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THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONALITY TYPE ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: A CRITIQUE OF THE ACCELERATIVE INTEGRATED METHOD

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Abstract

The Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM) is an inductive approach to second language acquisition. It was developed in Canada in 1999 by Wendy Maxwell to teach French in primary school. The AIM is currently being used to teach also English, Spanish, Mandarin and Japanese in over 10,000 primary and secondary schools in the world. The method privileges meaning-making and effective communication through a gesture approach. Maxwell claims that the AIM allows learners to reach high levels of communicative proficiency quickly, mainly through an emotional engagement with the language that they learn through dance, drama and creative writing. This paper critically evaluates the AIM; it focuses on how much it draws and impacts on the learner's personality. It also explores the appropriateness of the AIM for secondary school students who have a higher cognitive developmental age than primary students for whom the AIM was originally designed. The discussion is informed by theories on second language acquisition, emotion and personality type. The paper concludes by making recommendations on learning and teaching methodologies that can challenge and successfully engage foreign language learners while also developing in them intercultural literacy.

Keywords

Accelerative Integrated Method, Second Language Learning and Acquisition, Emotion and Personality Types

1. Introduction

Through the Accelerated Integration Method, the targeted grammar and high frequency vocabulary is taught kinesthetically, visually and in an auditory manner. Five sequences of learning build upon the Gesture Approach through a system of learnt signs which are associated with their corresponding meaning.

1) Memorization. Students memorize, rehearse and dramatize stories in the like of *The Three Little Pigs*. Those stories constitute the core learning activities.

2) Simple Oral Comprehension: Students are provided with a variety of simple language manipulation activities based directly upon the language of the play (cloze exercises, word scramble). Only the vocabulary contained in play is used in developing new sentences.

3) Complex Oral Comprehension: Through guided discussion, students rely on their knowledge of the play to learn how to respond to comprehension questions. They also express ideas and opinions orally about the content of the story.

4) Reading/Written Expression: Once students are able to read and comprehend the play orally, they read and answer written questions that test their knowledge of vocabulary from the play.

5) Creative Written/Oral Expression: Students engage in cooperative writing activities by drawing from the vocabulary learned in stories. They do so while continuing to use the Gesture Approach (GA) whereby all words are accompanied by their corresponding action. Students extend themes, characters and situations. They eventually end up writing their own original stories within a creative play through improvisational story drama.

Maxwell (2004) notes that, “through every aspect of this approach, words are constantly associated with a very strong ‘emotional hook’, ensuring that vocabulary is deeply embedded” (p. 5). But while success in language learning is strongly influenced by motivation and attitude, as it is for learning in general, the success of the AIM depends largely on how comfortable learners are in expressing themselves emotionally. The ‘emotional hook’ referred to by Maxwell is dependent on the personality type of learners. Questions are thereby raised on whether this methodology suits

all learners with all personality types. There is also the critical issue of the relevance of a story like *The Three Little Pigs* as core learning activity for secondary school students. Indeed, the cognitive developmental age level of those students might benefit from more sophisticated learning activities and more challenging learning approaches. The very notion of performance in the AIM can also cause the entertainment dimension of the method - through dance, plays, action and gestures - to surpass the value of learning itself. Learners could be putting on a show for an audience. To extend the metaphor, there may be more focus on gloss and glitter – on appearance - rather than on actual learning substance.

1.1 Edutainment

One of great challenges of language learning is to engage learners and sustain their sense of engagement. Teachers need to make lessons fun; they need to keep learners entertained. The Walt Disney Company invented the concept of edutainment (education and entertainment) through *The True-Life Adventures* series which is a collection of short subject documentary films produced between the years 1948-1960. But the first person to suggest the neologistic portmanteau *edutainment* is Robert Heyman, a former Harvard University professor and Hollywood producer, when he was producing documentaries for the American National Geography Society. Throughout the years, edutainment has been refined and adjusted to teaching by many educational practitioners. Presently, edutainment incorporates DVDs, internet games and numerous digital software devices that combine lessons with entertainment for children and adolescents. Edutainment depends on an obsessive entreatment that learning is inevitably fun. It sometimes is of course. It has to be. But it does not have to be always fun; sometimes learning must be serious and develop in learners the virtues of hard work, commitment and perseverance despite difficulty. For instance, Okan (2003) warns about the dangers of edutainment, which he notes, creates “this inflated expectation in the learners that the process of learning should always be colorful and fun, and that they can acquire information without work and serious study” (p. 255). The reality is that teachers and students are seen more and more as entertainers; their personality traits - sometimes more than their competence and attitude towards teaching and learning - become critical components of teaching and learning.

