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Individual Learner Differences and Second Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

Students confront great pressure while learning English due to an intense competition. In spite of trying hard, some students face struggling to acquire it well in comparison to high achievers. Thus, it is important to identify the key features that have an influence on second language learning and provide students with adequate results in learning. In this article, I will explore students' individual learner differences in terms of motivation, strategies, personality along with aptitude and prove that they play a great role in second language acquisition.

KEYWORDS: individual learner differences, second language acquisition, second language learning, motivation, strategies, personality.

Introduction

Shahila Zafar , K. Menakshi (2012) states that “The reason probably is that people are not homogenous. They have different personalities and styles”. SLA researchers not always focus on these non-linguistic features in compared to linguistic ones. Fortunately, many investigators did studies on identifying their role in SLA. When differences in learner's language, cultural and social behaviors are taken into consideration, learning is most efficient. As a teacher I also have learners with different characteristics which means this case study is crucial matter for my teaching activity as well. Individual learner differences can be caused by biological and conditioned factors. The distinctions are intertwined with each other and perform a vital role in language learning.

Aptitude has been regarded as a major factor in the field of SLA. Researchers figured out that aptitude measures have significant relationship with L2 mastery. The children who are talented in special abilities can perform excellently and become leaders in their specific fields unlike ordinary ones. Aptitude can increase the rate and easiness of learning. Carroll (1963) was one of pioneers to develop the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) which was supposed to foretell success in foreign language learning. MLAT assesses four major factors such as: phonemic coding capability, grammatical sensitivity, inductive language learning capacity and rote learning.

Learners are distinguished into memory-based, analytic and even ones as every person has his/her own type of personality. Most researchers believe that personality has a great influence on language learning as it detects

what individuals feel comfortable with. It is more usual to think that a sociable individual acquires L2 much better in comparison to shy person. Personality characteristics vary as extroversion vs. introversion, self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking and anxiety.

Motivation is a factor that encourages learners to learn languages. It determines why individuals want to master second language. It is divided into integrative motivation that is learning the language so as to be a part of the culture of its people and instrumental motivation which means learning language for professional advancement.

There are also variables in learning strategies of learners involving cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and social and effective strategies. Teachers should be aware of their learners' suitable strategies for second language acquisition.

Literature review

The research on second language acquisition started in western countries between the years of 1960 and 1970. Slobin (1982) detected the components influencing learner's individual differences such as character, age, gender, former language learning cases, the L1 mastery, linguistics, motivation, intelligence, perceptive strategies, and methods. As for Skehan (1989), individual learner differences incorporate linguistics, language learning strategies, inspiration, anxiety, intelligence, character and cognitive styles. Later he did investigations on community-based and mental stimulus, intellectual style and brain hemispheric sidedness, learning strategies and gender. Ellis (1989) created a system of second language acquisition principles and introduced fundamentals of hypothetical model. He arranged individual differences in two classifications which are individual factors and common factors. This issue caused the concept of individual learner differences to be implemented deeply and broadly.

The sphere of motivation in second language acquisition was initially explored by Gardner (1995). Prior to he introduced motivation theory, it was basically accepted that the main thing to have for language learning was aptitude which is decisive factor impacting the learning process. In his further research he established the mode of social education considering social mindset and integrative motivation tenet. The foundation of the model encourages the development of second language acquisition study. Nonetheless, this principle was disputed and critiqued in the late 1980s. Gardner (1995) put forward expansion motivation principle considering his concept of social education model. As for Gardner (1995) motivation is a collection of efforts, aspiration to reach the goals and attitudes. Saville-Troike (2006) proposes that motivation is the second powerful factor to foretell second language achievement and a key to ultimate degree of language mastery. Simultaneously, Dornyei (2005) promotes the theory of foreign language learning which integrated language learning motivation and supporting for the motivation effectiveness study in school education. Dornyei (2005) advanced motivation principle to another culmination with a more effective education style.

Carroll (1963) states that language learning is an analytical procedure. Other research in manner and motivation was carried out by Gardner and Lambert (1971) in early 1970's. Afterwards, in late 1980's researchers incorporate the strategy of second language acquisition in the frame of perceptive theory and found out the effectiveness of learning strategies in language learning. O'Malley (1990) promotes three types of learning strategies. Ellis (1989) did a thorough research on categorizing learning strategies considering earliest theories. He put forward the contemporary grouping which breaks learning strategies into direct and indirect features in 1994. Oxford (2003) started the principle of self-control and the individual differences in research of SLA. Moreover, he notes that the preference of learning strategy depends on the type of learner's

motivation, perceptive style and personality as well. Strategies are the instruments for dynamic participation required for advancing communicative capability in L2.

Researches have proven that personality has an impact on second language acquisition. Social and personal characters are contradictory. In such situation individuals are inhibited and thus, their cognitive energy is not released which results in different types of anxiety. Anxiety may prevent learners who do not perform well enough in language learning from learning fluently (Skehan, 1989). Slobin (1982) declared that every individual is born being more or less extroverted. Extroverts take energy from outside things while introverts relate themselves to their inner ideas (Shahila Zafar, 2013). Skehan (1989) claims aptitude has a correlation with L2 achievement but there are not enough researches on it. Saville-Troike (2006) put forward hypothesis that there is a talent belonging language learning. Skehan (1989) provides us with further conclusions that aptitude in language learning does not totally differ from common cognitive capabilities, but it is almost the same thing. Krashen (1981) notes aptitude is crucial matter in formal situations such as classrooms. Aptitude tests are usually designed for classroom settings which mean there is an open question: if common knack for learning languages exists in street settings. Oxford (2003) suggests dividing attitude into distinct parts which means individuals perform better at certain aspects of learning than universal learning.

