative competence. Professor Li (1985) has concluded that the students following the IR approach to English learning are ‘stronger in doing form-focused language exercises isolated from sociolinguistic contexts and void of communicative value, but weaker in doing meaning-focused tasks under the constraints of a specific sociolinguistic context and serving a communicative purpose’. In the IR approach, language competence is no more than linguistic competence in Chomskyan sense (see 4.2). All its teaching materials and strategies aim to help students learn (even study) ‘knowledge of the underlying system of rules’ (Chomsky, 1965:4). It views foreign language learning only in a linguistic perspective as a knowledge-imparting process. In this process, the learner has been put in a very passive position. He is required to receive the linguistic knowledge given by the teacher (input) and hopefully to take in this linguistic input by reinforcement exercises. Obviously, here lies the most crucial complex to plateau of EFL learning in China, which will be exemplified in the following discussion.

14.2.3 The Characteristics of the learner

In interpretation of language learning, the cognitive skills of the learner used to receive main emphasis. Language teachers often treated the importance of affective and personality factors as self-evident. However, in recent researches on foreign language learning, affective and personality factors have received more and more attention. These studies have focussed on the motivation and attitudes of learners in relation to the leaning outcomes (for example, Gardner and Smythe, 1981; Gardner and Lambert, 1972). However, Gardner (1975) points out that just as attitude cannot be treated as a unitary characteristic, large varieties of components can be classified into four categories: affective category (including motivation and attitude); emotional category (including confidence, anxiety, stress, etc.); learning strategies; and the learner’s aptitude for language learning. When we deal with plateau of EFL learning, we are, of course, dealing with the learners of average ability. Those who are intellectually retarded are not within our concern in this discussion. However, we are

ready to admit that the aptitude for language learning does vary between individual learners. Some can learn English faster; some are better in certain aspects of the English language. For example, some learners are good at imitating sound; some have a stronger inductive capacity; some have a better memory. These variations are likely to affect the outcomes of the EFL learning. But we view these variations as personal, innate talents, and we can do very little about it. What a teacher can do is to take it into account in his teaching work so as to develop the learner's talent to the maximum potential.

We would like to introduce Littlewood's (1984) analysis of the factors accounting for differences of learning efficiencies between EFL learners, and discuss how the characteristics of Chinese EFL learners lead to plateau of EFL learning.

1. Motivation and attitude. Littlewood focuses on the communicative need and attitudes towards the target language community. When a learner has a clear communicative need for the target language, he is most likely to learn the language spontaneously. If the language can be only used for external rather than internal communication, people are less likely to be motivated to acquire proficiency of it. Favorable attitudes towards the target language help to stimulate the learner's desire for communication in it. Therefore successful learners developed favorable attitudes, and in turn, these attitudes encouraged more success. On the contrary, failure may produce negative attitudes which may help to breed further failure. This suggests that the lack of communicative need and negative attitudes towards the target language community can be one of the contributors to the plateau of EFL learning.

In general, Chinese EFL learners do not have much problem with motivation or attitudes towards English learning. They are eager to learn English well and acquire the language competence of communication in English. But the general positive attitudes do not mean that the learner is always motivated to learn everything offered by the teacher and actively participate in the learning activities. As pointed out earlier, the IR approach generally ignores the establishment of a communicative environment in the classroom, and the linguistic input is often isolated from the communicative context. The students do not have a clear communicative need for what they are

supposed to learn. They cannot see in the present environment any opportunities to use the language input for communication. Their motivation for this specific linguistic input or for this specific lesson of English is much reduced because they do not have an immediate communicative need for this lesson.

2. Emotional factors. Because the EFL learner has limited communicative competence, he is most likely to have difficulties in relating to other people. This may cause the learner to feel anxious and constrained and thus cause in the learner's mind psychological barriers for communication. In this case, the learner tends to avoid personal communication with others, and take the language learning as knowledge accumulation. H. D. Brown (1987) points out that language is part of the emotion of the learner. When the learner has to communicate using a language that he has not yet mastered, he is very likely to make mistakes both in comprehension and expression. Therefore, every EFL learner possesses more or less constraints and anxiety with English especially when he makes mistakes in communication. The more constraints and anxiety the learner has, the less linguistic information he is likely to take in.

These descriptions of emotional factors are true of Chinese EFL learners although they are eager to acquire communicative competence of English. But the IR approach almost ignores all the emotional factors in class. It treats EFL learners as trainees and asks them to do reinforcement exercises in all kinds of mechanical ways, such as pattern drills, repetition, imitation, etc. Here obviously lies the influence of behaviorism. The learners are regarded as robots devoid of human emotions and feelings. As a result, the learners are reluctant to participate in classroom activities. Nor do they make good cooperation with the teacher. Their intake of language data is thus barred to a great extent. IR teachers tend to give priority to formal accuracy in EFL pedagogy. The learner, then, is always facing a danger of losing his face in front of his mates because the teacher is ready enough to point out every mistake in his utterance. The classroom is covered with a stressful atmosphere, which hinders the learner from an effective learning.

