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Current Misconceptions in Language Teaching in EFL Classes in Iran

چکیده

آموزش زبان دوم همیشه عرصه‌ی ظهور نگرش‌ها و نظریات متفاوتی بوده است که ابتدا براساس ذهنیات و تصورات افراد شکل گرفته‌اند و سپس به دفعات در بوته‌ی آزمایش تحقیقات علمی اصلاح و ویرایش شده‌اند. در این میان، ظهور مکاتب فکری در حوزه‌های روان‌شناسی و زبان‌شناسی نیز بر شکل‌گیری نگرش‌ها در این حوزه‌ی میان‌رشته‌ای بی‌تأثیر نبوده است. اما بین آن‌چه در کلاس‌های زبان‌آموزی در جریان است و آن‌چه که نگرش‌های غالب برگرفته از یافته‌های تحقیقی پیش روی ما قرار می‌دهد، تفاوت کاملاً محسوسی وجود دارد. این تفاوت در سیستم‌های آموزشی سنتی که در مقابل تغییرات زیادی از خود نشان می‌دهند، ملموس‌تر به نظر می‌رسد.

مسلم است که بخش اعظمی از فعالیت‌های یاددهی ـ یادگیری رایج در کلاس‌های زبان، متأثر از نگرش‌های معلمین در خصوص پدیده‌ی زبان و موضوعات مربوط به زبان‌آموزی است. بخشی از این نگرش‌ها ریشه در اولین تجربیات معلمین در برخورد با زبان دوم دارد که سالیان قبل به‌عنوان دانش‌آموز کسب کرده‌اند [لورتی، ۱۹۷۵] و امروزه به‌گونه‌ای پیچیده، باورها، نگرش‌ها و در نتیجه رویکرد آن‌ها را در کلاس‌ها تعیین می‌کنند. به نظر می‌رسد تأثیر نگرش‌های حاصله تا آن‌جاست که تجربیات جدید از صافی (فیلتر) این نگرش‌ها تفسیر می‌شوند [پیچارس، ۱۹۹۲] و نتایج حاصل از یافته‌های تحقیقی تأثیر چندانی بر ویرایش و اصلاحشان نداشته باشد [ریچاردسون، ۱۹۹۶]. لذا ضروری به نظر می‌رسد، معلمین با استفاده از ابزار فراشناختی، نگرش‌های خود را مورد بازبینی و ارزیابی قرار دهند و با مقایسه‌ی آن‌ها با نگرش‌های علمی موجود در ادبیات این حوزه، در راستای ارتقای کیفی عملکرد خود گام بردارند.

در راستای این هدف، مقاله‌ی حاضر تلاش دارد به بررسی برخی از نگرش‌های زبان‌آموزی رایج در نظام آموزش و پرورش بپردازد که با نگرش‌های جدید این حوزه هم‌سویی ندارند. نظر به این‌که در نظام آموزشی مذکور، متأثر از تعریف سنتی از زبان، تأکید خاصی بر اجزای گرامر و واژگان می‌شود، تصورات نادرست در این دو حوزه تمرکز اصلی این مقاله است. در این راستا، ابتدا نگرش‌های رایج در کلاس‌های زبان انگلیسی در دو حوزه‌ی گرامر و واژگان تحت عنوان «تصورات نادرست» (misconceptions) مطرح می‌شود و سپس نگرش‌های مذکور با استفاده از نظریات و یافته‌های تحقیقی تحت عنوان «دیدگاه مخالف» (counterargument) به چالش کشیده می‌شوند.

بدیهی است، تغییر آنی و دفعی نگرش معلمین هدف این مقاله نیست، چرا که نویسنده بر این باور است که تغییر مثبت در نگرش معلمین فرایندی طولانی مدت است که از طریق مسلح کردن آن‌ها با ابزار قضاوت امکان دارد. لذا مباحث مطرح شده تحت عنوان دیدگاه مخالف، بیش از آن‌که تجویز یک نگرش باشند، باید نگاهی متفاوت از منظری دیگر به پدیده تلقی شوند که به استناد علمی بودن، از ظرفیت کیفیت‌بخشی بهره‌مند هستند.

کلیدواژه‌ها: آموزش زبان دوم، انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی، اجزای زبان، تصورات نادرست، دستور زبان (گرامر)، واژگان.

