Chapter 5: Individual learner differences and Second Language Acquisition
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Aspects of SLA influenced by individual learner factors

There are two basic possibilities regarding which aspect of SLA is affected by individual learner factors:

One is that differences in age, learning style, aptitude, motivation, and personality result in differences in her route along which learners pass in SLA.

The other is that these factors influence only the rate and ultimate success of SLA.

These are separate issues. To claim that individuals vary in the rate at which they learn or the level of competence they eventually attain is not controversial.

Indeed, it is part of most language learners' and teachers' experience. However, to claim that individual differences influence the sequence or order in which linguistic knowledge is acquired is far more controversial.

As Fillmore (1979) points out, on the one hand individual differences are seen as an all-important factor, while on the other they are treated as relatively insignificant. Research which has concentrated on accounting for differences in the proficiency levels of learners has tended to emphasize the importance of individual learner factors.

Identification and classification of learner factors

The identification and classification of the different individual factors has proved to be problematic. The main difficulty is that it is not possible to observe directly qualities such as aptitude, .motivation, or anxiety.

These are merely labels for clusters of behaviors and, not surprisingly, different researchers have used different sets of behavioral traits. As a result, these labels to describe it is not easy to compare and evaluate the results of their investigations.

Each factor is not a unitary construct but a complex of features which are manifest in a range of overlapping behaviors.

It is, therefore, not surprising to find that a host of terms have been employed to describe the phenomena Hawkey (1982) lists some of these:

1- 'affective,
2- cognitive,
3- and social factors' (Tucker et at 1976),
4- 'affective and ability factors' (Chastain 1975),
5- and 'attitudinal/motivational characteristics' (Gardner et aL 1979)

I propose to make an initial distinction between personal and general factors.

Personal factors are highly idiosyncratic features of each individual's approach to learning a L2. Some examples are provided by Schumann and Schumann (1977) in a report of their own language learning experiences. They include 'nesting patterns' (the need for a secure and orderly home base before learning can effectively begin), `transition anxiety' (the stress generated by moving to a foreign place), and the desire to maintain a personal language learning agenda. The Schumanns found that such factors strongly influenced their SLR.

The general factors are variables that are characteristic of all learners. They differ not in whether they are present in a particular individual's learning, but in the extent to which they are present, or the manner in which they are realized. General factors can be further divided into those that are modifiable (i.e. are likely to change during the course of SLA), such as motivation, and those that are unmodifiable (i.e. do not change in strength or nature as SLA takes place), such as aptitude.

Personal and general factors have social, cognitive, and affective aspects. Social aspects are external to the learner and concern the relationship between the learner and native speakers of the L2 and also between the learner and other speakers of his own language.

Cognitive and affective aspects are internal to the learner. Cognitive factors concern the nature of the problem-solving strategic used by the learner while affective factors concern the emotional responses aroused by the attempts to learn a L2.

Different personal and general factors involve all is thought of as three aspects in different degrees.

Aptitude, for instance, primarily cognitive in nature, but also involves affective and aspects is primarily affective, but also has social and cognitive sides. Age is a factor that may involve all three aspects fairly equally.

Personal factors

Personal factors such as those identified by Schumann and Schumann are difficult to observe by a third person.

This methodological problem has been solved in two ways.

First, through the use of diary studies. In these, individual learners keep daily records of their experiences in learning a L24 When the learning period is over, the author of the diary can prepare a report, trying to highlight the `significant trends'. Examples of published reports of diary studies are Schumann and Schumann (1977), F. Schumann (1980), and Bailey (1980 and 1983). (The last of these is a comprehensive review of a number of published and unpublished diary studies.)

The second solution to the methodological problem is to use questionnaires and interviews with individual learners (e.g. Pickett 1978; Nairnan et al. 1978).

There are difficulties in collecting information about individual responses to SLA in this way. One is that subjects tend to say what they think the researcher wants to hear, or indulge in self-flattery. Another is that such techniques can reveal only those factors of which the learner is conscious. Nevertheless both the diary studies and the questionnaire and interviews have provided insights into the personal nature of language learning, particularly classroom language learning. Personal factors are by definition heterogeneous.