3. Learning strategies. The American sociolinguist Rubin (1975) defines learning strategies as techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire second

language knowledge. Stern makes a subtle distinction between learning strategies and techniques. In his opinion, “strategy is best reserved for general tendencies or overall characteristics of the approach employed by the language learner, leaving learning techniques as the term to refer to particular forms of observable learning behavior” (1983:405). Every EFL learner has his own learning habits and certain procedures in dealing with specific aspects of language learning. In China, college or university students of English are generally successful learners compared with many of their peers in high schools. They are hardworking, intelligent, and capable of learning. Their learning strategies are effective for their high school studies. But there is a great danger behind these “successful” strategies, for they may lead to plateau of EFL learning at tertiary level.

As stated earlier (see 12.2) IR is not only one of many subject courses in the curriculum of tertiary level for English learners. It is the teaching approach that has dominated Chinese EFL pedagogy for more than thirty years. It has not only prevailed in tertiary EFL pedagogy, but also prevailed in secondary EFL teaching and learning. In reality, the IR approach has even more widely and strictly employed in secondary EFL pedagogy. There are several reasons behind it. First, the unified national textbooks of English are grammar-centered. Second, the teachers of English in secondary schools are not well prepared for EFL pedagogy. Many of them do not have the language competence to communicate freely with native speakers in English. Third, the primary goal of the learners is to accumulate linguistic knowledge about English so as to pass examinations of various levels. The learning strategies cultivated in this learning environment cannot be anything else but intensive studies. Everyone has a book of new words, which has recorded the Chinese meaning of each word, its part of speech, its collocation and one or two sample sentences to illustrate its usage. Whenever they have time, they pick it up and read the words loudly or silently in order to memorize them by repeated reviewing. Their learning strategies can be summarized into two: one is to view language learning as linguistic knowledge accumulation; the other is to emphasize the formal aspect of language. Associated with these strategies, the teaching techniques are to increase vocabulary by

mechanical memorization and to analyze grammar using their well-developed cognitive capacity. They bring these strategies and techniques into university, and these strategies are not criticized but theorized as “intensive reading strategies”!

The IR approach has penetrated every aspect of EFL pedagogy in China. It has influenced the syllabus design, the linguistic input selection and presentation, the teaching strategies and the learning strategies. Although both the teacher and the learner desire to develop communicative competence, they are consciously or unconsciously following the IR approach and thus hindered from reaching their goal successfully. But what learning strategies should be adopted by Chinese EFL learners in colleges and universities for a more effective learning? This question will be thoroughly discussed in the following.

14.3 Suggestions for remedial Strategies

Three respectives that are closely related to the causes of plateau of EFL learning have been identified. They are the learning conditions, the teaching-learning process and the learner’s characteristics. Based on this identification, it is not difficult to reach a conclusion that plateau of EFL learning is a very complicated phenomenon, which can scarcely be explained by any single reason. The causes of it root almost in every step and aspect of the learning process. Therefore, any attempt for remedial strategies should not be single-dimensioned. The whole process of EFL learning must be taken into its view. Our suggestions for the remedial strategies to overcome, or prevent hopefully, plateau of EFL learning in China will be based on the Dynamic Process Model of EFL learning discussed in Chapter 6.

14.3.1 A brief review of the Dynamic Process Model

Language is a semantic code-system which contains rich components (e.g. vocabulary, phonetic sounds), strict prescriptive rules (e.g. grammar, intonations), and infinite possibilities of production. Mastery of a language, therefore, does not mean to memorize mechanically what one has heard or read (input), and then represent exactly what he has memorized about the input. Language learning is a generative process in

which one is exposed to the language input (both written and oral), takes in the language knowledge (e.g. vocabulary, phonetic sounds, syntactic rules, etc.), and produces automatically comprehensible meaningful and appropriate utterance in communication with other people. Language learning is not merely a knowledge-imparting process, but more likely a skill acquisition, that is, to acquire a capacity of communicating freely through the target language. In behavior, this capacity is characterized by automaticization. Based on this understanding of the nature of language and language learning, and in the light of the theoretical discussion in chapters 1—6, the Dynamic Process Model of EFL Learning can be simplified as in Figure 14:1

