

Research on Strategies of Second Language Acquisition Based on Individual Difference

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Keywords: second language acquisition, individual difference, learning aptitude

Abstract: Second language acquisition plays a quite important role in routines, work and study. Important differences refer to the important factors that affect learning effectiveness in the process of second language acquisition. This article discusses five factors within the individual differences of second language learners, including motivation, personality, learning strategy, learning aptitude and age, and analyzes how these factors affect second language learners and how to apply them to learning. It also provides relevant strategies to provide guidance for second language learners to improve their learning efficiency.

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, people are studying and working together due to world globalization. Communication skills fulfill people's satisfaction in study and life. However, monolingual adults have less ability to make a better life for their living compared with second language adults especially English. Therefore, mastery of a second language becomes more popular than it used to be. Second language refers to the language which you want to acquire and use in verbal communication except for your first language. For instance, in international companies, the staff who need to communicate with foreigners should acquire the target language in the specific countries. Therefore, second language acquisition tends to be quite important and accordingly. Several individual differences in second language acquisition needs to be monitored and observed by experts. The purpose of these researchers is to promote second language learners to acquire second language and seek to know how different cognitive and personality variables are related and how they interact with learners' experiences, therefore they can gain a better understanding of human learning. This paper will analyze these individual differences in order to understand human learning and accordingly help second language learners acquire the language better.

2. A Theoretical Review of Second Language Acquisition

According to Ortega (2009), scholars investigated the human capacity to acquire the language other than the first language. It began in the late 1960s and started to describe a range of procedure and results of the second language acquisition. By the end of the twentieth century, second language acquisition had reached its age of an independent field in the world.

From linguistic perspective, inter-language (IL) is one of the important theories in second language acquisition. Selinker (1972) presented that the IL means development process while constructing learners own learning system and it includes language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies of second language communication and overgeneralization of target language linguistics material. Another theory is called universal grammar (UG) from the linguistic perspective. Cook (1985) had presented that Chomsky had stated that if second language learners in their young age are pre-equipped with the contents of the universal grammar. They are likely to avoid some wrong hypotheses while acquiring second language. From cognitive perspective, Robert DeKeyser (1998) and Richard Schmidt (2001) were working an information-processing model, therefore, they suggested that second language learners should use mental process such as knowing, understanding and learning while processing information in acquiring second language. According to Vygotsky (1978), when second language learners solved problems with more capable learners, their learning is most effectively at that time, which is called “zone of proximal development (ZPD)”.

Many learning methods also appear in second acquisition. Ortega (2009) highlighted implicit learning which means acquiring knowledge under no intervention of controlled attention, such as the rules of grammar. And explicit learning refers to learning with the intervention produced outside, such as the rules and requirements of the grammar. Another learning method requires second language learners understand how to analyze interlanguage from formal and functional perspective in order to improve themselves in language acquisition. Ortega (2009) emphasized that second language learners should put morpheme analyses and function-form analyses into the acquisition process.

Influencing factors are of great significance in second language acquisition. According to Krashen (1982), the input hypothesis presented one important question that describes how second language learners acquire the language. Krashen(1982) highlighted that when learners use more than their linguistic competence to study. They would go for a higher stage in their language acquisition. In this section, individual differences variables were covered including language learning aptitude, learning motivation, learning strategies and the age of onset. Carroll (1911) represented that aptitude refers to the ability to learn second language quickly and many aptitude tests had been created including modern language aptitude test (MLAT) (Carroll and Spon, 1959) and the pimsleur language aptitude battery (PLAB) (Pimsleur, 1966). As Lightdown and Spada (1982) mentioned that the ability to identify and memorize new sound and understand the function of particular words in sentences, remember new words and figure the grammatical rules of linguistic forms. According to Lightdown and Spada (1982), motivation in second language learning defined the learners’ desire to communicate with others and learners’ attitude to acquire the language. Two terms of motivation are presented as instrumental motivation which describes immediate aims and its practical function, as well as the integrative motivation which depicts language learning for personal goals and the involvement of the individual into different cultural background. Integrative motivation tends to be more important than instrumental motivation while second language are acquired. Oxford (2001) stated a strategy chain in learning strategies, refers to targeted strategies which many effective second learners possess with long term goals. According to Lightdown and Spada (1982), even if many adults second language learners were able to achieve excellent level of second language acquisition, their ability to learning skills are less effective compared with the innate capacity children possess.

3. Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition

Individual characteristics have related to the success of second language acquisition for second language learners. Many scholars have strong interest in investigating how these characteristics including motivation, aptitude, age of onset and learning strategies. They will influence second language acquisition because they are quite important in reference to learners’ ability of language

acquisition. For example, personality is divided into one part of individual characteristic. Teachers think students who are quite outgoing tend to acquire language better compared with students who do not want to express themselves to some extent. We could analyze in this paper that individual differences including aptitude, motivation, age of onset, learning strategies are mainly introduced within second language acquisition.

When second language learners acquire language, both the level of speed and ease tend to influence the ability to learn the language for second language learners. And accordingly, aptitude refers to the ability to learn the language, thus putting into investigation for many scholars. Meanwhile, if second language learners have more desire to have contact with target language speakers, they would have more positive attitudes towards second language acquisition. Therefore, motivation which refers to learners' need to communicate with target language community and attitudes towards language learners tends to be quite important.

As for motivation, if second language learners have a strong mission to change another job, making higher salary, the new one requires better level of English standard, thus making these learners putting much effort into acquiring this second language.

As for the age of onset, second language learners would like to define the most important critical age for them to study English, specifically, when learners choose the best time for them to study English, they tend to study more effectively at their critical time. Some second language learners suppose that when they are children, they could digest the knowledge more easily because they haven't formed fixed logic in their mind. Other second language learners suppose that they tend to acquire knowledge more quickly when they turn into adults because adults have sufficient experience for life. Therefore, it is quite important to investigate the age of onset thus making second language learners acquire knowledge more effectively.

As for the learning strategies, different second language learners have different methods to study in their own fields, some people tend to study field independently, they do not like being interrupted by the environment and they do not like being controlled by the tutors. These learners could separate themselves from the general background and see the things from a whole perspective. It has been widely reported that the relationship between field independence and success in second language learning is close with each other.

As for the aptitude, when second language learners tend to identify the grammar structure easily in a complex sentence, they tend to remember the new sounds and words with ease and speed. The most important is when second language learners could deal with the processing information in limited time while verbal interaction, they may possibly have capacity to be successful in language learning.

As for personality, there are quite a lot of personality characteristics affecting second language learners' learning results to some extent. When second language learners study quite complex questions, they sometimes would be feeling anxious and nervous due to many outside influencing factors. Many scholars also investigate whether extroverted learners tend to be more successful in second language acquisition compared with inverted learners, but they have not concluded with a result. On the contrary, Lily Wong Fillmore (1979) has described that when second language learners acquire knowledge, at the same time, they observe and reflect these knowledges and they may achieve greater success in second language acquisition.

4. Strategies for Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition

4.1. Motivation

In classroom, teachers always think the students who act actively in the classroom, express interest in the subject and tend to study a great deal based on their positive motivation. When teachers make

great contribution to students' motivation including the content more interesting and relevant to their age, the students would have more motivation to achieve challenging assignments which the tutors as them to achieve. According to Marie Guilloteaux and Zoltán Dornyei (2008) presented a strong association between teachers' motivational practice and students' L2 language learning, before the class, the teacher would present the saying that "Hope you are looking forward to the next week's session on Development of L2 acquisition, it's the core of the whole research area." As in this case, the teacher would like to arouse students' curiosity or attention for the next class. During the class, teachers would design some practice activities based on the PowerPoint and students would have some individual competition and team competition during the class to get better understanding of the contents covered in this class. And teachers would also pay much attention on different students' feelings. If one student has low interactional competence, this student would not compete with other students in this class. The teacher would prevent this student from speaking in class, leaving more space for this student to process contents in mind. After class, when students sent emails to the teacher, the teacher would reply the email as quickly as possible to solve the students' problems at first time. Meanwhile, teachers also post some surveys and asked students to provide some details about their opinions, thus making teachers get an idea what students need through learning process and accordingly to provide students with some important points. As a result, the teachers' motivational practice has positive correlation with learners' engagement in class.