Abstract

This article aims at investigating the current misconceptions prevalent in EFL classes in guidance schools and high schools in Iran. In doing so, based on what Iranian teachers do as their daily practices for teaching English as a foreign language, their general attitudes toward language and its components will be identified. Because of the strong tendency for working on grammar and vocabulary in the given context, these two components will be the focus of attention. To evaluate the status of the current attitudes, this will be weighed against the research findings in the field of SLA. The perceived incorrect ideas are presented as "misconceptions" and the research findings on that particular idea come under the title "counterarguments". The pedagogical implications of such an interface will be presented in the counterargument section.

Keyword: misconceptions, EFL, class, language components, grammar, vocabulary, SLA

Introduction

The field of language teaching as an arena of human endeavor is a puzzle whose pieces are set gradually (Brown, 2000). In its course of development some pieces should be rearranged to be fitted into a more efficient paradigm for solving the current issues. The initial ideas for solving this puzzle were inspired by common sense because there were no other points of reference such as rigorous schools of thought. Educational authorities of the time had a "feel" for do's and don'ts of teaching and learning. Therefore, they put the puzzle pieces according to their feelings. As the schools of psychology and linguistics shed more lights on this field, the puzzle tended to take a new arrangement accordingly. But the location of some pieces seems so axiomatic that the research findings cannot take them or remove their remaining traces. Consequently, some teachers are still following the preceding version of the puzzle and refrain from keeping up with the innovations in language teaching. This article tries to depict two clear pictures one of which is what is happening in our classes as reality and the other is what research findings support by empirical evidence.

Setting the Scene: Stop Doubting Game

When Diane Larsen-Freeman (2001) wanted to write her famous book–

Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching– to elaborate on the debatable point of "Methods" which had been under attack by the majority (see for example, Kumaravadivelu, 1994), she referred to an article by Peter Elbow (1973) to provide some justification for her work. She wrote about her own experience about Caleb Gattegno's "the Silent Way", and two opposing voices in her head. According to her, these two voices - "On the other hand" and "Wait a minute "– resembled two games proposed in Elbow's article – The Doubting Game and the Believing Game. In his article, Peter Elbow points out that most academics or intellectuals are obsessed with one method of approaching new ideas - the doubting game which looks for errors and contradictions. Elbow's article is a plea for a more balanced approach that also includes the "believing game." The believing game allows you to believe everything intentionally. In other words, the doubting game is the disciplined practice of trying to be as skeptical as possible with every idea we encounter. In contrast, the believing game is the disciplined practice of trying to be as accepting as possible to every idea we encounter.

Elbow's article implies that in encountering new ideas most people take an extreme position by complete rejection or complete acceptance. None of these positions result in an "intellectual

enterprise" (Elbow, 1973, p.145). Treating the present article about misconceptions in language teaching also entails this intellectual enterprise. Some of the ideas presented as misconceptions may be strong axiomatic convictions for some readers. My suggestion is "wait a minute" and " don't start doubting game". If you try to explore the nuggets, you definitely see some merit in them.

Current Misconceptions

Research on second or foreign language acquisition is trying to find solutions to the problems of language learning. As the time passes, better keys are provided for the locks in this domain. But it takes time for some people to upgrade their views toward issues encountering them. Some people resist so dogmatically that the result of successive revisions of an idea on a particular issue stands against their current view toward that issue. The first step for keeping up with the latest developments in this domain is to provide them with two pictures: the first picture is supposed to show them the reality of what they think and do in their practices, and the second picture should reveal what is suggested by research findings. In what follows, the former is presented as "misconception" and the latter as "counterargument"

Misconception1: Language learning means lexical knowledge and grammatical knowledge.

For many years language was defined as a finite system of elements and rules that makes it possible for speakers to construct grammatical sentences (Finegan & Besiner, 1989).This definition considers language as consisting of two main components. One of them is "vocabulary" and the other one is structural patterns which we call "grammar". The logical implication for language teachers can be the notion that language competence constitues only vocabulary and grammer. Such an attitude is attributed to Chomsky (1965) when he proposed the notion of linguistic competence.

Counterargument 1: Linguistic knowledge accounts for only a small proportion of communicative competence.

