

Major factors influencing learners' achievement in second language acquisition es...

[Education](#), [Learning](#)



Nowadays as a result of globalization, people worldwide have more reasons to learn foreign languages. Together with the spread of foreign language teaching and learning is the development of theories on second language acquisition. One of the main issues of these theories is the investigation into factors that can influence learners' second language achievements. As a teacher of English, I find this an interesting issue as a good understanding of factors affecting learners' achievements in second language acquisition can help me choose appropriate approaches and design suitable materials to facilitate my students. Perhaps it is almost impossible to list all the factors that come into play in second language acquisition. In the scope of a final assignment I would like to present only some main social and individual factors that I believe to have great influence on a learner's achievement in learning a second language.

1. First and second language acquisition

In order to investigate the factors affecting learners' achievements in second language learning, it is important to understand what is meant by the term first and second language, and first - and second - language acquisition. The term first language refers to " the language one acquires in infancy" whereas a second language is " any language that is acquired after one's first language" (Finegan, 2004: 557) According to Finegan (2004), typically there are significant differences between first - and second - language learning. To begin with, first - language acquisition involves an initial linguistic experience, while a second language is mastered only by someone who already speaks another language. In addition, a first language is usually acquired in a home environment by an infant in the care of parents and other caretakers. In such circumstances, language use is closely tied to the

immediate surroundings and the context of language use. In contrast, second-language learning is seldom so context bound: usually an adult learning a second language use it to discuss imaginary events in the formal class settings.

A third difference is the adaptability and malleability of learners as a result of age and social identity. Adults have developed strong social identities as to gender, ethnicity, or social status, which can have great influence on second language learning. On the other hand, social identities do not come into play in infants' first - language acquisition. A fourth difference is that second - language learners ordinarily have linguistic meta-knowledge which is lacking in the early stages of a first language acquisition. Second - language learners are able to aware that words and sounds differ from language to language, that some sounds are more difficult to make than others, etc. while infants acquire first language spontaneously and unconsciously. 3.

Factors affecting learners' achievements in second language learning 3. 1.

Social factors

Second language learners differ greatly in how quickly they learn and to what extent their proficiency is. In part, these differences can be determined by social factors. For example, social factors help shape learners' attitudes which, in turn, influence learning outcomes, or the learners' socio-economic class and ethnic background may affect the nature and the extent of the input to which learners are exposed. There are a number of specific social factors which influence second language proficiency. According to Ellis

(1994), the most major social factors are (1) age, (2) gender, (3) social class, and (4) ethnic identity. 3. 1. 1. Age

Age is a major factor in second language learning, and there are a number of commonly held beliefs about age. Those who support Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) believe that there is a period when language acquisition takes place naturally and effortlessly: "Learners who commence learning an L2 after the onset of puberty (and possibly earlier) are unlikely to acquire a native-speaker accent, while those who begin after the age of about 15 years are less likely to develop as much grammatical ability as those who begin before" (Ellis, 1994: 201).

That children outpass adults in the mastery of second languages can be partly explained by the plasticity of the young brain and adults' slowing effects of ageing. However, this assumption is not entirely convincing since there are strong evidence that older learners are more efficient than younger learners in the early stages of the L2 development, or adults and adolescents can make more rapid progress than children toward mastery of an L2 in contexts where they can make use of the language on a daily basis in social, personal, professional, or academic interaction. In spite of all such controversies over learners' age, it is widely agreed by all that age is one of the very first things that need taking into account into when teaching a second language as people of different ages have different needs, competences, and cognitive skills. 3. 1. 2. Gender

Many studies on sociolinguistics have indicated that gender plays an important role in the way learners approach the task of second language learning and that female learners generally do better than male. Burstall (1975), for example, reports that girls had significantly higher scores than boys on all tests measuring French achievement in her study of approximately 6, 000 children studying French in a British primary school. Eskstrand (1980) reports on two large scale studies in Sweden, one involving Swedish children learning English and the other involve immigrant children learning Swedish. The results of both studies support proficiency difference in favour of girls. Boyle (1987), in his study of approximately 500 Chinese students studying English in Hong Kong found that females were superior in general language proficiency. It is not easy to find clear-cut explanations for these results.

