

A Critical Review of Lightbown and Spada's Analysis of Factors Affecting Second Language Learning

1.Introduction

Research on individual differences in second language learning stems from efforts to understand what makes some learners more successful than others (Rubin, 1975). Researchers are interested in discovering the common characteristics of good language learners. Studies have indicated that second language learning is a complicated process influenced by many factors (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). In this chapter, Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada explore key factors affecting language learning, including intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation, learner preference, learner belief, and age.

In this essay, I will review the authors' discussion of these factors and provide my comments. Specifically, I will further examine the theoretical discussion of motivation in language learning. Finally, I will highlight the significance of research on individual differences and its pedagogical implications.

2.Factors that Influence Second Language Learning

2.1 Intelligence

The first factor the authors mention is intelligence. Intelligence is a complicated psychological construct, but in this chapter, the authors simply refer to it as performance on a certain kind of intelligence quotient (IQ) test. Based on this assumption, it is traditionally believed that IQ scores are a good way of predicting how successful a language learner would be. Therefore, some researchers argue that learners with higher IQs are more likely to acquire the L2 successfully than those with lower IQs.

However, the authors also highlight conflicting research findings, suggesting no clear correlation between IQ and language learning. Interestingly, the authors propose one

possible explanation is that intelligence may influence different aspects of language learning in different ways. For example, research indicates that intelligence can be a strong factor when learning is related to language analysis and rule learning, but it plays a less important role in instructions, which focus more on communication and interaction.

In conclusion, the authors also remain cautious about the correlation between intelligence and language learning since intelligence is a complex and abstract construct that is difficult to measure accurately. Furthermore, there is more discussion of multiple intelligences, which cannot simply be measured by traditional IQ tests. Besides, there are ethical concerns when students' intelligence and assigning labels based on their test results.

2.2 Language Learning Aptitude

Language learning aptitude which refers to specific abilities to predict success in language learning, has drawn a lot of research interest during the 1950s and 1960s (Ellis, 1997). To measure learners' aptitude, two tests have been widely used. One is Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) (Carroll & Sapon, 1959) and the other is Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (PLAB) (Pimsleur, 1966).

The correlation between aptitude and language learning achievement is complex and not entirely straightforward (Lightbown & Spada, 2000). However, for teachers, research on language learners' aptitude is of significance since it provides evidence for placing learners in appropriate teaching programs and selecting classroom activities that align with their individual needs.

2.3 Personality

In this chapter, the authors suggest that personality is likely to affect second language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2000). For example, some studies have found that success in language learning is associated with higher scores on measures of extroversion such as assertiveness and adventurousness (Dewaele & Furnham, 1999). The hidden assumption is that extroverted learners can actively engage in conversations, increasing their exposure to input and opportunities for output, which are important for language learning. In contrast, introverted learners, who exhibit inhibition in language learning, tend to be less willing to take risks which is necessary for progress in language learning.

Although many researchers believe that personality plays an important role in language learning success, the exact nature of this relationship remains undefined (Lightbown & Spada, 2000). From my perspective, it is crucial to accommodate diverse learner profiles, regardless of whether students are extroverted or introverted. Interestingly, there is a recent trend of exploring the influence of people's personality types, i.e. Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), in language learning (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

2.4 Motivation and Attitude

Motivation, which concerns the questions of why learners would like to learn L2, is another important factor in second language learning. To better understand motivation, two types of motivation, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation, are mentioned in this chapter. Integrative motivation refers to “language learning for personal growth and cultural enrichment, and instrumental motivation for language learning for more immediate or practical goals” (Lightbown & Spada, 2000,p.33). In practice, integrative motivation for students could be a genuine interest in the people and culture associated with the English language. Conversely, students who are driven by instrumental motivation might view English just as a compulsory subject. What they want is to achieve high exam scores, receive praise from parents and teachers, or secure better job opportunities.

It is often suggested that learners with integrative motivation tend to achieve greater success in L2 learning compared to those solely driven by instrumental motivation. But this categorisation of motivation is preliminary. On one hand, it is difficult to distinguish these two types of motivation. For learners, their motivation can be a mixed one. On the other hand, motivation in language learning is complex, as it can be fluid and multifaceted, which I will have further discussion later. Nevertheless, for teachers, understanding the nuances of motivation is essential because it not only recognises what drives their students but also helps teachers implement strategies that foster and sustain motivation in the language learning process.

Studies have also explored the relationship between a learner's attitude toward the second language and its community and their success in language learning (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). While research findings do not definitively establish that positive attitudes lead to successful language learning, researchers claimed that positive attitudes relate to a greater willingness to keep learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

2.5 Learner Preferences

In this chapter, the authors also discuss the influences of learner preferences in language learning. Learner differences can be understood in terms of learning styles. For instance, visual learners need to see information to process it effectively, while aural learners learn best through listening. Kinaesthetic learners, on the other hand, benefit from incorporating physical actions into their learning process. Additionally, field dependence and field independence, which refer to whether an individual tends to separate details from general information or to see things more holistically, are considered learning styles (Lightbown & Spada, 2000).