As an objection to Chomsky's grammatical competence, Hymes (1972) argued that linguistic competence constitutes only one element of communicative competence; what is more important is knowing how to use that knowledge appropriately for the activities in which speakers want to take part. For Hymes and his proponents, communicative competence also covers sociolinguistic competence – knowledge of the relationship between language and nonlinguistic context, discourse competence – knowledge of how to begin and end a conversation, and strategic competence-the knowledge of communication

strategies. Therefore, if a person wants to be proficient in using a second language, he/she should know more than just grammar and vocabulary of that language.

Misconception2: We teach grammar because we think it is necessary.

For most teachers teaching grammar is an integral part of their teaching practice. This notion dates back to the time when "Grammar Translation Method" was the dominant method of teaching (Richards & Rogers, 2001). For these teachers, teaching intricacies of grammar is the backbone of their teaching activities because without grammar even the highest level of lexical knowledge cannot result in language comprehension or production. The relative importance of grammar makes so many teachers to allocate considerable amount of time to teaching grammar and in return expect learners to memorize lists of grammar rules.

Counterargument 2: Teachers tend to concentrate on grammar mainly because it is reassuring and comforting.

Michael Swan (2001) in his article, "Seven Bad Reason for Teaching Grammar and Two Good Ones", rejects the proposed reasons by teachers for teaching too much grammar and lists seven hidden reasons. He believes that teachers teach grammar because: 1) it is there, 2) it is tidy, 3) it is testable, 4) it is a security blanket, 5) it makes us who we are, 6) it is a whole system, and 7) it is a tool of power. What this list gives us are some hidden reasons for teaching so much grammar. In fact, if language teachers get to know about the roots of their strong tendency for teaching grammar, it may help them to revise their seemingly sound rationale for so much elaboration on grammar.

Misconception 3: Grammatical complexity equates learning difficulty.

For most teachers it seems logical to consider a positive correlation between complexity level of a grammatical item and its level of difficulty. These teachers believe that those grammatical items which are difficult to teach are difficult to learn and those which are easy to teach are necessarily simple to acquire on the part of the learners. Consequently, these teachers allocate more time elaborating on those grammatical items whose teaching entails detailed explanations and a lengthy list of exceptions. Similarly, apparently easy items deserve a short simple description.

Counterargument 3: Simplicity and complexity of grammatical items should be defined psycholinguistically not linguistically.

The equation of teachability - learnability is the core assumption of grammatical syllabuses which suggests that easy items should precede difficult ones when we
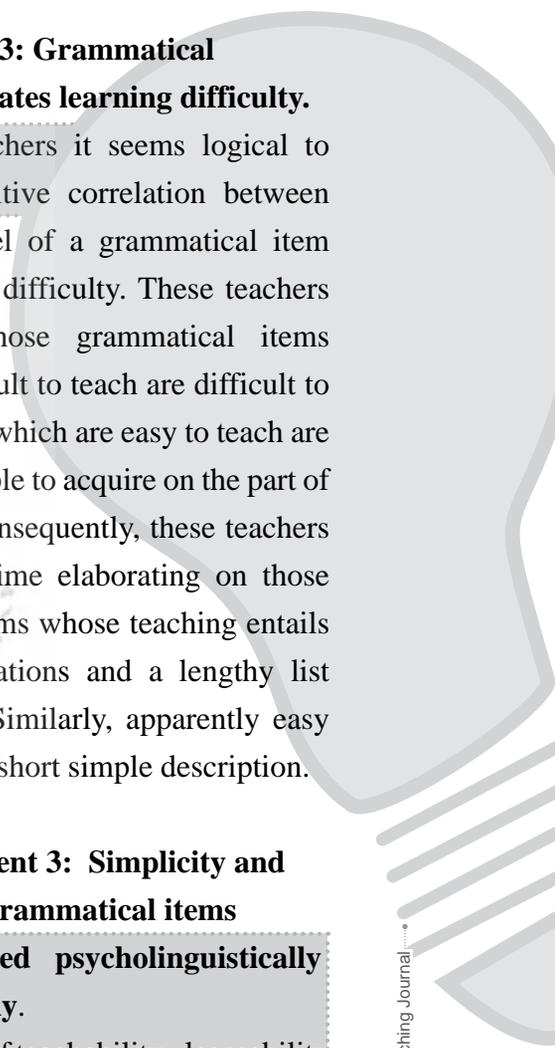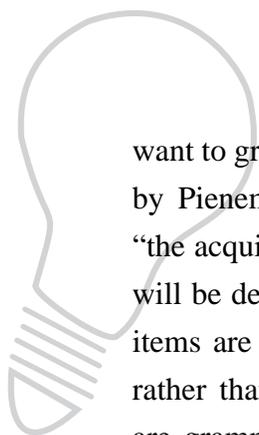
want to grade the selected items. Research by Pienemann and Johnson showed that "the acquisition of grammatical structures will be determined by how difficult those items are to process psycholinguistically, rather than how simple or complex they are grammatically" (Nunan, 1988, p.33). Therefore, it will be a logical conclusion to say that those items that are grammatically complex will not necessarily be those which are difficult to learn.

