

A Critical Assessment of *Factors Affecting Second Language Learning*

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I Introduction

Second language learning (SLL) focuses on the process and study of how people acquire a second language, often referred to as L2 or target language, rather than L1 (native language). In general, a second language under this circumstance can refer to any language learned in addition to the native language (it can also be a third or fourth language) (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

Lightbown and Spada examine how intelligence, aptitude, personality and motivational traits, learner preferences, and age influence the way a second language is learned. They believe that the learner's age is one of the features that determines the approach a learner learns a second language. The speed and achievement of second language learning are also influenced by three factors: learning opportunities, learning motivation and individual differences in language learning ability (Lightbown & Spada, 2000).

The principles of second language learning are so complicated that no one can explain them clearly. How to define and what research methods have become the biggest problems plaguing researchers. The nature of the interaction is too complex and hidden too deep to be easily discovered, which makes it difficult for researchers to study individual variables of learners. And, of course, there are some disappointing results. These learner characteristics are not independent of each other, i.e. learner variables interact in complex ways. Therefore, it is very difficult to predict exactly how individual characteristics will affect the success of language learners.

Still, the process of mastering a language is so simple that it doesn't need to be explained. Brown reminds teachers to adopt an "eclectic, open-minded approach" to

theorizing and to engage with second language learners in the classroom to make the theory work in the real world (Brown, 1988). In the classroom, a good teacher should take into account the students' personalities and specify a reasonable lesson plan. Creating a learning environment in which the vast majority of students can learn a second language successfully does not seem impossible.

II Factor Analysis

1. Controversial Factors

Genesee's research and some related studies prove that intelligence has nothing to do with the oral expression ability of second language learners, but only affects learners' reading, grammar and vocabulary (Genesee, 1976). Surprisingly, many students with low academic performance are able to achieve considerable success in learning a second language. This suggests that intelligence can only be an important factor in language analysis and rule learning. Because the traditional IQ test to measure learners can not test the learners have a variety of abilities and advantages.

The clear relationship between personality and second language learning has not been proven by current research. Even Guuira found that subjects who received low doses of alcohol performed better on pronunciation tests than non-drinkers (Guira et al. 1972). These interesting results are not based on actual classroom situations, so it is hard to believe that personality is a key factor in second language learning.

In order to better help language learners absorb new content, their learning preferences, including learning styles and language learning beliefs, will affect their strategy types.

2. Definite Factors

A successful language learner may have high aptitude, including strong memory or analytical skills, but that doesn't mean he or she is superior in all aspects of language learning. Wesche's experiment proved that after identifying the strengths of learners and placing students in a teaching environment compatible with their talents, matched students could achieve higher grades than unmatched students (Wesche,

1981). For example, students with high memory but moderate analytical ability were assigned to teaching that focused on memorization of new words rather than grammatical structure, so that their aptitude was matched to the teaching program. According to the general situation and characteristics of learners' abilities, teachers can choose appropriate classroom activities for them, that is, to provide learning opportunities or environments suitable for learners, which can give full play to the strengths of students. Even if it is not possible to determine a learner's aptitude, significant language improvement can be achieved by ensuring sufficient variety in teaching activities. In other words, second language learners' learning outcomes are influenced by learning opportunities.

Different from aptitude and personality, researches on the relationship between attitude and motivation and second language learning or the role of attitude and motivation in second language learning are easier to control variables and carry out extensive research. And so it was. The results show that attitude and motivation are positively correlated with second language learning. (Gardner & Lambert, 1985). Especially in the context of the classroom, teachers need to consider which way is more suitable to motivate students. In some classes, a student may be more suited to his or her language development in cooperative activities, while in others, competitive interaction will show a more pronounced role.

3. Age

The topic of the influence of age factors on second language learning has been favored by more and more scholars, followed by the rise of related research. In the last few decades,, many researchers have compared children, adolescents, and adult learners, with different findings and explanations. In the survey on the controversy about the relationship between L2 learning and age, almost 50% agree and 50% disagree.

In recent decades, linguists, psychologists, psycholinguists, or scholars in related fields have continuously studied and produced completely different views. Therefore, the arguments for and against the critical period hypothesis have never stopped. The

critical period is a specific and limited period of language acquisition. The Critical period hypothesis (CPH) states that there is a period in language acquisition when language learning is natural and effortless (Bongaerts, 2005).

