

## THE IMPACT OF INDIVIDUAL LEARNER DIFFERENCES ON SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Mavluda Yusupova  
Urgench State University

### ABSTRACT

The level of second language acquisition depends on many factors controlled by nature or shaped by nurture. The present paper studies the role of individual learner differences in second language acquisition (SLA). The individual differences, age, aptitude, motivation, cognitive style, learning strategies, and personality are defined and classified. A detailed review of the studies conducted in relation to the seven individual differences follows. The paper concludes by emphasizing that a language teacher must recognize the individual differences in his/ her students in order to impart effective language learning.

**Keywords:** second language acquisition, individual learner difference, personality, age, sex, aptitude, motivation, cognitive style, learning strategies.

### INTRODUCTION

Humans differ from each other due to many biological or conditioned factors (affected by nature) or unconscious forces (affected by past experiences). The many ways in which one learns about these differences are usually similar, through introspection and interaction with other people, or by reading books and watching television or cinema. However, in order to conduct research in individual differences, it is necessary to have rigorous instruments, and a scientific way of providing reliable and valid. The differences that one can explore are: age, gender, aptitude, motivation, learning style, learning strategies, personality.

The above mentioned differences are intricately interlocked with each other and in totality play important roles in language learning. Language teachers should be aware of their effects. In compared to the linguistics factors, these nonlinguistic factors are not given much importance in SLA research. Still many researchers over the years have made significant efforts at exploring the role of these factors. In a sequence, we will take a look at their role in second language learning.

Are children more successful second language learners than adults? Many would say yes, if we commonly observe the ease with which children, especially young children slip into the role of second language speakers. But Saville-Troike (2006) warns us against such easy assumptions and argues that that one must define the term „success“ (89). According to her, “Some define “success” as initial rate of learning while other studies define it as ultimate achievement. Also, some studies define “success” in terms of how close the learner’s pronunciation is to a native speaker’s, others in terms of how closely a learner approximates native grammaticality judgments and still others in terms of fluency or functional competence (89)”. She further warns that the evaluative criteria clearly must be kept clearly in mind while judging conflicting claims about success. It is believed that there is a critical period for first language acquisition.

Children are believed to have only a limited number of years during which normal acquisition is possible. Beyond that, physiological changes cause the brain to lose its plasticity, or capacity to assume the new functions that learning language demands. Individuals who for some reason are deprived of the linguistic input which is needed to trigger first language acquisition during the critical period will never learn any language normally. One famous case that provides rare evidence for this point is that of Genie, an abused girl who was kept isolated from all language input and interaction until she was thirteen years old. In spite of years of intensive efforts at remediation, Genie never developed linguistic knowledge and skills for her L1 (English) that were comparable to those of speakers who began acquisition in early childhood. For a long time, a debate on the existence or absence of a critical period of language learning has been going on in the field of SLA. A critical period means that beyond a particular age successful acquisition of a second language is not possible due to physiological changes in the brain (Kim et al., 1997). Moreover, as one gets older, one becomes more self-conscious which hinders him/her from making full use of his/her language skills, especially speaking skills. A more sophisticated version of the critical period hypothesis is the concept of „sensitive“ period for language learning by Slobin (1982). The sensitive period implies that there is a period in one's life (during childhood) when second language acquisition is optimized. Slobin (1982) argues that of the sensitive period of language learning is proven by the fact that the universal age of onset of production, rate of acquisition and age of completion of language learning is the same and it is relatively unaffected by the environmental variations and individual cognitive ability.

It is hypnotized that once this critical/ sensitive period is over, a child deprived of input and chances to communicate is never able to regain his/her ability to acquire language as happened in the case of „Genie“ who after her release from solitary captivation since early childhood was not able to learn even the basic language skills after she was rescued at the age of thirteen. So how much difference does age make? Long (1990) argues that for language learners of more than 15 years of age, it is difficult to acquire native like fluency and an absence of an „accent“. Saville-Troike (2006) agrees with Long (1990) that, “some older learners can achieve native-like proficiency, although they definitely constitute a minority of second language learners (89).”

