# FACTORS INFLUENCING SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT

Motivation, attitude, age, intelligence, aptitude, cognitive style, and personality are considered as factors that greatly influence someone in the process of his or her second language acquisition. Experts state that those factors give a more dominant contribution in SLA to learners variedly, depend on who the learners are, their age, how they behave toward the language, their cognitive ability, and also the way they learn.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, factors, influence

Introduction

This paper describes the definition of second language acquisition and factors that affect second language acquisition and the main point of this writing is discussing contributing factors in second language acquisition such as *motivation, attitude, age, intelligence, aptitude, cognitive style, and personality*. Some factors are said to be dominant and some others are being equal but each of them gives different contribution for the success or the failure of second language acquisition. It is believed that every normal child, given a normal upbringing, are successful in the acquisition of their first language. However, experience shows that some of them success variedly in acquiring their second language due to the factors influencing the process of second language acquisition.

## The Definition of Second Language Acquisition

Acquisition is basically another word for learning. However, it is sometimes used for different use and meaning such in second language acquisition. The process by which a person learns a language is sometimes called acquisition instead of learning, because some linguists believe that the development of a first language in a child is a special process (Richards, 1985, p.3). (Ellis, 1986, p. 292; Alice Omaggio, 1986, p. 29) explain that acquisition can be broadly defined as the internalization of rules and formulas which are then used to communicate in L2. They further say that it is the spontaneous process of rule internalization that result from natural language used while learning consists of the development of conscious L2 knowledge through formal study. In other words, acquisition is unconscious study of a language in natural way and it is not depends on the language teaching. On the other hand, learning is a conscious study through formal instruction such as language classroom learning.

In *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics,* Jack Richards, et al. (1985, p. 252) states that second language acquisition is, "the process by which people develop proficiency in a second or foreign language." Rod Ellis (1986, p. 4) explains that SLA is "a complex process, involving many interrelated factors. It is the product of many factors pertaining to the learner on the one hand and the learning situation on the other." In addition, Victoria Fromkin et. al (2002, p. 593) says that SLA is "the acquisition of another language or language after first language acquisition that  is under way or completed." To conclude, second language acquisition (best known as SLA) is subconscious study through which a person acquires L2 or additional languages.

## Factors Influencing Second Language Acquisition

There are many general factors that influence second language learning such as age, aptitude, intelligence, cognitive style, attitudes, motivation and personality (Ellis, 1985). The aim of this session is to present these factors and their contribution to success or failure in second language acquisition.

## Motivation

Motivation is one of the most important factors in second language acquisition. Richards (1985, p. 185) believes motivation as a factor that determines a person's desire to do something. It is obvious that learners who want to learn are likely to achieve more than those who do not. The role of attitudes and motivation in SLA has been investigated by Gardner and Lambert (1972), who define *motivation* in terms of ' the learner's overall goal or orientation', and *attitude* as 'the persistence shown by the learner in striving for a goal' (Ellis 1985, p. 117; Patsy Lightbown at.al, 2000, p. 56). They distinguish two types of motivation:

a) *Integrative motivation*: a learner studies a language because he is interested in the people and culture of the target language or in order to communicate with people of another culture who speak it.

b) *Instrumental motivation*: a learner's goals for learning the second language are functional and useful, for example they need the language to get a better job, to pass tests, to enable him to read foreign news paper, etc.

It has been stated that learners can be influenced by both types of motivation. However, there are situations when one can be more effective than the other. Integrative motivation plays a major role where L2 is learned as a 'foreign language', while an instrumental motivation is more important where L2 functions as a 'second language'. Gardner (1979) links an integrative motivation to 'additive bilingualism' which means that learners add a second language to their skills with no harm to their mother tongue. Instrumental motivation is more likely to be linked to 'subtractive bilingualism', where the learners tend to replace the mother tongue by the target language (Ellis, 1985).

Motivation can be also distinguished into intrinsic and extrinsic. "Intrinsically motivated activities are ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself. Intrinsically motivated behaviors are aimed at bringing about certain internally rewarding consequences, namely, feelings of competence and self-determination" (Edward Deci, 1975, as cited in Brown, 1994, p. 155). Extrinsically motivated behaviors expect a reward, for example money, a praise or positive feedback. Maslow

(1970) and other researchers claim that intrinsic motivation leads to greater success in learning a foreign language, especially in a long run (Brown 1994).

