

Factors Affecting Second Language Learning

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1. Introduction

It's not unusual to see that some people struggle very hard to learn a second language even with every bit of effort, while some seem very cozy and easy to make breakthroughs. The very mystery of this kind of individual difference has been discussed for years. What affects second language learning? According to Herschensohn&Scholten(2013), second language acquisition is influenced by internal, external and even biological factors. This essay starts with an overview of some major and influential factors currently and then probes into one specific factor----motivation in detail.

2. The overview of factors affecting second language learning

There's been a controversy on the causes of differences in individual second language learning. Here are some of the major findings on the correlational factors.

2.1 Main factors

Under the presumption of experience or anecdotes, certain individual characteristics might be connected with the outcome of language learning. According to Lightbown&Spada(2000), they could be categorized into the following classes, namely motivation, aptitude, personality, intelligence, learner preferences or belief, and age, though some can't be exactly exclusive to one class because of the difficulty of measurement and separation of those variables and no consensus on their definitions.

To start with intelligence, it has been found to be linked with second language learning by IQ tests and many other similar experiments, which is in line with Richard Mayer's statement(Sternberg 2020): in the educational background, "a reciprocal relation between intelligence and academic achievement" is observed in terms of verbal ability and mathematical ability. Certain cognitive abilities promote learning and the achievement from learning also lifts one's abilities. However, some studies suggested some students with not desirable academic performance also achieved success in their SLA(Lightbown&Spada 2000). It should be clarified that academic performance includes more than just language learning or verbal skills. Thus, further research should be done to confirm the chicken and egg tale and specific cognitive abilities of intelligence need to be identified and enhanced to exert an impact on language learning, rather than denying the connection.

Then aptitude lends itself to superiority in language learning by many comparative experiments between results of MLAT or PLAB with that of second language learning, whereas "some thriving language learners are not actually advantageous in all of the components of aptitude", according to Lightbown&Spada(2000). Those seemed contradictory findings could be explained by Peter Robinson's claim that "people are better specific aspects of learning rather than overall learning" and formal second language learning, in particular, might hinge on "certain prime cognitive processing ability"(Cook 2008). After all, versatility can't find its way to everyone.

Besides, many studies investigated the effects of personality on second language learning and revealed that success in language learning is related to individuals' certain characteristics such as adventurousness and assertiveness of extroversion, yet other studies argued that "some successful language learners don't score high at all on extroversion measurement test". This is further proved by Ehrman's experiment which summarized that "the best language learners are likely to be introverts because their intuition, logic and precise thinking enable better judgment"(Herschensohn&Scholten 2013). Therefore, the available research shows that no definite and clear correlation between personality and SLA has been found because of the challenges in measurement and identification, nevertheless, inhibition in personality proves to be a negative factor in second language learning, at least verbal performance(Lightbown&Spada 2000).

Individual differences also include learners' different preferences, mainly divided into field-dependent cognitive style (FD) and field-independent style(FI). Some believed that learners with FI preference could facilitate conventional classroom learning, and gain advantages in certain tasks, whereas "studies by Bacon found no differences between two groups of learners in communicative tasks"(Cook 2008). Thus different kinds of teaching methods should be accommodated to different learners' preferences according to different tasks so as to achieve the maximal outcome, because, in the process of learning, learners might be somewhere in the middle, rather than with an absolute clear-cut FI or FD tendency.

Though not all learners are fully aware of their own style of learning, they do have certain beliefs about the way of teaching and instruction, especially mature learners. As Lightbown&Spada(2000) put it, learners' belief in teaching strongly influenced their experience and learning strategies, and ultimately made a difference to the learning outcome in the long term, indicated by many previous studies. Hence, flexibility is required from instructors.

Moreover, some researchers contended that age of acquisition was critical to learning a second language. Some believed that the younger the learner was, the better and easier it was to achieve native-like fluency and mastery, especially in terms of verbal delivery. And this kind of Critical Period Hypothesis proposed that "the critical period lies in young children and ends around puberty, or maybe even earlier"(Lightbown&Spada 2000). However, the study of Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle in 1978 opposed that claim and suggested that compared with children, faster and more successful learning outcomes were found among adolescents and adults, with adolescents achieving the highest overall performance(Lightbown&Spada 2000).

As a result, the Critical Period Hypothesis was challenged and has been debated continuously. Some researchers thought older learners' better performance was explained by an integrative interaction of many complex individual factors, especially stronger motivation. It's generally held that strong motivation and positive attitudes are associated with success in SLA(Lightbown&Spada 2000). But what dimensions of motivation work on SLA and how needs more in-depth research and will be illustrated in detail later.

2.2 Other factors

Apart from what is mentioned above, some other factors are also listed to play a part in second language learning. For instance, the study by Andreou and co-researchers (2005) showed that proficiency in the second language was affected by “a combination of factors, like gender and handedness as well as faculty choice”. Other biological factors were said to play a role in it, such as the month of students’ birth, as Vivian Cook(2008) stated. She also mentioned second language learning might also be influenced by the level of first language and different levels of empathy in students. External factors can't be neglected, either, such as social-cultural background, family economic conditions, parental commitment and involvement, and even political and educational policies as well. The list of factors is to be filled with more items with time going.

3. Motivation and second language learning

Among all the above elements, motivation is regarded as crucial to the success of second language learning by many researchers(Herschensohn&Scholten 2013). The following is a detailed discussion on the relationship between motivation and second language learning.

