



Moving beyond the Intermediate EFL Learning Plateau

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Abstract

Plateau phase is an unavoidable stage which may happen constantly during the process of English language learning. This paper points out the plateau manifestations and causes, it also provides ways of overcoming and shortening the intermediate EFL learning plateau from the learner's perspective.

Keywords: Learning plateau, Intermediate learners, Learning strategy

1. Definition of learning plateau

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). In short, plateau implicates that one comes to another period of little or no further progress (as seen by a flat part on a learning curve) in study after making rapid progress initially. After a period of time the learning plateau is followed by further learning.

2. The distinction and relationship between plateau and fossilization

Selinker (1972) proposed the definition: "Fossilization is the phenomenon that linguistic items, rules, and subsystems of speakers of a particular native language tend to persist in their interlanguage relative to a particular target language. The age of the learners and the amount of input they are exposed to have no defossilizing effect". Selinker (1996) classified fossilization into temporary fossilization and permanent fossilization. Temporary fossilization is the prelude of permanent fossilization. Temporary fossilization is also called "plateau period" (Dai Weidong & Niu Qiang 1999). In this paper, "plateau" is adopted to refer to the phenomenon of temporary fossilization. In brief, the term *fossilization* is used to refer to the permanent state and the term *plateau* to refer to the temporary, reversible state.

3. Plateau manifestations

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. The other is to observe the performance of EFL learners at any time in the learning process. 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 they are not improving or even lagging behind in their college English learning, especially in the second year. Once learners have arrived at an intermediate level of language learning, progress does not always appear to be so marked, and making the transition from intermediate to the upper-intermediate or advanced level sometimes proves frustrating. Although the teachers were imparting new knowledge of language unceasingly, the students couldn't make use of it. Their comprehension is improving, but their expression stays stagnant on the whole. They feel 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, etc. Some may feel they have arrived at a plateau and making further progress seems elusive, despite the amount of time and effort they devote to it.

Inevitably, learners who have reached the intermediate level will have somewhat different language use profiles and learning needs, but the following problems are often encountered: psychologically, sensations of depression and loss of self-confidence can be found out among these English learners. Concerning the language performance, students have

the feelings of stagnation and they are having difficulty in pronunciation, writing, speaking, grammar, vocabulary and understanding. The details are listed as follows:

3.1 There is a gap between receptive and productive competence

Learners may have made considerable progress in listening comprehension and reading, but still feel inadequate when it comes to speaking skills.

3.2 Fluency may have progressed at the expense of complexity

Learners may make primary use of lower-level grammar, as well as vocabulary and communication strategies to express their meaning and may not have acquired more sophisticated language patterns and usage characteristics of more advanced second-language users.

3.3 Learners have a limited vocabulary range

Vocabulary development has not progressed sufficiently. Learners tend to overuse lower-level vocabulary and fail to acquire more advanced vocabulary and usage.

3.4 Language production may be adequate but often lacks the characteristics of natural speech

Learners' English may be fluent and grammatical but sounds too formal or too bookish.

3.5 There are persistent, fossilized language errors

Errors that are typical of lower-level learners reappear in certain circumstances despite the amount of time and effort devoted to correcting them.

4. The causes of the plateau phenomenon

Language learning seldom moves ahead at an even pace. Learners face spurts and slow-downs in their perceived progress. Intermediate students often feel they are stuck and are not making significant progress. This is partly because, in the early stages of learning, they can see a clear course ahead and can mark off the hurdles as they successfully tackle them. By intermediate stage, a lot of the learning process involves consolidation and extension of existing knowledge so it is harder to see what has to be achieved and to recognize when the achievement has been successful. Teachers should explain the typical learning curve for language acquisition. On the learning curve, big improvements come very quickly; then the rate of improvement slows right down to almost nothing (Rowntree, 1981: 153). In another word, at first it is steep but then levels out.

We can analyze the causes of the plateau phenomenon from different points of view. There are both external and internal factors which intervene English learning, some internal factors, such as interest, time and learning strategy play an important role in the formulation of learning plateau; while some external factors, such as teaching approaches, input and learning environment also figure a lot in the process.

5. Overcoming the plateau phase phenomenon

In fact, any theories and approaches to foreign language teaching, any foreign language pedagogical curriculum and syllabus, any teaching materials and strategies, no matter how marvelous they may sound, make no sense without the learner's active participation and appropriate learning strategies. Here I 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.

5.1 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 fulfillment, goal orientation, perseverance and risk-taking tendency (Stern, 1983).

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.

5.2 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. 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). From the studies of successful language learners, four sets of learning strategies have been derived:

5.2.1 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.

5.2.2 The good EFL learner employs 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 practice. 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 use English to meet communicative needs.

5.2.3 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.

5.2.4 Finally, good EFL learners tend to use an affective strategy

They cope effectively with emotional and motivational problems of EFL learning. English learning 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. 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.

5. Conclusion

Plateau phase is an obstacle that the students must overcome during the process of foreign language learning. Teachers should help the students to understand that in the intermediate phase, they are deepening their knowledge and gaining confidence. As part of this process, they are also becoming much more autonomous as language users: more capable of using the language in individual ways.

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