

A Brief Review on Influence Factors of Second Language Acquisition in Children

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Abstract: The present review systematically summarized the internal as well as external factors influencing children second language acquisition in light of a considerable number of previous empirical researches. Among which motivation, personal characteristics and aptitude, age of acquisition, and interdependence of language were explained as internal factors, socioeconomic status and exposure of language at home were explained as external factors. It also emphasized on how those factors exert differential impact on various linguistic domains in second language. The present review attempted to gain a comprehensive interpretation to the individual difference of second language acquisition in children so as to provide instructive overview to teaching practice as well as relevant studies conducted subsequently.

1. Introduction

Nowadays an increasing number of children grow up in bilingual environment. There was considerable evidence reported second language acquisition (SLA) not only widely expand children's social networking but also help build their social skills[1]. Meanwhile, it helped enhance the attentional control, problem-solving skills, increase the capacity of working memory and furthermore effectively reduce the risk of dementia in their adulthood[2][3][4]. Accordingly, it has stimulated extensive study on factors influencing SLA in children. Based on a summary of the existing studies, the present review analyzed how factors make an influence on the SLA from the perspectives of psychology and linguistics. Considering different features of factors, the review makes analysis both internally and externally.

2. Internal Factors

2.1. Language Learning Motivation

Motivation has been frequently mentioned in the scope of academic achievement and learning. It interpreted the reasons behind people's choice of behavior, the duration of people's persistence and the intensity of efforts to achieve their goal[5]. Accordingly, language learning motivation has been

defined as the aspiration and attitude to study a certain language. Gardner, Tremblay and Masgoret proved that motivation has a positive impact on SLA as well as highly relevant to language achievement[6]. Gardner and Lambert (1972) subdivided motivation into integrative motivation and instrumental motivation, the former one indicates that language acquisition is stimulated by the interest in people and culture of target language or the desire to communicate with someone, which positively predict language proficiency (Strong, 1984)[7][8]. Although some researchers argued that motivation has not been extensively confirmed in relevant research in young children[9]. Fillmore has started to applied integrative motivation to young children since 1976 and identified faster learners were those have a strong desire to be accepted as a member of target cultural group. Moreover, according to a study examined the relationship between the teaching practice and young children's motivation, kindergarten children's the interest and motivation regarding early academic development were influenced by teacher's teaching practice. Compared with teacher-directed classroom, children showed more interest and motivation, especially in reading in child-centered classroom (Lerkkanen, Kiuru, Pakarinen, Viljaranta, Poikkeus, Puttonen, Siekkinen & Nurmi, 2012)[10]. Also, they showed a higher expectation toward the outcome of a task, aspire to choose more challenging tasks and tend to be more independent[11], which benefits from the fact that teachers emphasizing on children-centered classroom pay close attention to children's autonomy and provide opportunities for children to explore spontaneously (Lerkkanen et al., 2012)[10]. Therefore, educator's active support and appropriately guidance played an important role in developing children's motivation and interest, which would correspondingly affect second language learning.

2.2. Personality traits and Aptitude

Personality traits were another internal factor that has an impact on SLA in children. Eysenck (1967) suggested personality traits can be biologically divided into two dimensions: extrovert and introvert[12]. Strong (1983) shows that a talkative and quickly responsive learner in conversations was able to master a second language quicker than others in that extroverts were high-frequency communicator and more actively use the vocabulary they have learned[13]. While introverts were more reluctant to communicate with second language (L2) and more anxious when exposed to the L2 because they had a higher level of neurotransmitter dopamine, which would beyond the reasonable range of neural control under pressure, reduced short-term memory processing, and thus weaken performance[14]. Moreover, the extroverts had advantages in short-term memory and working memory that facilitate learning of declarative knowledge, thereby improved the spoken fluency of the L2[15][16][17][18]. However, one research identified "outstanding language learners" conducted by Fillmore (1976) demonstrates that some successful learners had a strong social nature, tended to be outgoing and love to communicate with others. While others showed the characteristics of quietness, silence and weak sociability, as we know, many language tasks were not only oral communication and operational learning, but also word recitation and writing assignment, which exactly reflects the introverts' cognitive strength such as concentrated and work-oriented [19][20][21]. Therefore, it was evident that learners of both extroverts and introverts possessed advantages for SLA.

Aside from personality trails, as a factor that is stable and closely relevant to the acquisition outcome, the role that aptitude played in SAL cannot be underestimated, which is comprised of some cognitive-based abilities[22][23]. For young children learners, memory ability could predict the L2 fluency[24], high-level short-term memory would promote SAL[25]. Also, Paradis figured out that phonological short-term memory ability highly predicted the development of vocabulary

and morphology of young children[26]. Meanwhile, analytical abilities and non-verbal reasoning skills also could predict the verbal academic skill, vocabulary as well as listening comprehension of L2[9]. Moreover, musical ability had also been proved to predict the accuracy of L2 pronunciation perception[27].