However, they can be grouped together under three headings:

1**) Group dynamics**,

(2) Attitudes to the teacher and course materials, and

(3) Individual learning techniques. I shall consider each of these in turn.

Group dynamics

Group dynamics seem to be important in classroom SLA. Bailey (1983) records in some detail the anxiety and competitiveness experienced by a number of diarists. Some classroom learners. Make overt comparisons of themselves with other learners. In another kind of comparison, learners match how they think they are progressing against their expectations.

Often these comparisons result in emotive responses to the language-learning experience.

As a result of her analysis of competitiveness in different language learners, Bailey (1983) proposes a model of how the learner's self-image in comparisons with other L2 learners can either impair or enhance SLA.

Where the comparison results in an unsuccessful self-image, there may be debilitating or facilitating anxiety. In the case of the former, learners may reduce or abandon learning effort. In the case of the latter, learners increase their efforts in order to compare more favorably with other learners, and, as a result, learning is enhanced. Where the comparison results in a successful self-image, the learner experiences positive rewards and thus continues to display effort, so learning is also enhanced. Bailey's model provides an interesting generalization about how personal responses to the group situation can influence learning. It is summarized in Figure 5.1.

See the figure in page 102

Attitudes to the teacher and course materials

Students will inevitably have very different views about the kind of teacher they think is best for them.

Some prefer a teacher who, Srevick's (1980) term, creates 'space' for them to pursue their own learning paths.

Others prefer a teacher who structures the learning tasks much more tightly.

In general the diarists seem to prefer the former. Bailey (1980), for instance, states a definite preference for a democratic teaching style. She notes that student—student interaction in class rose sharply after a scene where the students had protested to the teacher about an unfair test.

John Schumann also expresses **a desire** for a personal learning agenda in language learning. He observes: discovered that I like to have my own agenda in second language learning . . . I like to do it my way. However, I found my agenda is often in conflict with my teacher's' (1978: 246).

Some learners wanted the teacher to act as 'informant', but others praised teachers who were logical, clear, and systematic (i.e. who imposed a structure on the learner).

The main generalization to emerge from Pickett's study is that learners need to feel sympathy for their teacher, and also want him or her to be predictable.

Learners also vary in their attitudes to teaching materials. In general, adult learners dislike having a course book imposed upon them in a rigid way.

Individual learning techniques

There is tremendous variety in the techniques employed by different learners. They will be dealt with in two groups: those involved in studying the L2, and those involved in obtaining L2 input.

Naiman et at (1978) and Pickett (1978) identify numerous study techniques. Here is a sample of those that learners reported they used to develop their vocabulary in the L2:

1 Preparing and memorizing vocabulary lists

Individual learners appear to have highly idiosyncratic ways of coping with this. For instance, one of Pickett's subjects kept a notebook in which he recorded first the English the foreign word in sh word, then P transcription, and finally the orthographic version of the foreign word.

He also reported having three vocabulary lists, which he kept going at the same time— one was arranged chronologically, the second alphabetically, and the third either grammatically or situationally.

2 Learning words in context

Some learners made no attempt to keep lists. They relied on picking out key vocabulary items from the contexts in which they were used.

3 Practicing vocabulary

Various techniques fall under this heading: deliberately putting words into different structures in order to drill oneself, reading to reinforce vocabulary, playing games such as trying to think of words with the same ending, and repeating words to oneself.

Techniques similar to these have been identified for other aspects of language learning such as grammar and pronunciation. Vocabulary is the area that learners seem most conscious of.

The second group of learning techniques concerns the ways in which the learner gets into contact with the L2.Learners often seek out situations in which they can communicate with native-speakers, or they make use of the radio or cinema to get maximum exposure to the L2. Some learners even arrange their holidays so they visit a country where the L2 is used.

General factors

The general factors which I shall consider are (1) age, (2) aptitude, -(3) cognitive style, (4) motivation, and (5) personality.

Age

Age is the variable that has been most frequently considered in discussions of individual differences in SLA. This is doubtlessly due in part to the ease with which it can be measured—unlike all the other general factors, it can be described reliably and precisely. Another reason, however, has been the need to submit to empirical investigation the commonly held belief that children are better language learners than adults. There are a number of comprehensive reviews of the SLA literature dealing with age and SLA.

