

Exploration the Influence of Field Independence and Field Dependence on Foreign Language Teaching

Xiangjun Chen

School of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing, China

Abstract: *This paper is to explore the relationship between field independence, field dependence and foreign language teaching, and the influence of these two cognitive styles on foreign language teaching. Because learners with field-independent and field-dependent cognitive styles have different learning strategies, teachers should choose teaching methods that match learners' cognitive styles in foreign language teaching to achieve individualized teaching. Therefore, on the basis of analyzing the characteristics of the two cognitive styles and their influence on foreign language teaching, this paper takes oral teaching as an example to design teaching strategies that adapt to different learners' cognitive styles.*

Keywords: Field independence, Field dependence, Foreign language teaching.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

President Xi emphasized that we should vigorously cultivate foreign language talents who not only master the language but also have a deep understanding of the social culture, local conventions and customs behind the language. However, Chinese students mainly learn foreign languages and understand language and culture through English class. Therefore, foreign language teaching is one of the most important channels for language learning and talents cultivation. Language learning and talents cultivation are related to efficient foreign language teaching methods.

Regarding to efficient foreign language teaching methods, various factors should be considered, including the learner's cognitive styles, cultural background, motivation, and exposure to the language. Among these factors, learners' cognitive styles play a crucial role in choosing appropriate teaching methods.

Field independence and field dependence is one of the cognitive styles that have been extensively studied in relation to language learning and teaching. Witkin proposed that these two styles exist in the process of processing information. Field dependence indicates that people tends to rely on external references; while, field independence means that people tend to rely on internal perceptual cues to process information. (Witkin, 1977)

Although these two types of cognitive styles have great influence on foreign language teaching, many teachers do not attach its importance in their classes. Studies have shown that some teachers pay only superficial attention to students' cognitive style, and some teachers only pay unilateral attention to foreign language teaching. (Wang Lifei, 1998) Few teachers combine students' cognitive style with foreign language teaching. Therefore, combining cognitive style with foreign language teaching to design a teaching method suitable for students' cognitive style is the focus of this study.

1.2 Research Purpose and Significance

This research seeks to investigate the relationship between field dependence, field independence and foreign language teaching. Then, based on the relationship between them and the influence of these two cognitive styles on foreign language teaching, teachers can adopt suitable teaching methods. Beside, it will hold importance in theory and the relevant suggestions will be given to foreign language teachers to enhance the efficiency of their teaching.

1.3 Research Questions

This study will answer the following research questions:

- (1) Is field independence more conducive to foreign language learning than field dependence? and why?
- (2) How do foreign language teachers take into account the learning needs of field-dependent and field-independent learners by adopting different teaching methods?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Core Concepts

2.1.1 Field dependence and field independence

Research on cognitive styles has identified various types, such as field-dependent and field-independent. Studies have shown that these styles influence students' learning preferences, strategies, and performance in different ways.

According to Brown (1941), the way we learn things in general and the way we attack a problem seem to hinge on a rather amorphous link between personality and cognition; this link is referred to as cognitive style. Field dependence and field independence is one of cognitive styles, and these two concepts come from the differentiation construction put forward by American psychologist H.A. Witkin in the early 1950s. It was used to study cognitive styles in 1962. (Witkin, 1962)

Actually, there is consensus on the definition of these two styles. According to Witkin, he found people have different cognitive tendencies when processing information. Those who have a tendency to rely on the external environment are regarded as field dependent learners and vice versa, they are referred to as field independent learners. (Witkin, 1962) Ehrman and Leaver clarified that field dependent learners pay more attention on contextualized learning, on the other hand, field independent learners are those who do not tend to learn by interaction with and responsiveness to an entire field or context. (Khoury, 2013)

2.2 Study of the Relationship between Field Dependence, Field Independence and Foreign Language Learning

To view the study abroad, Brown first proposed the relationship between cognitive style and foreign language learning, Brown conclude that the merging of cognition and affect in “cognitive styles,” which vary within and among individuals, might account for varying degrees of success in learning a second language. (Brown, 1973) But he did not specify the specific impacts.

In 1981, Hansen conducted his study, and about 300 students participated in the Group Embedded Test of field dependence and independence. The scores of this test are related to the scores of on tests of linguistic, communicative, and integrative competence. Thus, this study showed field independence would be related to the acquisition of linguistic competence, and that field dependence would be connected with the acquisition of communicative competence. (Hansen, 1981) However, Chapelle and Roberts found that communicative ability is related to field independence, but not to field dependence. (Chapelle & Roberts, 1986)

Other researchers, such as Tucker, believe that field-independent cognitive style is highly consistent with spelling, listening and vocabulary scores. In addition, other scholars have studied the influence of cognitive style on writing and reading learning. Shalbafan (1996) concludes that field-independent students perform better in writing form than field-dependent students, and the latter is superior to the former in writing content. Davey (1900) Selecting 11 students as subjects, he found that field independent readers performed better than field dependent readers when completing tasks requiring extensive memorization and efficient reorganization. Thus, most studies show that field-independent learners are better than field-dependent learners in foreign language learning.

