HPEN7005

English Language Teacher Education

Assignment 1: Essay

Factors Affecting Second Language Learning

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Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers both to people's learning of an additional language (L2) after their first language (L1) acquisition, and to the specific process of learning that additional language (Saville-Troike, 2008, p.2). A widely-noticed observation in SLA is that, while almost all normal children can eventually be successful in L1 acquisition, the levels which learners can reach in L2 learning vary vastly, so many researches try to explain the reasons behind it by discussing the factors affecting SLA. In the Chapter two of the book *English Language Teaching in its Social Context* (hereinafter referred to as the Chapter), Lightbrown and Spada (2000) (hereinafter referred to as the Authors) analyse six main factors: Intelligence, Aptitude, Personality, Motivation and attitudes, Learner preferences and beliefs, and age.

This essay will at first provide an overview of the Chapter, which will then be followed by an in-depth exploration on one specific aspect – anxiety, including its definition, scope, model, linkage with other factors and practical implications.

Part I: Overview of the Chapter

(1) Intelligence

Pointed out in the Chapter, many researches draw similar conclusions that intelligence is more related with L2 abilities that involve rule learning and language analysis, but hardly influences oral productive or communicative language skills. However, it is critical to remember that the concept of 'intelligence' is very complex and can be interpreted in various kinds of strengths, which may then lead to different results.

(2) Aptitude

While earlier researches have shown an outstanding relationship between aptitude and learner's performance particularly in relates to audiolingual or grammar translation methods, it seems irrelevant or lack of research on the link between certain types of aptitude and a more communicative approach of L2 learning. But importantly, the Authors stress the significance of teacher's understanding of students' aptitude profile,

so teaching approaches can be adjusted accordingly.

(3) Personality

The authors agree that many of the personality variables are likely to affect SLA. For example, inhibition plays a negative role in L2 pronunciation acquisition, and some other researches show that personality factors seem only influence communicative skills, but not literacy skills. But in general, they argue that it is not easy to clearly demonstrate such relationship due to the difficulty in personality measurement and complexity in distinguishing it from other possible affecting factors.

(4) Motivation and attitudes

It has been generally proved that positive motivation, including both integrative motivation which refers to cultural and personal development and instrumental motivation which associates with more immediate gains, is linked with L2 learning. Also, social variables such as cultural identity are closely linked with language, and it will influence learner's attitude towards L2 and therefore impact SLA.

(5) Learner preferences and beliefs

Learners usually have strong beliefs in certain learning methods, for example, some prefer visual approach while others are more hands-on type. Researches demonstrate that such preferences and beliefs can contribute greatly to learners' experience in the classroom. There is no one-fit-all approach and students should be encouraged to learn a language according to their own preference by using all means available, and teachers can tailor their teaching methods accordingly.

(6) age

A hot debate around age is whether there is a critical period during which learners can acquire L2 more successfully. The Authors critically analyse the age factor by reviewing relevant important researches and find out that age is closely linked with L2 learning abilities especially in terms of the study goals and different aspects of L2. To be specific, if learners wish to reach native-like mastery in L2, it is desirable to have an early start of L2 learning. If, however, the goal is to obtain basic communicative language skills, learning will be more efficient if L2 starts at a later time.

To conclude, the authors look at factors' impacts on different aspects of the language, making it comprehensive and convincing. More importantly, despite the fact that some findings are not conclusive, the Chapter brings useful practical advice on TESOL such as how teachers can tailor their methods according to students' different characteristics. Furthermore, it's important that the authors emphasise the complexity of those factors, because their impacts can differ largely due to individual variance, difficulty in measurement, data interpretation and the interplay among different factors.

However, there are some aspects that the Chapter could further explore. In Intelligence, Gardner (2011) puts forward his famous concept of Multiple Intelligence and argues that there are so far 9 different types of intelligence – linguistic, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intra-personal, spatial, naturalist, musical, logical-mathematical and existential – and it is likely that strength in different types of intelligence will differ in the implications to some certain aspects of L2 learning. Furthermore, there are many traits in personality, such as extroversion vs. introversion, inhibition vs. risk-taking, self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, etc (Saville-Troike, 2008, p.89) which are, however, not much presented in the Chapter.

That's why I would like to further explore one of the personality traits – anxiety, for which is very common among L2 learners and also crucial as it is one of the three affective factors affecting SLA that Krashen (1986) identifies in his famous 'Affective Filter Hypothesis'.

Part II: Further research on anxiety

Whether and how anxiety can affect the second language learning have been a debate that long interested scholars since 1960s. Results of early studies, however, were puzzling and even contradictory (Kleinmann, 1977, Chastain, 1975), and Scovel (1978) attributes early mixed results to the ambiguity and inconsistency of the term 'anxiety'

and therefore he calls for more united and precise definition, which is then widely recognised as the turning point of research in this field.

1. Definition and scope

Following Scovel's call for a clearer definition of anxiety, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) firstly introduce the influential term FLA (foreign language anxiety) and define it as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128), and it is a situation-specific anxiety (e.g., Gardner, 1985; Oxford & Ehrman, 1992).

Another perspective to look at the scope of FLA is whether it stimulates or undermines learning process and it can be grouped into 'facilitating anxiety' and 'debilitating anxiety' (Alpert & Haber, 1960). Majority of studies focus on debilitating anxiety and generally agree on its negative effects on SLA (Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019).

2. Theoretical model of FLA Sources

In terms of the sources of FLA and how they could affect L2 learning, researchers have proposed several theoretical models.

