

### Key Factors Affecting Learning

If any discussion is to be afforded to the analysis and comparison of the key factors affecting learning it should be acknowledged that this is a multifarious topic composed of numerous, interrelating variables. As a result, Taylor (161:2002) has deduced that "teaching is an art, not a technology." Therefore, detailed study and analysis, however careful, cannot generate comprehensive or situationally specific procedural rules that may be applied by teachers in order to obtain consistently desired outcomes.

Good intro!  
Good points

This quasi-dictum proposed by Taylor suggests, therefore, that there is no single route to classroom effectiveness. Consequently, any evaluative analysis of this topic requires a careful selection of a select number of correlative factors that are specific to the pupils, to the environment in which they learn and to Modern Foreign Languages (henceforth, MFL). Respectively, these topics are praise, motivation and performance as well as independence in learning; secondly, class layout, presentation and available resources; finally, use of the Target Language, variation between male and female students and its connection to an inherent stigmatisation of the subject. In addition to this analysis, a discussion surrounding the ways in which teachers may tackle these factors in order to maximise learning will be included.

True  
good

An integral element of analysing and assessing key factors that affect learning is the contribution made by pupils in relation to their own perceptions of their learning. Over the last decade, Weeden (5:2004) has maintained that there has been a growing research interest in identifying "...the learning and teaching strategies which pupils perceive to be enjoyable and most effective". To continue with this trend, the vast majority of the research for this discussion has been sourced from interviews with a number of Year 6, 8 and 10 students representing different levels of maturity, varying learning contexts and environments and the separate areas of the National Curriculum. By studying the perceptions of learning from a broad range of students, the key factors affecting learning can be analysed throughout their development across the compulsory education system.

Good approach  
views!

The first area to be observed and analysed was that of student independence in learning. Watkins (11:2003) believes that there are three interpretations of independent learning. Primarily, 'learning is being taught (LBT)' which seems to be the dominant conception in our society: that is, teaching is telling, learning is listening. This perception of learning seemed to be shared by a number of high ability Year 10 students who claimed they were more used to a 'lecture-style' approach in class. They claimed this was due to the high proportion of material that had to be covered in class during the course of the year. A second perception is that 'learning is individual sense making (LIS)' whereby the pupils are actively involved in the learning rather than passively receiving it from the teacher.

Good

So careful of polarising!  
i.e. it can be both at different times

Here, there is also an element of 'trial and error' and this is represented diagrammatically in figure 1 where following the teaching input, the pupil tests various ways to process and comprehends this input before applying this acquired knowledge. This perception of learning was shared by all pupils from all age ranges but the response was particularly unanimous amongst female interviewees; in particular, the female pupils responded positively to the question that they often ask themselves "Am I going about this in the best way?" The final interpretation 'learning is building knowledge as part of doing things with others' (LBKO) claims that meaning is constructed together as a social activity. All students, especially Year 6 who said they

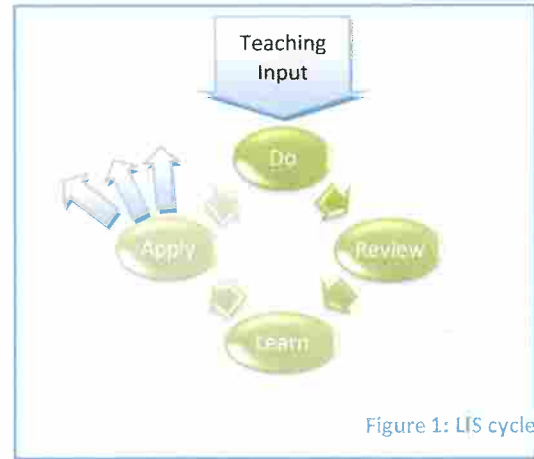


Figure 1: LIS cycle

were used to asking each other for assistance, claimed that working together was "an important part of our everyday school work".

