

Learner Factors and Second Language Learning (Acquisition)

Aspects of language learning, such as speed of learning, learning methods and learning outcomes, vary among second (foreign) language learners and the aspects influencing them are diverse and heterogeneous. Within the field of second language acquisition, 7 major factors have been identified as learner difference variables that have an impact on second language acquisition. This article reviewed 7 distinguishing learner characteristics of Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada (Lightbown & Spada, 2001, p.28-43), and the definition of one of these factors and its heterogeneous components are then elaborated.

Intelligence

An essential factor in second language learning is intelligence, which has traditionally been referred to as performances test scores (Lightbown & Spada, 2001), and test scores are an indicator of success or failure in SLL. As some complex aspects of intelligence cannot be tested by certain intelligence tests, intelligence is not the cause of SLL (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). Additionally, a number of learners with poor IQ have ability to gain significant achievements in SLL (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Aptitude

Aptitude is an essential measure of the efficiency of language learning in SLA. Previous research has developed a number of aptitude tests, and two of these are in widespread application. Based on the MLAT and PLAB studies, four capabilities were tested, namely the ability to recognize and remember sounds, the ability to remember words, the ability to know the syntactic function of words and the ability to summarizing grammar principles in examples of language (Lightbown and Spada, 2001). The aptitude aspects alone do not decide the success or failure for language learners; however, aptitude tests show strong and weak as well as moderate levels of ability, so the different characteristics of learners' aptitudes derived from the test help teachers to adopt different teaching methods and materials into their teaching (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Personality

Individual learners have different personality traits and these personality traits play an essential role in second language acquisition. People judge, based on their common sense, that extroverts learn better than introverts, that communication inhibition can impede learning the

language, and that traits like esteem, self-empathy and response skills (Lightbown & Spada, 2001) are viewed as positive factors in language learning. Nevertheless, no empirical studies have consistently demonstrated clear connections with personality traits and performance in language learning, thus confirming the strong influence of personality traits on second language acquisition performance (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Motivation and attitudes

The determination of motivation is complicated and may be classified into two elements: the learners' communication needs and their attitudes towards the second language community (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). A number of scholars have demonstrated that high level of motivation and attitude generate learning achievement. Gardner and Lambert (1972) coined two terminologies to describe two kinds of motivation: integrative motivation aimed at individual growth, culture awareness and tool initiative aimed at immediate and realistic targets (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, quoted in Lightbown & Spada, 2001). Learners' identities influence their attitudes by causing them to have positive or negative attitudes on the second language group; the same is true of the socio-mobility and rank status of the native language and second or foreign language (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Learner Preferences

There are various types of principles for classifying a learner's preference for learning styles in second language acquisition. Based on the learners' preferred learning style, learners may be categorized as visual learners, auditory learners and kinesthetic learners (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). Depending on the cognitive learning style, learners can be classified as field-independent learners and field-dependent learners (Lightbown & Spada, 2001). Research into the learning styles of learners negates the idea of a good approach that applies to the whole range of learners (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Age

Age is a disputed aspect in second language acquisition. Firstly, age matters in second language acquisition. Several studies have demonstrated that children tend to acquire the language similarly to natives, but adults tend not to. Furthermore, learners who learn a foreign language in the target language environment are more likely to acquire the target language in their early years

than in later years (Patkowski, 1980, quoted in Lightbown & Spada, 2001). Besides, other research has also confirmed older learners pick up faster and do better than young ones (Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978, quoted in Lightbown & Spada, 2001). The debate on the age aspect may disclose that the age aspect alone is not responsible for the same mastery of the language as native speakers. With regard to the right time to adopt SLL, it is best to consider all possible conditions prior to decision-making (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

Learners beliefs

Learner beliefs are subordinate to individual differences and influence learners' learning strategies and language learning outcomes. Study on the concept of second language acquisition has ability to retrospect to the mid-1980s (Barcelos, 2003), and after 35 years of research, learner beliefs have been widely explored in various disciplines with fruitful results. As learner beliefs are located in different disciplines and are studied interdisciplinarily, this section focuses on the definition of learner beliefs and their systems.

Definitions of learner beliefs and its sub-systems

Due to the complexity of this phenomenon and the different agendas of researchers, there is no consensus on the definition of learners' beliefs (Barcelos, 2003). After looking at 11 cited belief terms and their definitions, Barcelos (2003) outlines two characteristics common to these two distinct classifications: beliefs about the essence of language and language learning, and some beliefs that illuminate their perceived, social and cultural nature. In addition, she identifies normative, cognitive and contextual approaches, where learner beliefs research can get bogged down when definitions, methodologies are used in holistic research (Barcelos, 2003). However, her classification of belief studies seems to differentiate learner belief studies well, but the lack of uniform classification principles does not differentiate different learner beliefs as effectively. Thus, group beliefs seem clear from the underlying theories that have been used to study these beliefs. Therefore, non-exhaustive lists of five definitions of beliefs come from the aspects of zero theory, cognitive theory, educational psychology, epistemological beliefs and Vygotsky's theory are provided.

Zero-theory

No disciplinary theory supports the interpretation of the beliefs implied by the concept of "theory zero", which as a terminology indicates a preconception or view of language learning and

teaching (Horwitz, 1985). Horwitz was a forerunner in the research of learners' beliefs and developed beliefs about language learning. The belief system is a scale containing 43 Likert scale items (BALLI) and five themes such as language learning difficulties (6 items), foreign language proficiency tendencies (9 items), nature of language learning (8 items), learning and communicative strategies (8 items) and motivation and expectations (4 items) (Horwitz, 1988).

