

Informing teachers: exploring Lightbown and Spada's 'Factors Affecting Second Language Learning'

Language is a topic about which everyone has something to say because everyone has a personal experience with it and, consequently, false beliefs abound about how it operates, how it is learned and how it should be taught. The need to ascertain the veracity or falsehood of those generally accepted theories is the premise of much of the research done in linguistics. One such belief is that only those with a 'special talent' are able to learn foreign languages. Hawkins (2019, p. 1) asserts that if one or more additional language is required for an individual to 'function normally in society' the prospect of success in that task is 'realistic' for most people. In their article 'Factors Affecting Second Language Learning' (2001), Lightbown and Spada establish a sharper contrast between 'all normal children, given a normal upbringing' for whom the acquisition of their first language poses no difficulty, and second language learners, 'whose success varies greatly' (p. 28).

The authors present the results of a collection of studies on second language learning carried out by several researchers and comment on the implications the conclusions of such studies might have for language teaching. Research results on personality characteristics, intelligence, aptitude, motivation and attitudes, learner preferences, learner beliefs, and age of acquisition are examined in an attempt to assess their impact in the process of learning a second language. The authors aim to determine the extent of our capacity to 'predict differences in the success of second language acquisition in two individuals' based on what we know about their aptitude, motivation, intelligence, etc. (p. 28).

The description of the studies shown in the article is prefaced by identifying the difficulties in conducting and drawing definite conclusions from the findings (p. 29 – 31). Discerning which factor is at play in the learner's success is not always easy – for instance, is a student 'willing to make mistakes' because he is motivated or because he is extroverted? Three main difficulties are delineated: a) the impossibility of accurately measuring qualities such as motivation, extroversion and intelligence; b) a correlation found between language learning and a certain learner characteristic does not necessarily allow the conclusion that a relation of cause and effect exists; and c) some of the characteristics are intrinsically interrelated, which means that that may be labeled differently in separate studies.

Each of the factors is discussed in turn – intelligence, personality, aptitude, learner preferences, learner beliefs, age of acquisition and motivation and attitudes – and existing research on each is commented, as is summarized below.

Although some studies have found that a good IQ (Intelligence Quotient), is a good predictor of success in language learning, that conclusion is questioned by other researchers, who found that *intelligence* is more closely linked to language analysis and the learning of rules, and less so in oral productive skills. The date of the study referred to is 1976 and the authors, writing in 2001, must have felt the need to remind us in a

post-Howard-Garner note that not all of the multiple abilities and strengths people have can be measured by traditional IQ tests.

The feature that characterizes *aptitude* is the ability not only to learn, but to learn quickly. Applied to languages, that implies the ability to identify and memorize sounds and words, understand how words function in sentences and to figure out grammatical rules. However, once again the time elapsed between when the research was carried out – when grammar translation or audiolingual methods were favored – and the present meant the findings and the conclusions had to be revised. The authors question whether those skills still represent an advantage nowadays, when communication and meaning are the focus, not memorization of rules and metalinguistic explanations. As in other cases, the wisest advice given to teachers is to vary the types of activities offered to the students, in order to contemplate as many diverse student aptitudes as possible.

Lightbown and Spada report that although several traits of *personality* such as extroversion/inhibition, self-esteem, empathy, dominance, talkativeness, and responsiveness have been researched in their possible relation to second language acquisition, clear results have yet to be found. Some of the difficulties mentioned above concerning measurement and establishing cause/effect relation have led to different results coming from different researchers.

Learner preferences are explained as the ‘learning styles’ all learners have, their habitual ways to learn, strategies they have built to process and absorb new information and skills. Some favor visual stimuli, others like to listen, and others, called ‘kinaesthetic, need physical actions associated with new materials to learn. According to the authors, very little research has been done to verify how learning styles and second language acquisition interact. The authors very wisely assert that this paucity of data ‘should make us sceptical of claims that a particular teaching method or textbook will suit the needs of all learners’ (p. 35)

Previous learning experiences foster learners’ assumptions about how they should be instructed. The existing research suggests that *learner beliefs* may lead to learners’ dissatisfaction, but the authors point out it did not include what would have been most interesting: Did their opinions affect their progress?

The *age of acquisition* is certainly the most easily measured of all the factors examined in the article, but even so, its impact on the success or failure in learning a second language is debatable. The article refers to common anecdotal knowledge that ‘the younger, the better’ when it comes to second language learning, especially when native-like linguistic competence and accent are the goal, but acknowledge that there are several impediments to the comparison of children’s, adolescents’ and adults’ success in second language acquisition: some tasks to measure linguistic competence are too complex for very young learners; adults may have less time of instruction; adults may also have less opportunities to use the language. The Critical Period Hypothesis – the theory that there exists an optimum period for learning languages which hypothetically ends around puberty – supposedly explains why older learners’ apprehension of a second language would be incomplete or somehow deficient, although it has been challenged. The studies discussed do not utilize the same parameters and their findings, therefore, defy comparisons. In one such study younger

learners fare better than older ones, another seems to indicate that teenagers are better learners than both children and adults. In the end, Lightbown and Spada draw the conclusion that ‘for every researcher who holds that there are maturational constraints on language acquisition, there is another who considers that the age factor cannot be separated from [other] factors (p. 41). They also warn that context matters and that native-like competence in the second language is not a universal desire for second language learning.

