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EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY & COUNSELLING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Langerian mindfulness and language learning

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Abstract: In the current article, the tenets of Langerian mindfulness and the principles of the main approaches towards language learning, that is, the environmentalist, innatist, and interactionist approaches will be reviewed and discussed. Through this review, we show what commonalities exist between the two sides of the study (i.e., mindfulness theory and language learning) and how mindfulness theory can cooperate in and facilitate the language learning process.

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1. Introduction

Language affects the lives of people of any ethnic background, creed, and area of the world. It assists individuals to convey their emotions, needs, and concerns to the world around them. The distinctive and diverse methods humankind can employ to communicate via spoken and written language is actually most of what makes it possible to control and use their innate ability to develop enduring ties with one another; differentiating human beings from the rest of the animal kingdom (De Valoes, 2014). The language role is not merely restricted to communication; rather it plays a substantial role in the wide divisions of knowledge and human sciences. Languages can handle the development of human knowledge and the expansion of it for the advantage of humankind (Zedan et al., 2013). Based on the crucial role that languages play in individuals' life, researchers and educators in the field have made diverse attempts and have tried different theories and perspectives to facilitate the process of language learning (see Richards, 2008; Mitchell & Miles, 1998). However, in this regard, the theories of the nature of language which are concerned with "modeling the nature of the language system that is to be acquired" (Mitchell & Miles, 1998, p. 7) have not been the only considered theories since in language learning the phenomenon under investigation is human being and its language, and human possesses different

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Langerian mindfulness as the state of living in the present has been proved to have a positive impact in the diverse dimensions of life including education. In the area of education, different studies have confirmed the influential role of mindfulness in the better performance of the students. Although there exist several research in the realm of education, Langerian mindfulness has not yet entered language learning research seriously. Therefore, in the current theoretical proposal, the researchers are going to show the different possible connections between Langerian mindfulness and language learning to motivate the investigators to open a new chapter of research in the area of language learning concerning the impact of Langarian mindfulness on it.

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dimensions including cultural, social, psychological, etc. Therefore, the theories and perspectives in every stated area might play a role in the process of language learning and teaching.

Psychology, the dimension which is the focus of the current theoretical proposal, as one of the influential sciences in human life has affected the history of language learning and teaching for a long time. When language experts tried to increase the quality of language education in the late nineteenth century (Richards & Rogers, 2001), they often managed it with reference to overall theories and principles regarding "how languages are learned and how knowledge of language is represented and organized in memory" (Richards & Rogers, 2001, p. 18). Therefore, psychology seems to be to some extent something inseparable from language learning. One of the new interesting theories in psychology which might be conducive to second language education is the mindful learning theory proposed by Dr. Ellen Langer (Langer, 1997). Langer defined mindfulness as "a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context. Being mindful leads us to greater sensitivity to context and perspective, and ultimately to greater control over our lives" (Langer, 2000, p. 220). On the basis of this theory, when leaners apply mindfulness in their learning processes, they employ creativity, experience and practice cognitive flexibility, and are capable of a better use of information (Langer, Hatem, Joss, & Howell, 1989; Thornton & McEntee, 1995). This perspective emphasizes the significance of process and understanding. The actual instructional potential of mindfulness deals with educational issues like 'the ability to transfer skills and knowledge to new contexts, the development of understanding, student motivation and engagement, the ability to think creatively, and the development of self-directed learners' (Sherretz, 2006, p. 17). And all these elements appear to be crucial in the process of language learning to help learners achieve prosperous and fruitful results.

In sum, we suggest that Langerian mindfulness could be important as it helps developing new perspectives on language acquisition. The features it defines for mindful people include novelty seeking, novelty producing, flexibility, and engagement. We argue that applying this mindfulness approach in language learning context may improve the role of learners, by making them more actively engaged, focusing on meaning, enhancing their attention and creativity, and reducing their stress. Accordingly, in the following sections, Langerian mindfulness theory will be discussed and how it can relate to and facilitate the language learning process.