Domestic language educators have also done a lot of research on this, and have reached a similar conclusion. Liu Runqing concluded field independence is positively correlated with foreign language learning performance, but he indicated that the cognitive mode of field independence in the middle and upper stages of second language acquisition is conducive to learning (Wu Yian, Liu Runqing, 1993) and Li Zhe concluded that field independent cognition is beneficial to foreign language learning. (Li Zhe, 2000)

After reviewing the foreign studies on cognitive style, Qin Xiaoqing pointed out that there is a close relationship between

field-independent cognitive style and language system knowledge level, gestalt test score and writing ability. However, these two cognitive styles are not fixed. Due to different situations or different language tasks, the two styles can be switched between. (Qin Xiaoqing, 1997)

An excellent foreign language learner should flexibly use the cognitive styles adapted to the occasions and language tasks according to the different learning objects and tasks. Accordingly, foreign language teachers should adopt teaching methods suitable for students' cognitive styles and design appropriate teaching activities so that students can give full play to their cognitive advantages and promote the transformation of cognitive style.

2.3 Study of the Influence of Field Dependence, Field Independence on Foreign Language Teaching

In terms of influence on language teaching, Riding and other researchers pointed out through a comprehensive analysis of cognitive mode that field-dependent learners have holistic thinking and can integrate fragmented knowledge into a whole. Such learners are suitable to adopt language teaching methods and learning strategies emphasizing the whole (such as natural method and recitation method), while field-independent learners have analytical thinking. So, it is more suitable to adopt the method emphasizing rational analysis (such as grammatical translation method). (Riding, 1993)

Wang Lifei discusses the influence of cognitive style on foreign language learning and proposes to improve foreign language teaching methods by treating field-dependent and field-independent students differently. (Wang Lifei, 1998) The learning styles adopted by these two types of learners are different. Therefore, teachers should adopt appropriate teaching methods to give full play to the advantages of these two types of learners. (Li Zhe, 2000)

Zhao Yaqin also pointed out that teachers should encourage students to change their style through various means (such as language materials, learning tasks, etc.) to make up for the deficiency of their cognitive style in actual teaching. (Zhao Yaqin, 2006)

As can be seen from the above review, scholars at home and abroad have studied the effects of field independence and field dependence on foreign language learning and teaching, but most of the studies only explain the respective advantages of field dependence and field independence learners in foreign language learning and advocate that teachers can use various means to encourage students to give full play to their cognitive style advantages in actual teaching. However, few studies have mentioned what kind of methods teachers use to give full play to the advantages of students' cognitive style and promote the transformation of cognitive style in foreign language teaching. Therefore, taking oral language teaching as an example, this paper aims to explore how to adopt different teaching strategies in foreign language teaching, so as to give full play to the advantages of field-independent and field-dependent learners and improve teaching efficiency.

3. Innovative Teaching Strategies for Field Dependence and Field Independence Learners

Field-dependent and field-independent learners have different characteristics, so they have their own advantages in foreign language learning. Teachers should choose teaching strategies suitable for learners' cognitive style in foreign language teaching, so as to improve teaching strategies. The following teaching strategies take oral English teaching as an example.

3.1 Strategies for Field Independent Learners

3.1.1 Providing Challenging Tasks and Individual Projects

In oral English teaching, teachers can start with simple questions related to the topic and gradually increase the complexity to include more intricate role-play scenarios. Teachers provide scaffolding by asking questions, and then students will engage in independent practice. This incremental difficulty helps field independent learners to continually engage their problem-solving abilities and deepen their understanding of the language's nuances.

3.1.2 Encouraging Autonomous Exploration and Critical Thinking

In oral English teaching, fostering an environment where learners can create their own study routines is pivotal. Teachers can introduce a variety of resources and let students explore them at their own pace such as oral books cater to diverse interests. As part of this personalized approach, learners can set their goals, whether they're aiming for fluency, focusing on specific vocabulary, or targeting grammatical accuracy.

To maximize the potential of field-independent learners, teachers can guide students to organize oral teaching activities themselves. By assigning roles like "topic analyst" or "activity designer," these learners use their analytical skills while engaging with the language. The topic analyst might collect interesting subjects to discuss in class, ensuring that conversations are relevant and stimulating for all participants. Meanwhile, the activity designer can create innovative exercises that encourage language practice, such as simulations or debates.

