

Factors Affecting Second Language Learning (Acquisition)

Second language learners (SLL) differ in every aspect of language learning, such as learning approaches, learning rates and learning outcomes, and the possible contributing factors are diverse and heterogeneous. In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), several main factors constitute learner difference variables, and they are believed to have direct or indirect influences on SLA. This paper reviews seven factors being regarded as significant learner characteristics presented by Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada (Lightbown & Spada, 2001, p.28-43) and then elaborates on one factor in terms of its definition and its heterogeneous components.

Intelligence

Intelligence is a necessary factor in Second Language Learning (SLL), and it traditionally refers to performances on tests, the scores of which serve as indicators of successes or failures in SLL (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). Intelligence is not a causal factor of SLL since some complex aspects of intelligence failed to be tested by intelligence tests in use (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). On the other hand, the fact that some students who have low intelligence scores do achieve great success in SLL also support this argument (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Aptitude

In SLA, aptitude is a significant indicator of language learning efficiency. Previous researches have developed some aptitude tests, two of which (MLAT & PLAB) are widely used. According to MLAT & PLAB, four abilities about aptitude being tested are abilities to identify and memorize new sounds, memorize words, comprehend syntactic functions of words, and induce grammatical rules from language examples (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). How is aptitude related to SLA? Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada note that aptitude factor alone will not determine successes or failures of language learners, who display strong or weak or moderate levels of aptitude abilities in aptitude tests, but their diverse aptitude profiles drawn from these tests will help teachers to integrate different teaching approaches and materials into their lessons to teach students in accordance with their aptitudes (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Personality

Learners differ in their traits, and it is believed that these personal traits play a part in SLA. Judging from their common sense, People feel sure that an extrovert learns better than an introvert, and that inhibition in communication hinders language learning, and that traits such as self-esteem,

empathy, and responsiveness are seen as positive factors which facilitate language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). However, it is unsatisfactory that no empirical or confirmatory research has proved a defined relationship between personality and language learning achievements, but these researches have confirmed its great impact on SLA achievements (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Motivation and attitudes

Motivation is very complex and can be grouped into two factors: learners' communicative needs and the attitudes they hold toward a second language community (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). Previous researchers have confirmed a relation between positive motivation and attitudes and success in SLL but failed to explore how these two factors affect learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). Gardner and Lambert created two terms to refer to two types of motivation: integrative motivation aiming for personal development and cultural literacy and instrumental motivation for short-term and practical goals (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, quoted in Lightbown & Spada, 2001) and it is confirmed that certain types of motivation and attitude are related to success in SLL. Finally, Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada (2001) remind that Learners' identities affect their attitudes by positioning them to adopt either positive or negative attitudes towards second language communities; so do social mobility of language learners and the hierarchical positions of their original language and the target language.

Learner Preferences

In SLA, there are different principles to classify learners' preferred way of SLL. According to their preferred learning modalities, learners fall into three categories such as visual learners, aural learners and kinaesthetic learners. According to their cognitive learning style, learners are divided into field independence learners and field dependence learners. The research on learners' learning preferences denies a good method applicable to all learners (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Age of acquisition

Age is a controversial factor in SLA researches. Some studies have proved that learners who started learning second or foreign language in target language environments at early years are more likely to have higher a level of mastery of the target language than those who started at late years (Patkowski, 1980, quoted in Lightbown & Spada, 2001). On the other hand, other studies have confirmed that older learners learn faster and better than younger learners (Snow &

Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978, quoted in Lightbown & Spada, 2001). The controversy about age factor may reveal that age factor alone is not the causal factor for a native-like language command. When it comes to the proper time to take on a second language, it is advisable to take into consideration all possible conditions, esp. learning contexts, before making a decision (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Learner beliefs

Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada's introduction to learner beliefs revolves around two points: learners with different learning experiences and assumptions have strong beliefs about how language is learned, and learner beliefs serves as a mediator factor, which tends to influence strategies learners take in their learning process (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Due to the simple introduction to learner beliefs and its less explored area, the second part of this paper is devoted to definitions of learner beliefs and its different sub-systems since learner beliefs is positioned into different disciplines and is researched cross-disciplinarily. The research interest in beliefs about SLA dates back to the mid of 1980s (Barcelos, 2003), and during a period of 35 years, learners' beliefs are being explored interdisciplinary, yielding fruitful results.