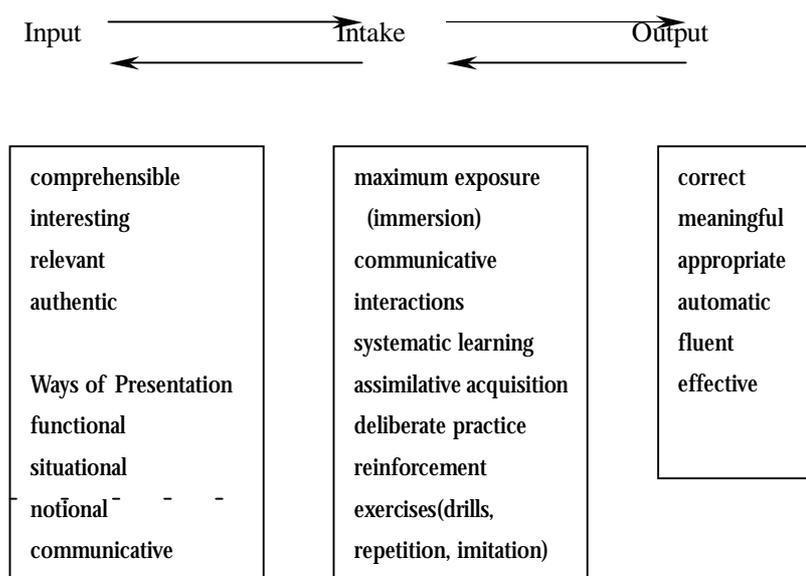


Figure 14:1 A simplified version of Dynamic Process Model of EFL Learning

This Process Model is characterized as dynamic, which means EFL learning is not a linear one-way process, but reciprocating process. ‘→’ indicates that there is mutual impact between each other. ‘→’ indicates the development direction. Proper input is taken in by the learner in proper ways; Proper intake enables the learner to make proper output. This simply reflects the two stages of foreign language learning: skill-learning and skill-using. ‘←’ indicates the feedback direction. It is significant in two senses: quality and quantity. The output reflects whether the learner’s intake is proper and enough; the intake reflects whether the input is proper in quality and enough in quantity.

By regarding this model as dynamic, we also mean that the learning emphasis is not fixed throughout the whole process. In the early stages, the emphasis may be placed on input: easy to understand, interesting, relevant to the learner’s communicative needs, etc. Gradually the emphasis may shift to intake. In order to take in language knowledge effectively, the learner may “walk on two legs”, that is, employ both assimilative acquisition and deliberate practice. In the advanced stage, output is more and more emphasized. We are no longer satisfied with an utterance correct in grammar but inappropriate for the communicative context. Nor are we satisfied with a stammering utterance even if it is correct, meaningful, and appropriate for the context. So the emphasis of learning keeps shifting as the learner progresses in foreign language acquisition. It must be specially pointed out that the Dynamic Process Model is not a closed, but an open spiral cycle. In other words, the satisfactory language proficiency is not achieved in one course from input to output. It may require several courses like this. The acquired output ability can stimulate and activate intake for more difficult input. The more difficult input will eventually lead to higher language proficiency. This cycle goes on and on until the learner has acquired a language competence that entirely satisfies his communicative needs.

Bearing this model in mind, we can now discuss the specific suggestions for the remedial strategies to overcome the EFL learning plateau in China.

14.3.2 The administration

In the Dynamic Process Model, input initiates foreign language learning. Associating it with the diagram of the main factors determining foreign language learning (see 2.1), we find that input is closely related to learning conditions and learning process. The EFL learning conditions in China can be regarded as consisting of two environments: the social environment and the pedagogical environment. As school teachers, we cannot do very much about the social environment, but we can do a lot to adjust the pedagogical environment so that the advantages of the social environment can be maximized and the disadvantages can be minimized. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the IR approach should account largely for the plateau of

EFL learning in China because it has penetrated every level of EFL teaching pedagogy. To change this situation, any single teacher cannot do much about it, but the educational administration can do a lot to adjust the EFL education policy, such as curriculum and syllabus design, teaching material selection and compiling, and evaluation standards.

Curriculum and syllabus design

The EFL curriculum and syllabus designers must bear in mind two tasks: to meet the learner's immediate needs and to prepare him for further studies. Having learned English for around six years in secondary school, the learner comes to university with a considerable amount of knowledge about the English language (Yue and Chen 1985). His weakness lies in the lack of an ability of using this linguistic knowledge for communication. He can read and write a little, but he hardly speaks or understands what is being addressed by other people. At this stage of learning, the learner is just anxious to develop his communicative competence for both the immediate need and further studies. However, the current curriculum does not serve these needs well because it follows the IR approach, taking linguistic knowledge accumulation as the only way to the communicative competence.

On the one hand, the learner has already had a considerable sum of linguistic knowledge and an immediate need to develop his language competence; on the other hand, the current curriculum ignores the learner's need and stands itself on

grammatical structures. Therefore, our first suggestion for remedial strategies to overcome plateau of EFL learning in China is to abandon the IR approach in EFL teaching curriculum and syllabus design, and adopt the communicative approaches to the tertiary EFL teaching pedagogy.