*How do you feel about these ideas? Perhaps they can learn from this!*

The principal question which arises from the theory is whether total independence in learning is the most effective form of teaching. Black *et al.* (12:2002) agree that both LBKO and LIS are both essential elements of modern classroom culture in the form of "the empowerment of pupils to become active learners in their own learning" and "the expectation that teacher and pupils work together for the same end." It certainly seems that, when observing teachers in the classroom, they maximise pupils' independence in learning by using a holistic combination of these forms but still provide, at blanket level, support for those who require it.

A second factor affecting learning in the classroom is that of praise, motivation and performance. According to Collins *et al.* (2002), research into learning styles suggests that pupils share the characteristics of being 'learning orientated' and 'performance orientated'. The former describes learners who believe that effort can lead to success, show a preference for challenging tasks, and thrive on the satisfaction they gain through self-motivation. The latter includes pupils who believe that ability leads to success, who seek satisfaction by doing better than others and emphasise competition. However, when observing this factor, it is difficult in many cases to claim that students are defined clearly as one or the other, as pupils can potentially demonstrate the behaviour of both of these attributes depending on the situational context. High ability Year 10 and Year 8 students admit to being performance learners in subjects or when using particular skills. Many Year 8 pupils added that they were more likely to be performance learners if they felt the subject content is relevant to a particular goal. Interestingly, Year 6 students also admitted to many of the attributes of performance learners, especially in literacy, but fewer adopted this style in numeracy due to the difficulty of the subject.

*Good point*

In many cases, therefore, students were more likely to want to prove their competence rather improve it. Teachers, however, tend to steer pupils away from this performance learning attitude due to its negative effects (for example, performance learners tend to use less strategies or less effective ones, have a greater focus on grades rather than process, have greater helplessness) and encourage the counter learning style. To do this, teachers often discuss strategies for approaching activities and provide various support systems such as seating their pupils according to their ability so that peer support can take place. However, teachers continually discuss levels and grades in class (a preference of Ofsted) but this appears to promote unhealthy competition between students which, according to the theory, has a pejorative effect on their learning.

The physical environment of a classroom also appears to be a major factor which affects a pupil's learning. The vast majority of pupils from Year 8 and Year 10 believed that the quality of displays, the quality of furniture, the cleanliness of classrooms, the ICT facilities available and, interestingly, the temperature and climate of the room itself were all equally important and conducive to a pleasant learning environment. Keys and Cress (94: 2002) believe that factors such as the aforementioned have a greater impact on pupils' interest in school work, the positive values they attach to a school and its ethos, levels of discipline and concentration than many are prepared to admit. Interestingly, the Year 6 pupils interviewed for this discussion were members of a high-achieving school, which invested great time and effort in presentation and resources, and revealed that they felt 'safe and comfortable' in their learning environment. Conversely, Year 8 students felt that the generic layout of desks in classrooms, ageing equipment and furniture were 'off-putting'. Despite financial constraints, it is evident that secondary school teachers endeavour to maximise the physical learning environment of their classrooms by being imaginative with desk layout and creating purposeful displays that can help pupils in lesson time.

The final focus of this discussion centres on those factors that are specific to MFL beginning with the balance of use between the Mother Tongue (MT) and the Target Language (TL). During the 1990s, various amendments to the National Curriculum established the expectation of TL use as the 'normal means of communication.' However, results from empirical research and pedagogical literature question whether its usage leads to the learning gains it promises prima facie. Indeed, this view seems to be shared by pupils. A motivated Year 10 pupil interviewed for this discussion claimed that she enjoyed using the TL because it reinforced the idea that she was in a German lesson. Nevertheless, she admitted that she felt reluctant to use unfamiliar language unrelated to a precise meaning in her MT. Interestingly, Butzkamm (30:2003) finds it particularly revealing when MFL teachers learn a new language and realise that "...they want the very thing they are denying their own pupils: use of the MT." In fact, he has almost rebuffed monolingualistic dogma and believes that, paradoxically, a "foreign language friendly" atmosphere is only attainable through selective use of the MT. Numerous



observations of teachers in the MFL classroom reveal no salient preference that is common to all teachers; however, pupils seem to believe that the most effective way to maximise their learning in the artificial MFL classroom setting, also promoted by the National Strategy at KS3, is a metalinguistic approach whereby the TL meaning is reinforced through the use of the MT.