## Attitude

Ellis (1985, p. 292) clarifies that attitude is sets of beliefs about factors as the target language culture, their own culture and, in case of classroom learning, of their teachers, and the learning task they are given. Language attitudes are the attitude which speakers of different languages have toward other's languages or to their own language. Expression of positive or negative feelings toward a language may reflect impression of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degrees of important, social status, etc (Richards, 1985, p. 155). Gardner and Lambert have investigated a number of different attitudes, which were classified by Stern (1983, p. 376-7) into three types:

1) attitudes towards the community and people who speak L2,

2) attitudes towards learning and language concerned,

3) attitudes towards languages and language learning in general.

Certain personality characteristics and general interest in foreign languages of learners can influence them in a positive or negative way. It is also important how they feel about learning a particular language in a particular course and from a particular teacher. It is obvious that learners who have positive attitudes learn more, but also learners who learn well acquire positive attitudes.

## Age

Age is one of the factors that influence second language learning. It is generally believed that children are better at language acquisition t than adults. However, only the studies conducted in naturalistic learning settings provide the evidence that supports this assumption. *Critical period hypothesis* by Lenneberg proposes that in child development there is a period during which language can be acquired more easily than that at any other time. According to him the critical period lasts until puberty and is due to biological development. He adds that language learning may be more difficult after puberty because the brain lacks the ability and adaptation (Richards:

1985, p. 68). Other researchers have also proved that learners who start learning a foreign language as children achieve a more native-like accent than those who start as adolescents or adults (Oyama, 1976; Asher and Garcia, 1969) and they are also better in the acquisition of grammar (Patkowski, 1980, p. 1990).

On the other hand, the research carried out in formal learning environments give the opposite results. In the case of classroom learning adults appear to be better both in syntax and morphology, while adolescents are the best (Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978; Fathman, 1975) and they also progress faster. The studies concerning the age factor were summarized by Ellis (1985, p. 107, Patsy Lightbown: 2000, p. 60) who states that the route of SLA is not influenced by the starting age, but there is a relationship between the rate of learning and the age of the learners. Adolescents learn faster than adults and children as far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned. Although young learners do not learn as fast as older ones, they are prompt to gain a higher overall success because of a longer exposure to the language. He also provides some explanations of the research results. The studies do not support the critical period hypothesis, which states that children can acquire a language naturally and with no effort to some age. The starting age is important only as far as pronunciation is concerned, which is inline with Selinger's (1978) claim that there is a possibility of multiple critical periods.

Cognitive explanations draw attention to the differences between children and adults in the relation to their abilities to learn a language. Older learners are able to apply linguistic rules when they use the language. For children language is a tool for expressing meaning and they can not respond to it as a form. The explanation can also lie in affective states of the learners. Although adults learn faster, children are more motivated because they want to be accepted by peers. The aim of the studies investigating the age factor was to establish the optimal age of learning a foreign language. It has to be noticed that each age brings some advantages and disadvantages to the learning process and the decision when to start learning a foreign language depends on the situation of the individual learner. Students are taught in all age groups and teachers' task is to use appropriate methods to suit the demands of a given age group (Patsy Lightbown, 2000, pp. 64-7). In conclusion,

younger age is better at language acquisition, but adults are better at learning language rules and systems.

## Intelligence

Ellis (1985, p. 293) says that intelligence is general ability to master academic skills. Intelligence is defined and measured in terms of linguistic and logical-mathematical abilities. Success in life and learning should correlate with high IQ (intelligence quotient) tests scores. The studies on intelligence show a strong relationship between intelligence and acquisition of a foreign language but only as far as academic skills are concerned. Learners with high IQ achieve better results on language tests. It is proved that intelligence can predict the rate and success of SLA in the formal language classroom (Genesee, 1976). "The ability to perform well in standard intelligence tests correlates highly with school related second language learning, but is unrelated to the learning of a second language for informal and social functions" (Spolsky, 1989, p. 103). It is assumed that some people are gifted and they learn foreign languages with ease. It was observed that learners acquire a language with different results despite the fact that they are at the same age and are equally motivated.

Gardner (1983) introduced a theory of Multiple Intelligences. He described eight types of intelligence:

1.  linguistic (sensitivity to spoken and written language, the capacity to use the language to accomplish certain goals);
2.  logical-mathematical (ability to detect patterns, reason deductively and think logically);
3.  spatial (ability to recognize and use the patterns of wide space and more confined areas);
4.  musical (capacity to recognize and create musical pitches and rhythmic patterns);
5.  bodily-kinesthetic (ability to use mental abilities to coordinate bodily movements);

6. interpersonal (capacity to understand intentions, motivations and desires of other people);

7. intrapersonal (ability to understand oneself, to develop a sense of self-identity)

8. naturalistic (ability to understand the natural world).