The critical/ sensitive period hypothesis is yet to be tested at the scientific level and SLA theorists have a long way to before the find a clear and final answer to the fascinating question of why and how children seem to be better (second) language learners.

Motivation to learn a language is considered one of the most plausible reasons of success at second language acquisition. According to Gardner (1985) Motivation = effort + desire to achieve goal + attitudes. Saville-Troike (2006) claims that motivation is the second strongest predictor (after aptitude) of second language success. She further argues that motivation largely determines the level of effort that learners expend at various stages in their L2 development, often a key to ultimate level of proficiency.

According to Gardner and Lambert (1972) the following two types of motivation exist: i. Integrative: found in individuals who want are interested in the second language in order to integrate with and become a part of a target community/ culture; here the learner wants to resemble and behave like the target community. ii. Instrumental: found in individuals who

want to get learn a second language with the objective of getting benefits from the second language skill. Objectives, such as business advancement, increase in professional status, educational goals etc. motivate an individual to learn a second language in this case. Both the types of motivations have different roles to play. Both can lead to success. According to Saville-Troike (2006) the relative effect of one or the other is dependent on complex personal and social factors. L2 learning by a member of the dominant group in a society may benefit more from integrative motivation, and L2 learning by a subordinate group member may be more influenced by instrumental motivation.

Language learning styles refer to cognitive variations in learning a second language. It is about an individuals' preferred way of processing, that is, of perceiving, conceptualizing, organizing, and recalling information related to language learning. According to Cornett (1983) the language learning styles are the overall patterns that give general direction to learning behavior. Brown (2000) states that unlike factors of age, aptitude, and motivation, its role in explaining why some L2 learners are more successful than others has not been well established, it involves a complex (and as yet poorly understood) interaction with specific L2 social and learning contexts. The following cognitive styles have been identified by Knowles (1972 as cited in Lochart & Richards, 1994):

1. Concrete learning style. Learners with a concrete learning style use active and direct means of taking in and processing information. They are interested in information that has immediate value. They are curious, spontaneous, and willing to take risks. They like variety and a constant change of pace. They dislike routine learning and written work, and prefer verbal or visual experiences. They like to be entertained, and like to be physically involved in learning.
2. Analytical learning style. Learners with an analytical style are independent, like to solve problems, and enjoy tracking down ideas and developing principles on their own. Such learners prefer a logical, systematic presentation of new learning material with opportunities for learners to follow up on their own. Analytical learners are serious, push themselves hard, and are vulnerable to failure.
3. Communicative learning style. Learners with a communicative learning style prefer a social approach to learning. They need personal feedback and interaction, and learn well from discussion and group activities. They thrive in a democratically run class.
4. Authority-oriented learning style. Learners with an authority-oriented style are said to be responsible and dependable. They like and need structure and sequential progression. They relate well to a traditional classroom. They prefer the teacher as an authority figure. They like to have clear instructions and to know exactly what they are doing; they are not comfortable with consensus-building discussion.

## CONCLUSION

From the details in the sections given above, one can conclude that individual learner differences play a crucial role in the acquisition of second language. However, despite the efforts of many researchers at reaching a conclusive theory with regard to this, success has eluded them. At present, the scientific study of the role of these differences in second language learning may not be very sophisticated and advanced, but it can be hoped that the growing



awareness of the need to focus on the individual student and his individuality in a language learning situation will fuel the need to study the phenomenon in a detailed and empirical manner.

Moreover, the analysis of these differences reiterates the commonly held belief that a teacher, especially a language teacher, apart from imparting knowledge must also be a psychologist who can modify his/ her teaching methodology according to the factors related to the individual differences of his/ her students. It is not enough to just know that all students are different from each other. The teacher should also be skilled and willing enough to help the students use these differences to their advantage in the process of second language acquisition.

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