The final area of observation is the factor of gender in MFL. Ofsted reports according to Pachler and Field (2003) frequently draw attention to the fact that girls tend to do better than boys in a range of Curriculum subjects, but particularly in MFL. The reasons for this divide are numerous; male pupils interviewed from Year 10 were unanimous in their disaffection for the subject and describe the use of the TL, the perceived lack of scope and usefulness of the subject beyond 'grammar' as well as a difficulty in seeing actual progression as reasons for this. Conversely, Year 10 female pupils were more inclined to rate their ability as 'good' or 'very good' despite the difficulty of the subject in comparison to other areas of the National Curriculum. Many schools have tried to combat this gender difference and maximise pupils' learning by creating single-sex classes so that the particular needs of each gender can be catered for.

Nonetheless, a greater concern is that these views are also shared by many Year 8 pupils many of whom have only been studying a foreign language for one academic year. One particular male pupil confessed that he had lost interest in the subject at an early stage of Year 7. Jones and Jones (2001) and, more recently, Davies (57:2004) have highlighted this early male disaffection stating that "boys failing to achieve at KS4 may have never even got started rather than 'switched off' later." Apart from single-sex classes, teachers are attempting to combat this factor by broadening the thinking surrounding the content of the MFL curriculum primarily through the contextualisation of language learning within the target culture – for example, creating links with other pupils of the same age in the countries where the TL is spoken – and supporting lessons with elements originating from the Citizenship Curriculum. Whether these approaches will truly maximise learning is something that requires constant analysis over the coming decade.

It seems that there are a number of concluding observations that can be made from this detailed analysis of a few of the factors affecting learning in the classroom. Primarily, it is apparent that the opinions and observations made by pupils pertaining to their own learning are as equally valid as those of the teacher. Furthermore, the only way in which teachers can hope to maximise the learning of their pupils is to reflect not only on their own practice but also on those they are teaching. Secondly, despite the variety of factors and contexts discussed, it is clear that many classroom variables are inextricably linked; for instance, the failure to address factors concerning the use of the TL may demotivate pupils, especially males, and widen the gender gap in MFL. These interrelationships reiterate the maxim highlighted at the beginning of this discussion: teaching is not

an exact science. As a result, in order to be an effective teacher and address the individuality of pupils, there is a need to be flexible so as to maximise their learning.

*This is the core  
of the debate!!*

**Word Count: 1,999**

**Bibliography:**

*Good / comprehensive list!!*

Collins, J *et al.* Manifesto for Learning: Promoting Fundamental Principles. (Continuum, London, 2002)

Black, P *et al.* Working Inside the Black Box: Assessment for learning in the classroom. (NFER Nelson, London, 2002)

Butzkamm, W 'We only learn language once. The role of the mother tongue in FL classrooms' in Language Learning Journal (No. 28). (Winter 2003)

Carnell, E & Lodge, C. Supporting Effective Learning. (Paul Chapman, London, 2002)

Davies, B. 'The gender gap in modern languages: a comparison of attitude and performance in Year 7 and Year 10' in Language Learning Journal (No. 29). (Summer 2004)

Jones, B and Jones, G. Boys Performance in MFL: Listening to Learners. (CILT, London, 2001)

Pachler, N and Field, K Learning to Teach Modern Foreign Languages in the Secondary School (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). (Routledge, London, 2001)

Taylor, W 'Classroom Variables' in Moon, B & Shelton Mayes, A. Teaching and Learning in the Secondary School. (Routledge, London, 2005)

Weeden, P. Pupils' Perceptions of Geography: A Literature Review. (University of Birmingham, 2006)

*V. Good overview!  
Equivalent with  
detail / analysis*