

Factors affecting second language learning

Ever since the 1960s, the study of the second language (L2) acquisition has attracted more and more attention. Penfield and Roberts, the two cooperators, and Lenneberg brought neurological and physiological theories into linguistics. From then on, a lot of researchers started to shift their studies from the process of teaching to the process of learning. Learner-centred study focuses more on learners' individual differences. In our real life, almost all normal children can succeed in mastering their first language, provided that they have a normal upbringing of their parents. Nevertheless, second language learning is quite different. There are many factors are believed to have something to do with language learning. They are personal intelligence, individual motivation, aptitude, learner preferences, learner beliefs and age of acquisition.

(1)Intelligence

It is long believed that learners' intelligence are closely related with second language learning. In the past decades, some intelligence tests or different methods are used 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 students are very successful in second language learning without 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 relevant to second language learning. For example, it is argued that extroverted people are more likely to learn a second language faster and more efficiently. Nevertheless, many studies indicate that many successful learners haven't got high scores on measuring extroversion.

In terms of inhibition, it discourages the progress in language learning. It is because the learners' courage of taking risk call 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 understand what the words mean in 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 role in language learning and using. 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. Among all these tests, the most popular ones are the Modern Language Test and the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery.

(4)Motivation

Many researchers did some researches about the relations between the learners' attitude and motivation and second language-learning. Motivation is a factor which can be studied in two main parts: learners' communicative needs and their attitudes towards the second language community.

Therefore, if the learner needs to use or speak the second language widely or to fulfill some certain ambition, they will treasure the communicative skills and be more motivated to learn the second language. On the other hand, the personal growth, cultural enrichment and instrumental motivation are all some types 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 second 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 are intrinsically better learners. But this idea has not been confirmed by all researchers in this field. 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 only exception might be pronunciation, which is learned more easily quickly by younger children. However, some evidences support the fact that adults can also learn native-like pronunciation and speak a foreign language with any accent.

In the past few decades, several hypotheses are proposed to give an explanation of the differences among children, adolescents and adults 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 they are likely to develop a set of learning skills and strategies to help their learning, while children 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 tend to use learning strategies and methods that are suitable to the tasks, and to their own goals. Studies show that language learners at all levels use strategies (Chamot& Kupper, 1989), but that some or most learners are not fully aware of the strategies they are using or a strategy that might be useless to employ. Obviously, students is able to be taught to employ better methods and strategies in accordance with their own traits respectively, and researches frequently argues 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, learning a foreign language might be strongly impressed on their brain, which can stimulate nervous function system and the further learning can help them to form language habit and competency quickly and easily, especially in acquiring pronunciation naturally.

The disadvantages 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 have not formed abstract logic idea yet and have to spend more time in L1 learning than the L2 learners in other age stages. So language environment such as bilingual social and living environment which can expose them to the L2 and push them to take L2 as a tool of thought, game and communication, or very excellent teachers and ideal teaching establishment will be extremely important in 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 lessons and content-based instruction will be offered when they learn this language. These programs provide the students with more time on task in English than bilingual classes. Researches, however, suggest that the increased exposure to English are not extremely relevant to the faster acquisition of English. Over the length of 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, 1981; Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991). This would not be expected if time on task were the most important factor in language learning. 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). So teaching children L2 intensively too early will damage their L1 acquisition.

2. Features of Adolescents

For language learner in this period, the predominance in L2 learning is that their cognitive competency has developed to certain extent and their meta-language, which helps the learners to analyze or describe a language, is fairly sensitive. Consequently, imitation and reminiscence will be the two jobs that they are very good at. Adolescents take the upper hand of children in employing the strategy of language communication and they are sure to understand concepts and definitions between language and culture easily. In accordance with this, these abilities promote the processes of L2 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 other people's attitude towards them. The low psychological barrier is advantageous for operating inherent mechanism. Similar to adults, adolescents can make full use of the language regulations they have learned to monitor their outputs as well, but children are lacking of monitoring competency in general. The interjections and self-corrections that speakers make while talking indicate that monitoring is occurring in order to make meaning clearer. Adolescents and adults could compare what they say with what they intend to say by listening to their own utterances, and mistake corrections are sometimes necessary. But children seldom perform like that, they are unconscious of whether their words are suitable or not. For this reason, adolescents can acquire a second language faster than adults and children. Meanwhile, they can do a better job than adults and children in concrete language learning, such as syntax, listening competency and so on.

The unfavorable points are that adolescents should work harder than children and need strong self-control and self-discipline in L2 learning according to their schedules. 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 a lot of learning tasks given by their parents and teachers, which might discourage 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 come into being completely. They can handle complicated language forms and contents easily, because their meta-language consciousnesses, common sense and literary knowledge are better than 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 listening, reading, writing and so on. Apart from that, they have clear studying goals, strong motivation, a wide range of knowledge and experience as well as better understanding competency and memories. All of the factors mentioned above play a crucial part in second language learning. Their second language learning might be quicker than children initially through the knowledge of systematical L1 and monitor approach.

There are also some disadvantages which prevent them from focusing on their study. Their second language learning are constantly interrupted by family plans or social activities. It is almost impossible for them to imitate or utter standard pronunciation and they will do much 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.

In conclusion, studies have indicated the relationship between their influences in the process of L2 learning and the learners' influence of age along with the other aspects in different age stages, such as motivation, attitude, opportunity and learning ability. The unique characteristic in each age stage has its advantages and disadvantages. 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 treat language as an object very well, for example, being able to define a word, to say what sounds make up that word. Then they can learn grammar consciously and understand the language easily. On the other hand, a difficulty in comparing the learning ability of children, adolescents and adults is that children have the best learning conditions among the three groups: more time, attention, communicative need, opportunities for use, and so on (William Littlewood 2000: 66). The characteristics concluded from the tests can help educators find out the pertinence to teaching approaches and learning strategies in class.

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.

References

- Lightbrown Patsy M. and Nina Spada. (2002). *How language are learned?* [M] Oxford: Oxford University press. Accessed 25 th March 2021.
- Bailey, Bruer, Symons, and Lichtman . (2001). *Critical Thinking about Critical Periods* . [M] Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. Accessed 20 th March 2021.
- Brown, D.(1987). *Principles of Language learning and Teaching*. [M] Prentice-Hall, Regents.
- Curtiss, Susan . (1977). *Genie: A Psycholinguistic study of a Modern-Day "Wild Child"* . [M] Academic Press. Accessed 18 th March 2021.