Kaleidoscopic definitions of learner beliefs and its sub-systems

There is no well-accepted definition for Learner beliefs due to the complexity of this phenomenon as well as researchers' different agendas (Barcelos, 2003). After observing eleven technical terms for beliefs and their definitions, Barcelos (2003) generalized two standard features shared by these different definitions: beliefs are about the nature of language and language learning, and some beliefs reveal their cognitive, social, and cultural natures. Then taking definitions and methodologies of previous beliefs research as a whole, she deduced normative, cognitive and contextual approaches (Barcelos, 2003). However, her categorization seems to discriminate researches about learners beliefs well, but does not sound well for the discrimination of different learners' beliefs for lacking a consistent classifying principle. Therefore, it seems much clear to group beliefs in terms of the underlying theories within which they are studied. Accordingly, five definitions of beliefs and their sub-systems are presented from the perspectives of Zero-theory, Cognitive theory, Educational psychology, Epistemological beliefs, and Vygotskian theory, and the list is open to be modified since the perspectives are not exhaustive.

Zero-theory

There are no disciplinary theories underlying the definition of beliefs suggested by the connotation of the name and as a term, beliefs means preconceived ideas or viewpoints about how languages are learned and should be taught (Horwitz, 1985). Horwitz, a pioneering researcher in learner' beliefs, developed the Belief About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) with 43 Likert-scale items and the five themes, regarded as a beliefs system in this paper, comprising Language Learning Difficulty (6 items), Foreign Language Aptitude (9 items), Language Learning Nature (8 items), Strategies of Learning and Communication (8 items) and Motivations and Expectations (4 items) (Horwitz,1988).

Cognitive theory

Cognitive theory means that learner beliefs is investigated within cognitive disciplines. Initially, learner beliefs is equated with metacognitive knowledge, a specialized portion of the knowledge stock a learner has acquired, including knowledge about learning and language learning (Wenden,1999). Learners' metacognitive knowledge about language learning concerns five aspects of language learning: the languages learners are learning, learners' language proficiency, results of learners' efforts, learners' role in the learning process, and the best way to approach a learning task, put forward by Anita L.Wenden after she analyzed statements recalled by 25 interviewees (Wenden,1986).

Theoretically, researchers in this group differentiated metacognitive knowledge with learners' belief, which is taken as a subset of the former (Wenden,1999), but they are likely to take the former for the latter in practice. Secondly, to survey learners' metacognitive knowledge or learner beliefs is only a preliminary step of researches in this category, but to reveal how metacognitive knowledge or learner beliefs interact with metacognitive strategies is the most valuable part of researches in question, which is still less explored, since the subsets of metacognitive strategies - skills with which learners plan, regulate and assess their behaviors in the whole learning process (Wenden,1999) - make great difference in language learning processes.

Educational psychology

Researchers in the first two categories directly investigate learner beliefs or investigate it via metacognitive knowledge. For fear of two approaches' inadequacy in representing the full-width of learners' thinking about language learning, the representative researchers, Phil. Bensor and Winnie Lor introduced terms such as approaches and conceptions in educational

psychology to explore learners' language learning thinking, with approaches being further divided into surface and deep approaches and conceptions being subdivided into six orderly levels, thus falling into two broad categories such as quantitative learning conceptions and qualitative conceptions, corresponding to surface approach and deep approach respectively (Bensor & Lor, 1999). Approaches and conceptions are related to each other; for example, when a learner is aware of a level of quantitative learning conception, he or she achieves a surface learning approach. From the perspective of educational psychology, learner beliefs, seen as a second level of conceptions, means what is true about objects and processes in their learners' mind while conceptions of learning means what objects and learning processes are in learners' viewpoints (Bensor & Lor, 1999). Another researcher, Koichi Tanaka advised adding a third level conception - self-efficacy, which deals with learners' perception of their learning abilities and their progress in a particular context (Ellis, 2008).