The concept of the CPH was first proposed by Penfield and Roberts. On the basis of Penfield' and Roberts' arguments, children's brains are more plastic than adults'. Children before the age of 9 are experts at learning to speak. They can learn 2-3 languages as easily as he can learn one. However, in order to learn language, the brain gradually stiffens between the ages of 9 and 12 (Penfield & Roberts, 1959). Penfield hypothesizes that children's brain plasticity has a superior capacity, especially for acquiring language units. The critical period hypothesis was introduced into second language acquisition by Lenneberg in 1967. Lenneberg speculated that after the critical period, people could not easily acquire a specific language, or could not acquire any language (Bongaerts, 2005). The critical period here refers to the period from infancy to adolescence (ages 2 to 13). Snow and his colleagues studied 42 English-speaking Dutch learners in the Netherlands for 13 months, ranging in age from 3 to adult. They found that adults aged 12 to 15 mastered Dutch most quickly in the first few months of learning. But over the course of a year, participants aged 8 to 10 and 12 to 15 had the best command of Dutch, while children aged 3 to 5 performed the worst in all tests. This result of their study denied CPH (Snow, 1978).

MarkS.Patkowsky studied 67 immigrants in the United States who arrived at different ages. Based on a questionnaire of practical and pedagogical variables, the experiment tested the syntactic ability of immigrants in English and found that higher syntactic ability was common among language learners who had been exposed to a second language before the age of 15. The study found that age was a strong predictor of grammatical proficiency, while other independent variables had little effect, even because of how long people had lived in the United States. Of all the factors examined in Patkowsky's study, which focused on grammatical proficiency, unlike earlier studies that focused on phonetic linguistics, he found that age was the most influential factor in success in learning a second language. (Fauziati, 2009). The interpretation of these results provides support for the acquisition of second language grammar.

Through empirical research, Long found that many subjects who began to learn second languages after the age of 6 (some after the age of 12) had difficulty in acquiring idiomatic oral English. Learners who start to learn a second language after the age of 15 cannot reach the same level of grammar and morphology as native language students. He argues that there are multiple periods that limit different aspects of language: for instance, different periods are associated with phonological acquisition and grammatical acquisition. He also points out that there is no absolute cut-off point for these periods, only that L2 is more likely to be acquired if learning begins in childhood (Long, 1990). Newport argues that "smaller is better" in this regard: One reason younger learners tend to develop intuitionistic grammar in their native language is that they are in a non-analytical processing mode. This requires another qualification: informal and natural environments (L2) are more suitable for young learners and increase their probability of success in learning the language, while formal teaching environments are significantly more suitable for older learners to learn and absorb language knowledge..

Hartshorne and Joshua studied 669,498 native and non-native English speakers and designed a computational model to evaluate the gradient of potential learning ability by studying the users' age of first contact, current age and age of acquisition. The results showed that exposure to a second language at ages 10 to 12 tended to result in progressive learning outcomes regardless of other factors, strongly suggesting that the critical period hypothesis does play an important role in second language acquisition. However, only a small number of subjects have reached this level, and more empirical studies are needed to confirm the importance of the critical period hypothesis in second language acquisition (Hartshorne & Joshua, 2021).

Flege also evaluated the second accent of 240 Korean native English learners and found that the longer they lived in the United States, the more authentic their American accent became (Flege, 1999).

At present, the research on the critical period of second language acquisition mainly focuses on the second language acquisition of subjects living in the target language country, but there are few studies on the critical period of second language

acquisition outside the natural environment.

III Conclusion

Based on the above research, language acquisition is a very complex process. Individual physiological factors have a great influence on language acquisition. The age of learners is an important factor affecting language learning. In addition to age, social and other factors should also be considered. Since second language learning is generally carried out through some form of school education, second language learning is more influenced by social, cultural, educational, psychological, emotional and other factors than native language learning. According to evolutionary theory, pre-adolescence is considered to be the best time for language acquisition. During this period, the brain has the strongest plasticity, strong language imitation ability, keen listening ability, less psychological obstacles, language acquisition speed, good effect. The earlier learners start learning, the more accurate and accustomed their pronunciation will be. Of course, social, cultural, environmental and other factors also have a certain influence on language acquisition. The first language, gender, education time, residence time will also have more or less influence on the second language being learned. The research results on the critical period of language acquisition are of great significance to second language teaching. As far as L2 acquisition is concerned, most learners still acquire L2 through classroom learning. In teaching, teachers should determine appropriate teaching contents and choose appropriate teaching forms according to the age of learners, and do not put too much pressure on students to study, which may lead to boredom of second language.

To sum up, age is only one factor affecting the second language acquisition process. Native language interference, language learning environment and individual learner differences have great influence on second language acquisition. The existence of this critical period has been a controversial issue in the linguistic community. However, many cases show that adult second language learners can reach a higher level as long as they have a strong learning motivation and a good language environment. Therefore, learners should make full use of existing resources, enhance

their sense of identity with the target language and culture, and increase their second language learning time to improve their second language level.

IV References

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