2.3. Age of Onset of Learning

Many researchers discussed whether learners had an optimal age range for starting learning L2 as a critical period. Some studies have even suggested that early exposure to second language could activate the neural mechanism of grammar and display a high level of metalinguistic and meta-cognitive awareness[28][2], which had a crucial impact on grammar processing[29]. Early exposure to L2 could also affect the purity of foreign language accent, making the L2 closer to the native speaker[30]. As examined by Flege, Munro and Mackay, compared to those who start to learn L2 at the age of fifteen, earlier learners could acquire an accent closer to native speaker[31]. In contrast, some researchers believed that after cognitive maturity, the highly balanced flexibility and stability of brain with more complete grammar system and processing procedure can achieve faster development of L2[32][33][34]. However, Long (1990) mentioned that “learning faster” did not necessarily mean a better development[35]. In the long run, early exposing to L2 generally had an overwhelming advantage. In fact, the impact of age on SLA depended on different domains within the language. For instance, Early exposure to second language had a greater impact on grammatical processing, grammatical judgment[28], syntactic processing[36], pronunciation(Long, 1988[31][35], and word recognition[37]. While 6-15 years old learners outperformed than very young children in morphology, syntax, listening, reading, free writing, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, spoken fluency and metalinguistic skill[38][39]. As for the critical period for learning L2, Johnson and Newport suggested that it’s probably between 4-6 years old[40], Long also considered that before 6 years old is more likely to obtain native accent. Similarly, other researchers believed 5-7 years old children can better master bilingual cognitive as well as language skills[37].

All in all, attention on onset age of learning L2 is still mainly focused on the learning difference between younger and older learners. It was relatively tough to measure the specific age for learning L2 since its impact was likely to be limited by other factors such as quite limit input or individual difference on cognitive ability. But disputation over critical period still offered researchers a wider space to explore the interplay between factors.

2.4. Interdependence of Linguistic

Although first language (L1) and L2 belonged to dual linguistic systems, there were still some acquired skills can be transferred from L1 to L2 during the learning process, which is called “interdependence”. Verhoeven verified that this cross-linguistic transfer can be identified in grammar, phonology, pragmatic skill, and especially in the case of literacy skills. Linguistic transfer was reflected in typology[41], the high similarity between the different language types, such as sharing common grammatical features, could promote SLA[23][26]. As Cummins assumed that even though the dual linguistic structures maintain highly inconsistent like English and Chinese[42], the level of children’s L1 acquisition still affected that of L2 because certain potential cognitive skills, such as literacy skills, could make cross-linguistic influences. For instance, word spelling ability of L2 was highly correlated with similar ability in L1, the abilities of word decoding and comprehensive reading in L2 could be predicted in L1 acquisition[41]. Besides, it was revealed by other studies that phonological awareness could make cross-linguistic influence, children’s

pronunciation managing skills of L1 laid a solid foundation for understanding L2 pronunciation structure, making it the key of acquiring L2 literacy[43]. Furthermore, it had been found that the proficiency of L1 can just facilitate the transfer of such skills. Ekstrand confirmed that children with improved L1 literacy skills could acquire cognitive-related skills of L2 at a faster rate[44]. Whereas immature linguistic coding skills would restrict SLA level[14][21][45]. Moreover, some tasks with decontextualized content and a higher level of abstraction further promote cross-linguistic transfer [41]. In a word, L1 learning to a greater extent can provide favorable conditions for SLA.

3. External Factors

3.1. Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status(SES) was comprised of parental educational level, occupation type, family income[46][47], as well as economic and cultural resources that all directly or indirectly affect children's language development[48], being regarded as a strong predictor when discussing the external influence. Hartas indicated in research that the impact of SES on children's literacy development was greatly significant than social skills[49]. Even if there was sufficient parental involvement in the family language environment, the effect of SES' gap on children cannot be reconciled. Children from different SES background certainly experienced different language environments, which impacted on the pace as well as ability of language acquisition. It had been proved that children from low-SES background were more likely to suffer language delay or slower lexical accumulation than those from high-SES background. Comparatively speaking[50], a child from high-SES did stand a good chance of enriching vocabulary even if he might possessed insufficient language input, which was deemed by Golberg, Paradis and Crago that high-SES family could provide sophisticated and non-language specific verbal interaction[32], For instance, asking questions that keep the conversation going, which was more critical than providing a lot of target language input.

The specific dimensions in SES had also been studied separately, among which, maternal educational level has been considered as a significant factor[49], for the reason that young children's language learning was mainly from their mother who spent more time at home. Hence, mothers with less educational experience acquired relatively simpler pragmatic and literacy skills, which would impair the quality of verbal interaction with their children. Mothers with higher educational level would use richer vocabulary, more accurate verb forms and more complex grammar in their utterance[26], correspondingly children would learn more vocabulary and more various syntactic structure[51].

