

Review of Factors Affecting Second Language Learning

Shan Long-2124946

Second language learning is a complex and challenging process. To gain a deeper understanding of how second language learners acquire additional languages and how this knowledge can be applied to language teaching, it is essential to examine this process from the perspectives of psychology, theoretical linguistics, and first language acquisition. Besides, it is crucial to consider the factors that affect second language learning.

This essay will analyze the seven variables presented in Lightbown and Spada's 'Factors Affecting Second Language Learning' (2000) in terms of relevant theory, literature review, and teaching practice. In addition, it will discuss the age factor of second language acquisition in more detail. By exploring these variables, this essay aims to provide insight into the complexity of second language learning and offer some reflections on second language teaching.

Intelligence

It is not difficult to find that IQ scores are a good predictor of learner success in language learning based on language analysis and rule-based learning. However, intelligence has a limitation in traditional classrooms which are related more to communication and interaction.

According to the research, Multiple Intelligences has had a positive effect on second language teaching and learning. Chen (2018) examined how the Multiple Intelligences theory could be applied to language learning and proposed some targeted teaching approaches. Xi *et al.* (2020) found that intrapersonal, musical, spatial and bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence also had a significant impact on mobile foreign language learning.

Second language teachers should therefore consider a variety of instructional designs based on developing students' MT, such as mind maps, circle dancing,

visualizations, logic puzzles, and brainstorming, which then effectively enhance students' second language learning.

Aptitude

Aptitude is the potential for achievement. Early research demonstrated a correlation between language learning aptitude and achievement, the correlation was not readily apparent with the use of the communicative teaching approach, which after all emphasizes understanding language over its grammar and syntax.

Teachers can choose appropriate teaching methods and activities according to the learners' natural characteristics. For example, students with a strong memory could be asked to do more practice with grammar rules, while those who are not good at quick memory but good at using grammar rules could do shorthand exercises with their group members and write down given passages sentence by sentence based on their quick memory.

Personality

The majority of research still suggests that personality types have an influential role in foreign language learning, but there is only controversy over which personality type contributes to the development. Wang X.M. (2000) pointed out that basic interpersonal skills can facilitate the development of both listening and speaking skills, whereas cognitive academic language skills can facilitate the development of many other skills to varying degrees. This is consistent with Wang C.M.'s (1990) observation that extroverts do not always outperform introverts in foreign language learning, especially when considering listening, reading, and writing skills. Students' personalities have an influence on the use and choice of learning strategies, but there are no advantages or disadvantages to personality types for language learning. Teachers should help students to understand their personalities and to use their strengths to facilitate learning.

Motivation and Attitude

Gardner's model of second language acquisition places significant emphasis on the role of motivation and attitude in the process of acquiring a new language. Gardner (1985) argued that learners who have the integrative motivation and a

positive attitude toward the target language and its speakers are more likely to achieve high levels of proficiency. Unfortunately, this study cannot accurately demonstrate the relationship between motivation and learning, that is, “Which one of the two is the cause and which one is the effect ?”

Motivation is a kind of complicated situation in second language learning. For those from minority backgrounds, learning a second language may pose identity and cultural recognition issues, which can influence learners’ communicative needs and their attitudes toward the second language community. Minority group members learning the language of a majority group may face additional challenges and barriers, such as discrimination or prejudice, which may affect their attitudes and motivation toward learning the language. For example, in a study conducted by Oller and Chen (1992), the correlation between motivation and foreign language proficiency was examined among Chinese-speaking graduate students studying in the US. The research concluded that integrative motivation was not a reliable indicator of success in acquiring a second language among this group of students. An explanation is that the group of students may be afraid to lose their Chinese identity and Weaken their mother tongue through the use of a second language.

In summary, learning a second language may present many challenges for people from minority backgrounds, but it can also bring many broader career development opportunities and other benefits. Understanding one’s language background, maintaining an open attitude, and having a sense of recognition for new cultures are the keys to successful second language learning.

As second language teachers, they have to employ various strategies to motivate students from minority backgrounds. Typically, they can use Krashen and Terrell’s “Natural Approach” (1983) to design a low-anxiety, low-stress language learning atmosphere and also keep Krashen’s 5 hypotheses (1982) in mind to design the teaching plan for the different needs of students.

Learner Preference and Beliefs

Researchers find it helpful to consider their individual learning preferences when embarking on second language learning.

Yang and Nae-Dong (2013)'s research found that learner beliefs about the usefulness of specific language learning strategies can affect the strategies that learners choose to use. For example, learners who believe that vocabulary memorization is effective are more likely to use this strategy than learners who do not believe in its effectiveness.

It's important to note that everyone's learning style is unique and may not fit neatly into one category. Additionally, it can be helpful to experiment with different learning strategies to see what works best for you. Learners' preferences and beliefs can shape their language learning experiences and outcomes. Teachers and educators should take these factors into account when designing language learning materials and activities to help learners achieve their language learning goals.

Age of Acquisition

Unlike the variables mentioned above, age is easier to define and measure, but its relationship with the likelihood of successful acquisition of a second language has been a subject of much debate.