4.2 Language Learning Aptitude

According to John Carroll (1991), aptitude has been defined as the ability to learn quickly. When some complex assignments have been designed to the students, some learners would identify and solve the problems of the questions with greater ease and speed compared with other learners. In the environment of English as a second language, some second language learners could identify sounds produced by others as quickly as possible and they could get a better understanding of the words speakers produced in verbal interaction. And accordingly, they could respond with the quickest and appropriate way to the speakers. According to Nick Ellis (2001), working memory is the most important variable in many specific language environments. And it refers to the ability to process the active information produced by other speakers at a given time. Different second language learners have different level of ability to deal with information. This is called the working memory. For example, when the manager ask the staff about the task at an important conference meeting, the staff need to respond to the questions as quickly as possible even if there is no preparation for this prompt question, thus making good smooth to the conference meeting. Then the manager will be satisfied with your performance.

4.2.1. Age

Many parents in China send their children to foreign countries to study when they were only around 3 years old or these children are growing up in the native speaking countries as immigrants. And accordingly, these children could get more contact with target language community and they can also have more opportunities to practice target language with native speakers. Therefore, these second language learners are more likely to achieve higher proficiency in target language when they grow up. On the contrary, adults second language learners could be quite professional second learners because they have rich vocabulary, sufficient grammar knowledge and complete pragmatic intuition. They may have better understanding of the second language because they have the ability to identify the knowledge based on their own life experience. Mark Patkowski (1980) has presented one study about the influence of the critical period on the success of second language learners. Mark Patkowski (1980) has argued in this study that when second language learners start learning their target language

before 15 years old, they are able to master the full proficiency of the target language.

4.2.2. Learning Strategies

Different second language learners have different strategies of studying. Some second language learners would like to acquire knowledge while listening to others. Some learners like to study when they get the whole sight of the contents. Some second language learners would like to study alone instead of studying with others. For example, when international students study in native language countries, they usually have to choose to write their own essays alone or cooperate with others and study together. Some second language learners would like to write their essay alone because they like to get the sight of the knowledge from a whole perspective. Some second language learners would like to study with partners and they could communicate with each other about different opinions thus getting better understanding of the contents covered in the assignments. When one Spanish learner is studying applied linguistics in Australia, this second language learners would like to do role plays and elicited conversations with other second language learners to acquire the target language pragmatics.

4.2.3. Personality

If one student is quite introverted, the teacher would not ask the student to post answers directly in class because this student may be shy to share ideas in class. According to Lily Wong Fillmore (1979), students with this kind of introversion personality tend to be more likely to be successful as quiet observants in specific situations. For example, one introverted Chinese international student in England does not like to raise heads when teachers are speaking, because this student is afraid of having eye contact with teachers thus being asked to answer the questions in public. Although in this case, some other factors may be confronted within the environment such as language barrier. During the pronunciation tests, second language learners especially adolescent learners perform badly because they are self-conscious and do not pronounce naturally. The most important part in personality which has great impact on individual characteristics is second language anxiety. For example, when this Chinese student first got to England and began to start classes in classrooms, this student feels anxious and nervous speaking in the whole English classroom. According to Peter MacIntyre (1995), nervous second language learners tend to focus on the tasks at hand and their grades on these tasks. So, these nervous second language learners are not able to study better than learners who are studying in a relatively relaxing second language environment.

5. Conclusion

It is of quite significance to investigate how different individual differences affect the second language acquisition. Studying second language tend to be more popular nowadays. Some second language learners could get a better understanding of what they received from others and identify the implied meaning from the speakers. Some second language learners could take advantage of their language usage into their workplace. In conclusion, when second language learners get better understanding of their learning, they could improve and evaluate their learning by themselves.

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