

Individual Differences in Language Learning

The field of second language learning and teaching has changed tremendously over the past few decades. A significant paradigm shift has taken place, resulting in less emphasis on teachers and teaching and greater stress on learners and learning. The study of individual learner differences, which started in the late 1970s, is one aspect of this shift of focus. Investigating individual learner factors that affect the success of second language acquisition became the centre of researchers' attention. Age, aptitude, motivation, personality, learning styles, and learning strategies are the main areas emphasized in SLA literature.

1. Age

It is generally believed that children are better learners of second languages than adults. This belief is reflected in the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) which claims that "there is a limited developmental period during which it is possible to acquire a language be it L1 or L2, to normal, native like levels. Once this window of opportunity is passed, however, the ability to learn language declines" (Birdsong, 1999, as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 405). In other words, the CPH, often attributed to Eric Lenneberg (1967), suggests that there is a period in human life (generally before puberty) after which language acquisition becomes difficult. Lenneberg, referring to Chomsky's Universal Hypothesis, claimed that the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), functions correctly before the brain loses its 'plasticity', that is, before brain lateralization (normally finished by puberty) is complete. This hypothesis, according to Lenneberg, applies to first language acquisition as well as second language acquisition. However, research did not fully support the view of a critical period for second language acquisition. Age related studies have found that different aspects of language are differently affected by the age of the learner. In this regard, three main questions have been raised by researchers: Does the age of

the learner affect the 'route' of acquisition? Does it affect the 'rate' of learning? And, does it affect the 'success' of SLA? Studies have shown that age does not affect the route of acquisition. Children, adolescents, and adults go through the same stages, that is, they follow the same order of development in the acquired structures. As for the rate of acquisition, it has been found that adults progress more rapidly than children, especially in the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary; but adolescents (12-15 years old) outperform the two groups. Regarding pronunciation, there were no significant differences in the acquisition rate among the different age groups. Concerning the success level (ultimate attainment) of SLA, research has found that it is affected by the starting age and the period of learning. The longer L2 learner is exposed to L2, the more native like level of mastery he achieves. Children were found to achieve a more native like mastery of language, particularly in pronunciation. Larsen-Freeman (1991) suggested four major explanations for age related differences in SLA (as cited in Trawinski, 2005, p. 34).

1- Social psychological explanation:

Adult second language learners are more inhibited than children because they are more aware of their social identity. Adult learners of L2, in contrast to young learners, often feel anxious and ashamed after experiences of frustration. As a result, they develop a sense of inadequacy. Moreover, they may hold negative attitudes toward native speakers of the language they are learning. These feelings and attitudes have a negative effect on their achievement in SLA.

2- Cognitive explanation:

It was mentioned earlier that adults learn faster than children, that is, their rate of acquisition is higher. The explanation for this is that adults depend on their fully developed cognitive abilities. These abilities give adults an advantage over

children in using metalinguistic knowledge, memory strategies, and problem solving skills.

3- Input explanation:

Young learners are believed to receive better and more natural input than adults because they are more willing to participate in interactions with other speakers of L2. This may be viewed as one aspect of the social psychological explanation.

4- Neurological explanation:

Child-adult differences in second language acquisition are the result of neurological (brain) development. This explanation was the basis for the Critical Period Hypothesis. It was believed that optimal and successful acquisition occurs before the completion of brain lateralization, that is, before the brain loses its plasticity. However, some researchers have claimed that the acquisition of different aspects of L2 depend on different age periods. It was suggested that 'lower order' processes (such as pronunciation) depend in their acquisition on early neurological development, whereas 'high order' processes (such as syntactic and semantic relations, and communicative functions) depend on later neurological development.