Based on communicative approaches, the curriculum must make clear that both the primary task and ultimate goal of English learning is to acquire a capacity of using the English language effectively to communicate with other people. This general objective must be reflected in the syllabus, the textbook and the evaluation. In EFL pedagogical practice, we should develop an integrated English course to replace the IR course. The integrated English course teaches speaking, reading, writing and listening comprehension altogether with its emphasis on developing the learner's communicative fluency rather than formal accuracy. In this course, the learner tries to apply what he has learned about the English language to actual use for communication. Through communicative interactions, he 'digests' or internalizes the learned linguistic knowledge and develops out of it a communicative competence. The integrated course does not exclusively stand on its own, but stands at the center of the curriculum. The curriculum sets up a number of courses (e.g. Phonetic Practice, Oral Communication, Fast Reading, etc.) to give a special training for the specified area or skill of the learner. We call these courses "satellite courses", serving around the integrated course. The satellite courses can be more or less directed by the IR approach, focusing on accurate mastery of certain linguistic knowledge. In fact, the proposed curriculum design tries to "walk on two legs". The integrated course follows the communicative approaches for a natural acquisition of language competence while the satellite courses follow the IR approach for a conscious learning and systematic study of the language knowledge. However, I must point out that the integrated course must stand at the center of the curriculum so that the curriculum is guaranteed to be communicative-approach-oriented.

Teaching material selection and compiling

With a new curriculum at hand, we still need a new set of textbooks which is

basically guided by communicative approaches. The textbook should aim at the cultivation and development of the learner's communicative competence. In order to reach the aim, the new textbook must have three characteristics: communicative presentation of input, integration of four language skills, and interactive learning activities.

Having abandoned the assumption that EFL learning is facilitated by grading grammatical constructions so that there is a progression from simple to complex structures in the input that the text provides, the new textbook should follow Krashen's (1982) conclusion that naturalistic language acquisition does not depend on graded materials but results from providing learners with the right type of input. Such input should:

- a. be comprehensible and interesting;
- b. provide structures a little beyond the learner's current level of acquisition;
- c. not be grammatically sequenced;
- d. focus on meaning, not on form, and
- e. be presented in communicative contexts, not in isolation.

(See the Dynamic Process Model in 6.1)

In the new textbook, input should not be isolated linguistic items. It should always go with communicative contexts. The learner is not facing a series of abstract language knowledge and studies it intensively using his cognitive capacity and memory. He is acting in communicative situations as one of the communicators. Language is the form of his message or notion, not isolated knowledge waiting for him to learn or study. The complexity of that language input should be considerably reduced to stimulate the students for classroom interactions. The promise of two is no better than the mastery of one.

The second characteristic of the new textbook should be the integration of four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As pointed out earlier, the university EFL learners in China have accumulated a considerable sum of language knowledge. They do not start from zero. On the contrary, they are seemingly overwhelmed by relatively too much language knowledge and too little

communicative competence. Therefore, it is possible and necessary to integrate the four skills altogether in learning activities. According to communicative approaches (Littlewood, 1981), there is a mutual impact in the development of the four skills. Isolated from other skills, any single skill can hardly be developed. So there should be adequate learning activities involving the actual use of four skills in each lesson or unit. A lesson or unit may start from a piece of reading or listening material, then go on to oral discussion, and at last ends in written work. In a word, the new textbook should not separate the four language skills and place special emphasis on any single one of them.

The third characteristic is that the new textbook should provide adequate interactive learning activities of various sorts. In the past decade, foreign language pedagogists have created numerous sorts of interactive learning activities (for example, Rivers, 1987; Long, 1985; Littlewood, 1984; Norman et al, 1986; Hadfield, 1992; etc.). These activities are characterized as learner-centred instead of teacher-centered or content-centred as in traditional textbooks of English. Learners are not only motivated for the topic, but also involved in the interactive communication. Apart from task-based and problem-solving activities, the popular interactive learning activities include language games, picture strip story, role-play, and scrambled sentences (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). These activities can be conducted in pair work, group work, or at the class scale. Every learner cares and shares the learning activities as a participant. He is part of the community and acts as one of the communicators. In the interactive communication he is no longer a pupil who is passively waiting for the teacher's instruction, guidance and correction. He is treated as an adult, being able to conduct on his own. To meet different communicative needs, he applies his learned language knowledge to use and develops his communicative competence unconsciously and naturally.

Evaluation Standards

Evaluation not only measures the results of learning output but also directs the attention of the learner, especially in a formal EFL learning environment. Language

proficiency tests are roughly classified as tests of linguistic knowledge and tests of communicative competence. The former focuses on evaluating the learner's cognitive ability of learning language knowledge. The most common way is isolated-item or more technically discrete, tests, such as multiple choice. By isolated-item or discrete, we mean the item being tested is not presented in a direct, natural communicative context (Oller, 1979). This way of evaluation often leads the learner to straying away from developing his communicative competence. There are all too many examples of students who, through an intensive study of grammar and vocabulary, have achieved a relatively high level of linguistic knowledge, but, who cannot exchange much information at all in real communicative situations.