Misconception 4: Students acquire grammatical morphemes according to the order we teach them.

Grammatical morphemes are those morphemes that express grammatical aspects, such as person, number, tense, aspect, case, etc. Examples of these morphemes are plural "-s", progressive "-ing", regular past tense "-ed", third person "-s", and possessive"-s" (Cook, 1991). For most teachers these grammatical morphemes are of different levels of difficulty so it will be logical to grade them according to the perceived level of complexity and teach them in an additive manner.

Counterargument 4: Students have their own order for acquisition of grammatical morphemes.

In the early 1970s, it was revealed that English children learn the grammatical morphemes in a definite sequence (Brown, 1973). Similar order was found in L2 acquisition by L2 researchers such as Dulay and Burt in 1974. Their findings showed that the order in the acquisition of L2 grammatical morphemes is as follows: plural "s", progressive "ing", copula "be", auxiliary "be", articles, irregular past, third person "s", and possessive "s" (Cook, 1991). A quick look at this list shows that this order doesn't necessarily reflect the order of complexity. What these findings give us at the first sight is an order which is independent of what teachers teach. In fact, learners have their own "inbuilt syllabus" which determines the order of acquisition regardless of the order which teachers follow in teaching grammar.

Misconception 5: Grammatical items are learned one by one in an additive sequential static fashion.

Being inspired by most grammar books, many teachers divide the whole body of grammar into so many subdivisions. For these teachers, every grammatical item is independent of others so they select one of them, work on it, and finally assess their learners on that particular item. They believe that by elaboration on all grammatical items in this way gradually the whole body of grammar takes shape. This view is reflected in synthetic syllabuses which dissect the language into its smallest components to teach them one at a time in an additive linear mode. Rutherford (1987)

calls this view the "accumulated entities" view of language learning.

Counterargument 5: Students learn grammatical items in a spiral cyclical organic fashion.

For most researchers linear additive fashion of learning grammar is not valid enough (Rutherford, 1987). These researchers propose a spiral cyclical mode of learning, instead. To understand this model better, consider a curved line in a snail shape which has also some straight lines from its center cutting the curved line many times periodically. The curved line is metaphorically the track which the learners should go in their journey of learning grammar and each straight line is a grammatical point which is encountered by those who are traveling in this track. In this model every grammatical item is dealt with in an infinite number of times and in every instance of encountering, the learners' understanding of that particular item becomes deeper. Therefore, there is no end to the final state of internalization of grammar in learners' cognitive structure.

**Misconce** *[text obscured]* **to the learners** *[text obscured]* **ame**
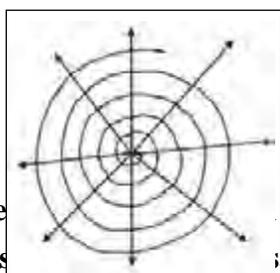
amount of output.

Like any other processes, the language acquisition process begins with some raw material and ends with a kind of product while something happens in between ironically in a "black box". This conceptualization of the language process makes some teachers view the whole process as an equation in which more amount of input leads to more amount of output. In fact, for these teachers this process doesn't have any by-product or wastage. Therefore, they expect the same amount of output as they gave to their learners some time ago as input. This is apparent in most teachers' approach when they teach a lesson and evaluate it in the next session.

Counterargument 6: The learner's mind is not an assembly line in which input and output are equal quantitatively and qualitatively.