1.2 Personality Types in Second Language Acquisition

Many theorists and educationalists share the view that that personality influences the learning of a foreign language. For instance, Reiss (1983) notes that personality traits such as

extroversion, assertiveness and adventure someness have significant correlations with success in language learning. But at no point is there any research suggesting that that learners without the aforementioned personality traits cannot successfully learn a foreign language. Masgoret & Gardner (2003) for instance advise educators to use inclusive methodologies to cater for all personality types of learners. They argue that reserved learners should not experience alienation, discomfort or stress in class. Good language pedagogy must ensure that learners are exposed to a range of learning approaches and strategies. Learners then can choose the ones that suit best their personality types to approach any learning task with confidence. It is hence the responsibility of the educator to offer to students a variety of activities suiting different personality types and, at the same time, engage and challenge the students to go beyond their comfort zone. Maxwell (2006) explains that, for the first three weeks of the course, students only learn to communicate using the specific AIM sign language. They do not write anything. Such an approach makes the inclusion of - or correlation to - a learning system problematic. It is difficult for teachers in AIM lessons to use strategies other than the Gesture Approach to adjust to the different personalities of their students. Cohen and Macaro (2007) note that learners use strategies for retrieving information about the language already stored in memory. Likewise, Oxford and Ehrman (1995) suggest that learners develop strategies for rehearsing target language structures and cover strategies for speaking in the target language in class. But when learners experience difficulty in associating words to their corresponding AIM-exclusive signs and gestures they are likely to struggle to communicate in the target language. This may result in discomfort, anxiety, and eventually disengagement.

1.3 Extraversion and Introversion in Foreign Language Learning

Eysenck and Eysenck (1991) explain that the “typical extravert is sociable, likes parties, has many friends, needs to have people to talk to” (p. 9). The AIM is appropriate for this personality type. The “the typical introvert is a quiet, retiring sort of person, introspective, fond of books rather than people; he is reserved and distant except to intimate friends” Eysenck and Eysenck (1991, p. 11). Variation on the personality dimension in foreign language learning is physiological; introverts have higher baseline levels of cortical (grey matter) arousal than extraverts. In layman`s terms, they have more reactivity to individual stimuli than extraverts. Ergo, as noted by Zelenski, Sobocko & Whelan (2014), introverts perform better than extroverts in a quiet learning atmosphere. They also tend to have greater focus and long-term memory than extroverts. Introverts are not risk-takers by nature. They are likely to experience some level of

discomfort engaging in group activities where the common social denominators are gregariousness and affability. In the AIM students have to perform in front of their peers and the teacher to act out a story. This causes embarrassment and anxiety in introvert learners. On the other end, extraverts have more success in their learning when challenged by more arousing tasks that involve greater sensory stimulation. They have an outgoing attitude and are willing to take risks. They have the ability to shrug off (temporary) setbacks or disappointment. It is easy for teachers to make them try a task a few times when they have not succeeded in the first place. These characteristics make extraverts suited for the AIM. The AIM is also appropriate for extraverts because the vocabulary is taught kinesthetically, visually and in an auditory manner. But introvert learners are embarrassed and unwilling to make gestures, participate in plays, run around, and dance, and engage socially with their peers. This may cause them to lag behind.

For the primary schooling years, the AIM does have great value though. McCrae and Costa (1989) explain that younger children are more likely than older children and adults to develop the personality traits within the sanguine, which characterizes highly talkative, enthusiastic, active, and social learners. Extraversion is expressed into six facets: “warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity, excitement-seeking and positive emotions” (McCrae and Costa, 1989, p. 590). Those facets can inform the development of language methodologies in the primary schooling years where learners are comparatively less self-critical of their learning than students in secondary school. Primary school is also a time when learners also have comparatively thicker emotional filters than secondary school students. Such a condition allows them to engage in different learning tasks presented to them with more spontaneity than secondary learners. Through the AIM, “learners sing and create dances, learn to speak publicly to an audience in role as they become the characters in original stories” (Maxwell 2004, p. 3). But while the extrovert learner is dancing, talking with their hands, busy preparing their version of the story, the introvert learner can feel lonely in the classroom. They may also develop a sense of inadequacy about their language learning abilities. For all they know, the way to learn a foreign language would be through the AIM because their teachers would not have experienced other methodologies.