<u>Horwitz's three-component model of FLA</u>

The most influential one is Horwitz's three-component model of FLA. Horwitz, et al. (1986) contends that FLA includes three major components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and learner's fear of negative evaluation. For example, the shyness stemmed from fear of communicating with others is a typical manifestation of communication apprehension. Students may also worry about negative evaluation from their teachers, parents, peers or even themselves. Bailey (1983) conducted a very interesting research on this point in which he interviewed 11 language learners and found out that learners experience more anxiety when they evaluate themselves

negatively in comparison with others, and such anxiety will be alleviated when leaners perceive themselves as becoming better in language proficiency. Some of my observations also back up this point, for example, in the Chinese-English interpretation task, my students would generally perform better when they are being told that the listeners could only understand English and have no clue about the original Chinese sentences, because in this way, students are more likely to be relaxed as they do not worry about listener's judgement such as 'the interpreter missed important information!' or 'they are not translating, but only guessing!'.

Based on this model, Horwitz, et al. (1986) further develop a measurement of FLA – Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)which is a self-report instrument that contains 33 items which utilise 5-point Likert scale. Although there is a concern that FLCAS primarily measures speaking anxiety and lack of comprehensiveness (Luo, 2013), it has developed fast and become one of the most popular scales for measuring learner's FLA level.

Young's six-source model of FLA

Another crucial one is the six-source model proposed by Young (1991), in which she believes FLA can be characterised into six major causes: 1) personal and interpersonal anxieties; 2) learner beliefs about language learning; 3） instructor beliefs about language teaching; 4) instructor-learner interactions; 5) classroom procedures; and 6) language testing. In this paper, she offers in detail the examples of each type and argues that FLA would impede SLA and therefore teachers should help students reduce anxiety.

Building upon the previous Horwitz's theory, Young adds more analysis on the anxiety specifically brought by teacher-learner relationship and class design, and offers useful teaching practices, for example, encourage students to verbalise their fears, so to realise that anxiety is a common phenomenon among language learners and then they will be calmer next time.

As a personality factor, anxiety is often viewed as an individual trait, however, some other researches also include social causes, for systematic cultural difference is found among learners. For example, Korean students generally have higher level of FLA than their Turkish counterparts in classrooms, and this may be related to the cultural concept of 'face' in many Asian countries (Saville-Troike, 2008, p90).

3. Effects on L2 learning

In terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing, scholars generally agree that all these four aspects can be, to some extent, undermined by FLA (e.g., Steinberg & Horwitz, 1986; Hilleson, 1996). From the perspective of learning process, MacIntyre & Gardner (1994) argue that anxiety becomes stronger in the processing and output stages than that in input stage.

Recently, with technology development and the tendency of putting many courses online in the post-Covid era, a new mushrooming research direction is the language anxiety among online learners. Compared with traditional classroom-based learning, there are shared sources of FLA in distance learning, and evidence shows that a decrease may occur for the reasons such as anonymity, absence of exposure to negative public feedback, and having more opportunities to study at one's own pace (Hurd, 2007). However, despite the reduced level in common types of FLA, there are some notably different causes of language anxiety that specifically provoked by distance learning such as lacking of instant feedback, isolation – both physically and emotionally, difficulty in evaluating personal progress compared with classmates, etc. (Hurd, 2007). Moreover, FLA for online learners varies largely by individuals because apparently distance learning is not the cup of tea for everyone, particularly those who are lacking of motivation and autonomous learning abilities (Russell, 2020).

4. Links with other affecting factors

As highlighted for many times in the Chapter, it is vital to keep in mind the complexity of affecting factors as many of them are inextricably linked together.

This is true for anxiety too. For example, it links with learner's preference and beliefs in the way that, when using student's preferred learning style, a better instructor-learner relationship will be built which will help reduce learner's anxiety (Young, 1991). Interestingly, it works the other way around too: reduced anxiety can create a more enjoyable learning environment (Dewaele, et al., 2018), making students more in favour of certain learning style so to improve their performance.

Moreover, in the motivation part of the Chapter, learners' communicative needs are clearly identified as an important form of motivation. But anxiety will reduce learner's willingness of using the second language to communicate with others (MacIntyre, 2007; Liu & Jackson, 2008) and therefore negatively correlated to motivation. Similarly, other researches find that lower anxiety in class links to higher scores on attitudes towards L2 (Dewaele, et al., 2018), thus jointly affecting learner's success.

Furthermore, as discussed above in the scope of anxiety, there is a type of facilitating-anxiety, which is believed to be linked with intelligence when looking at the influence on SLA. Scovel (1978) contends that anxiety is more likely to facilitate learning when students have upper level of IQ, whereas anxiety is associated with poorer performance when students have lower level of intelligence.

Age could affect language learning through anxiety too: it is believed that children have lower FLA than adults in acquiring L2 (Dewaele, et al., 2008). Adults progress less than children partly because adults may worry more about the negative evaluation from others who usually have higher expectations in adult's performance than that in children.

5. Practical implications

Many practical implications of reducing debilitating-FLA have been brought to language educators. For example, teachers can use a communicative strategy that focus more on messages instead of form, do not emphasise too much on early production, and be careful about negative comments. Moreover, encourage students to participate in overseas exchange programmes which have been proved useful in reducing student's anxiety in speaking English (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). In terms of distance learning, providing prompt feedback and keeping digital records of students' progress are useful means to support students in reducing FLA (Gacs et al. 2020).

Summary

All in all, it is of great significance to analyse the factors affecting SLA as it can help learners, teachers, parents and educators better understand the language learning process, take up more effective methods and bring more success to L2 learning.

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