In addition, researchers have also confirmed that SES determines the qualitative and quantitative differences of input in children's language. High-SES family provided children with richer vocabulary, complex sentences and semantically cohesive structures[48][52]. They could also provide additional reading and writing activities, such as book reading sharing, as well as resources conducive to language development, such as watching educational TV programs, listening to music and singing activities[53]. Among them, appropriate TV programs including some repetitive and novel vocabulary[54], to certain extent has been proved to promote vocabulary enlargement[51][55].

3.2. Exposure of Language at Home

Successful bilingual learners were substantially influenced by their parental language input[56]. The study by Scheele, Leseman and Mayo demonstrated that L2 input can effectively mediate the influence of SES' gap on the development of bilingual children's language ability[48]. Numerous studies have explored the influence of input from both qualitative and quantitative aspects.

First of all, in terms of the input quantity, namely how much and how often target language input the child has heard at home. Study have shown that if a child listens to less than 20% of the target language, he was reluctant to speak that language[57]. Whereas the more input the target language has at home, the better the children's vocabulary, reading and writing in that language would be[57], and the faster lexicon and morph syntax would be acquired[26]. As to the specific domain, input quantity particularly affected the development of vocabulary[58][59], grammar[57][60] and fluency[61][62]. That is, the more opportunities parents provided for communication and dialogue, the more favorable it was for children's language development.

Based on certain input quantity, researchers began to analyze the impact of the property and feature of input on SLA, such as the richness of language environment, the variety of family language activities, whether there was a native speaker to communicate with children and its number, and the L2 proficiency of parents themselves[26]. Study have shown that compared to enormous input, the proportion of native speakers interacting with children in the overall input is more predictive of the development of vocabulary as well as the grammatical complexity [59]. Another experimental study showed that some different speakers at home were beneficial to children's word recognition and processing, because children need to recognize words from different tone when communicating with different adults[59][63]. Meanwhile, the differences in the form and structure of input also potentially affect children's utterance and the acquisition of verb morphology. In a study by Paradis and Navarro[64], a young bilingual learner, when receiving input from native speaker mother, had more overt and rich subject usage than others, this was due to this kind of input could promote cross-linguistic influence. In addition, growing up in the family environment with diverse language activities, such as spending a certain amount of time reading picture books every day or organizing singing activities, could actively enhance reading ability and promoted the development of young children's pragmatic competence[65]. Thus, it could be seen that the quality and quantity of input played a significant role in children's SLA. Bohman, Bedore, Pena and Gillam also pointed out other than input[66], learners' output was also crucial since the more often learners use a language, the more frequently the language was practiced and the more accurate the language be.

Apart from the factors mentioned above, there were a few studies discovered that among those L2 children learners, girls keep better spoken pronunciation than boys[31], and teachers' language competence would also affect children's grammatical performance[67].

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, internal and external factors, namely learners' personal differences and environmental differences, account for a certain proportion of children's SLA. However, what ultimately determines children's SLA outcomes was more likely to be the result of the interaction between internal and external factors. There were a few studies have explored this interplay, as is claimed by Ausubel, Pauwels and Carr [68][69], low-SES or working-class families paid little attention to children's education and foreign language learning, hence their children showed more anxiety and less motivated due to the lack of encouragement and confidence, whereas high-SES

students had a more positive attitude towards foreign language learning because they often encouraged by parents who attached more importance to foreign language learning and they were able to enjoy sufficient resources, such as books and learning materials, and even plenty of opportunities for traveling to foreign countries[70], which indirectly indicated that factors could not separately affect SLA. Besides that, I surmised SES not only affected children's motivation, but also the age of onset of SLA, because low-SES families with relatively faint educational sense and limited educational resources were apt to expose their children to L2 at a later age. Comparatively, high-SES families with better economic condition and sufficient resources were more likely to set up high quality language environment and educational resources as early as possible. In addition, as proposed by previous studies that the process of transfer in learning was mainly influenced by personality traits, attitude, motivation and emotion[71][72], learners' motivation might also affect the cross-linguistic transfer: learners with strong motivation or interest were likely to actively establish connections between different knowledge. Age and aptitude might also contribute to the occurrence of transfer, young learners probably had lower transfer level since their knowledge system and structure have not been perfected, high aptitude level would be helpful as well cause cognitive-related skill might be conducive to the transfer. However, the existing study involved in the interaction between factors has not sufficient to support the speculation above, especially in children. So, it is suggested that the follow-up studies are supposed to focus on interplay between SLA and further help researchers to evaluate children's SLA performance from a more comprehensive perspective so as to provide individualized support, intervention and guidance.

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