

Factors affecting second language learning

Ever since the 1960s, researchers focus more and more attention on the study of the second language (L2) acquisition. Penfield and Roberts, the two cooperators, and Lenneberg brought neurological and physiological theories into linguistics. Ever since then, researchers began to turn their attention from the process of teaching to the process of learning. Learners' individual differences are given top priority. Nearly all children are capable of succeeding in mastering their first language, provided that the upbringing of their parents is normal. Nevertheless, second language learning is totally different from first language learning. Many factors are believed to have something to do with language learning, which are age of acquisition, personal intelligence, individual motivation, aptitude, learner preferences, learner beliefs.

(1)Intelligence

It has been long believed that learners' intelligence are closely related with second language learning. In the past decades, some intelligence tests or different methods are applied to prove this viewpoint. However, very few evidences show that intelligence has a lot to do with second language learning. It is very complex to know the relationship between a learner's intelligence and his ability to learn a new language. What's more, we can see many people are very successful in second language learning without high intelligence scores. So intelligence is not a crucial factor on second language learning.

(2)Personality

Many people are in favor of the idea that personality characteristics are very important to master another language. For example, it is argued that extroverted people tend to learn a second language faster and better. Nevertheless, many studies indicate that some successful learners haven't got high scores on measuring extroversion.

Inhibition discourages the progress in language learning. It is because the learners' courage of taking risk can be reduced by the inhibition personality. In fact, there are some other personality characteristics such as empathy, talkativeness, self-esteem, dominance and responsiveness. Most English teachers prefer the active and lively students in the class because this kind of students are often willing to practice and express themselves more.

(3)Aptitude

Some studies indicate that the aptitude is composed of different kinds of abilities. Here are some examples:

1. The ability to get the meaning of the sentences.
2. The ability to keep new words in mind.
3. The ability to make analysis of the grammar rules.
4. The ability to translate.

Translation plays a crucial part in language acquisition. If a student can be very good at translating, he can do a better job in reading, speaking and even writing. Meanwhile, researches show that some individuals have special aptitudes. So there are some tests to measure the learners' aptitude.

(4)Motivation

Many researchers did some researches about the relations between the learners' attitude and motivation and the results of learning a foreign language. Motivation can be divided into two major parts: learners' needs for communication and their attitudes to the foreign language community.

Therefore, if the learner needs to complete some particular tasks by means of using the language, they will be more willing to learn it. What's more, the personal growth, cultural enrichment and instrumental motivation are all some categories of motivation, which are related to the success of the second language learning.

(5) Learner preference

Different learner has different preference for the learning topics, the learning material and the learning methods. When learners prefer some particular materials or topics which we disagree, instead of stopping them or correcting, we should encourage the learners to use the suitable ways to achieve the success.

(6) Learner beliefs

Learners' strong beliefs and experience from the past will have influence on second language acquisition.

(7) Age of acquisition

We all know that people of different age may have their different attitudes and methods in learning a foreign language. And quite a number of studies have given us indications that a learner's age is related with his learning results.

Many people have strong conviction that kids can learn second language (L2) faster and better. It seems that children are able to achieve success without so much hard work, while adults learned so diligently for many years only to get an unsatisfactory result. Children have strong tendency to be fast and better language learners. Scholars doing researches about SLA haven't provide enough evidence to prove this idea. Instead, a great number of evidences have proved that the older children grow the more effectively they learn and that teenagers are probably the best learners (Elks, 1994: 484-94). The accent, intonation as well as pronunciation are likely to be an exception. Small kids can master these more easily and precisely. Nevertheless, some researches show that adults are able to have a good command of standard pronunciation and speak a foreign language without any accent.

In the past few decades, several hypotheses are proposed to give an explanation of the differences among small kids, teenagers and grow-ups in second language learning, which include critical period hypothesis, neurological hypothesis, cognitive hypothesis, affective hypothesis as well as linguistic hypothesis. Each of them may interpret the phenomenon to some extent, but cannot solve the problem once for all. Do children, adolescents and adults learn language in the same way. There is no doubt that clear differences exist. The adults tend to have stronger ability of understanding and thinking logically than that of the other 2 groups, and it is possible for them to learn some learning skills and methods to accelerate their learning, while little kids are unlikely to develop them. Moreover, adults are more self-disciplined, patient and persistent in the hope of long-term rewards. They often have a definite goal, and therefore they are learning on their own initiative. Tom Scovel (2004:111 — 112) also claims that the older learner holds the advantage in three aspects: Schematic Knowledge, Metalinguistic Knowledge, Literacy Knowledge.

Whether the scholars agree or disagree on the existence of age affecting, the gaps among the

three age groups apparently exist. Recently, an increasing number of researchers, linguists as well as teachers have come to realize how important language learners, learning processes and independent learning are. Teaching learners how to fish is much more significant than only to give them fish. That is to say, studying "learners" is always more meaningful and useful than to study "teachers". Investigations of language learners (Skehan, 1989; Oxford, 1989; Oxford&Crookall, 1989) constantly indicate that learners who succeed in mastering a second language are likely to employ learning skills and methods that are suitable to help them to reach their goals. Studies show that language learners at all levels use strategies (Chamot& Kupper, 1989), but not all the language learners realize that the skills and methods they are using might be useless to employ. Obviously, students are able to be taught to employ better methods and strategies in accordance with their own traits respectively, and researches frequently argue that better methods and strategies improve learners' language performance. To face the different characteristics of learners, what should the learners themselves do and what should the teachers do? First, we should find out the traits in three groups respectively and confirm the optimal among them age onset in L2 acquisition. Second, we should compare the differences and find out the cause. Third, we should check the teaching approaches and learning strategies and confirm which one is suitable in their group. It may make the learning easier and interesting and accelerate the process of L2 acquisition.