However, very little empirical research has been conducted to validate the effectiveness of learning styles in language learning. One possible explanation could be defining and

measuring learner preferences or learning styles remains challenging, as there is no widely accepted operational framework.

2.5 Learner Beliefs

Beliefs refer to individuals' thoughts and perceptions (Lightbown & Spada, 2000). Different learners hold varying beliefs and opinions about how instruction should be delivered, which can influence language learning outcomes. The authors discuss different learner beliefs in a study by Carlos Yorio (1986). In one class which emphasises the importance of communicative competencies, most of the students expressed dissatisfaction with the teaching style of the lack of attention to language form, corrective feedback and teacher-oriented instructions.

Regarding the significance of research on learner beliefs, the authors do not talk much about statistical correlations between learner beliefs and language learning achievement. However, the authors highlight the findings that students are convinced that instructional approaches which are not consistent with their beliefs will negatively impact their language learning process. One instrument of learner belief, such as The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI; Horwitz, 1988) has gained attention.

At present, an important research topic is the source of learner beliefs, investigating the factors that shape them. For example, studies suggest that learners' previous educational experiences significantly influence their beliefs about language learning.

2.6 Age

Compared to other factors of individual differences, age, which is of significance, is relatively easy to define. However, the relationship between age and success in language learning is rather controversial (Lightbown & Spada, 2000). One reason for this heated

discussion is its practical implications. Many learners wonder whether there is an ideal age for language learning and whether they should start as early as possible.

The discussion of age in language learning starts from an observation that kids who start English learning at a young age and have years of immersion can have a native-like accent. In contrast, adults, even spend much time still have their non-English foreign accent. This happens frequently in immigrant families. To further the discussion, researchers have explored whether a critical period exists for language learning, leading to the development of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). CPH is that “there is a time in human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning.” (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p.87).

The CPH supports the idea that “the younger, the better”. However, CPH is still not a conclusive idea. Even if a critical period exists, researchers have yet to determine its exact timeframe. To advance the discussion, neuroscience can provide further insights by comparing brain activity across different age groups. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking language learners over time could offer valuable evidence on the effects of age on second language learning.

Despite the ongoing debate, research on age and language learning has important pedagogical implications for teachers. For example, learners of different ages have varying needs and learning styles. For young learners, they prefer to learn the language actively and playfully. However, adult learners are more self-directed in most cases and have specific learning goals. Teachers must adapt their instructional strategies to accommodate these differences.

Furthermore, research on age also has policy and practical implications regarding the optimal starting age for language learning in educational curricula. For example, in China, students typically begin learning English at age 9 (Grade 3 of primary school). However,

in major cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou, children may start learning English as early as kindergarten. The decision to introduce English at an earlier stage comes with practical considerations. Early exposure can give students a competitive advantage, allowing them to excel academically. It can also help them manage their workload by developing language skills before more demanding subjects are introduced. Conversely, students who start learning English later may struggle to balance multiple subjects. For adult learners, the biggest challenge is often a lack of time due to work and family responsibilities, making sustained language learning difficult.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

There has been a shift in research perspectives, moving away from viewing individual differences as fixed and stable learner traits. Instead, researchers are calling for a dynamic and contextualized understanding of learner characteristics. Among these individual differences, motivation has received the most research attention. Rather than categorizing motivation into integrative and instrumental types (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003), L2 motivation is increasingly analyzed through the lens of complexity theory, which highlights its nonlinear and dynamic nature (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Among the theories, the L2 Motivation Self System (L2MSS) and self-determination theory (SDT) have gained increasing prominence.

L2MSS is proposed by Dörnyei (2005, 2009). The theory consists of three components. The first is the ideal L2 self, which reflects the learner's image of themselves as a proficient L2 user. The second is the ought-to L2 self, which refers to the abilities the learner believes they should possess to fulfill external expectations and avoid negative consequences. The third is the L2 learning experience, which encompasses situation-specific motives influenced by the learning environment. This theory has greatly contributed to the dynamic change of motivation and motivation fluctuations over time.

The key concept of SDT is that people have innate, basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In this theory, the learner is placed at the centre, with motivation varying in its degree of self-determination (Al-Hoorie & Liu, 2024). Specifically, motivation can be influenced by external regulation, driven by rewards or pressure. It can also stem from integrated regulation and intrinsic motivation, where actions are fully self-driven. SDT highlights the importance of fulfilling learners' basic psychological needs to promote self-determined motivation (Al-Hoorie et al., 2022). The depth and flexibility of SDT provide a comprehensive framework for understanding motivation in second language learning.

Second language learning is a complex process, making research on individual differences in language acquisition a highly rigorous field. Researchers have dedicated themselves to exploring the relationship between different individual differences in second language learning. However, it is important to approach this research with caution, as it heavily depends on the measurement of psychological constructs. To study these constructs, researchers have developed various operationalized measurement tools, each with its own limitations of full understanding of language learners.

In summary, research on individual differences offers valuable pedagogical insights. For teachers, understanding these factors is essential for designing effective instruction and adapting lessons to meet the diverse needs of learners.

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