Tests of communicative competence, on the other hand, do not focus on linguistic formal accuracy, but on fluency or communicative aspect of language. They evaluate the learner's ability of using the target language to achieve a communicative purpose. They tend to measure the learner's general language competence or at least several sorts of language skills. They are also referred to as global tests or integrative tests (Oller, 1979; Savignon, 1982). The question being tested often occurs in a specific communicative situation. The learner is expected to solve a problem or accomplish a task of communicative nature by applying his learned language knowledge to real communication (Madsen, 1983).

As the focus of evaluation shifts to communicative competence, the learner is not only encouraged but also forced to shift as well his attention of learning to the development of language competence. He would have to change his learning strategies to serve the new learning tasks. This certainly helps to overcome the plateau of EFL learning.

14.3.3 The teacher

In a class conducted with the IR approach, the learning activities are both content-centered and teacher-centered. By content-centered, we mean that both the learner and the teacher focus their attention on linguistic knowledge, which the teacher imparts and the learner receives. By teacher-centered, we mean that learners

entirely depend on the teacher's instruction, explanation and management of all class activities. The teacher has absolute authority in terms of discipline as well as language. His role is to monitor the learner's performance in a correct or accurate way and to ensure that the learner understands the input accurately.

However, according to communicative approaches, the teacher is a facilitator of classroom learning. He has a number of roles to fulfil. He is the manager of the classroom activities. In this role, one of his major responsibilities is to establish situations that are most likely to promote communication among the learners. During the activities, he acts as an advisor, answering the learner's question and monitoring their performance. He may also be "a co-communicator", engaging himself in the communicative activities with the learners. After class, he is a friend of the learners, cherishing a good rapport with them. A teacher whom his students are afraid of can hardly involve them in his classroom activities. The roles the teacher can play in overcoming the plateau of EFL learning will be approached in two perspectives: classroom management and teaching strategies.

Classroom management

Since the IR approach views EFL learning as knowledge-imparting process, it naturally requires a highly-disciplined class. So the primary aim of the IR teacher for classroom management must be class control and order. "It seems to us that adequate management of the classroom environment forms a necessary condition for cognitive learnings; and if the teacher cannot solve problems in this area, we can give the rest of teaching away" (Bunkin and Biddie 1974: 135). The IR teacher often sacrifices the learner's participation in learning activities in order to achieve his ideal discipline over the class. Obviously, that way of classroom management does not serve the purpose of EFL teaching in communicative approaches.

In communicative interactions, especially when learners are not yet competent enough for communication, the learner needs a positive environment, which has three characteristics:

1. The learner feels strongly a communicative need using English in the class.

2. Adequate opportunities are provided for the learner to use English for personal communication.
3. There is an easy climate in the classroom in which the learner enjoys participating in the learning activities.

When the learner has a clear communicative need of using English, he is most likely to learn the language spontaneously and take active part in all learning activities. So the primary aim of the classroom management must be creating positive situations that encourage and involve the learners in communication.

In the classroom, anxiety hinders learning and makes the learner reluctant to express himself or participate in oral activities. Anxiety often comes from the learner's insufficient language proficiency for communication. The teacher, therefore, should try to avoid causing anxiety, embarrassment and depression in class by employing strict class control and discipline. Instead, he should try to build up a good rapport with the learners. He should create a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom so that the learners are willing to join in. But how can the teacher establish such a positive climate in which the learner is motivated to participate and is provided with adequate opportunities to communicate in an easy and a relaxed class? The teacher may follow the following teaching strategies.

Teaching strategies

The current teaching strategies in the IR approach account a lot for the occurrence of plateau of EFL learning in China. Having stemmed from the IR approach, the current teaching strategies serve its curriculum and syllabus. Following communicative approaches to EFL pedagogy, the new curriculum and syllabus set up new tasks and principles of teaching strategies. Applied to the EFL pedagogical practice, the new teaching strategies function as remedy both to overcome the plateau of learning and to prevent it from occurrence.

1. Integrative treatment of language items and skills

Language skills are rarely independent of one another. For example, aural-oral

practice provides the base for reading and writing; reading, in turn, develops vocabulary and improves writing skills. Grammar should not be taught in isolation, but should be incorporated into reading and writing activities. The teacher should therefore try to adopt an integrative treatment of individual language items and skills, allowing reading lesson to slip into a writing exercise or a grammar lesson, or to flow into a natural form of oral communication, the conversation.