There is a noticeable lack of agreement in the conclusions reached by these authors. This is a reflection of the complexity of the age issue. My main aim in this section is to highlight the key elements in this complex issue by first examining the effects of age and then looking at various explanations of these effects.

The effects of age

First, it is necessary to separate out the effects of age on the route of SLA from the effects of age on the rate or success of SLA. Most of the studies that have investigated the role of age have been concerned with the latter. That is, they have examined the extent of the correlation between measures of age or length of learning period and measures of proficiency achieved.

The available evidence suggests that age does not alter the route of acquisition. Bailey et al. (1974) investigated the order in which adults acquired the same set of grammatical morphemes studied by Dulay and Burt. They found an order similar to that found in the morpheme studies of children. Fathman (1975) found that the order of acquisition of twenty grammatical items remained constant in her sample of two hundred children aged from 6 to 15 years.

In both of these studies, however, the method used was to equate accuracy and acquisition orders, so there are methodological doubts about the validity of the results. Longitudinal studies also indicate that age does not produce a different order of development

The generalization, however, needs to be modified in two important ways.

First, as Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) have shown, the learners who progress most rapidly may be adolescents. In their study of Dutch L2 learners, they found that although the adults (15 years and older) outperformed the children (6 to 10 years), the teenagers (12 to 15 years) learnt more rapidly than both. It would appear that although age improves Language learning capacity, performance may peak in the teens, after which performance declines.

The second modification to the generalization concerns the aspect of language that is being investigated_ the study by Snow and Hoefnagel-Fiiihle is also relevant here. They found that age was a factor only when it came to morphology syntax.

Success in SLA also appears to be strongly related to the age when SLA is commenced. This is particularly the case where pronunciation is concerned, Oyama (1976), for instance, found that the age of arrival of sixty Italian male immigrants in the USA was a far more potent determinant of the levels of pronunciation they achieved than was length of stay.

In other words, as far as success in pronunciation is concerned, younger learners do better. In this respect, at least, popular opinion is substantiated. Oyama also investigated the effects of starting age on grammar, but the results were far less clear cut. These results may appear confusing and contradictory, but a fairly clear pattern emerges if route, rate, and success are treated as separate, if due account is taken of the differential effects of age on pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, and if starting age is not confounded with the number of years' exposure to the L2.

The pattern is:

1 Starting age does riot affect the route of SLA

Although there may be differences in the acquisitional order, these are not the result of age.

2 Starting age affects the rate of learning. Where grammar and vocabulary are concerned, adolescent learners do better than either children or adults, when the length of exposure is held constant. Where pronunciation is concerned, there is no appreciable difference.

3 Both number of years of exposure and starting age affect the level of success. The number of years' exposure contributes greatly to the overall communicative fluency of the learners, but starting age determines the levels of accuracy achieved, particularly in pronunciation.

Explaining the effects of age

The critical period hypothesis

The critical period hypothesis states that there is a period when language acquisition takes place naturally and effortlessly.

Penfield and Roberts (1959) argued that the optimum age for language acquisition falls within the first ten years of life. During this period the brain retains plasticity, but with the onset of puberty this plasticity begins to disappear.

They suggested that this was the result of the lateralization of the language function in the left hemisphere of the brain. That is, the neurological capacity for understanding

and producing language, which initially involves both hemispheres of the brain, is slowly concentrated in the left hemisphere for most people.

The increased difficulty which older learners supposedly experience was seen as a direct result of this neurological change. Some evidence to support the critical period hypothesis was supplied by Lenneberg (1967). Lenneberg found that injuries to the right hemisphere caused more language problems in children than in adults. He also found that in cases of children who underwent surgery of the left hemisphere, no speech disorders resulted, whereas with adults almost total language loss occurred. Furthermore, Lenneberg provided evidence to show that whereas children rapidly recovered total language control after such operations, adults did not do so, but instead continued to display permanent linguistic impairment. This suggested that the neurological basis of language in children and adults was different.

Cognitive explanations

One obvious difference between the young child and the adolescent or adult is the ability of the latter to comprehend language as a formal system.

Older learners can learn about language by consciously studying linguistic rules. They can also apply these rules when they use the language. In contrast, younger children, while not totally lacking in meta-awareness, are not so prone to respond to language as form.

