LEARNER FACTORS INFLUENCING SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Second language (L2) learners are different. They learn with different speed and different results. There are many explanations for that issue. The general factors that influence second language learning are: age, aptitude and intelligence, cognitive style, attitudes, motivation and personality (Ellis 1985). The aim of this article is to present these factors and their contribution to success or failure in language learning.

1 Age

Age is one of the factors that influence second language learning. It is generally believed that children are better at languages than adults. However, only the studies conducted in naturalistic learning settings provide the evidence that supports this assumption. Researchers have 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; 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 summarised by Ellis (1985) 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. Selinger (1978) claims 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. Neufeld (1978) distinguishes two levels of language: 'primary' - vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar rules, and 'secondary' - ability to handle complex grammatical structures and different language styles. He states that all people have an inborn ability to acquire primary levels, but children are more likely to acquire secondary levels and be more successful in learning a foreign language. 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. The next part of this chapter deals with the issue of intelligence and aptitude that are believed to be inborn and essential for SLA.

2 Intelligence and aptitude

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 1989:103).

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. It is not just intelligence that can explain these differences. 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.

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. 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 recognise and use the patterns of wide space and more confined areas);
4. musical (capacity to recognise and create musical pitches and rhythmic patterns);
5. bodily-kinaesthetic (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. The next part of this chapter describes different learning styles which can not be mistaken with multiple intelligences because a learning style is the way we approach a learning task while intelligence is a capacity to deal with this task.

3 Learning styles

Keefe (1979, cited by Ellis 1994:499) described learning styles as "the characteristic cognitive, affective, and physiological behaviours 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. Researchers have developed many different types of the learning styles. Field dependence/independence is one of the most widely studied classifications. It was proved that people who are field independent prefer deductive way of introducing a language, and achieve high level of proficiency in the classroom (Neiman at al. 1978; Abraham 1985). The field dependent students do better in naturalistic language environment. Brown (1994) states that neither of styles decides about success or failure in the language learning. Both types of learners can achieve a lot but in the appropriate conditions of learning. He also suggests that field dependence/ independence does not have to be a stable factor and some people can change their style in different contexts and situations.

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), kinaesthetic (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 organise 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. Kinaesthetic 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.

The other learning styles are described by Willing (1987), who distinguished:

1. Concrete learning style - direct means of processing information; people-oriented; spontaneous; imaginative; emotional; dislikes routinized learning; prefers kinaesthetic modality.
2. Analytical learning style - focuses on specific problems and proceeds by means of hypothetical-deductive reasoning; object oriented; independent; dislikes failure; prefers logical, didactic presentation
3. Communicative learning style - fairy independent; highly adaptable and flexible; responsive to facts that do not fit; prefers social learning and a communicative approach; enjoys taking decisions.
4. Authority-oriented way of learning - reliant to other people; needs teacher's directions and explanations; likes a structured learning environment; intolerant to facts that do not fit; prefers a sequential progression; dislikes discovery learning (Ellis 1994:507).

Ellis (1985: 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 but these factors are discussed in the next part.

4 Motivation and attitudes

Motivation is one of the most important factors in second language acquisition. 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 1985:117). They distinguish two types of motivation:
 a) integrative - when learners study a language because they are interested in the people and culture of the target language;
 b) instrumental - when learners' goals for learning the second language are functional, for example they need the language to get a better job.

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 'substractive bilingualism', where the learners tend to replace the mother tongue by the target language (Ellis 1985).

Stern (1983) claims that the level and type of motivation is strongly influenced by the social context in which language learning takes place and the relationship between L1 and L2. For example, if the status of target language is higher than of L1 the learner can be integratively motivated and wish to assimilate with the people of the L2 speaking country. The learner can be also negatively motivated in the form of 'fear of assimilation' (Clement 1979; Taylor et al. 1977) and will learn only to satisfy instrumental needs.

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 behaviours are aimed at bringing about certain internally rewarding consequences, namely, feelings of competence and self-determination" (Edward Deci 1975:23, cited by Brown1994:155). Extrinsically motivated behaviours 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).