One explanation for females' greater success in L2 learning in classroom settings is that they are generally more motivated than male learners and have more positive attitudes towards speakers of the target language. Another explanation is that girls usually consider that learning a foreign language will offer them more vocational opportunities whereas boys do not. However, it is not always the case that females outperform males. Ellis (1994) reports that Asian men in Britain generally achieve higher levels of proficiency in English than do Asian women for the reason that they have more contacts with English speaking group while women are often "enclosed" in the home. Thus, gender interacts with such factor as age,

ethnicity, and also social class in determining one's second language proficiency.

3. 1. 3. Social class

Social class refers to the hierarchical distinctions (or stratification) between individuals or groups in societies or cultures. It is customary to distinguish four groups: lower class, working class, lower middle class, and upper middle class. There is evidence of a relationship between social class and second language achievement. Burstall (1975, 1979) found that for both male and female learners of L2 French there was a strong correlation between socio-economic status and achievement. Children from middle-class homes regularly outperformed those from lower-and working-class homes. There were also class-related differences in the learners' attitudes. Working-class children tended to drop French after their second year in secondary school, while middle-class children were likely to continue. Skehan (1990) also reports correlations between the family background of 23 secondary school children in Bristol and foreign language achievement in French and German, with middle-class children again outperform lower-class. Such results can be explained partly by the different types of language use that children experience at home; however, it is important to recognize that socio-economic class is not the only factor that produces such differences in learners' second language achievement.

3. 1. 4. Ethnic identity

Ethnic identity is a concept that "easily embraces groups differentiated by color, language, and religions; it covers "tribes", "races", "nationalities" and "castes". (Horowitz, 1985: 53) There is a general consensus that ethnic

identity can exert a profound influence on second language learning. According to Ellis, " this influence can take three possible forms, corresponding to normative, socio-psychological, and socio-structural views of the relationship" (Ellis, 1994: 207) The key concept in the normative view of the relationship between ethnic identity and L2 learning is the distance between the cultures of the native and target language. The idea is that the more distant the two cultures are, the more difficult L2 learning is and, therefore, the lower the achievement levels. A socio-psychological view of the relationship between ethnic identity and L2 proficiency focuses on the role of attitudes. Learners who have a positive view of their own ethnic identity and of the target language tend to have higher language achievement than those with less favourable attitudes.

A socio-structural view of the relationship between attitudes and L2 learning investigates the effect that ethnic identity has on the interaction between members of different ethnic groups: " Learners who are status- and person-centred are more likely to converge on L2 norms and therefore more likely to be successful learners than those whose solidarity with their own in-group encourages divergence."(Ellis, 1994: 211) In sum, age, gender, social class and ethnic identity play significant roles in second language learning.

However, it should always be recognized that it is not age, gender, social class or ethnic identity alone that determine second language proficiency. These factors interact with each other and among themselves, and their effects on learning depend largely on the settings in which one learns a second language.

3. 2. Individual learners' differences

Second language learners vary on a number of attributes such as aptitude, personality traits, motivation and learning styles. 3. 2. 1. Aptitude

Aptitude can be defined as an individual's ability to learn or to develop proficiency in an area if provided with appropriate education or training.

Aptitude refers to potential for achievement, and an aptitude test is designed to make prediction about an individual's future achievement. According to Carrol and Sapon (1959), aptitude for language learning consists of 3 major components: (1) phonetic coding ability, which consists of the ability to perceive and memorize new sounds; (2) grammatical sensitivity, which is the "individual's ability to demonstrate awareness of the syntactical patterning of sentences of a language", and (3) inductive ability, which consists of the ability to notice and identify similarities and differences in both grammatical form and meaning.

A number of researches into aptitude have revealed that there is a substantial relationship between aptitude for language learning and performance in foreign language that was taught with grammar-translation or audio-lingual methods. However, aptitude does not seem to come into play with the adoption of a more communicative teaching approach which focuses on meaning rather than on form. Studies on effects of aptitude on language learning also reveal that successful language learners are not necessarily strong in all of the components of aptitude. Some may have strong memories but only average ability to figure out grammatical rules. Therefore, teacher should select appropriate teaching approach and

activities based on learners' aptitude profiles to accommodate their differences in aptitude. 3. 2. 2. Personality

There are a number of personality characteristics that are likely to affect L2 learning. Some studies have found that learners' success in language learning is associated with extroversion such as assertiveness and adventurousness. The reason for this is that extroverted learners usually find it easier to make contact with other users of the second language and therefore find it easier to obtain more input as well as more chances of language practice. However, some other researchers found no significant relationship between extroversion or introversion and proficiency. Social skills are also believed to have certain effects on second language learning. Fillmore (1979) in a longitudinal study of 5 Spanish-speaking children's acquisition of English argues that the social skills of the learner control the amount of exposure to the L2.