1.4 Kinesthetic and Linguistic Learners

Knowing the learner’s learning styles is arguably the first step to effective teaching. As noted by Lozanov (1992) such knowledge helps learners to develop strategies to compensate for sides of their intelligences that are not necessarily well developed. When being exposed to new

knowledge in learning the foreign language, learners also build on their strengths and continue to develop a positive attitude in class. They eventually enhance their self-confidence to the point where they are ready and comfortable to try new ways of learning that can successfully challenge other less developed facets of their intelligence. Maxwell (2004) notes that in the AIM, “all target vocabulary to be learned by the students is taught kinesthetically, visually and in an auditory manner, thus responding to a variety of learning styles” (p 3). What is missing in the AIM is to cater for the linguistic intelligence of the learners. Linguistic learners think in words, they like reading, play word games, make up poetry or stories. Their preferred and most successful learning type is seeing and saying words and reading books. Through the AIM approach, learners only listen to the stories for the first three weeks of the class during which they do not write anything. Maxwell (2006) argues that students with strong verbal-linguistic intelligence still benefit from the AIM because they will “hear only French words [...] see the words in the text [...] speak exclusively in French (and) read and complete in writing simple language-manipulation activities” (p. 12). But the focus remains on *acting* the words, not writing them down, which linguistic learners would have been more comfortable with. Maxwell (2004) also notes that in the AIM “the vocabulary is selected according to frequency, function and ease of acquisition” (p. 4). This is very similar to the audio-lingual method (see Fries, Cummings, Lockwood & Spruiell, 2002; Skinner 1976). Based on the principle that language learning is habit formation, the audio-lingual method fosters dependence on mimicry, memorization (parrot-learning) of set phrases identified as most commonly used and most useful in the foreign language that is being studied. Those set phrases facilitate communication in real life situation, as opposed to the set phrases in an artificial storytelling situation.

Other problems are identified with the AIM methodology. As the focus is on student active listening, the teacher needs to be a native or near-native speaker; the lesson goes fast because the pace and flow of words need to be those of a play (with movements, gestures, signs accompanied by associated words and sentences). Also, learners only develop their listening and speaking skills during the first three weeks of the AIM program. Through the Gesture Approach, they learn a new but only preliminary/preparatory semiotic system (association of signs to language) that would allow them later to learn the foreign language. Because of differences in personality and intelligence types, not all learners are able to assimilate or choreograph in their mind the expected sounds and gestures for three weeks. As a result, the next sequences in their learning are

compromised. The AIM is exactly like performing a dance routine and knowing what moves, action or gestures go with what sound. But that does not necessarily mean that there is a proper understanding of what the sounds mean. It is actually transferring one semiotic system of sound into another system of sound without any guarantee of a semantic comprehension. However, arguments have been put forward about how learners have progressed quickly through the AIM. “Grade two (meaning second year of primary school) students who have spent only a few years in this program - 200 hours of instruction - have successfully reached levels of fluency that compare favorably with students at the same grade level in immersion programs - up to 1,500 hours of instruction” (Maxwell, 2001 p. 3). Professor Jim Cummins from the University of Toronto also argues that the results achieved by students who have received instruction in French Second Language (FSL) through the AIM are “truly significant” and “revolutionary” (Maxwell, 2004, p. 8). It has already been conceded that the AIM can work well for primary school students. But the aforementioned results are not necessarily those of all students with all personality types; nor are they specifically indicative of the performance of the linguistically bright but introvert students before and after the introduction of the AIM. Moreover, while linguistic learners have excellent auditory skills, the fact that they think in words require them to write and play with the words calligraphically. Through the AIM, such learners may be lost, unwilling to participate, embarrassed and anxious in class. They have the impression of being in a show whose meaning, semantic representation and relevance evade them.

1.5 Language Learning and Intercultural Competence

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that the aim of a multilingual education is to encourage intercultural awareness and foster global citizenship. The organization also states that,

Literacy programmes and methodologies are most relevant and respond to the needs of learners when they are context-related, bilingual and support intercultural understanding within the framework of lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2019, par. 3).

