

FACTORS IN L2 LEARNING AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS IN ELT

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I. Introduction

Language learning has always become an important work-field both in schools and other private sectors dealing with language teaching and learning process. Second language (L2) learning is a process which is affected by many factors. It is accompanied by different kinds of factors including the learner's institutional and external environment. The level of intelligence, aptitude, learning styles, personality, motivation and attitudes, identity and ethnic group affiliation, learner beliefs, and age of the learners' can be expressed as the factors affecting L2 acquisition. This paper analyses these eight main factors and focuses on age of acquisition and motivation factors in the L2 learning process. Then, the implications will be drawn for the teaching of English in the Vietnamese context will be discussed.

II. Factors in L2 learning

1. Intelligence

Traditionally, intelligence refers to the mental abilities that are measured by an IQ test. It usually measures only two types of intelligence: verbal/linguistics and mathematic/logical intelligence. There are other types of intelligence such as spatial intelligence, bodily intelligence, kinesthetic intelligence, etc. Intelligence, especially measured by verbal IQ tests, may be a strong factor when it comes to learning that involves language analysis and rule learning. Genesee (1976, as quoted in Ellis, 1985:111) found that "intelligence was strongly related to the development of academic second language skills (reading, grammar, and vocabulary). Ekstrand (1977, according to Ellis, 1985) found high correlation while measuring proficiency on tests of reading comprehension, dictation and free writing. On the other hand, intelligence may play a less important role in language learning that focuses more on communication and interaction. It is important to keep in mind that "intelligence is complex and that a person has many kinds of abilities and strengths".

2. Aptitude

Aptitude refers to potential for achievement. An aptitude test is designed to make a prediction about an individual's future achievements. The relationship between aptitude and L2 learning success is a very important one and various studies, such as Gardner (1980) and Skehan (1989) have reported that aptitude is a major factor determining the level of success of L2 learning. Aptitude for language learning is usually composed of four different types of abilities: the ability to identify to memorize new sounds, the ability to understand the function of particular words in sentences, the ability to figure out grammatical rules from language samples, the ability to memorize new words, Earlier research revealed a substantial relationship between aptitude for language learning and performance in foreign language that was taught with grammar-translation or audio-lingual methods. However, aptitude seems irrelevant to L2 learning with the adoption of a more communicative approach to teaching (i.e., with a focus on meaning rather than on form). Successful language learners are not necessarily strong in all of the components of aptitude. For instance, some may have strong memories but only average abilities to figure out grammatical rules. Teacher can select appropriate teaching approaches and activities based on learners' aptitude profiles to accommodate their differences in aptitude.

3. Learning styles

The term "learning styles" has been used to describe an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills (Reid 1995). According to the way information enters brain, learning styles are classified to 3 kinds - auditory, kinaesthetic and visual learning styles. Those styles are called perceptually-based learning styles. According to whether the learners tend to separate details from general background or tend to see things more holistically, researchers focused on distinction between different

cognitive learning styles. Individuals have been described as field independent or field dependent. For a number of years, it was widely reported that there was a strong relation between how learning styles interact with success in language learning. However, we should encourage learners to use all means available to them. The challenge is to find instructional approaches that meet the needs of learners with a variety of aptitude and learning styles profiles.

4. Personality

There are various theories that claim that personality factors are important predictors of success in L2 learning. Personality traits such as extroversion, introversion, risk-taking, independence and empathy have been the basis of discussions and disputes relating to this topic (Ellis, 1986). According to Krashen (1981), introverts generally perform better academically whereas an extrovert appears more likely to take advantage of social opportunities for L2 input (Coleman & Klapper, 2005). Despite these theories, the available research does not demonstrate a clearly defined one on L2 learning. Rather, we all have different and unique personalities and each personality trait can affect our L2 learning in different ways (Ellis, 1986).

5. Identity and ethnic group affiliation

Elizabeth Gathbonton, Pavel Trofimovich, and Michael Magid (2005) found a complex relationship between feelings of ethnic affiliation and L2 learners' mastery of pronunciation. They found that learners who had achieved a high degree of accuracy in pronouncing the L2 were sometimes perceived as being less loyal to their ethnic group than those whose L2 speech retained a strong 'foreign accent'. Such perceptions can affect learners' desire to master the L2, especially in contexts where there are conflicts between groups or where power relationships imply a threat to one group's identity.

6. Learner beliefs

Virtually all learners, particularly older learners, have strong beliefs about how their language instruction should be delivered. Learner beliefs are usually based on previous learning experiences and the assumption that a particular type of instruction is better than others. Learner beliefs can be strong mediating factors in learners' experience in the classroom. Learners' preference for learning, whether due to their learning styles or to their beliefs about how languages are learned, will influence the kinds of strategies they choose to learn new material. Teachers can use this information to help learners expand their repertoire of learning strategies and thus develop greater flexibility in their L2 learning.