Those children who found it easy to interact with English-speaking children progressed more rapidly than those who did not. Another major aspect of personality that has been studied with regard to second language acquisition is inhibition, which is said to be a negative force for second language pronunciation performance. However, in general, the available research does not show a clearly defined effect of personality on second language learning, and many researchers share the same idea that personality can be a major factor in the acquisition of communicative competence and conversational skills but not in the acquisition of literacy skills (i. e. reading and writing skills). 3. 2. 3. Motivation

Gardner (1985) defined motivation to learn an L2 as “ the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity”. In discussions of motivation, a distinction is often made between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation “ is caused by any number of outside factors, such as the need to pass an exam, the hope of financial reward, or the possibility of future travel” (Harmer, 2001: 51) In contrast, intrinsic motivation comes from the personal interests and inner needs of the learner, thus a person is motivated by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or by a desire to make themselves better. Most researchers and educators agree that motivation “ is very important, if not the most important factor in language learning” (Van Lier, 1996: 98), without which even “ gifted” individuals cannot accomplish long-term goals, whatever the curricula and whoever the teacher. Accordingly, the most successful learners will be those who have both a talent and a high level of motivation for learning. “ Motivation affects the extent to which individual learners persevere in learning the L2, the kinds of learning behaviours they employ (for example, their level of participation in the classroom), and their actual achievement.” (Ellis, 1994: 36)

With regard to effects of two types of motivation on second language learning, most researchers and methodologists have come to the view that intrinsic motivation is especially important for encouraging success and obtaining long-term goals. According to Jeremy Harmer, “ even where the original reason for taking up a language course, for example, is extrinsic, the

chances of success will be greatly enhanced if the students come to love the learning process" (Harmer, 2003: 51) As motivation is widely considered one of the key factors in second language learning, it is important for the teachers to find ways to initiate and, more importantly, to sustain students' motivation. As suggested by Dornyei, there are Ten Commandments for teacher to motivate language learners as follows

1. Set a personal example with your own behavior.
2. Create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom.
3. Present the task properly.
4. Develop a good relationship with the learners.
5. Increase the learner's linguistic self-confidence.
6. Make the language classes interesting.
7. Promote learner autonomy.
8. Personalize the learning process.
9. Increase the learners' goal-orientedness.
10. Familiarize learners with the target language culture. Dornyei (1998: 131)

3. 2. 4. Learning styles

Learning style is the ways in which an individual characteristically acquires, retains, and retrieves information (Felder: 1995). With regard to second language learning there are two types of learning styles: perceptual learning styles and cognitive learning styles. Perceptual learning styles refer to the physical environment in which we learn, and involve using senses in order to perceive data. Some researchers have identified different perceptual styles

such as the visual, the tactile and kinesthetic, and the auditory. Visual learners prefer that information be presented visually rather than in spoken or written words whereas auditory learners tend to learn more effectively through hearing. The tactile learns by touching and manipulating objects, and kinesthetic learns like movement and need frequent breaks in desk activities. Cognitive learning styles relate to thinking, problem solving abilities and the ability to organize information. One type of cognitive learning style research measures field independence and field dependence in learners. The field independent students prefer to learn in a context where rules, instructions, discrete-point tests and imitation are emphasized.

The field dependent students, on the other hand, generally prefer cooperative and experiential learning environments. Differences are also made between another pair of cognitive learning style: reflectivity and impulsivity. Reflective learners tend to make a slower, more calculated decision thus they are usually more systematic and cautious in learning a second language. In contrast, impulsive learners tend to make a quick or gambling guess at an answer to a problem; hence they are usually more intuitive and more willing to take risks in learning a second language. From such classification of language learning styles, we can come to a conclusion that every person has his own learning style; therefore, there is no particular teaching or learning method that can suit the needs of all learners. As teachers, we need to “ balance the interests of individuals against what is good for the group” and “ recognize which students need more personal attention than others, and which need different kinds of explanations and

practice of language" so that students of different learning styles will be empowered in a variety of learning situations. 4. Conclusion

This paper has briefly presented some major factors influencing learners' achievement in second language acquisition. An in-depth understanding of what the factors are and to what extent they contribute to the process of second language learning is crucial for all language teachers so that they can facilitate their students' learning by choosing appropriate teaching approaches as well as design materials and activities to enhance the positive effects of such factors.

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