2. Langerian mindfulness

Ellen Langer's concept of mindfulness can be best understood as the process of drawing novel distinctions (Langer, 1989). Actively drawing these distinctions keeps individuals situated in the present. It also makes people more aware of the context and perspective of their actions than if they rely upon distinctions and categories drawn in the past. The process of finding new distinctions might cause a range of diverse outcomes such as "(1) a greater sensitivity to one's environment, (2) more openness to new information, (3) the creation of new categories for structuring perception, and (4) enhanced awareness of multiple perspectives in problem solving" (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000, p. 2). The subjective sense of mindfulness represents an increased state of engagement and vigilance because once one makes an effort to pull out new distinctions, the whole person is engaged (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000, p. 2). As a matter of fact, mindfulness contains a state of increased awareness, elevated consciousness, and greater powers of creativity and attention. Once performing and behaving throughout the basic default mode network, most of what people believe and think is usually unexamined and customary, and most of the actions they take appear to be reflexive. It seems that they are functioning with less than their complete mental ability (Olendzki, 2014). Conversely, getting close to circumstances with cognitive flexibility and curiosity uncovers their novelty, keeping individuals open to novel facts and information and retaining them in the present. Taking a mindful perspective raises creativity and leads to more productive behavioral reactions to problems and situations (Carson, Shih, & Langer, 2001). In fact, once attention is intentionally aroused, guided, placed, and held, things appear to vary greatly, and Langer and colleagues (e.g., Langer, 1997, 2009; Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000) have invested

a considerable amount of effort to vividly illustrate this contrast and display the advantages of enhanced awareness (Olendzki, 2014).

As stated by Langer (2009), mindfulness sets individuals free from getting confined to a single mindless perspective. Compared with the absolute mode of thinking, Langer puts great stress on the conditional form of thinking as an effective antagonist to mindlessness (Saarinen & Lehti, 2014). In Langer's (1997) view, the importance of uncertainty is praised as it makes it possible for individuals to mindfully analyze and criticize the presumptions which might have been deemed as inevitably solid because of their extensive and repeated exposure (Fatemi, 2014). The Langerian approach shows how getting surrounded by the labels impede the opportunity of having a real look at what might exist beyond our presumptions (Fatemi, 2014). Langer (2009) demonstrated that labels cause individuals to continue looking for data that confirm their hypotheses. In other words, they search for evidence to corroborate the label. Nonetheless, the labels should not direct people towards considering them as unquestionably and definitely accurate (Fatemi, 2014).

Contrary to mindfulness, mindlessness is an inflexible state in which an individual sticks to one viewpoint and communicates with the surroundings through predetermined and fixed automatic replies, regardless of perspective or context (Carson, 2014). When an individual is in a mindless state, (s)he operates much like a robot: behaviors and cognitions are determined by programmed routines based on categories learned in the past (Bodner & Langer, 2001). Langer hypothesizes that mindlessness is mostly the result of premature cognitive commitments or the propensity to employ formerly shaped mindsets to present circumstances, which cause people to have a repetitive absolute approach to everyday life. Langer declares that the most important impact of mindlessness is its role in impeding people's overall potential and creativity (Haigh, Moore, Kashdan, & Fresco, 2011). As a matter of fact, mindlessness appears to be as the primary reason of man error in complicated conditions, of stereotyping and prejudice, and of the feeling of switching between anxiousness and dullness that are features of many lives (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000).

3. Approaches to language learning

3.1. The environmentalist approach

The environmentalist beliefs dominated the area of language learning up to the end of the 1960s. The theory underpinning these views was grounded in two parallel movements in linguistics and psychology. In linguistics, structuralism was highly dominant in the 1940s and 1950s. To the structural linguists, language was thought of as comprising diverse components (i.e., phonemes, morphemes, words, and sentence types) associated with one another in a linear way through a number of rules or structures. The goal of language learning was to become proficient at all the components of the system and to master the rules by which these components were joined together, from phoneme to morpheme to word to phrase to sentence (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006).

The particular theory of the nature of language learning drawing teachers' interest and attention in those days was behaviorism (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006). Behaviorism, similar to structuralism, was an empirically based anti-mentalist approach to the study of human behavior. For a behaviorist, a human was basically considered as an organism able of a broad collection of behaviors. The occurrence of these behaviors was at the mercy of three important factors in learning: a stimulus, which provoked behavior; a response, which was activated by a stimulus; and reinforcement, which showed whether the response was appropriate or not and caused the repetition or suppression of the response afterwards (Richards & Rogers, 2001). When this theory was employed in language learning, language was considered as a behavior to be taught. Accordingly, language tasks in small, successive steps were provided for pupils. A small portion of the target language like a structural pattern was given as a stimulus, to which the student responded, for instance, through substitution. The teacher, then, reinforced the student's response.