For them language is a tool for expressing meaning.

As Halliday (1973) i pointed out, the young child responds not so much to what language is as to what it does. It is possible that age differences in SLA can be explained in terms of the different orientation to language of children and older learners.

Rosansky (1975) has argued that cognitive development accounts for the greater ease with which young children learn languages. She believes that 12 development can take place in two different ways, according to whether or not the learner is aware of what he is doing. The young child sees only similarities, tacks flexible thinking, and is self-centered.

These are the pre-requisites of automatic language acquisition, because associated with them is an absence of meta-awareness. The young child does not know that he is acquiring language. Furthermore, the young child has not developed social attitudes towards the use of one language as opposed to another.

For these reasons he is cognitively 'open' to another language. In contrast, the adult cannot learn a L2 automatically and naturally. The onset of abstract thinking that comes around the age of twelve with the final stage of cognitive development, as described by Pia (i.e. Formal Operations), means that the learner is predisposed to

recognize differences as well as similarities, to think flexibly, and to become increasingly de-centered.

Affective explanations

Another possibility that has been explored is that differences in the affective states of young and older learners account for age differences in SLA. Brown (1980b) proposes that SLA is related to stages of acculturation (i.e. the ability of the learner to relate and respond easily to the foreign language culture). Brown identifies four stages of acculturation:

(1) initial excitement and euphoria; (2) culture shock, leading to feelings of estrangement and hostility towards the target culture; (3) culture stress, involving a gradual and vacillating recovery; and (4) assimilation or adaptation to the new culture. <u>**Brown argues that**</u> stage (3) is the crucial phase. Young children are seen as socio-culturally resilient, because they are less culture-bound that adults.

<u>**Conclusion**</u>

Neufeld's theory, supplemented by cognitive factors, can accommodate all the known facts about age differences in SLA.

<u>**First**</u>, it explains why the route of acquisition is not influenced by age. If innate abilities i account for the acquisition of primary levels, no differences in route between children and adults will be observed. Adults, however, will acquire primary levels more rapidly because of their greater cognitive abilities. The exception to this will be pronunciation, because of the difficulty of consciously manipulating this aspect of language.

Children will prove the more successful learners, particularly when pronunciation is concerned, because they are strongly motivated to become part of the first language community and require a native-like accent to achieve this.

Intelligence and aptitude

Learning a L2 in a classroom involves two sets of intellectual abilities, it involves what might be called 'a general academic or reasoning ability' (Stern 1983: 368), often referred to as **intelligence**. This ability is involved in the learning of other school subjects as well as a U. The other kind of ability consists of specific cognitive qualities needed for SLA, often referred-to as aptitude.

<u>**Intelligence**</u>

Intelligence is the term used to refer to a hypothesized 'general factor' (often referred to as the `g' factor), which underlies our ability to master and use a whole range of academic skills.

As McDonough (1981: 126) emphasizes, it refers to 'capacity rather than contents of the mind'. That is, it is the underlying ability to learn, rather than the actual knowledge that is supposedly measured by intelligence tests. In practice, of course, it is extremely difficult to separate these. To what extent does the 'fie factor influence SLA? Oiler and Perkins (1978: 413) have argued that 'there exists a global language proficiency factor which accounts for the bulk of the reliable variance in a wide variety of language proficiency measures.

Cummins (1979) provides a way of reconciling Oiler's claims with the objection described above. He distinguishes two kinds of language ability.

(1) Cognitive/academic language ability (CALP): this is the dimension of language proficiency which is strongly related to overall cognitive and academic skills and can be equated with 01ler and Perkins's 'g' factor and general intelligence.

(2) Basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS): these are the skills required for oral fluency and also include sociolinguistic aspects of competence. They are `basic' in the sense that they are developed naturally.

Cummins argues that CALP and BICS are independent and that both sets of abilities are to be found in first and second language acquisition.

Different measures of language proficiency are likely to tap both abilities in varying proportions.

The distinction between CALF and B1CS explains a number of research findings in studies that have investigated the effects of intelligence. For example, Genesee (1976) found that intelligence was strongly related to the development of academic L2 French language skills (reading, grammar, and vocabulary), but was in the main unrelated to ratings of oral productive skills by native speakers.