Krashen (1985) argues that not every kind of input is appropriate for the process of natural acquisition of language. He believes that if input is comprehensible it eventually [my emphasis] leads to output. Some other researchers go on to consider some intermediate stages between the starting point of input and the final stage of output (Van Patten, 1993; Ellis, 1994). In their proposed mode between input and the output stages, there are intake stage, acquisition stage, and access stage. From
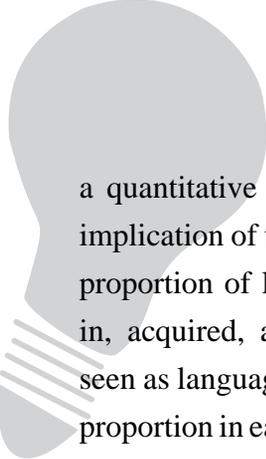
a quantitative point of view, one logical implication of this new mode is that not all proportion of language data can be taken in, acquired, and finally accessed to be seen as language production. In fact, some proportion in each stage is lost temporarily. From a qualitative point of view, what enters each stage and what comes out of it may be different in essence. This is because the learners' cognitive structure has its pattern of analysis or its own raw materials left from previous analyses. Consequently, those teachers who teach a grammatical point in a particular way in one session and expect their learners to give it back equally and thoroughly in the next session overlook the reducing effect of these intermediate stages and intervening effect of cognitive structure.

Misconception 7: Words are coins exchangeable from one language to another language according to a fixed exchanging rate.

All languages have so many words to turn percepts into concepts and visa versa. If a concept is shared by two speakers of two different languages, these two languages have different words in the surface structure for which there is a common origin in the deep structure. Therefore, /mæn/ in English, /mærd/ in Persian, and /ælræj?l/ in Arabic are superficially different realizations of the same concept. If this is right, it will be acceptable for foreign language learners to change these surface forms into each other exactly the same as dealers who exchange different currencies because all of them are essentially money.

Counterargument 7: Every word in every language is unique and should be learned within the full context of the culture of that language.

A century ago Jesperson illustrated an example to assert that no word can be exactly translated into other languages (Cook, 1991). He argued that a bird which is called "bat" in English has other equivalents in other languages and each equivalent shows the way speakers of that language view the most salient perceived characteristic feature of this bird. Here a question is raised: If a concrete object like a bird is viewed differently by speakers of different languages, what happens to abstract concepts such as democracy, freedom, and faith? To make it tangible, do the words /deməkrɑ:si/ for Iranians and /di'mɑkrəsi/ for Americans share identical concepts? For most teachers these two words need a colon (:) in share because the former is the loan translation of the latter. But if somebody views a word -whether concrete or abstract - from the filter of his own worldview, their grasp is definitely sterile because that word is meaningless out of the context of its own culture.

Misconception 8: The more vocabulary you know, the more proficient you will
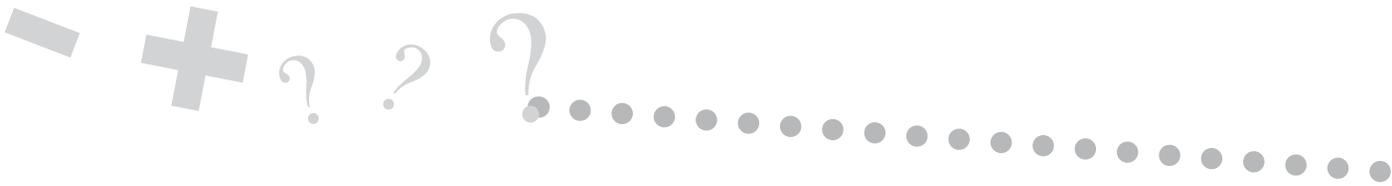
be.

For some foreign language teachers, vocabulary is the core component of language proficiency so they feel an urgent need for building up their learners' lexical knowledge. In line with this conviction, their learners define memorizing lengthy lists of new words in the target language as their main challenge. It seems so important for some motivated language learners that they even think of memorizing a handy pocket-sized dictionary as an ultimate solution to their permanent problem. To do so, they accumulate large quantities of the new words of all types to guarantee their comprehension and production.

Counterargument 8: It is the quality of your lexical knowledge not its quantity that contributes to language proficiency.