Cognitive theory

The category of cognitive theory suggests that learners' beliefs are examined within the context of cognitive disciplines. Initially, learners' beliefs are equated with metacognitive knowledge, which is part of the knowledge base acquired by learners and includes knowledge of language learning and study (Wenden, 1999). Learners' meta-cognitive knowledge of language learning relates to 5 dimensions of learning a language: the language a learner studies, the learner's language level, the outcome of the learner's efforts, the learner's role in the learning process and the best way to complete the learning task (Wenden, 1986).

In theory, this group of researchers distinguishes meta-cognitive knowledge from learners' beliefs and treats it like a subsection of the first (Wenden, 1999), although they often treat the former as the latter in practice. Secondly, investigating learners' meta-cognitive knowledge or learners' meta-cognitive beliefs is merely a first order step in this area of research; revealing the interplay between meta-cognitive knowledge or learners' meta-cognitive beliefs and meta-cognitive strategies is the most valuable part of this area of research, but still lacks exploration because a subset of metacognitive strategies - the learner's entire learning process skills to plan, regulate and evaluate their behaviour (Wenden, 1999) - has a significant impact on the language learning process.

Educational psychology

The first two types of researchers investigate learners' beliefs either directly or through meta-cognitive awareness. Due to concerns that these two methods do not represent the full range of learners' thinking about language learning, representative researcher Phil. Bensor and Winnie Lor's third category introduced the terms methods and concepts in educational psychology to explore the concept of learners' thinking, and methods of language learning are further classified into superficial and deep methods, and concepts are further divided into six ordered levels, which are divided into two categories, quantitative learning concepts and qualitative concepts,

corresponding to surface methods and deep methods respectively (Benson & Lor, 1999). Methods and concepts are interconnected; for instance, when a learner becomes aware of the level of quantitative learning concepts, he or she has achieved a surface learning method.

In terms of educational psychology, the learner's beliefs are considered as the secondary layer of the concept, which implies the learner's true view of the object and process while learning concepts imply what the learner sees as objects and learning processes (Benson & Lor, 1999). Another researcher, Koichi Tanaka, suggests adding more concepts -Self-efficacy, which refers to the learner's perception of his or her learning ability and progress in a given situation (Ellis, 2008).

Learners' beliefs about language learning are about the essence of language and the authenticity of the process of learning language (Benson & Lor, 1999). Phil. Benson and Winnie Lor's belief systems in language learning focused on three subcategories of belief systems: language beliefs (14 items, divided into work, approach and motivation), self-beliefs and situational beliefs (Benson & Lor, 1999). The importance of the aforementioned research is that it helps to address the complexity of learners' beliefs by using the realized relationship between methods and beliefs and concepts to generalize beliefs while reflecting the hierarchy of concepts and the hierarchy of methods. Furthermore, the study of concepts, methods and beliefs is placed in a specific context (Hong Kong) as a framework of reference for assessing the concepts and functions of beliefs.

Epistemological beliefs

The research on the beliefs of learners about learning languages from the perspective of learners' epistemological beliefs applies to educational psychology as well, however, epistemological theory divides this research into a category of its own.

Epistemological beliefs explain learners' beliefs about learning in general, whereas beliefs about language learning are limited to beliefs about learning a particular language (Mori, 1999). The belief system regarding learning a language consists of 6 elements: the complexity of studying Kanji, methods of analysis, taking risks and avoiding ambiguity, dependence on the mother tongue and the ease of learning Japanese, from 42 items (Mori, 1999), stretching from beliefs regarding the essence of knowledge and knowledge learning to other perspectives like awareness of difficulties, the effectiveness of strategies and dependence on the mother tongue

(Mori, 1999).

Mori's assertion about the multidimensional character of beliefs about language learning (Mori, 1999) and his decomposition of the factors of learning difficulties in Chinese characters trigger additional reflection on the range of beliefs regarding the learning of language and its sub-systems. Has a subsystem of beliefs about language learning been created, whether it is possible to incorporate elements of other themes or interdisciplinary principles, and is it possible to add a special sub-system for a particular foreign or second language, such as Japanese, Chinese, Korean, etc.?

Vygotskian Theory

Researchers acquainted with Riikka Alanen may view learners' perspectives on learning language in the context of Vygotsky's theoretical research in a socio-cultural method, discussing and classifying research as a result of the usage of technical terminology and concepts like self-discipline, drawing on Vygotsky's internalization and appropriation theories. In this, beliefs about language learning are seen as mediating instruments, such as psychological tools (Kozulin, 1998), which are in long-term and frequent use in many learning events and practices in a variety of contexts to standardize learning events and to structure the investigation process as it proceeds (Alanen, 2003). Its system of beliefs includes the essence of language learning, strategies, abilities, difficulties and motivation.

The above study gives a concise summary of the overall state of research on learners' beliefs in perspective of definitions, conceptual structures, attainment and shortcomings. In my opinion, it is significant to generate a simple and popular definition of beliefs and a stable system, like the ones proposed by Horwitz in the late-1980s, when integrating interdisciplinary tenets into the study of beliefs. As seen in Vygotsky's theory and in research in educational psychology, it is useful to locate beliefs at the metacognitive level, whether they refer to a part of knowledge as a mediating behavioural tool, or are actually equivalent to knowledge. It is hoped that future research will broaden the scope of the study of belief systems and stabilize the themes or factors of belief systems as beliefs are examined under the principle of interdisciplinarity. In addition, deeper research will examine beliefs regarding various learner elements or investigate beliefs in particular areas of language learning practice, like writing and speaking.

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