Language learning, therefore, was considered as attaining a set of proper mechanical habits, and errors were frown on as they strengthened undesirable habits (Williams & Burden, 1997).

The environmentalist approach presented a good explanation of the way children learn some rudimentary routine facets of language. Besides, it demonstrated the significant role that adults and educators have in arranging suitable learning conditions (Alcón, 2000; as cited in Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006). Nonetheless, by concentrating merely on the input, it was incapable of offering a thorough explanation of the way children learn more difficult and complicated grammatical structures of language (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006).

3.2. The innatist approach

Commencing in the 1950s and up until the 1960s, both linguistics and psychology experienced significant changes. Linguistics witnessed a change from structural linguistics with the aim of describing the surface structure of language, to generative linguistics which highlighted the creative and rule-governed nature of human language (Mitchell & Miles, 1998). Within this perspective, Chomsky formulated the concepts of the Generative-Transformational (GT) Grammar and the Universal Grammar (UG). Opposed to the prior structuralist approaches in which a description of specific languages was provided, language for the UG was comprised of a collection of universal rules, features, and transformations developing the linguistic system or grammar. The UG was an endeavor to find out what common feature(s) children bring to the process of language acquisition irrespective of the language they hear around them. The research was conducted to uncover universal characteristics, and, to this aim, structures like negations, questions, relative clauses, word order, etc. were studied. Based on the GT perspective, every language possessed a surface and a deep structure, the latter being the universal facet was manifested by the surface structure in every single language. Language learning was deemed as a creative process in which the learner was involved in hypothesis building. This process was universal and inbuilt, i.e., the same for all children and possibly learners since children were viewed to be gifted with a Language Acquisition Device, that is an inborn predisposition to generate the rules of the language from the input they were subjected to (Molina, Cañado, & Agulló, 2013).

In the field of psychology, contrary to the mechanic and anti-mentalistic view of human learning supported by the behaviorist approach, the new approach called cognitive approach was mentalistic and dynamic (Richards, 2008; Mitchell & Miles, 1998). In this approach, the student was viewed as an active contributor in learning, employing different mental strategies to successfully deal with the system of the target language. The pupils were needed to make use of their minds to see, reflect, classify, and hypothesize, and in this manner to gradually figure out how the language works (Williams & Burden, 1997).

The focus on output of the innatist approach was crucial in that it offered an account of what was learned. Nevertheless, this view neglected to take the functions of language into consideration as well as to determine the operation of the learning process. As a result, it was still essential to address the actual course language development took and to give an important role to linguistic and environmental input in the process of language learning (Richards, 2008; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006).

3.3. The interactionist approach

During the 1970s, discourse analysis emerged partially as a reaction to the Chomskyan view of language. Chomsky considered language as a system that concentrated chiefly on decontextualized and unconnected units of semantics, phonology, and syntax. Rejecting the Chomskyan focus on grammar, Halliday (1973; as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006) specified language as meaning potential, i.e., as a collection of choices in meaning which is accessible to the speaker-hearer in social contexts. Rather than regarding language as something entirely internal to the learner, Halliday considered it as a channel to function in society. From a functional view, he recognized three macro functions for language: the interpersonal, the ideational, and the textual. The interpersonal function is pertinent to the human's personal relationships with others. The ideational function signifies the person's meaning potential and pertains to the representation and experience of the processes, notions, and objects regulating the natural and physical

phenomena of the world around. The textual function is connected with the linguistic manifestation of the ideational and interpersonal functions empowering the person to produce coherent texts, written or spoken. For Halliday, language communication is the consequence of the interaction between the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions of language. By means of this interaction, the meaning potential of language is recognized and experienced. Learning a language, then, involves learning to mean. Learners deepen and widen their capability for language use via meaningful interactive activities in communicative contexts (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

Contrary to Halliday who cast doubt on the Chomskyan notion of competence and tried to replace it, Hymes (1972) strived for elaborating and expanding it (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). He believed that Chomsky's theoretical differentiation between performance, "how language is used in real life" (Mitchell & Miles, 1998, p. 56), and competence, "the abstract mental representation of language" (Mitchell & Miles, 1998, p. 56), did not contain any orientations to the facets of language use in social practice and associated matters regarding the suitability of an utterance to a specific situation. Consequently, he created the term "communicative competence" which contained the language use rules in social context, the sociolinguistic standards of appropriacy as well as Chomsky's grammatical competence. Thus, the interactionist approach took into account the functions of language use in social context and stressed the quality of communication as well as pupils' cognitive capacity in such a process. All these facets were considered as crucial in developing students' communicative competence in the process of second language learning (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006).

