

Critical Review of 'Factors Affecting Second Language Learning'

Qing He (UWTSD Student ID: 2306690)

Unlike the fact that nearly all children acquire their first language successfully, learners anywhere in the world appear to acquire distinct levels of second language. The varieties in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) success is believed to be caused by the factors or characteristics of learners. In the book chapter titled '*Factors Affecting Second Language Learning*' written by Lightbown, P.M. and Spada, N (2000) in *English Language Teaching in its Social Context* edited by Candlin, C. N and Mercer, N (2000), the factors of intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation and attitudes, learner preferences, learner beliefs, age of acquisition are closely examined one by one closely with the support of research findings. The present essay aims to briefly review the article in the aspects of 1) brief examination of all the factors; 2) major focus on the factor of the age of acquisition in detail; and 3) conclusion.

1. Examination of all the factors the authors have presented

As mentioned above, all the seven factors in the article will be reviewed here.

1.1 Intelligence

'Intelligence' has been widely used as a term to refer to the performance of humans, especially in academic aspects. As concluded from the authors based on the research findings, Intelligence Quotient (IQ) Test scores were good to predict the success of a learner and related to certain kinds of abilities such as language analysis and rule learning, but it might be less effective in assessing real context communication and interaction. In overall, both intelligence and language proficiency are

such complex concepts that they might be correlated in some area within some specific context, but any attempts to attributing one's language learning success to their high intelligence quotient are irresponsible, unhelpful, and misleading for the large varieties of SL learners as well as their teachers and parents.

1.2 Aptitude

According to Saito, K. (2017), foreign language aptitude is 'a set of cognitive and perceptual abilities which predict how learners can quickly improve their L2 performance (rate of learning) and the extent to which they can eventually approximate native-like performance (ultimate attainment) in classroom and naturalistic settings'. This notion is useful for language teachers to predict learners' differences and take relevant strategies. The concept of aptitude was constructed in America tertiary education in 1920s due to time and economic concerns (Berthele, R. and Udry, 2021). As mentioned in this chapter, researchers investigated aptitude for L2 learning efficiency prediction and developed tests such as Modern Language Aptitude (MLAT) and the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (PLAB). As shown by research findings, on one hand, there were substantial relationship between MLAT performance and foreign language proficiency when using grammar translation or audiolingual methods, but irrelevance were found when using a more communicative approach; on the other hand, the assessments of learner's differences in the components of aptitude will help to place students to appropriate teaching programs. In my mind, these findings do reveal important facts about the learners' abilities and inspire me to treat students' aptitude more objectively and adapt my teachings strategies to their individual aptitudes.

1.3 Personality

In this section, the terms such as extroversion or introversion, inhibition, are briefly presented. The findings are summarized as follows. Firstly, the observations that extroverted people are more likely to learn a language well are not fully supported by studies. Namely, some successful language learners do not get a higher score on measuring

extroversion. Second, inhibition, a term used to describe the idea of discouraging risk-taking in language learning is measured as a negative force in learning a second language in some studies investigating the correlation between alcohol drinking and pronunciation (Guiora et al. 1972), but the experiments are far different from classroom context. Thirdly, other terms such as self-esteem, empathy, dominance, talkativeness, etc., have been studied, but the available research does not show a clearly defined relationship between these personality and SLA. From my perspective, the success of learning a language should be a goal of all the learners with different personalities and each personal trait has its special value in learning a language and should be considered and respected within a whole dynamic changing system of a human being.

1.4 Motivation and Attitudes

Motivation and attitudes drew considerable amount of attention in SLA since its impact on promoting the success of SLA. The findings were summarized by Gardner (1985) that positive attitudes and motivation are related to success in second language learning. Besides, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation, the two terms to classify motivation were coined by Gardner and Lambert (1972) to respectively refer to the more internal personal growth driven one and external practical needs driven one. In L2 learning, motivation has been mostly used to refer to long-term stable attitudes in the learners' minds (Cook, 2013, p. 137).

The societal reason, in my observation, needs much more consideration, as mentioned by Lightbown P.M. and Spada, N (2000, p. 34), "one factor which often affects motivation is the social dynamic or power relationship between languages." For instance, the Chinese secondary school English learners are supposed to be more motivated to learn English since foreign language is a compulsory subject of National College Entrance Examination, while in the UK in general, the pupils are supposed to be less motivated since modern languages have not been compulsory in England beyond the age of 14 since 2004 and the entries for MFL exams had almost halved since 2002 (Shepperd, L. 2021). I

think age and socio-cultural factors will also play a role in the way the teachers use in motivating students and motivation is such a complex concept which needs further investigation.