Learner`s profile

The first participant of my case study is a 17 year old male student who studies in my 11th grade class. His name is Victor (his name has been changed in order to keep his privacy).He is a multilingual speaker who speaks Uzbek as a native language , Russian in intermediate level and English in advanced level. He started learning English language from his childhood. He used to make use of Grammar Translation and Audio-lingual methods. He often tries to compare English sentence structure with Russian one which helps him to produce meaningful speech. He is interested in learning English language as he believes that knowing English language will open his way to the world. Watching English movies, Ted Talks along with listening to English podcasts help him to progress .He has already taken an IELTS score of 6.5.Yet he wants to develop his English language proficiency . He asked me for help. Thus, I am eager to find out his individual differences as an English learner to make language learning process effective for him.

The second learner that I have attracted to my case study is a female who is also in my 11th grade class. Her name is Janet (Her name has been changed).She can almost be considered as monolingual person as she speaks only in Uzbek which is her native language .Since her future major is IT, she strives to master English language. Sometimes her attempts fail which makes her sad. She has been learning English in the last few months. She has mostly used the direct method of language learning. English language has gained popularity as a prime language of World Wide Web and modern technologies. This is the reason why she learns it. Mostly, learning vocabulary items in the context facilitates her to get the gist of a text. She likes to hear English songs. However, she listens without full comprehension if she does not look at their scripts. She also asked me for help .I believe, I will be able to provide her with proper instructional materials and guidance after this case study.

Research design

In this study I have made an attempt to discover the subjects` individual learner differences considering motivation, aptitude, learning strategy together with aptitude and their correlation to their success in language learning.

Firstly, I would like to interview the participants so as to figure out what language learning strategies work to their benefit and apply in their learning process later on. Moreover, I will ask them how they describe their personality as a learner. Before asking them to tell about their personality, I will get them familiar with personality varieties.

Secondly, I am going to make use of Euro barometer (2006) which I got from Cook's (2016,p.137) article to find out their type of motivation and if it is suitable for their social group.

Then, I will give them MLAT which I composed to detect their aptitude categories which facilitates me to predict their success in their further learning.

After identifying all the learning differences of the learners, I will differentiate learning materials, conditions and methods for them to utilize within two weeks.

Finally, I will get their feedback about changes in their language learning. Those changes will be approval of the correlation between ILD and success in SLA.

Data collection

The process of my data collection launched with making questions for the interview with the subjects of my study. Questions were made taking into account types of learning strategies and also asked about their personality. The scripts of the interview are given in Appendix I. From Victor's answers it can be inferred that he can use mixed type of learning strategies. The first couple of the questions were based on cognitive learning strategies. He gave one positive and one negative answers. The next two questions involve metacognitive strategies and again the answers were half positive and half negative. The last pair of questions was about social and affective strategies. He responded positively to both of them which means this kind of strategies can be used widely in his learning process. His description about his own personality can give us a sense that he is an introvert learner, needs to develop self-confidence and feels a little anxiety in formal settings.

Next participant Janet is a very flexible learner. Because she gave positive answers to the majority of questions. Yet she is not comfortable with social and affective strategies due to her lack of language proficiency. According to her personality type she is an extrovert learner who likes to work in a team. She also feels anxious about speaking English.

The second instrument of the study is Euro barometer which evaluates motivation of the participants. Both of the subjects gave more "B" answers which means they have instrumental motivation that suits well to their social group. If they had integrative motivation it would be short term as it is specific to dominant group representatives.

The last tool of my investigation is MLAT. I made good use of it to detect participants' ability types. It consists of two parts: Part I questions are done with the help of memory and part II questions require analytical ability. In Part I Victor found five correct responses out of ten. He replied to nine questions correctly in part II. It can be concluded that Victor has high level of analytical ability.

Janet's results in part I are eight correct responds out of ten. She answered only four of questions correctly in part II. It means that Janet's memory and learning abilities are pretty high.

Based on the findings from my research I created a list of instructions that fit their individual learner differences for each one separately. The list is in appendix IV. They followed the instructions for two weeks.

Then I asked for their feedback about the changes in their progress in language learning. Both gave positive feedback about my instructions and their influence on their language skills performance. Their feedback can be found in appendix V.

Conclusion

After looking data from the research it can be inferred that individual learner differences have significant influence on second language acquisition. There are always some elements that can only be characteristic to the individual. The investigation of the differences proves that language instructors must be a psychologist who can adjust teaching methods considering the factors connected with the individual differences of his/her learners. A teacher must be capable of utilizing the differences to students` benefit in the procedure of second language acquisition. The teacher should also prevent psychological problems, concentrate on introverted type of students as they often have anxiety which is the reason of poor performance in study. Learner`s personality type has a considerable correlation with language learning. Introverts and extroverts should be assisted properly. Learners` ability should be directed correctly. Personally, I believe that the key approach to enhance the effectiveness of language learning is to generate individualized learning atmosphere, encourage students` interest and facilitate students to find a suitable way to learn.

Further implications

While looking through the sources related to the topic, I found out that individual learner differences need further studies as there are some controversial hypotheses of researchers. With the help of the sources from my SLA course, eric.edu.go and Google scholar articles I could carry out this case study. I got much more knowledge on the field of my study which outweighs the difficulties I confronted while fulfilling it. I think additional researches should be done to make clear some vague ideas on the topic.

Credits

At first I had no idea how to conduct and complete this case study .It seemed to me that it is beyond of my skills. However, with the proper guidance of my SLA instructor it changed into reality. He directed me to the right way when I asked for his help. Moreover, I must also highlight my peers support when we exchanged our ideas. I appreciate all people`s taking time to assist me with the study.

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