Aptitude

Aptitude is not easy to define. It is usually defined in terms of the tests that have been used to measure it (Carroll and Sapon, s Modern Language Aptitude Test (1959) and Pimsleur's Language Aptitude Battery (1966)).

These tests do not measure exactly the same behaviors. Both tests, however, seek to measure the abilities of learners to discriminate the meaningful sounds of a language, to associate sounds with written symbols, and to identify the grammatical regularities of a language.

Carroll and Sapon (1959) identify three major components of aptitude:

(1) Phonetic coding ability, which consists of the ability to perceive and memorize new sounds;

(2) Grammatical sensitivity, -which is 'the individual's ability to demonstrate awareness of the syntactical patterning of sentences of a language' (ibid: 7); and

(3) Inductive ability, which consists of the ability to notice and identify similarities and differences in both grammatical form and meaning. In this view of aptitude, which is shared with Pimsleur's Language Aptitude Battery, the emphasis is on 'a composite of different characteristics' (Stern 1983: 369).

The effects of aptitude on language learning have been measured in terms of the proficiency levels achieved by different classroom learners.

The usual procedure is to obtain aptitude scores using one of the tests referred to above, and proficiency scores consisting of the results of a language test or teachers' grades.

Conclusion

This discussion of the role of intelligence and aptitude in SLA indicates that there are several problems in establishing whether any effects can be traced to their influence and, if so, what the effects are.

The main problem is one of definition. Is intelligence distinct from aptitude, or are they both aspects of a single general language faculty, as claimed. by Oiler?

If they are separate, what is each one composed of? Is it possible to identify the discrete components of each, or do they exist as composites? Cummins's distinction between cognitive/academic language proficiency and basic interpersonal and communicative skills may provide a starting point for answering these questions. The former may be related to general intelligence, as Cummins suggests, while the latter may correspond to aptitude.

If this is the case, however, new measures of aptitude need to be developed, as both the Modern Language Aptitude Test and the Language Aptitude Battery measure skills that appear to belong more to academic than to communicative proficiency.

Cognitive style

Cognitive style is a term used to refer to the manner in which people perceive, conceptualize, organize, and recall information. Each person is considered to have a more or less consistent mode of cognitive functioning. Various dimensions of cognitive style have been identified. These are usually presented as dichotomies. The

dichotomy which has received the greatest attention where SLA is concerned is that of field dependence independence.

The distinction is neutral as to which style is most facilitative of learning. It is assumed that whereas 'field independents' will perform some tasks more effectively than 'field dependents', the opposite will be true for other tasks. There are a number &hypotheses about the role of field dependence/ independence in SLA.

One of the most interesting is the suggestion that field dependence will prove most facilitative in naturalistic SLA, but field independence wilt lead to greater success in classroom learning.

The empirical research into the effects of cognitive style, however, has not addressed this hypothesis. The approach has been similar to that used to investigate aptitude. That is, measures of field dependence/in-dependence are obtained using a rest such as the Group Embedded Figures Test (Wirkin et al. 1971), which requires the subject to perceive a simple geometric figure within a larger more complex design.

These measures have then been correlated with various measures of proficiency (e.g. using imitation tasks, comprehension tests, or teacher grades).

Attitudes and motivation

The problems of defining attitudes and motivation are considerable. A common-sense view is that a person's behavior is governed by certain needs and interests which influence how he actually performs. However, these cannot be directly observed. They have to be inferred from what he actually does.
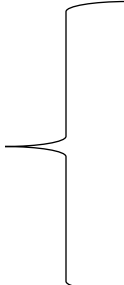
Not surprisingly, therefore, the study of attitudes and motivation in SLA has involved the development of concepts specific to language learning. The concepts have been derived from the behaviors of language learners and have been only loosely related to general theories of motivation in psychology, It is not always clear in SLA research what the distinction is between attitudes and motivation.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) define 'motivation' in terms of the L2 learner's overall goal or orientation, and 'attitude' as the persistence shown by the learner in striving for a goal.