Under teacher's supervision, allowing students to organize oral language teaching themselves can significantly benefit field-independent learners by fostering their natural inclination for autonomy and critical thinking and can help field independent learners enhance their ability to analyze and categorize language components.

3.2 Strategies for Field Dependent Learners

Field dependent learners often thrive in collaborative and interactive settings. They value social interactions and benefit from context-rich learning environments.

3.2.1 Incorporating Context and Real-Life Examples in Teaching

To maximize the learning potential for field-dependent learners, teachers can incorporate real-life materials based on the relevant topic such as restaurant menus, transportation timetables, or other scenarios from the target language's country to create an immersive environment. Using these authentic materials provides a natural context for language use. In addition, these authentic resources serve as excellent discussion prompts that can lead to classroom activities such as role-plays, debates, or group projects. This not only reinforces the language skills but also builds upon the learners' social and collaborative strengths, allowing them to excel in an environment that mirrors real-world interactions. Thus, by making use of these real-life materials, educators can align perfectly with the needs of field-dependent learners.

By employing these strategies suitable both for field dependent learners and field independent learners, educators can create a balanced approach that addresses the diverse needs of both field dependent and field independent learners. This not only fosters an inclusive learning environment but also enhances overall engagement and success in oral language acquisition. It is crucial to mix these approaches, adapting to the individual needs of each student to ensure that all can find a pathway to success in foreign language learning.

4. Conclusion

This paper discusses the characteristics of two cognitive styles, field independence and field dependence, and their influence on foreign language learning and teaching. Field independence was defined as a cognitive style favoring analytical and autonomous learning, whereas field dependence was characterized by a preference for holistic and collaborative approaches. The impact of these cognitive styles on foreign language learning was examined, highlighting the influence of these two styles on vocabulary, reading and writing. And these two types of learners reflect their strengths respectively in foreign language learning, so field independent learners are only superior to field dependent learners in certain aspects.

In response, in order to leverage their strengths, this paper discussed tailored teaching strategies for both field independent and field dependent learners. For field independent learners, these strategies included providing challenging tasks, encouraging autonomous exploration, and fostering critical thinking. Field dependent learners, on the other hand, benefit from the incorporation of context and real-life examples in teaching.

Thus, the implications of field independence and field dependence has significant potential to improve foreign language pedagogy and by embracing these cognitive styles and implementing tailored teaching strategies, educators can foster a more engaging, inclusive, and effective learning environment for all students.

References

- [1] Brown H D. Affective variables in second language acquisition[J]. *Language learning*, 1973, 23(2): 231-244.
- [2] Chapelle, C. Roberts C. Ambiguity tolerance and field independence as predictors of proficiency in English as a

- second language[J]. Language learning, 1986, 36(1):27-45.
- [3] Hansen J, Stansfield C. The relationship of field dependent-independent cognitive styles to foreign language achievement[J]. Language learning, 1981, 31(2): 349-367.
- [4] Khoury A G. A field-independent view of field-independence[J]. Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 2013, 3(6): 885.
- [5] Riding R, Caine T. Cognitive style and GCSE performance in mathematics, English language and French[J]. Educational Psychology, 1993, 13(1): 59-67.
- [6] Witkin H A, Dyk R B, Fattuson H F, et al. Psychological differentiation: Studies of development[J]. 1962.
- [7] Witkin, H.1977· Field-dependent and field-independent styles and their educational implications [J] .Review of Educational Implications47:1-64.
- [8] [8] Cao Shiqing A review of research on learning styles in second language acquisition [J] Journal of Yantai Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 2001, (04): 77-81
- [9] Dai Yuncai Field independent/dependent cognitive approach and second language acquisition [J] Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 2002, (03): 203-208+240.
- [10] Li Zhe The Differences in Learner Cognitive Styles and Foreign Language Teaching [J] Foreign Language Teaching, 2000, (03): 61-64.
- [11] Qin Xiaoqing The Current Status of Cognitive Style Research in Second Language Acquisition [J] Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 1997, (02).
- [12] Wang Lifei Cognitive style research and its implications for foreign language teaching [J] Shandong Foreign Language Teaching, 1998, (04).
- [13] Wu Yian, Liu Runqing, P. Jeffrey. A survey report on the quality of undergraduate English students in China [J] Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 1993, (01): 36-46+80.
- [14] Zhao Yaqin. Reflection on the Study of Midfield Independence/Dependence in Second Language Acquisition [J]. Journal of Hetian Normal College (Chinese Comprehensive Edition), 2006, (4): 130-131.