Accordingly, learner beliefs about language learning is what is true about the nature of language and the processes of learning that language (Bensor & Lor, 1999). The beliefs system in language learning proposed in a survey administered by Phil.Bensor and Winnie Lor in 1999 is composed of three sub-systems of a beliefs system: language beliefs (14 items, being grouped into work, method, and motivation), self-beliefs, and situation beliefs (Bensor & Lor, 1999).

The significance of the research mentioned above lies in its utilization of the realization relationships between approaches, beliefs, and conceptions for deducing beliefs, which at the same time reflects levels of conceptions and levels of approaches, thus helping to tackle the complexity of learners' beliefs. Additionally, the research of conceptions, approaches, and beliefs are put into a specific context (Hongkong), which serves as a reference point to assess the functions of conceptions and beliefs.

Epistemological beliefs

The study of learner beliefs in language learning in terms of learners' epistemological beliefs also fits into education psychology, but the epistemological theory classifies the study into a separate category.

Epistemological beliefs accounts for learner beliefs about general learning, while beliefs about language learning confine to beliefs about learning a specific language (Mori, 1999). The beliefs' system about language learning is made up of six factors: the difficulty of learning Kanji,

analytic approach, risk-taking, avoidance of ambiguity, relying on L1 and whether Japanese is easy, drawn from forty-two items (Mori, 1999), extending from beliefs about nature of knowledge and knowledge learning to other aspects such as difficulty awareness, the efficacy of strategies and dependence on L1 (Mori, 1999).

Mori's assertion about the multidimensional features of beliefs about language learning (Mori, 1999) and his succession of factoring out the difficulty-of-learning-Kanji factor gets people to further reflect on the scope of beliefs about language learning - its subsystems. Are the subsystems of beliefs about language learning well-established, and is it likely to integrate other themes or factors within cross-disciplinary principles, and is it likely to add a specific subsystem directing at a specific foreign or second language, such as Japan, Chinese, Korean, etc.?

Vygotskian Theory

Researchers who are familiar with Riikka Alanen are likely to see Learner beliefs about language learning within Vygotskian theory as a research within the sociocultural approach. The classification of the study is made due to the use of technical terms and conceptions such as self-regulation, internalization and appropriation borrowed from Vygotskian theory. Within it, beliefs about language learning is seen as mediational means, such as psychological tools (Kozulin, 1998), and is permanently and frequently used in many learning activities and practices across various contexts to regulate learning activities and is constructed at a moment when the investigation process is underway (Alanen, 2003). Its belief system covers the nature, strategy, aptitude, difficulty, and motivation of language learning adapted from BALLI.

In conclusion, What presents above presents a brief panorama of learner beliefs and its sub-systems within cross-disciplinary principles but fails to converge them as a whole. From my perspective, it is essential to assign beliefs a simple but popular definition, and stable but complete sub-systems such as themes developed by Horwitz in the late 1980s, which would be what is expected to put forward after integrating cross-disciplinary principles into beliefs researches. Additionally, it is good to position beliefs into metacognition level within Vygotskian theory and education psychology, whether beliefs refers to part of the knowledge seen as tools in mediated actions or to beliefs practically equating with knowledge, but it is hoped that future researches will take further by expanding the scope of beliefs sub-systems, and stabilize the themes or factors of sub-systems when beliefs are researched within cross-disciplinary principles. Furthermore, more

in-depth researches, investigating different sub-systems of beliefs, and investigating beliefs in specific domains of language learning such as writing and speaking are expected.

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