They argue that there is no reason to expect a relationship However, Gardner (1979) suggests between the two; the type of motivation is distinct from the attitudes displayed to different learning tasks that attitudes are related to motivation by serving as supports of the learner's overall orientation.

Brown (1981) also distinguishes 'motivation' and 'attitudes'.

He identifies three types of motivation:

(1} **Global motivation**, which consists of a general orientation to the goal of learning a L2;

(2) **Situational motivation**, which varies according to the situation in which learning takes place (the motivation associated with classroom learning is distinct from the motivation involved to naturalistic learning);

(3) **Task motivation**, which is the motivation for performing particular learning tasks.

(1) Clearly corresponds to Gardner and Lambert's sense of 'motivation',

 (2) Is a new concept, and

(3) Seems to be the same as Gardner and Lambert's `attitudes'. Brown uses the term 'attitudes' to refer to the set of beliefs that the learner holds towards members of the target language group (e.g. whether they are seen as 'interesting' or 'boring', 'honest', or `dishonest', etc.) and also towards his own culture.

These also figure in Gardner and Lambert's later use of the term 'attitudes'. It is clear that there is no general agreement about what precisely 'motivation' or `attitudes' consist of, nor of the relationship between the two. This is entirely understandable given the abstractness of these concepts, but it makes it difficult to compare theoretical propositions.

Gardner and Lambert have also investigated a number of different attitudes which they consider relevant to L2 learning.

Stern (1983: 376-7) classifies these attitudes into three types:

(1) Attitudes towards the community and people who speak the L2 (i.e. 'group specific attitudes);

(2) Attitudes towards learning the language concerned; and

(3) Attitudes towards languages and language learning in general.

These attitudes are influenced by the kind of personality of the learner, for instance whether he is ethnocentric or authoritarian. They may also be influenced by the social milieu in which learning takes place. Different attitudes, for instance, may be found in monolingual and bilingual contexts.

The results of the empirical research based on Gardner and Lambert's theoretical framework are mixed and difficult to interpret.

The following is a summary of the major findings:

1 Motivation and attitudes are important factors, which help to determine the level of proficiency achieved by different learners. For example, Gardner (1980) reports that a single index of attitude/ motivation derived from various measures of affective responses to L2 learning is strongly related to measures of French proficiency in Canadian school leavers. Savignon (1976: 295) claims that 'attitude is the single most important factor in second language learning'.

2 The effects of motivation/ attitudes appear to be separate from the effects of aptitude. The most successful learners will be those who have both a talent and a high level of motivation for learning.

3 In certain situations an integrative motivation may be more powerful in facilitating successful L2 learning, but in other situations instrumental motivations may count far more.

4 The level and type of motivation is strongly influenced by the social context in which learning takes place, as has already been noted. There can be little doubt that motivation is a powerful factor in SLA. Its effects are to be seen on the rate and success of SLA, rather than on the mite of acquisition.

A rather similar view is taken by MacNamara (1973). He argues that 'the really important part of motivation lies in the act of communication itself' rather than in any general orientation as implied by the integrative/instrumental distinction.

It is the need to get meanings across and the pleasure experienced when this is achieved that motivates SLA, These are views which are encouraging to the language teacher. Motivation that is dependent on the learner's learning goal is far less amenable to influence by the teacher than motivation that derives from a sense of academic or communicative success. In the case of the latter, motivation can be developed by careful selection of learning tasks both to achieve the right level of complexity to create opportunities for success and to foster intrinsic interest,

Personality

In general psychology, personality has been explored in terms of a number of personal traits, which in aggregate are said to constitute the personality of an individual.

Eysenck (1964) identifies two general traits, again represented as dichotomies— extrovert/introvert and neurotic/stable. However, with one or two exceptions (e.g. Hawkey 1982), SLA researchers have preferred to develop their own battery of personality traits, calling them anything from 'social styles' (Fillmore 1979; Strong 1983) to 'egocentric factors' (Brown 1981).

Some researchers (e.g. Daley, Burt and Krashen 1982) even include cognitive style as a personality trait.

This confusion is the result of both the many-faceted nature of personality and the need that individual researchers have felt to investigate traits which intuitively strike them as important.

Extroversion /introversion

One of the intuitively appealing hypotheses that has been investigated is that extroverted learners learn more rapidly and are more successful than introverted learners.