3.1 Historical overview of research on motivation

The term “motivation” has been constantly changing its connotations because of its complexity. For example, in terms of cognition, some motivational theories focus on the conscious drive while some on unconscious; in terms of stage, some regard motivation as a cause of SLA, others as an effect or it should be considered as a process due to its dynamic feature; in terms of context, some take the individualistic perspective of motivation to see the social world, others with a societal outlook. Consequently, the motivational theories are established with challenges, some take reductionist models and some comprehensiveness models. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) noted, “by definition, most researchers would agree on motivation is that it involves the direction and magnitude of human behavior, namely, “the choice of a particular action, the persistence with it and the effort expended on it”.

The motivational theories have evolved through the following distinct periods. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) wrote, the first period started from 1959 to 1990, known as the social-psychological period, represented by Wallace Lambert and Robert Gardner. Integrative motive is the most researched, which refers to “a motivation to learn a second language because of positive feelings towards the community that speaks the language(Dörnyei&Ushioda 2011).”

When it comes to the classroom setting, some researchers questioned the validity of the social-psychological proposal, and then theoretical studies came into the second period, noted as the cognitive-situated period during the 1990s. It has seen two prominent trends. One was asking for “linguistic motivation studies conform with the cognitive development of motivational social psychology”; the other was calling for “motivation studies in a more situated and specific learning context”. There were three major theoretical proposals, With Crookes and Schmidt’s four components of motivation, three-level framework of L2 motivation by Dörnyei’s and social constructivist model from Williams and Burden(Dörnyei&Ushioda 2011). The attention of these theories mainly focused on the motivation in the classroom setting

and teachers' concerns and needs. The major weakness of this period's studies was the static approach to motivation on language learning. After all, language learning is always done in a certain period of time, and motivation varies as well, which leads to the next period.

The third period was around the turn of the century, called the process-oriented period by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), laying emphasis on the motivational process and its dynamic change over the learning period. From the time perspective, Williams and Burden emphasized the need to separate motivation initiation and maintenance, and then Ushioda suggested "more introspective research approaches to dig into the qualitative and dynamic evolution of motivation with the changing time". The process model of L2 motivation, put forward by Dörnyei and Ottó(Dörnyei&Ushioda 2011), was considered to be "the most detailed and elaborate, which included action sequence and motivational influences to see motivation as experience and process over time, instead of an effect or cause of learning".

3.2 Recent development

The current studies, especially after 2000, moved from process-oriented to socio-dynamic perspectives. One of the main representative views was Ushioda's "person-in-context relational view of motivation", which highlighted the need to view language learners as real people of complex individuality in specific social contexts and their learning motivation interacts with these contexts(Dörnyei&Ushioda 2011). Integrating the development of psychology into L2 study, Dörnyei in 2005 put forward the "L2 Motivational Self System", composed of three dimensions. They were "ideal L2 self whom the learners would like to become", the assumed most powerful motivation; "Ought-to L2 self whom the learners try to avoid and disgust", the extrinsic instrumental motive"; and "L2 Learning experience, the executive motives, referring to their learning environment and experience"(Dörnyei&Ushioda 2011). Later motivation studies took a more complex dynamic perspective to explore the interaction of those dimensions varying over time and in different situations. The theoretical turn somehow correspondingly acts on research methodology as well as researchers worldwide.

Apart from the theoretical studies on motivation, the new era, from 2005, witnessed a balanced interest in de-motivation and practical approaches too, like how to motivate students or sustain motivation in college students, particularly(Boo et al. 2015). Additionally, a growing number of innovative and qualitative research methods by scholars from different backgrounds are adopted to reveal a more welcoming, accommodating, dynamic, and compatible academic environment, though quantitative research still prevails in terms of methodology. The research center has also shifted its center from Europe and North American towards East Asia, particularly China and Japan.

The dynamic of motivation research also lies with the studied L2 and development of technology with time. With English becoming global, more studies begin to examine whether or how far the current motivation theories on English as a second language suit to learn languages other than English(LOTE). For example, the L2 learning experience, used to be neglected and undertheorized(Dörnyei 2019), is

now found to be the strongest influencer on the motivation of LOTEs revealed in Huang's study(2019). Besides, new technology brings about some novel motivating strategies and more complex research settings. For instance, Ebrahimzadeh&Alavi(2017) introduced commercial video games to enhance students' language learning motivation, while Meng and associates(2020) combined traditional classroom teaching and offline teaching with several software learning platforms and communicative software to experiment with the intervention of incentive strategies in SLA; both of which proved to be successful attempts. These initial self-directed learning trials might facilitate distance learning during the Covid-19 lockdown period worldwide. As Pelikan and co-researchers(2021) pointed out, better communication and coordination between students and teachers online might relieve students' anxiety and support their intrinsic motivation during Covid-19, yet the importance of contact with peers and teachers as well as social support also can not be overlooked. That indirectly suggests motivation studies should be interlinked with other social dynamics. Indeed, the interaction of motivation with other factors never stops catching the attention in much literature now and then. Just as Dörnyei&Ushioda (2011) concluded, "the complex dynamic approach predicts that no human behavioral phenomenon has one single explanation".

4. Conclusion

Drawn from previous studies, the progress of second language learning is correlated with a lot of variables, such as intelligence, aptitude, personality, learner preferences, learner beliefs, age of acquisition, motivation and attitude. Among them, theoretical research of motivation on second language learning is lengthy examined in this essay. Based on most literature, those variables are delicately interacted with each other and holistically affect second language learning. It still remains challenging to predict how a particular variable works on individuals' language success, thus it's not possible to generate a universally unified theory workable for all second language learners in all learning settings. Further studies might focus on the qualitative self-reports from learners on those variables to uncover this mystery and those individual differences should always be borne in mind while implementing language teaching, preferably with specific strategies catering to different learners' characteristics.

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