Nowadays it is generally accepted that not all words enjoy the same level of usefulness; therefore, words should be prioritized according to their frequencies in authentic situations (Nation, 1990). Referring to West's (1953) General Service List, Hunt and Beglar believe that about 2,000 highly frequent words cover 87% of an average nonacademic text and 80% of an average academic text. In another study, Nation (2001) showed that the highest frequency 1,000 word families constitute to over 80% of corpuses of conversational English and fiction, over

75% of newspaper texts, and over 70% of academic texts. Therefore, the good news for second language learners and second language teachers is that a small number of the words of English occur very frequently and if a learner knows these words, that learner will know a very large proportion of the running words in a written or spoken text. Most of these words are content words and knowing enough of them allows a good degree of comprehension or production. But knowing a word is more than just knowing its denotative meaning. Therefore, learners are recommended to invest qualitatively on acquiring the most frequent words through extensive reading, rather than accumulating a large quantity of words through list memorization.

Misconception 9: Using synonyms is a valuable technique of teaching vocabulary.

Using synonyms in teaching a foreign language dates back to the time when the use of the mother tongue was forbidden (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). It was welcomed by proponents of the direct method and audio-lingual methods. In a typical classroom run based on these methods, the first reaction towards an unknown word was bridging the gap by providing a synonym for it. This technique is still considered as a prestigious one because it not only teaches a new word efficiently without the intervening effect of the mother

tongue but also reviews the synonyms and reinforces the previously learned words.

Counterargument 9: When encountering synonyms, what should be emphasized are the minute differences between them rather than the similarities.

Applying Chomsky's(1991) Economy Principle can lead us to this conclusion that it will be impossible for all natural languages to have two completely identical representations for the same concept because if there are two identical words, languages themselves omit one of them as "a superfluous symbol in representation"(p.69). Therefore, if we have two or more words which are considered synonymous, definitely they would have different shades of meaning. What is important in treating these seemingly similar words is recognizing and identifying the differences not overlooking the differences and taking them as identical. For a teacher who uses synonyms as a technique of teaching, the words" foresee", "foretell", and "forecast" would be used interchangeably regardless of the minute differences in various contexts or different collocations. It seems more appropriate to suggest synonym as a technique of testing not a technique of teaching.

Conclusion

The field of SLA is one about which everyone has their own idea. It is old in the sense that its fascinating questions have a history of centuries, and at the same time it is new in the sense that its systematic investigation to answer the questions only goes back to about 40 years ago (Gass & Seilinker, 2008). The questions raised have been given some thought by scholars of the time and some solutions have been proposed some of which firmly rooted in hunch or feelings and some of which based on empirical evidence. This article addressed some of these questions and presented the status quo of EFL classes and compared it with what research findings they would support as sound practice. The conclusion is that, teachers need to reflect on their pedagogical practices in the light of these findings. As time passes, they will be armed with professional judgment for solving their "puzzles", not necessarily problems, and experience "teacher development", not necessarily teacher training.
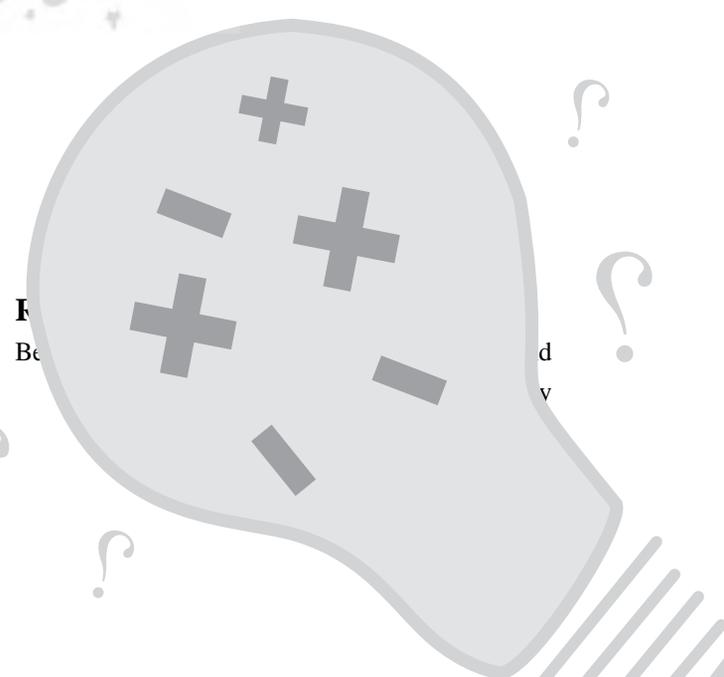
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