He states that every person possesses the eight intelligences, which evolve independently at different times and to different degrees. Learners should be encouraged to develop all types of intelligences because they are closely bound and the growth of one area increases the capacity of the whole. Teachers should use a variety of techniques and materials in order to enable students to learn using their strengths and achieve better results. He claims that people are intelligent in different ways and they also learn in different ways.

## Aptitude

Aptitude refers to specific ability a learner has for learning a second language (Ellis, 1986, p. 293). Richards (1985, p. 154) explains that aptitude is natural ability to learn a language. Further he adds that language aptitude is thought to be a combination of various abilities, such as the ability to identify sound pattern in a new language, the ability to recognize the different of grammatical functions of words in sentences, etc. Students need aptitude - some specific abilities, which are responsible for learning languages.

The first tests that measured aptitude are Carroll and Sapon's Modern Language Aptitude Test (1959) and Pimsleur's Language Aptitude Battery (1966). Carroll describes aptitude as a stable factor, which can not be trained; it is separate from motivation, achievement and intelligence. It is an ability that allows to learn a L2 faster and with less effort. He identified four factors in language aptitude: phonemic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, inductive language learning ability and rote learning ability.

Later studies conducted by Skehan (1986) were concentrated on the underlying complexity of language aptitude and its relation to first language acquisition and second language learning. He has shown two predictors of the language aptitude:

'a general language processing capability' and an 'ability to use language in a decontextualized way.' Skehan's findings show that aptitude consists of abilities identified by earlier researchers and the ability to deal with context-free language, which is connected with learning academic skills and intelligence (Ellis, 1994). It is still not known whether intelligence is a part of attitude or they are separate notions.

Cummins (1983) distinguished language abilities into two: cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP) and basic impersonal communication skills (BICS). He suggested that CALP might be related to general intelligence while BICS to aptitude. 2 The studies, which were concerned with formal classroom learning and measured academic language proficiency, found aptitude as a predictor of second language achievement. The researchers agree that it is necessary to improve and develop new aptitude tests, which will measure not only cognitive abilities but also communicative competence. Some researchers do not believe that something like general intelligence can influence learning a foreign language. All children acquire their first language successfully. To sum up, a person with high language aptitude can learn more quickly and easily than that of low language aptitude.

## Learning styles

Learning style is also called cognitive style. It is the particular way in which a learner tries to learn something. In L2 or foreign language learning, different learner may prefer different solution to learning problems. Some learners may want explanations for grammatical rules (*audio learners*), some may feel writing down words and sentences help them to remember (*kinesthetic learners*). And others may find they remember things better if they are associated with picture (*visual learners*) (Richards: 1985, p. 45). Ellis (1986, p. 299) mentions that learning style or strategy accounts for how learners accumulate new L2 rules and how they automate existing ones.

Keefe (1979, as cited in Ellis 1994, p. 499) described learning styles as "the characteristic cognitive, affective, and physiological behaviors that serve relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment." Students' learning styles can be influenced by many factors among which are their genetic background, their culture and previous learning experience.

It is said that if teachers match their teaching methods to the students' learning styles, the students will be more successful and more interested in the language.

Another classification is left-/right-brain dominance, which is strongly related to field dependence/independence. Brown (1994) presents a table listing left and right-brain characteristics by Torrance (1980). Left-brain dominated students are intellectual, prefer established, certain information and rely on language in thinking and remembering while right-brain dominated students are intuitive, process information in a holistic way, rely on drawing and manipulating to help them think and learn.

Reid (1987) identified four learning modalities: visual (seeing), auditory (listening), kinesthetic (moving) or tactile (touching). Visual learners learn through seeing. They prefer to see a teacher during a lesson, learn by visuals: pictures, wall displays, diagrams, videos. They make notes during lectures and use lists to organize their thoughts. Auditory learners learn through listening. They prefer verbal instructions, like dialogues, discussions and plays, solve problems by talking about them, use rhythm and sound as memory aids. Kinesthetic learners learn through moving and doing. They learn best when they are active. It is difficult for them to sit still for long periods. Tactile learners learn through touching.  They use writing and drawing. They learn well in hands-on activities like projects and demonstrations.

Ellis (1985, p. 116) states that "the existing research does not conclusively show that it [cognitive style] is a major factor where success is concerned." It was observed that learners produce different kind of errors, depending on their cognitive style. It is complicated to measure because learning styles are influenced by other learner factors. Learning styles do not seem to predict the possible success in L2, but they show the most effective way to achieve the best results. If students are aware of their learning style, are highly motivated and have positive attitudes, they are likely to succeed in SLA.