1. Features of childhood learning

Children's predominance in second language learning is that they are most willing to accept knowledge from outside. For children in this period, it is possible that the kids are impressed deeply by the new language because of their curiosity to the world, which lead to stimulation of nervous function system and learning more is able to assist them in developing language learning habit and competency quickly and easily, especially in acquiring pronunciation naturally.

The drawbacks in this age group are that their long-term memory and the ability to analyzing and understanding are not fully developed. They can easily mix their first language with a foreign language. What's more, they may hardly distinguish their native culture and second language culture. They are lack of abstract logic idea and L1 learning is more time-consuming than L2 in other age groups. Therefore, the environment in which children speak a second language enables them to have access to communicate with others, and help them to take L2 as means of exchanges of ideas, or very qualified teachers and marvelous teaching techniques will be key to deciding whether their foreign language learning will be successful or not. It is believed that children who know nothing about English will be able to learn English better through structured immersion. In other words, English modules and professional instruction will be offered when they learn this language. These programs requires the students to spend much time on assignment in English than bilingual lessons. Researches, however, suggest that having easier access to English is not closely related with the quicker acquisition of English. In the program, children in bilingual classes, with exposure to the L1 and to English, acquire English language skills equivalent to those acquired by children who have been in English-only programs (Cummins, ;Ramirez, Yuen, &Ramey, 1991). It would not happen if time is not considered to the most important factor when learning a non-native language. Researchers are also against withdrawing home language support too soon and suggest that although oral communication skills in a second language may be acquired within 2 or 3 years, it may take 4 to 6 years to acquire the level of proficiency needed for understanding the language in its academic uses (Collier, 1989; Cummins, 1981). Therefore teaching children L2 a great deal too early will do harm to their first language learning.

2. Features of Adolescents

For language learner in this group, imitation and reminiscence will be the two jobs that they are very good at. Adolescents take the upper hand of children in employing the way of language communication and they are sure to understand concepts and definitions between language and culture behind it easily. In accordance with this, these abilities speed up the processes of a foreign language learning. There are fewer psychological barriers in adolescent learners than adults learners. Learners in this age group would not pay a great deal of attention to how people around them look at them or think about them. Just like grown-ups, teenagers are capable of taking advantage of the language rules they have mastered to monitor their outputs as well, but they usually do not have monitoring competency. Teenagers and grown-ups could compare their words with what they have a desire to say by means of listening. But children rarely do it, they do not have a clear idea whether what they said is appropriate or not. For this reason, teenagers tend to master a foreign language faster than grown-ups and kids. Meanwhile, they can do a better job than adults and children in concrete language learning.

The disadvantages are that adolescents are supposed to be more diligent than children and need to be self-disciplined if they want to have a good command of a foreign language. What's worse, it is very difficult for adolescent learners to be successful if they do not stick to their learning goals when heavily loaded with various learning tasks, because exterior factors can easily affect their learning result. Adolescents have a strong tendency to refuse criticism and are unwilling to tolerate authority due to ego centrism.

Furthermore, they have no choice but to finish many learning assignments, which probably stop them from spending more time learning a foreign language.

3. Features of Adulthood

Adults' thinking habits have become mature, because adults' cerebral nerve network has been well developed. They can handle different language variations easily, because they have more meta-language consciousnesses, common sense and literary knowledge compared with children, as Krashen (1982:21) claimed "we also use context, our knowledge of the world, our extra-linguistic competency to help us understand". So their predominance is especially conspicuous in reading comprehension, writing and so on. Besides, they have definite learning targets, great study motivation, rich knowledge experiences and better comprehension competency and short-term and long-term memories. All of the factors mentioned above facilitate the process of L2 learning. Their L2 learning is likely to be faster than children initially by means of systematical L1 and monitoring.

Their disadvantages are that they have not enough time to focus on their study. Their continuity of learning is always interrupted by social activities. It is difficult for them to imitate or utter standard pronunciation and they are obviously worse than children and adolescents in removing their L1 habits which are in conflict with the L2 system.

Therefore, their communication ability improves rather slowly when applying knowledge of social language contradictory to their L1 to practice.

According to Lightbown and Spada, adolescent and adult L2 learners have developed the

cognitive maturity, which means the ability to engage in problem-solving, deduction, and complex memory tasks (2002: 171) and the meta-linguistic awareness (2002: 177), which means the ability to regard language as an item, for instance, being capable of making a definition of a word, to tell others how many sounds a word is made up of. After that, they are able to study syntax more consciously and have a better insight into a foreign language. Although there have been intensive debates on which factor mainly affects the process of the three groups L2 learning for several decades, it is impossible for us to draw a final conclusion at present for lack of effective testing methods.

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