4. Mindfulness and language learning

We argue that mindfulness can contribute to effective language learning in a number of ways. The four components of Langer's conceptualization of mindfulness are novelty seeking, novelty producing, engagement, and flexibility (Langer, 2004; Author). Novelty seeking and engagement are parts of Langer's conceptualization of mindfulness which refer to people's orientation to their environment, being engaged in a search for novelty, as opposed to being stuck into previously defined perceptions. Novelty seeking includes the inclination to get an open and curious direction to one's environment. The concept of engagement refers to a person's tendency to interact with and actively pay attention to changes in the environment (Bodner & Langer, 2001). In a novelty-seeking mode, a person interprets every single circumstance or situation as a chance to discover and learn something new (Haller, 2015). Our theoretical proposal concerning any possible associations between these two components of Langerian mindfulness and language learning is that learning a second language is learning something quite novel. If learners are open to new ideas and perspectives, they might improve greatly in their language learning. As people usually tend to be cautious when faced with something new or unknown, they may take guard on learning novel things and like to stick to their known beliefs or experiences. However, when novelty seeking grows in them, they might welcome changes and meet new things with open arms. Since learning a second language might be something completely unfamiliar, it could be regarded as a novel experience. If a learner seeks novelty in his life, (s)he may also welcome new patterns and information in the learning process and adapt them easier to his mental library. As a result, he will be a more successful learner compared to the one who is worried or stressful once faced with novelty. Concerning engagement, people demonstrating engagement could possibly get involved in the things they are doing and might detect new things about their environment (Haller, 2015). As Astin (1984) stated, the more the learners' participation and engagement, the higher will be their level of learning and personal development.

Novelty producing and flexibility are other elements of mindfulness which relate to the way one operates in one's environment (Bodner & Langer, 2001). A person with a tendency towards novelty producing actively generates novel categories instead of depending on formerly created distinctions and categories (Langer, 1989). Flexibility pertains to a mindful individual's capability to observe his or her experiences from different perspectives and to employ feedback from the environment to make the required changes to his or her behavior (Haigh et al., 2011). In a novelty-producing mode, a person is inclined to utilize every situation as a chance in producing new things. A flexible person is capable and willing to consider situations from different points of view and realize that each one has its value.

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A flexible individual continuously reassesses and appreciates a changing environment instead of standing against it (Haller, 2015). Regarding language learning, novelty producing can be manifested in language production. As producing a new language is producing something novel, those learners who learn novelty producing or are encouraged to produce novel things, appear to be more competent in speaking and writing in a new language. Flexibility can be also beneficial for language learners in several ways. Firstly, language learners are inevitably subjected to cultures, beliefs, and customs different from their own (Romoli, 2017). Flexible learners are more likely to accept and to successfully manage the differences between the two language communities. They are more likely to observe the world through new perspectives and to enjoy a greater understanding of individuals indicating dissimilar points of view (Romoli, 2017). Secondly, it seems to be more probable that such kinds of learners adjust themselves with the features of the new language system which are not in line with the first language system. Thirdly, they might not be resistant to the constructive feedback they receive from the contributors in the learning environments including teachers, classmates, etc.

Another aspect of mindfulness that can support language learning is its involvement in enhancing bottom-up processing in the brain. A portion of what is experienced enters the mind through senses. Yet, this is intervened and interpreted by top-down processes which enforce presumptions on input and adjusts experience in an acquainted and convenient manner. As Langer (1989) reported, an individual's proven assumptions and views impose themselves upon newly arriving data and considerably limit the possible array of interpretation and reaction. Realizing that this is occurring, and trying to soften the previous contexts and reinforce the freshness of new data is something that is achievable via mindfulness (Olendzki, 2014). Mindfulness might demand a suspension or minimization of the impact of top-down on bottom-up experience. Within creative mindfulness, this would include letting go of predetermined names and categories (Siegel & Siegel, 2014). It appears that this mechanism can manage and inhibit the negative effect of the formerly learned languages which interferes with the learning of the target language. However, it does not prevent learners from taking advantage of the positive transfer of the first language or previously learned languages since in Langerian mindfulness it is believed that behaviors are guided by previously learned categories and experiences and not governed by them (Langer, 2000).