## Personality

Personality has been described as a set of features that characterize an individual. It has been stated that this concept is difficult to define and measure because of its complicated nature. Studies which investigate personality traits are based on

the belief that learners bring to the classroom not only their cognitive abilities but also affective states which influence the way they acquire a language. Some of them have been found as benefits while the others as an obstacle in learning a second language. The most important personality factors are: introversion/extroversion, self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety and empathy (Ellis, 1986, pp. 119-121; Patsy Lightbown, 2000, p. 54).

## Self-esteem

People need some degree of self-esteem, self-confidence in order to succeed in any activity. Coopersmith (1967, as cited in Brown 1994, p. 137) provided the following definition of self-esteem: "By self-esteem, we refer to the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself; it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which an individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy." People develop their sense of self-esteem as a result of the information they receive about themselves from others. Wiliams and Burden (1997) present social comparison theory that claims that classroom interactions have a great influence on how learners perceive their abilities. Their sense of achievement is strongly affected by the information they get from the teacher and their peers in the classroom. Teachers should realize that they influence not only students' academic performance but also their emotional states. They should create such atmosphere in the classroom that will help to build students' confidence and lead them to4 success. The results of the research suggest that self-esteem is an important variable in SLA. Many studies show a positive relationship between high self-esteem and academic achievement (Brodkey & Shore, 1976; Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

## Inhibition and risk-taking

The concept of inhibition is closely related to the notion of self- esteem. All people protect their ego by building sets of defenses. The higher self-esteem the lower walls of inhibition and greater success in learning a foreign language. It has been suggested that inhibition influences language learning in a negative way because it discourages the risk-taking, which is an essential element in this process. It is

necessary to make mistakes if a person wants to learn a foreign language. This is mainly a problem of adults who are more self-conscious than children are. A child adopts a new language and accent more rapidly than an older person who is less open to the influences and changes.

## Anxiety

Anxiety is another important aspect of personality that affects learning a foreign language. Brown (1994, p. 141) describes anxiety as a state of mind connected with "feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt and worry." MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) distinguish anxiety into: trait anxiety, when some people have some general predisposition to be anxious and state anxiety, which can be experienced in a particular situation. They also identify three components of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation and test anxiety. Although anxiety is regarded as a negative factor which must be avoided, the concept of facilitative anxiety, "a little nervous tension in the process", is a positive factor. It must be remembered that "both too much and too little anxiety may hinder the process of successful second language learning" (Brown, 1994, p. 143). There has been some research that investigated the reasons of the state anxiety in the classroom. Bailey (1983) found that competitiveness among students, their relationship with a teacher and tests could increase anxiety.

## Empathy and extroversion

The other aspect of personality that has been studied is empathy – "the willingness and capacity to identify with others" (Stern, 1993, p. 381). It is perceived as an important factor in learning a foreign language but only as far as communication skills are concerned as it involves the participation in other people's feelings and ideas. Some studies tried to link empathy with the acquisition of the native-like pronunciation (Guiora, 1972; Guiora et al., 1972) but it is considered as "an essential factor in the overall ability to acquire a second language rather than simply in the ability to acquire an authentic pronunciation" (Schumann, 1975, p. 226).

Many researchers believe that personality has an important influence on success in language learning. Ellis (1985, p. 119) claims that the effects of person-

ality on SLA are difficult to investigate because these factors are not easy to define and measure as most of the tests used lack validity. Most of personality traits are not table and may change depending of a situation. The same student may behave differently in a similar setting only because of some external reasons like mood or tiredness.

Personality is said to influence only the acquisition of speaking skills and it cannot predict the overall success in learning a language. It is true that talkativeness and responsiveness help a lot to improve the acquisition of communicative competence but it does not mean at all that a shy person who prefers studying alone has no chance to master a language. Everything depends on how hard he works, how much time he spends studying a language and what motivates him to do it. It is important for a teacher to recognize students' personality in order to supply them with suitable instructions and create the accurate atmosphere for learning.

## CONCLUSION

Several factors described in this paper influence second language acquisition variedly. It has to be said that individual differences are important factors in SLA. Those factors: motivation, attitude, age, intelligence, aptitude, learning style, and personality   influence the way learners encounter language learning and may hinder or support them in their efforts to master L2. Moreover, these elements seem to be an essential part of the learning process, which can contribute to the success or failure of a second language learner.

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