Motivation was selected among the factors examined in the article to be discussed with particular attention here.

After reminding us of the Latin root of ‘motivation’ in the verb *movere*, meaning ‘move’, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, p. 3) approach motivation as “the potential range of influences on human behavior”, that which moves people to make the choices they make and to dedicate energy to act and persist in the action. Given the complexities of the issue, the authors are skeptical of there ever being a single theory able to explain “nothing less than why humans think and behave as they do” – why they choose to do something and how long and how hard they will persist in the task.

Hedge (2008) explains motivation as an affective filter and offers a helpful metaphor: ‘the filter can be imagined as a sliding barrier which moves into place when a student is, for example, tired, dispirited, tense, or angry, and which prevents the processing of input’ (p. 21). We surmise that the learners’ cognitive and the emotional aspects are closely interconnected in the learning process.

According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, P. 5), “attention has been divided between conscious and unconscious motivational processes, as well as between the roles of cognition and affect in motivation”, that is to say, from an early Freudian focus on unconscious emotional, instinctual impulses that drive human behavior to a concentration on conscious cognitive processes that impact action and behavior. The recent studies in motivation integrate both approaches.

In the text the terms ‘integrative’ and ‘instrumental’ are used to differentiate between motivation that aims to internalize the knowledge acquired as personal enrichment and motivation to use the new knowledge to achieve an immediate goal, such as passing an exam. Elsewhere, the terms ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ are used with similar meanings. Harmer (2015), for instance, underscores the relevance of intrinsic motivation as the one ‘teachers have considerably more power to influence [...] than its extrinsic cousin’ (p. 90).

To teachers, understanding motivation is of immense interest because of its close interaction with cognitive abilities. Hawkins (2019) emphasizes that relevance in second language learning since ‘the willingness to interact with samples of the target language, and to do so over long periods of time, appear to be key factors’ (p. 2). It is Harmer’s view that motivation ‘is not the sole responsibility of the teacher ... But it is something that we can have a profound effect upon’ (2015, p. 92).

Lightbown and Spada see a consensus among scholars that motivation is related to success in second language learning, but that the interaction between pedagogy and motivation has not been clarified by research in second language classrooms. In other

words, is it motivation that leads to successful learning or successful learning that fosters motivation? Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, p. 5 – 6) clarifies the issue saying that

‘[motivation] functions in a cyclical relationship with learning’: positive cycles of ‘high motivation => high achievement => high motivation’ or negative cycles of ‘low motivation => low achievement => low motivation.’

Despite the lack of explanation as to how the relationship between motivation and second language learning operates, Lightbown and Spada provide advice to foster motivation in the classroom: motivating students into the lesson, varying the activities, tasks and materials, and using co-operative rather than competitive goals.

After Reading the article I am very aware of how much more closely a teacher needs to observe his/her students. Being able to determine each pupil’s success in, and enjoyment of, each activity is a decisive step to assure a continued refinement of one’s practice in the subsequent lessons. Like most things in teaching, however, it is not an easy task. And although it is undeniable that there is a paramount need for teachers to exercise and expand their sensitivity to a vast range of issues in the classroom, it seems to me that Lightbown and Spada’s claim that ‘in a classroom, a sensitive teacher, who takes learners’ individual personalities and learning styles into account, can create a learning environment in which virtually all learners can be successful in learning a second language’ (p. 42. My italics) places excessive responsibility on the teachers and downplays the enormity of the obstacles each student, group, and course present. With all other possible hurdles minimized, failure, it would seem, would rest solely on the teachers’ shoulders.

There have always been good teachers, but, as one can perceive from the article, nowadays the standard has been raised for someone to be considered a good educator. Stern (1991) notes how inconsistent and confusing the advice given to teachers may sound when they are urged to let linguistic research guide their practice and follow one method or another, but are simultaneously encouraged to trust their own counsel and guard against the influence of ‘pseudo-science’. In the end, teachers are left alone to make decisions and their failure or success will be determined by whether the decisions are ‘well thought out, informed, based on sound theoretical foundations, and are as effective as they can be expected to be, or whether they are patently naive, uninformed, ill-founded, and inconsistent’ (p. 1 – 2).

There is not a lot of conclusive evidence in the research results presented by Lightbown and Spada in most of the topics. However, I can see that even just raising these topics to the attention of teachers is relevant, productive and beneficial because it contributes to building the teachers’ awareness and sensibility to these issues when planning courses and classes.

The difficult job of teaching is not going to be made easier by his/her confidence in the results of one research or another, but by making informed sensible decisions that contemplate diversity.

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