2. Continual consolidation and reinforcement

Communicative approaches do not exclude reinforcement exercises of deliberate practice, but minimize mechanical drills which are isolated from any communicative contexts. At each stage of learning, it is necessary to revise and consolidate what has previously been taught simply because language competence is the development of a continuum in skill rather than in knowledge. The acquisition of language competence can not be fulfilled in one learning or study. For example, some learners may need to be repeatedly shown how to pronounce a certain sound or write a summary. The complex rules on the use of tenses and subject-verb agreement, for example, must be regularly revised in their practical application. Kennedy (1988) believes that foreign language learners must purposely and constantly implement his language knowledge and make efforts to transfer or internalize the acquired linguistic knowledge to automatic language competence through both natural communication and deliberate reinforcement practice.

3. Relation of language teaching to everyday language situations

Since there is not an English-speaking social environment in China and the learner lacks opportunities to communicate with native-speakers, we have to build up ourselves a campus, department, or at least, class English-speaking environment for the learners to immerse themselves in. Learning from peers as a supplementary teaching approach has been more and more emphasized (Krashen and Terrell, 1983; Richards, 1985). Thus the learner does not have to depend entirely on the formal instruction in the language classroom. He has one more source of linguistic input—his peers, apart from the teacher and teaching materials. In addition, it is easier and natural for the learner to communicate with his peers than with the teacher. Everyday

language situations concern more concrete and relevant things, and less abstract concepts. So the teacher should relate his teaching to everyday language situations which the learner is familiar and intimate with. To speak of a thing that the learner knows well makes him both confident to participate and eager to express his personality in English.

4. Increase of expressive activities

Foreign language learners learn language knowledge first. Through internalization by actual performance, they acquire language competence. So performance is not merely 'the goal of learning' (the end), but one of the ways in which learning itself takes place (the process). Moreover, it is so important a way of learning that it is the only bridge through which language knowledge is transformed into language competence. So, from the earliest stages, we should not only encourage but also actually involve learners into communicative interactions. They lack a communicative environment out of school, then they should form a communicative community themselves in school and make good use of it. Receptive and productive communication activities are equally important even at the earliest stage of learning. Savignon(1983) states that expression should be used at the starting point in building language competence. Too much receptive learning without performance tends to lead to plateau of learning while productive activities help to internalize the language knowledge and thus prevent plateau of learning from occurring.

5. Fluency prior to accuracy

Since language learning is to develop 'a correct, natural, spontaneous flow of language' (Johnson and Myklebust, 1976:136) for communicative needs, the teacher should give communicative effectiveness priority over formal accuracy. Behaviorists lay too much stress on formal accuracy in order to ensure that learners can form a 'good' habit from the very beginning. The price they pay is that the acquisition of language competence is delayed or even sacrificed. The emphasis on formal accuracy involves subtle linguistic discrimination in form, usage, collocation and semantics. Thus learners' attention is shifted from general language competence to specific language knowledge. As a result, the learners can talk a lot about a specified language

point but cannot use it effectively to communicate.

6. Appropriate input

The linguistic input should have communicative value. We should relate the language data to the social context in which they are actually used either in the spoken or written form. We should create similar contexts in the classroom so that learners can use the language they are learning to express their own personal needs. The introduction of new words and concepts should be gradual and explicit, comprehensible and relevant. Drills on nonsensical words or isolated syntactic structures should be avoided. When the learner is thought to be on plateau of learning, the teacher can reduce the input of new language data or lower down the requirement of his intake. For remedial conduct, the teacher may involve the learner in more productive activities in which more challenging performance is required so as for him to internalize the language knowledge he has learned, and in turn he will be stimulated for new linguistic input.

7. Encouragement for the learner to work to his limits

If we readily think language teaching-learning process is learner-centered, we must encourage the learner to work to his best. Richards and Rodgers(1982) state that “many of the newer methodologies reflect a rethinking of the learner’s contribution to the learning process and acknowledgement that the design of an instructional system will be much influenced by the kinds of assumptions made about learners”. Thus, learning is largely in the learner’s own hands. Breen and Candlin (1980) describe the learner’s role within a communicative methodology as negotiator between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning. They conclude that “the implication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an interdependent way”. When a learner is on plateau, his motivation and attitudes become of crucial importance. Many EFL learners lost their confidence during the period of plateau of learning and never gained language competence as a means of communication. During this period of time, learners extremely need encouragement, patience, and even tolerance of their errors. The teacher’s anxiety only makes the situation even worse. So, what is more suggestible is that the teacher, in the process of

teaching, should accordingly adjust his teaching philosophy and teaching techniques so that plateau of learning can be prevented before it comes into existence.

14.3.4 The learner

Any theories and approaches to foreign language teaching, any foreign language pedagogical curriculum and syllabus, any teaching materials and strategies, not matter how marvelous they may sound, make no sense without the learner's active participation and appropriate learning strategies. Communicative approaches set the learner at the center of the language teaching-learning process, and thus the influence of the learner factors on the outcomes of foreign language teaching and learning cannot be too much estimated. Here we would like to discuss two categories of factors that the EFL learner has to consider in order to overcome plateau of learning or to prevent it from occurrence. They are personality factors and learning strategies.