Furthermore, augmenting bottom-up process in which "the brain begins with externally received stimuli and analyzes that to arrive at its final interpretation" (Chastain, 1988, p. 36) allows a kind of presence to occur for people, a presence that provides a clarity of awareness and interpersonal as well as physiological advantages (Siegel & Siegel, 2014). Being fully present causes learners to become more able to manage stressful conditions (Langer, 1993). In fact, mindfulness training is a technique which has the potential to aid learners to lessen the negative impacts of environmental stressors by directing their attention to the moment so that they can completely concentrate on class activities. Therefore, applying mindfulness practices in language learning classes has the advantage of lowering learners' affective filter. According to Affective Filter hypothesis, learners with a low affective filter try to find and get more input, communicate confidently, and tend to be more open to the input they are given; as a result, they are more effective learners. In contrast, anxious learners possess a high affective filter, which inhibits learning from taking place (Krashen, 1985; Richards & Rogers, 2001).

Besides, attentional processes have been presumed to be essential to learning. In language learning, it has been suggested that without some amount of attention, nothing can be learned from the input. It is agreed that being able to guide and concentrate cognitive activities on specific stimuli for a while is essential for second language learning. Noticing drives second language learning and lack of noticing limits the scope of learning and its relevance (Iwanaka, 2011). If pupils learn to be completely present, they might be able to improve their learning quality by being more focused (Langer, 1993); this, in turn, may lead to learning and teaching which is much more meaningful (Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005). Additionally, if learners are taught to change the stimulus, that is to say, to mindfully discover and notice new things about it, then attention increases. This kind of mindful attention also brings about a higher liking for the task and enhanced memory (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Hence, being mindful inside the

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classroom might well improve learners' capacity to keep their attention, which in turn may result in lowered stress and greater learning (Napoli et al., 2005).

The other point that is worth considering is the fact that pedagogical approaches have altered from instruction-based teacher-centered approaches to learning-driven learner-centered approaches, where the students are the focus and the aim is to expand their learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995). To be mindful means to develop and deepen learners' thinking. Mindfulness entails thinking, creating meaning, refining, and taking advantage of learning. Accordingly, being involved in mindful strategies, language learners become responsible for their learning (Wang & Liu, 2016). Learning turns into a process in which students are actively and cognitively engaged in noticing and recognizing new things concerning information they receive as well as paying attention to differences, perspectives, and contexts (Langer, 1997). In such a class the focus is on students and the instructor assists the students to create meaning, think about their learning, and employ their learning (Wang & Liu, 2016).

Lastly, the principles of Langerian mindfulness and learning based on this view appears to be compatible with the features of interactionist approach (the most comprehensive view compared with the environmentalist and innatist approaches) towards learning the language. For instance, both perspectives believe in the context-dependent nature of information (Langer, 1997; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006). Both emphasize learners' cognitive capacity and consider an active role for learners in the learning process. Within mindful learning, students should actively pay attention to contexts, differences, and perspectives, draw novel distinctions, etc. (Langer, 1997). In a similar vein, based on the interactionist approach, learners have an active and important role in the act of communication (Martínez-Flor, Usó-Juan, & Soler, 2006; Richards, 2008). Another commonality between the two perspectives is the focus on meaning and meaningful information and interaction. Langer (1997) believed that students should be taught to make the material meaningful to themselves so as to have effective learning. In the interactionist perspective, learning a language includes learning to mean. It is merely via meaningful interactive tasks in communicative contexts that a student enlarges the language use capacity (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

5. Conclusion

In the current paper, we tried to find the associations between Langerian mindfulness and language learning theoretically. Comparing the principles of mindfulness and the tenets underpinning second language learning, we concluded that there are some similarities between the norms of mindfulness theory and the principles of the more recent trends towards language learning. We also suggest that an emphasis on novelty, creativity, engagement, being present, flexibility, focusing on learners, and sensitivity to context can facilitate second language learning. Indeed, we have reached these conclusions only theoretically. Empirical studies are warranted to test the impact of applying mindfulness theory to language learning environments.

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