Gardner and Lambert have investigated a number of different attitudes, which were classified by Stern (1983: 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.

There is no doubt that motivation and attitude are very important issues as far as second language learning is concerned. But they themselves are not the key to success. They depend on success, are not stable and can change during studying the second language. Teachers should be aware of that and try to develop positive motivation in their students by making the classroom itself an environment in which they experience success. The next part of this chapter presents the role of personality, which appears to be a very important factor in SLA and is closely related to motivation.

5 Personality

Personality has been described as a set of features that characterise 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 a benefit 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.

5.1 Self-esteem

People need some degree of self-esteem, self-confidence in order to succeed in any activity. Coopersmith (1967:4-5, cited by Brown 1994:137) 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. Brown (1994:137) described three levels of self-esteem: global, situational and task self-esteem. He claims that situational self-esteem "might refer to SLA in general, and task self-esteem might appropriately refer to one's self-evaluation of a particular aspect of the process: speaking, writing, a particular class in a second language, or even a special kind of classroom exercise." 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 realise 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 to

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 and Shore 1976, Gardner and Lambert 1972).

5.2 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 defences. 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. People make hypotheses about the language and then test them out by trial and many errors. If learners do not want to speak until they are absolutely certain that they are correct they will never acquire communicative skills (Brown 1994). 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. The next thing that language learners have to face is the *loss of status*. They must accept the fact of being depended on others and sometimes be prepared to reveal their weaknesses or look foolish. "An individual who is detached, self-critical, and has a sense of humour can cope with this demand of language learning better than a rigid or status-conscious individual who lacks self-awareness or humour" (Stern 1983:382). It has been also suggested that *tolerance of ambiguity* is an advantageous feature as learning a second language is closely connected with baffling and confusing situations. "The learner who is capable of accepting with tolerance and patience the frustrations of ambiguity that second language learning inevitably involves is emotionally in a better position to cope with them in a problem-solving frame of mind than a student who feels frustrated or angry in ambiguous situations" (ibid.).

5.3 Anxiety

Anxiety is another important aspect of personality that affects learning a foreign language. Brown (1994:141) 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. Their studies show that "foreign language anxiety can be distinguished from other types of anxiety and that it can have a negative effect on the language learning process" (ibid.p.112, cited by Brown 1994).

It is important to differentiate between debilitative and facilitative 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 1994:143).

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. Skehan (1989) states that it is possible that anxiety can be a result of low achievement. Poor and average students are prompt to encounter failure because of debilitative anxiety more often than high-ability students are. It was also suggested that different kind of anxiety appears depending on the level of students. The more proficient learners are the more facilitating anxiety they experience (Scovel 1978).

5.4 Empathy and extroversion

The other aspect of personality that has been studied is empathy – "the willingness and capacity to identify with others" (Stern 1993:381). 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 1975:226).

People need some basic predisposition in order to acquire a foreign language effectively. Extroversion and introversion are personality characteristics that can influence language learning in a positive or negative way depending on the measured aspect. It is believed that extroverts, who are sociable and open to other people, are more successful in learning languages than introverts, because they have more contact with L2. On the other hand, well-organised and serious introverts are seen as better learners as far as the systematic study is concerned (Stern 1983). This assumption has been only partially confirmed by the research results (Naiman et al.1978; Swain and Burnaby 1976). But, to be friendly and approachable does help in the development of communicative skills and has been supported by a few studies (for example Pritchard 1952; Pimsleur et al. 1966). These personality traits will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Many researchers believe that personality has an important influence on success in language learning. Ellis (1985) claims that the effects of personality 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 stable 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 can not 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 recognise students' personality in order to supply them with suitable instructions and create the accurate atmosphere for learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has to be said that individual differences are important factors in SLA. They 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 learner. To be a good language learner does not mean to acquire languages easily and quickly but to have an ability to continue studying steadily and with determination in spite of difficulties, to overcome frustrations, to be ready to make many trials and errors before achieving success (Naiman et al. 1978).

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