In a way, the debate on this issue is mainly related to the debate on the "Critical Period Hypothesis" (Lenneberg, 1967) of second language acquisition. The different aspects of language, such as phonetics, syntax, and semantics, present varying levels of difficulty for language learners, and the acquisition process can be influenced by factors such as the learner's linguistic background and external language environment. As a result, there may not be a universal critical period for language acquisition. Moreover, some of these components of language may have a critical period while others may not. Currently, there is a lack of convincing research and evidence regarding this issue.

The "Critical Period Hypothesis" involves three main points: firstly, children have an advantage over adults in learning a second language. Secondly, it involves the age of acquisition, which is a psycholinguistic variable that refers to the age at which a word is normally learned. And thirdly, adult second-language speakers rarely reach native-like levels.

Based on the ideas in the literature on variable age, I will comment on the following three questions. 1) What exactly are the strengths and weaknesses of children learning a second language compared to adolescents and adults? 2) Is it better to learn a second language at an earlier age? 3) What is the optimal age to begin teaching a second language?

Pros and cons of learning a second language during childhood versus adolescence and adulthood

Children are able to imitate and reproduce the sounds and intonation patterns of the target language more accurately than adolescents and adults. One seminal study on this topic is the work of Kuhl (1992) and her colleagues, who conducted a series of experiments with infants and young children to investigate their ability to acquire the phonology of a second language. The researchers found that infants were able to discriminate between sounds of different languages as early as 6-8 months of age and that young children (ages 2-3) were able to acquire the phonology of a second language more quickly and with greater accuracy than adults.

Research shows that children have a natural ability to learn languages, especially during the critical period of language acquisition, which is typically between 0-7 years old (Lenneberg, 1967). This is due to their brain's high plasticity and neural development, which allows them to process and acquire language at a much faster rate than adults. Johnson & Newport (1989) compared the language learning abilities of Korean and Chinese immigrants to the United States who arrived at different ages. The authors found that those who arrived before age 7 had significantly better English proficiency than those who arrived after age 7.

However, children may have a natural aptitude for language learning, so it is crucial to maintain assistance and openings for language acquisition throughout their lifespan. For example, Granena and Long (2013) suggested that language learning ability can persist into adulthood with the right training and environment.

Children have limited cognitive and metalinguistic skills, which may impede their ability to understand and use complex grammatical structures and abstract concepts. On the contrary, adolescents and adults have a more developed cognitive

and metalinguistic awareness, which can facilitate the acquisition of complex grammar and abstract concepts.

But to some extent, these two age groups of people may transfer structures and rules from their first language to the second language, leading to errors and interference. Similarly, Adolescents and adults may bring preconceived notions and expectations from their first language or previous language learning experiences, which can hinder their ability to adapt to the target language.

Is it better to learn a second language at an earlier age?

There is a consensus in the literature that earlier exposure to a second language can result in higher levels of proficiency and greater ease of language learning (Johnson & Newport, 1989; Lenneberg, 1967). This phenomenon is often referred to as the “critical period hypothesis”, which suggests that there is a limited period time in childhood during which the brain is particularly receptive to language acquisition.

However, as mentioned above, the critical period hypothesis has been the subject of much debate and controversy in recent years, with some researchers suggesting that it is not a fixed period but rather a range of sensitive periods that vary depending on the linguistic task, the language being learned, and individual differences (Bialystok *et al.*, 1997).

Although there is certain proof in favor of the idea that learning a second language at an early age can have advantages, it's essential to take into account various aspects that can influence language acquisition and refrain from oversimplifying the complex nature of language acquisition.

What is the optimal age to begin teaching a second language?

According to the literature, the optimal age to begin second language teaching depends on several factors, including the child's cognitive and linguistic development, cultural background, and the type of language being taught.

Some studies suggest that the earlier a child begins learning a second language, the better their chances of achieving native-like fluency. Other research has found that children who start learning a second language at a later age can still achieve high levels of proficiency. (Granena & Long, 2013).

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages recommends starting second language instruction in primary school, ideally between the ages of 6 and 9 (Council of Europe, 2001). What's more, CEFR 2.0 also emphasizes the importance of language contact, that is, the opportunities to use a second language to facilitate language acquisition. Therefore, CEFR 2.0 encourages providing language contact opportunities in various environments, such as through digital media or communicating with other language users in homes, communities, or online. However, some countries, such as Canada and Finland, begin teaching a second language as early as kindergarten or preschool (Birdsong, 2018).

In terms of the type of language being taught, research has shown that the optimal age to begin second language learning varies depending on the language's phonological and grammatical complexity. (Werker & Hensch, 2015).

Overall, these reviews suggest that the optimal age to begin teaching a second language may depend on various factors, such as the similarity between the first language and the target language, the learning environment, and individual differences of the learner (Julia, 2007).

Conclusion and Implications

The process of acquiring a language is multifaceted, encompassing not only physical aspects that affect learning a second language but also non-physical factors, such as exposure to the second language, cognitive development, level of learning effect, attitude and motivation, and the influence of the mother tongue.

As second language teachers and trainers, it is advisable to create a positive and supportive learning environment, fully understand the personal factors of language learners, pay attention to the influence of learners' mother tongue on their second language, apply teaching theories, and design teaching processes and methods according to learners' characteristics and needs, and encourage students to adopt learning strategies that are appropriate to their actual situation.

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