1.5 Learner Preferences and Learner Beliefs

It is unfair to conclude these two factors are less important, but the two sections are indeed much shorter in this chapter. The former one refers to the different learning styles or inclinations, such as field independent and field dependent learners from a cognitive perspective and the findings show that field independence is related to performance on certain kinds of tasks, but not a good one predicting language performances as summarized in this chapter (p. 35). The latter is about the learners' beliefs on the optimal or appropriate way of language learning, including how the instruction should be delivered. These factors are less studied and underestimated as the authors said, but I hold the belief that they will be gaining increasing attention with the advancement of language education and technology.

1.6 The Factor of Age

For decades, whether language learning success could be better achieved within a certain period of lifetime has always been a hot topic among academics and the public. Based on intuition, people seem to take for granted that the earlier one starts to learn a second language, the more likely they will succeed and the myth about what is called the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) is prevalent. However, it is needed to test through scientific studies. This factor will be examined in detail in the next part.

2. The Factor of Age

The age factor will be examined along with my personal thoughts in the end.

In this article, Critical Period Hypothesis is explained as 'a time in human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning' (p. 36) and this period is most claimed to end around

puberty, or even earlier. The authors argued that due to the different language learning conditions, comparing children and adults could be of difficulty indeed and hence CPH has been challenged in recent decades from different aspects.

To investigate the CPH impact apart from phonological achievement, the study by Patkowski (1980) was richly introduced, which investigated the effect of age on the acquisition of features of a second language other than accent. After examining the spoken English of 67 highly educated immigrants to the United States with a lengthy interview, he found that for the group who began to learn English before the age of 15, their success in learning a second language is inevitable and by there was much more variety in the levels by the post-puberty group by contrast. Therefore, the age factor is a key factor in the development of native-like mastery of a second language and the limit does not only apply to accent, resulting in the support of CPH.

Another study was introduced to support the CPH. Conducting a study of 46 Chinese and Korean speakers who had begun to learn English at different ages, Jacqueline Johnson and Elissa Newport (1989) found that those who began before the age of 15 showed few individual differences in second language ability while later starters differed greatly and did not have native-like abilities.

However, my own critique of this part lists as follows:

Firstly, possibly due to the size limit, the article being examined does not present a detailed overview of the studies of age factor, especially the major studies with the findings against CPH, not even to mention the origin of CPH. In short, I think the author attempts to present the research trends objectively and an angle to consider SLA, but idea of the existence of CPH was favored or trusted in an implicit way.

Secondly, since the article being examined was published more than two decades ago, the newly conducted studies should be included. The studies mentioned in this article mainly focused on the immigrants' learning of the second language in a target language context. However,

the studies of the CPH in the foreign language context are not contained. With English as a global lingua franca, the latter is of greater significance. As for early foreign language learning, as DeKeyser, R.M. mentioned, ‘where foreign language learning rather than second language learning is concerned, directly relevant research, carried out with classroom foreign language learners, is even more sorely needed. (2013, p.631)’. Take China as an example, most parents follow the trend as the firm believers of the CPH myth, exposing their children to instructed English training schools or self-taught materials as early as pre-school period.

However, some recent studies show conflicting findings. Nils Jaekel et al. (2017) conducted a longitudinal study of early foreign language learning in German School, finding that late starters surpassed early starters in year 7 group and ‘extending EFL into elementary school did not seem to produce the anticipated linguistic outcomes’(p. 654). What’s more, based on the probe into the myth of CPH, Singleton and Pfenninger (2018) conducted a thorough review of previous studies offered the following thought-provoking opinions: 1) both the opinions from Penfield and Lenneberg (the theory founders of CPH) are not supported by recent research; 2) the success in the L2 context is attributable to a range of socio-affective factors, to how learners experience the L2, rather than to age factor; 3) the earlier starters were not able to retain their learning advantages in the longer run.

By contrast, after examining the effect of learning English as a foreign language in early childhood on children’s later English achievement, Chen, S. et al. (2022) found that the experience of early childhood English learning alone positively contributed to later English language and to attitudes toward English learning. Similarly, the findings of Hartshorne, Tenenbaum, and Pinker, S. (2018) supported the CPH by examining a dataset of unprecedented size (669,498 native and non-native English speakers) age, age at first exposure, and years of experience.

To summarize, these findings reveal the complexity of the issue due to different research focus, purposes and contexts, which should be analyzed to further explore the ‘myth’ from the aspects of 1) the length of

the Critical Period, 2) the contexts of the SL learners and 3) its relevance to the specific language abilities, etc and more interdisciplinary studies are integrated.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, all the factors affecting the second language learning mentioned in the article are examined and a deeper examination was given to the age factor. Again, though the article was published more than 20 years ago, the basic framework and former studies lay a solid foundation for further development. I believe that the influences of these factors are not exclusive to each other but make a difference in an overlapping mode instead, which should be considered as a whole.

As for the research methods, I think the existence of the research limits should be understandable due to the invisibility of human brain and entirety of those characteristics and it might be improved when mixing with qualitative methods for more thorough and deeper investigation. Furthermore, with the development of neuroscience, various means of research are expected to integrate, such as ERP, to explore the matrix of the human brain.

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