Educating for intercultural competence and global citizenship is very well articulated through the immersion program, where the school curriculum is taught through the medium of foreign language. The foreign language is the vehicle for instruction: it is not the subject of instruction. The philosophy of immersion programs work on the premise that “language is text and discourse based [...] (that language) draws on integrated skills (and) is purposeful [...] teachers

build on previous experiences (class and outside) of the learners” (Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 208-210). The first immersion programs were developed in Canada in the 1970s to provide English speakers with practical French language skills as a as concrete for social survival (Richards and Rodgers (2001). In developing intercultural literacy in students, it is important that learning tasks remain as authentic as possible. There seems to be a growing consensus amongst researchers and language specialists that the philosophy of language immersion programs is in line with the 21st century skills relative to developing intercultural literacy in learners, as defined by UNESCO (see Bournot-Trites & Denizit, 2005; Kovelman et al., 2008, Fortune, Tedick, & Walker, 2008). According to Christian (2011) and Bialystok (2009), highly proficient bilinguals who use regularly both languages are very good at pattern recognition in areas other than languages. They are also good at problem-solving. But more importantly, bilingual programs develop cultural agility in learners, allowing them to be at ease with people from diverse linguistic and cultural referents. But there are some obstacles in implementing immersion programs. For instance, Fortune et al. (2008) explain that one of the challenges is to have specialized teachers who can address content language, and literacy development in an integrated way. Despite that major obstacle, more immersion programs are currently being set up by many schools around the world.

1.6 Conclusion

1.6.1 The Appropriate Method for the Cognitive Age Level

Lowe (1999) addressing policy makers and modern foreign language teachers in the primary and secondary sectors insists on an “inherent separateness of the primary and secondary schooling experiences both for teachers and learners” (p. 60). The different cognitive components and language technicalities (grammar, syntax, sentence construction) need to be sequential from the primary to secondary. The linguistic components and technicalities need to be clearly identified and compartmentalized in learning stages. A learning stage is not dependent exclusively on themes or topics of study; it is rather an identifiable cognitive stage which should not overlap with another learning/cognitive stage. The AIM is appropriate for the primary and even pre-primary year levels where learners do not have of a high affective and linguistic filter: they are less self-critical, less self-conscious and more spontaneous than older (secondary) students. Hence, for the mentioned schooling years, a program like the AIM which puts such emphasis on - and even encourages - extroversion can be pedagogically relevant and successful. While being entertaining it can nonetheless fulfil the academic objectives of fluency development at the same time. Secondary

school learners have different educational needs, a different psychological profile and different cognitive development levels. The AIM is not appropriate for them. Nevertheless, it can be argued that different methodologies and approaches towards foreign/language can – and even must - be experimented. This is a necessary condition for progress in language learning. That being said, “one of the consequences of opting for a model which aims to improve pupils’ foreign language competence is that such outcomes can be measured [...] that if anticipated improvements do not ensue, then the whole program seems to be vulnerable” (Lowe, 1999, p. 61). However, to measure accurately learners’ language competences and proficiencies is a difficult task. It is even more difficult to account precisely which factors contribute to the success or failure of those. However, certain pedagogical insight can inform educators about students’ lack of progress because of an ill-suited methodology. The latter can then be substituted by a more effective one.

1.6.2 Edutainment: A Means to an End

In foreign language learning the pressure to engage learners by entertaining them redefines learning benchmarks whose integrity often has to be negotiated between retaining the learners by entertaining them, and educating the learners. Policymakers in secondary schools need to make the most pedagogically sound choices on the methodologies they decide to implement. Those choices need to be made by avoiding the confusion of personality-type with attitudes in learning, such as engagement and motivation. Students’ proficiencies in language learning and teachers’ perceived professionalism and motivation in language teaching need not to be dependent of how much extrovert the teachers and learners are.

In a world dominated by instant access to and dissemination of knowledge through social media and a focus on instant gratification, young people definitely have a broader knowledge than ever before. But this knowledge is more superficial, short-lived, impermanent and transient. It can also be acquired without much patience and perseverance - virtues that are difficult to cultivate in the 21st century education. The AIM has been able to reach out to 10,000 schools around the world mainly because of its high entertainment value, and also because it is adapted to some societal norms that are reshaping learning and education. But educators need to be mindful that entertainment is a means to an end. The end, the ultimate objective, is - and must remain - to educate, and not to entertain. It is important that foreign language educators continue to develop language methodologies that respond to the cognitive developmental age and lived reality of the

learners. In that respect, immersion programs have proved successful when appropriately implemented.

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