Personality factors

It is generally accepted that there are certain personality characteristics which are helpful or detrimental to successful language learning. For example, outgoing students with histrionic talents tend to be more successful language learners than students who are more inhibited or introverted. Classroom observation generally gives support to this assumption. In recent years, quite a number of systematic investigations have also found positive evidence (Brown, 1980; Mcdonough, 1981; Littlewood, 1984).

Foreign language learning demands flexibility and openness to new language norms and norms of social behavior. So a learner who is ready to accept new norms from different cultural community is positively correlated with the integrative motivation and successful language learning. Good language learners are not necessarily those to whom a language comes very easily, but they have persevered, have overcome frustration, and have, after many trials and errors, achieved a satisfactory level of language proficiency (Naiman et al, 1978). One group of personality variables distinguishes successful task orientation, ego-involvement, need fulfilment, goal orientation, perseverance and risk-taking tendency (Stern, 1983).

Another group of personality characteristics relates to the social and communicative nature of language. If a learner tends to withdraw from social interaction and be occupied with inner thoughts and feelings, he might be good at the systematic study of a language, but he is absolutely hindered to develop his communicative skills. On the other hand, if a learner tends to be outgoing and interested in contact with the native speakers, it is certainly easier for him to command the interpersonal aspect of language skills. So, to be sociable and outgoing and uninhibited is often a recommended character trait to be adopted by language learners, especially in the development of communicative skills (Naiman et al, 1978).

The willingness and capacity to identify oneself with others is also positively related to foreign language learning. Not only does it help the learner to acquire the capacity to pronounce the language in a native-like manner, it is also ‘an essential factor in the overall ability to acquire a second language’ (Schumann, 1975:226).

Because of insufficient language proficiency, the foreign language learner often finds himself in situations that are ambiguous or even incomprehensible and confusing. Therefore, tolerance of ambiguity is also a useful characteristic of a good language learner. ‘The learner who is capable of accepting with tolerance and patience the frustrations of ambiguity that second language learning inevitably involves is emotionally in a better position to cope with them in a problem-solving frame of mind than a student who feels frustrated or angry in an ambiguous situation’ (Stern, 1983: 382).

Affective aspect of foreign language learning has been almost entirely ignored by the IR approach. It seems that the Chinese EFL learners also take it for granted that the language learner has to accept the frustrating situation and the position of inferiority since his language proficiency is inadequate for communication. Under the IR approach, both the teacher and the learner tend to focus on cognitive factors when they are dealing with plateau of EFL learning. However, recent researches on affective aspect of foreign language learning have found more and more evidence to the conviction that the affective component contributes at least as much as and often more to foreign language learning than the cognitive skills (Gardner, 1975; Brown, 1987).

When an EFL learner is on plateau of learning, the affective factors become more obvious. The learner becomes sensitive and easily gets to be embarrassed when communicating with others. The teacher, in this case, should pay special attention to maintaining the learner's motivation for further learning. And the learner should review his own personality that hinders him from progressing in EFL learning. A good and positive rapport between the learner and the teacher, the learner and his peers certainly helps the learner on plateau of learning to minimize the negative effect of affective factors.

Learning strategies

Inappropriate learning strategies have contributed a lot to the formation of EFL learning plateau. To develop suitable and effective learning strategies then becomes an important way of overcoming the plateau of learning. In a study of differences between successful and unsuccessful learners, the successful learners who were asked to recall the ups and downs of their language learning careers expressed a great consensus as to the learning strategies to be employed. The study found that '...good language learners take advantage of potentially useful learning situations, and if necessary create them. They develop learning techniques and strategies appropriate to their individual needs' (Naiman et al, 1978:25). The successful learners tended to make a combination of formal self-instruction with the attempt to immerse themselves in a communicative setting (Qiu, 1997:17).

Cohen and Hosenfeld (1981) also found in a comparative study of successful and unsuccessful readers that "the successful readers tended to employ similar strategies in reading. Successful readers keep the meaning of the passage in mind, read in broad phases, skip unessential words and guess from context the meaning of new words. In contrast, unsuccessful readers lose the meaning of sentences as soon as they decode them, read word-by-word in short phases, rarely skip unessential words, and turn to the glossary for the meaning of new words" (1981:296).

From all these studies of successful language learners, four sets of learning strategies have been derived:

1. Good learning involves first of all an active participation. The good EFL learner tries to expose himself to the target language input as much as possible and actively participates in communications using his learned linguistic knowledge.

2. The good EFL learner employs, secondly, a deliberate learning strategy. Foreign language learning is, to some extent, a perceptual and cognitive task, and good EFL learners are prepared to study and practise. They analyze the language and develop the necessary techniques of practice and memorization, through which they exclude the first language more and more until they acquire internal standards of grammaticality and appropriateness, and eventually achieve an automaticization of using English to meet communicative needs.