It has been suggested that extroverted learners will find it easier to make contact with other users of the 11 and therefore will obtain more input. Krashen (1981a), for instance, argues that an outgoing personality may contribute to 'acquisition'. The classroom learner may also benefit from being extroverted by getting more practice in using the L2.

Social skills

Related to the extroversion/introversion distinction are the types of social skills involved in SLA. Fillmore (1979) in a longitudinal study of five Spanish-speaking children's acquisition of English argues that the social skills of the learner control the amount of exposure to the 12.

Those children who found it easy to interact with English-speaking children progressed more rapidly than those who did not. However, Strong (1983) disputes the emphasis Fillmore places on social skills. The thirteen children in his study learnt English at markedly different rates. After one year the differences were so great that whereas some children had become comfortable communicators, others had hardly acquired any English at all.

Inhibition

The other major aspect of personality that has been studied with regard to SLA is inhibition. It is hypothesized that the defensiveness associated with inhibition discourages the risk-taking which is necessary for rapid progress in a L2.

Krashen (1981a) suggests that the onset of Formal Operations has a profound effect on the affective state of the learner. It induces egocentrism, which in turn leads to increased self-consciousness and greater inhibition.

Thus adolescent learners tend to obtain less input and to make less effective use of the input they do obtain than younger learners.

Conclusion

In general the available research does not show a clearly defined effect of personality on SLA. One reason why this is so may be because personality becomes a major factor only in the acquisition of communicative competence.

Strong (1983) suggests that the rather confused picture presented by the research can be clarified if a distinction is made between those studies that measured 'natural communicative language' and those that measured 'linguistic task language'.

Personality variables can be seen to be consistently related to the former, but only erratically to the latter. Certainly a relationship between personality and communicative skills seems more intuitively feasible than one between personality and pure linguistic ability.

The 'good language learner'

There have been a number of attempts to specify the qualities of the 'good language learner', based on studies of personal and general learner factors (Rubin 1975; Naiman et AL 1978) shall draw on these in my own list of the characteristics of good language learning. The good language learner will:

1 be able to respond to the group dynamics of the learning situation so as not to develop negative anxiety and inhibitions;

2 seek out all opportunities to use the target language;

3 make maximum use of the opportunities afforded to practice Listening to and responding to speech in the L2 addressed to him and to others—this will involve attending to meaning rather than to form;

4 supplement the learning that derives from direct contact with speakers of the L2 with learning derived from the use of study techniques (such as making vocabulary lists)--this is likely to involve attention to form;

 5 be an adolescent or an adult rather than a young child, at least as far as the early stages of grammatical development are concerned;

6 possess sufficient analytic skills to perceive, categorize, and store the linguistic features of the L2, and also to monitor errors;

7 possess a strong reason for learning the L2 (which may reflect an integrative or an instrumental motivation) and also develop a strong `task motivation' (i.e. respond positively to the learning tasks chosen or provided);

8 be prepared to experiment by taking risks, even if this makes the learner appear foolish;

9 be capable of adapting to different learning conditions.

Summary and conclusion

The study of individual learner variables is not easy, and the results of research not entirely satisfactory. This is partly because of the vagueness of many of the concepts that have been investigated.

This is reflected in a common refrain in the research literature that the tests chosen to measure a particular concept may not have been valid. Another reason lies in the interrelatedness of the various factors.

It is difficult to distinguish variables relating to cognitive style and personality, or even to age and motivation. However, some of the problems are the result of the quantitative research methods used.

Notes

1 The Pearson Product Moment Correlation is a statistical procedure for establishing the degree of fit between two sets of measurements relating to two separate variables. It enables the researcher to establish whether increases or decreases in measurements of one variable are related to increases or decreases in measurements of the second variable.

The procedure indicates the relationship between the two variables, but it does not indicate whether the relationship is a causative one.

2 The effects of individual variables on the developmental sequence require further investigation, as (with the exception of the age variable) there has been little research. The robustness of the findings regarding the natural route, however, suggests that it is unlikely that individual factors will disturb it.

One aspect of L2 competence that individual factors are likely to contribute to is knowledge associated with a careful style. This knowledge, however, is not reflected in the natural route.

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