A critical review of factors affecting second language learning

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Abstract

This essay critically reviews *Lightbown, P.M. and Spada, N (2000)' Factors Affecting Second Language Learning. In Candlin, C. N and Mercer, N (2000) English Language Teaching in its Social Context, Routledge London*. The factors affecting second language learning include intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation and attitudes, learner preferences, learner beliefs and age of acquisition. In particular, I explored age of acquisition in detail. I find that factors affecting second language learning are complex and tend to influence each other. However, as a good language educator, he/she should take these complex factors into consideration and endeavour to address individual learners' needs. I also put forward some suggestions to minimize the influence of age of acquisition.

Keywords

second language learning, intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation and attitudes, learner preferences, learner beliefs and age of acquisition, individual learners' needs

1.0 Introduction

As complex as human nature, factors that affect second language acquisition(SLA) are multiple. Over the past few decades, researchers in the fields of SLA and English language education have published plenty of works to investigate the individual learners characteristics in relation to the success of their second language acquisition. In the book, *English Language Teaching in its Social Context*, Candlin and Mercer have introduced to us relevant literature on SLA. In Chapter 2 of the book, the factors affecting second language learning are examined in detail, which can be categorised into intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation and attitudes, learner preferences, learner beliefs and age of acquisition. In this essay, I am going to review these factors critically, with a particular emphasis on age of acquisition.

2.0 Some problems

Before my discussion, it needs to be pointed that it is difficult to precisely correlate these factors with the success of second language learning. There are several reasons for this. First of all, due to the fact that some of the factors, such as motivation, personality, and intelligence are on a spectrum of behaviours and characteristics, and that they are dependent on one another, it is not realistic for researchers to observe and measure them directly. Secondly, language proficiency is hard to define because it involves different aspects of language skills, such as oral communicative skills and metalinguistic knowledge. For the former, as the author argues, motivation plays a critical role in informal communicative situations, while, for the latter, motivation may not necessarily work to make a successful learner. Another problem is to interpret the correlations between different factors as they interact with each other instead of one determining another.

3.0 Overview of the Factors

3.1 Intelligence

First of all, intelligence plays a critical role in SLA, as shown by plenty of research conducted over the years. Similar to motivation, however, intelligence tends to influence second language learners' certain aspects of language skills more than the others. For instance, Genesee reached the conclusion in 1976 that learners with higher intelligence could result in better development of their language analysis and rule learning skills than speaking skills. However, it needs to be noted that human intelligence, which varies from one individual to another, include all types of abilities and strengths, which are important for second language teachers to consider when choosing their teaching methods.

3.2 Aptitudes

Aptitudes in L2 learning, including memorizing new sounds, understanding syntax and grammar, and memorizing new words, also vary from one individual to another. If learners aptitude profiles are recognised, teachers can place them in suitable settings and adopt teaching methods appropriate for them. According to Majorie Wesche's(1981) study, if the learners' aptitudes match with teaching methods and settings, they will achieve considerably higher level of success than those unmatched. This finding is much valued, but I have a doubt that, for instance, if a student with strong ability to learn grammar rules is put in an environment that encourages and focuses on his/her learning of grammar, he/she may lose the opportunity to develop other aspects of language skills, such as oral communicative skills, resulting in an unbalanced development of overall language competency.

3.3 Personality

Once again, personality traits are important but complex factors in SLA. Studies have shown that it has greater influence on the acquisition of oral language skills than metalinguistic knowledge. Among various personality traits, inhibition negatively affects the learners' acquisition of pronunciation, according to the series of studies by Alexander Guiora and his colleagues.

3.4 Motivation

Motivation is also a complex factor because motivation and success of L2 learning can mutually influence each other. We can precisely determine whether motivation leads to successful learning or successful learning promoted high motivation. But it has been proved by studies that fulfilling personal or professional goals and favourable attitude towards the L2 community usually contribute to successful L2 learners. In the classroom setting, as pointed out by Graham Crookes and Richard Schmidt (1991), teachers can based their pedagogy on educational psychology. They can motivate their students to learn if they get them into the lesson, vary teaching activities and materials and get students to learn cooperatively. However, I disagree to the last point, as based on my own teaching experience, if I integrate games into students' learning, which are competitive in nature, students show much stronger motivation and interest in winning awards or a sense of achievement.