3. Good EFL learners are likely to employ a social learning strategy. In early stage of learning, they recognize their dependent status and strive to learn linguistic knowledge from the teacher, teaching materials and all other possible language sources. As they progress, they turn to seek communicative contact with native-speakers and the English community either in person or through writings. In spite of their insufficient language proficiency, good EFL learners tend to develop and use communication strategies, that is, techniques of coping with difficulties in communication. They constantly try to improve their communicative competence by being actively involved as participants in authentic use of English for communication.

4. Finally, good EFL learners tend to use an affective strategy. They cope effectively with emotional and motivational problems of EFL learning. Classroom learning as well as natural immersion in an English-speaking environment each causes specific affective problems such as anxiety, frustration, nervousness, language shock and stress or culture shock and stress, etc. In face of these difficulties, good EFL learners approach the learning task in a positive frame of mind, try to overcome frustration, and persist in their efforts of learning English (Stern, 1983).

From these learning strategies of successful EFL learners, the Chinese EFL learners can derive helpful guidelines to overcome plateau of learning. With the focus shifting to the cultivation and development of communicative competence, the university students of English should abandon their learning strategies that stem from

the IR approaches and adopt new learning strategies that suit the communicative approaches. Understanding and memorization of the linguistic items and rules are no longer satisfactory. Taking every chance to use English for communicative purposes is the key point.

Productive work, instead of receptive work, is more meaningful to overcome plateau of EFL learning, for when one has something to express he has a demand for higher language proficiency. When one has a demand, he is more likely to take in the supply. So the learning strategies at this stage should be characterized as communication-oriented. English is more than an object to study; it is rather than a tool of communication for the learner to use.

14.4 Conclusion

It has been commonly accepted now by all the foreign language teaching methodologies that the ability to communicate in the target language is the ultimate goal of language learning. To achieve this goal, two concepts of essential importance have been discussed. They are linguistic competence (knowledge of the language) and language performance (actual use of the language). However, for foreign language learners, the knowledge of the target language does not necessarily mean language competence (capacity of using the language for communication). More knowledge does not necessarily lead to better performance either. Linguistic competence is thus reconceptualized as language knowledge to distinguish the concept of communicative competence which means the practical capacity of using the language to communicate both effectively and appropriately.

Language knowledge may stay in the cognitive domain and crowd in the learner's mind, and thus hinders him from taking in more input of new linguistic data. As a result, it may cause the learner to suffer a lot from frustration and anxiety in psychology and a standstill in the development of language competence. In educational psychology, the learner is regarded as on plateau of EFL learning. The transformation from language knowledge to language performance thus becomes so important that it measures the eventual outcomes of EFL learning and teaching

pedagogy.

The transformational process from language knowledge to language competence is called internalization which is closely related to language performance in communicative interactions. Language performance includes two aspects: receptive and productive, which are equally important for the acquisition of language competence. In the process of EFL learning, performance is the bridge through which language knowledge is transformed to language competence. All the language knowledge, competence and performance must be of communicative value. Thus communicative value becomes a crucial term that links all the three components.

The EFL teaching pedagogy in China has been predominated by the Intensive Reading approach which theoretically originated from behaviorism and structuralism. It views foreign language teaching as a knowledge-imparting and reinforcement process. It is constituted with grammar as its key link, focusing on linguistic formal accuracy rather than communicative effectiveness and appropriateness. The Chinese EFL learners are thus led by this approach to the accumulation of isolated language knowledge instead of the cultivation and development of communicative ability. While their knowledge about the language has been accumulated so much, the learners find themselves handicapped with insufficient language proficiency and unable to use their learned knowledge for effective communication. They become frustrated and anxious with English learning. Here lies one the most important causes to the plateau of EFL learning in China.

If the IR approach is employed in secondary school EFL teaching as a choice of no choice, it is more reasonable and necessary to abandon this behaviorism-structuralism-based approach in university EFL teaching pedagogy and adopt communicative approaches to the curriculum and syllabus design, teaching material selection and compiling, and evaluation standards. To meet this adoption, the teaching strategies and learning strategies are all in need of review and innovation.

For the Chinese EFL learners, they may start the process of learning through a grammatical syllabus and switch to a communicative syllabus soon after some learning has taken place. They should develop skills in manipulating the linguistic

system, to the point where he can use it spontaneously and flexibly in order to express his intended message. However, linguistic competence and communicative competence should not be taught separately, as items mastered as part of a linguistic system must be timely internalized as part of a communicative system.

Indeed, the sum of our knowledge of the factors accounting for plateau of EFL learning is still very limited and imprecise. However, since it is a widely observed problem in EFL teaching and learning, all initiative efforts should be valuable.

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