3.5 Learner preferences and Learner beliefs

As described by Reid(1995), 'learning style' is an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way

of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills. Some people prefer to learn new knowledge and skills using their hearing, while others prefer to learn using their eyesight. As teachers, we should not judge their ways of learning things as right or wrong. Instead, we should encourage them to make full use of their advantages in second language learning. Moreover, learning beliefs also have a role to play in the learners' preferences, particularly for the older learners. They will choose the strategies they believe are best for them, based on their past experience, to learn a second language.

3.6 Age of acquisition

In most cases, adult learners can never achieve native-like fluency in their L2 learning as children who began learning the language while they were very young. The theory the best explains this is The Critical Period Hypothesis, which suggests that there is a time in human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning. In early childhood, young learners enjoy the advantage of basing on their learning on the innate biological structures that may change as they pass their puberty or even earlier. When they become adults, learning a second language is nothing more than learning other kinds of skills or information, which are based on more general learning abilities. In addition, younger learners and adult learners face different external environment. Younger learners usually have enough time and opportunities to observe and practise the language and to learn from mistakes in more encouraging and accepting settings. On the contrary, the adults often face situations that demand them to produce complex language to express complicated ideas. Inadequate and frustrated, as is often the case, their learning motivation may be discouraged, which will result in less successful L2 learning outcomes than younger children.

Many linguists, including Mark Patkowski, Jacqueline Johnson and Elissa Newport have conducted experiments that tested The Critical Period Hypothesis. Patkowski's experiment provided a positive answer to the question "Will there be a difference between learners who began to learn English before puberty and those who began learning English later?" Also, the findings show that age of acquisition influences other aspects of language skills, such as word order, overall sentence structure as well as the accent. However, in another research carried out by Catherine Snow and Marian Hoefnagel-Höhle in 1978, children, adolescents, as well as adults were tested in their learning Dutch as a second language in Netherlands. Various aspects of language were included in the test, such as Pronunciation, auditory discrimination, Morphology, sentence translation, sentence judgement, Peabody Picture Vocabulary, story comprehension. After one year learning, they discovered that adolescents performed the best in general. Judged by this research, The Critical Period Hypothesis seems to hold no ground. In spite of the contradictory discovery, it can be explained that adults and adolescents learn faster because their learning is based on previous experience, and that if they have more opportunities to use the language in multiple dimensions, for instance, in social, personal, professional, or academic settings, which contribute to their better performance than children. Given the research continued for longer period of time for the three groups of learners, the children might eventually catch up and surpass the other two groups in second language learning.

3.6.1 Some suggestions

Despite the crucial role of age of acquisition play in L2 learning, we cannot deny the fact that it is a complex issue and we can do something about it. In fact, we can increase the influence of other factors to withstand it and contrive to create conditions to minimize its influence. For example, firstly, we can expose the older learners to as much language material as possible to immerse students in a second language learning environment. As long as the older students' input of language is abundant and they have sufficient opportunities to practice the language they receive in speaking and writing activities, they can make significant progress in overall language performance. Secondly, we can make an authentic, interesting and natural L2 learning environment that can increase the students' motivation. Thirdly, we can make full use of older learners' of advantages of language learning. For instance, they have more experience in their first language and their brain is more capable of analysing complex grammatical systems. Therefore, when they are learning a language which is similar to their first language, we can guide them to draw inferences from previous learning experience. When they are learning a language that is vastly different from their first language, we can adopt comparative and contrastive approaches in their second language learning.

4.0 Conclusions

Therefore, based the above research findings, can we reach the conclusion that earlier the learners start to learn a second language, the greater achievement they will make the language in later years? I would strongly argue that it depends on the goals of learning and the context in which the learning take place. If the goal is to achieve the highest possible level of second language proficiency, and if the learners can be totally immersed in the language environment, the answer may be yes. However, if the learners begin to learn the second language very young, but lose the opportunity to continue develop their language skills in later stages, they will be less motivated to achieve high level of second language proficiency. So once again, I would argue that factors affecting second language learning are complex, which always influence each other. Bearing all these knowledge in mind, a good language educator should take individual learners characteristics into consideration and make his/her classroom one that address individual learners' needs.