7. Age of acquisition and Critical Period Hypothesis

The results of research suggest that there is a critical period for foreign language acquisition. This is supported by proponents of Critical Period Hypothesis, which states that human beings are optimally suited to learn certain types of behaviour during a certain age span, and that after this period has passed, learning such behaviour is difficult or impossible (adapted from "Learner Characteristics: Factors Affecting the Success of L2 Acquisition"). Dekeyser (2000) observed that there was strong negative correlation between age of acquisition and score on the GJT. As far as critical period hypothesis goes, research has found that different critical periods may apply to different language skills (Birdsong, 1999). Some researchers suggest that the critical period in its original conception only concerns pronunciation and native-like accent and that other levels of the target language need not be involved (Bongaerts, 1999). Moreover (according to the same source), adult learners can even outperform younger learners in acquisition of L2 grammar.

8. Motivation and attitudes

Without any motivation or positive attitude, there can hardly be a successful process of learning. The question why people learn foreign languages can be put forward. According to Trigos-Gilbert (1999) most people nowadays feel the need to speak a new language for personal and professional aims.

According to Thanasoulas (2002:4) "ideally, all learners exhibit an inborn curiosity to explore the world, so they are likely to find the learning experience per se intrinsically pleasant. In reality, however, this "curiosity" is vitiated by such inexorable factors as compulsory school attendance, curriculum content, and grades – most importantly, the premium placed on them". Learner's motivation and needs have always had a central place in theories of foreign language acquisition. According to Ellis (1985:118), "motivation and attitudes are important factors, which help to determine the level of proficiency achieved by different learners." Savignon (1976:295, according to Ellis, 1985) even declares that "attitude is the most single important factor in second language learning."

III. The most important factors in L2 learning and implications in ELT

1. Age and critical period hypothesis

Among six factors above, age and motivation of the learner's can be expressed as the most important factors affecting second language acquisition. The competency of a learner's in his or her first language has a direct relationship with his or her age. Schooling and cognitive development are the other factors affecting the second language acquisition. In researches and studies made on second language acquisition, the learners who completed their first language acquisition have been found more successful in second language acquisition. Motivation is another factor affecting second language acquisition. Achieving motivation lets the learner a desire

to learn a language. Studies on motivation show that motivated learners are more successful in second language acquisition.

'Age' is one of the crucial issues in the field of child Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The theories on second language acquisition and research studies point out both the benefits and drawbacks of introducing a second language to young learners. The findings of research have a profound impact on language policy decisions of educationist involved in child language learning. The article provides an overview of some of the theories pertaining to the issue of age in child SLA. A learner's age is one of the important factors affecting the process of L2 acquisition. Collier (1988) expresses that successful language acquisition depends on the learner's age. In one of the earliest studies on L2 acquisition Lenneberg (1967), claims that there is a certain period in acquisition of a L2. In this period, which is identified critical period hypothesis (CPH) in language acquisition, Lenneberg theorizes that the acquisition of language is an innate process determined by biological factors which limit the critical period for acquisition of a language from roughly two years of age to puberty. Lenneberg believes that after lateralization, which is a process by which the two sides of the brain develop specialized functions, the brain loses plasticity and lateralization of the language function is normally completed by puberty, making post-adolescent language acquisition difficult. After Lenneberg, in some other studies examining subjects' pronunciation after over five years of exposure to the L2, it was found that the large majority of adults retain their accent when the L2 is acquired after puberty, whereas children initiating L2 acquisition before puberty have little or no foreign accent. In two different studies on assessing students' acquisition of pronunciation after three years of exposure to the L2, Fathman (1975) and Williams (1979), found that younger students had retained more accent-free pronunciation when compared to adolescents just past puberty. While critical period studies usually focused on child-adult differences and suggested that younger learners should be superior learners, studies of oral language skill acquisition by children of different ages have led to the conclusion that older children acquire faster than younger children (Collier, 1988). In a study made by Ervin-Tripp (1974), it was found that after nine months of instruction in French, 7-to-9-year-olds performed better than 4-to-6-year-olds did in comprehension, imitation, and conversation. Fathman (1975), found that in the first year of study, 11- to 15-year-olds were significantly better at acquiring English as a L2 than 6- to 10-year-olds in pronunciation, morphology, and syntax. As to academic purposes, students need to acquire as complete to a range of skills in the L2 as possible. In school language becomes abstract and focus of every content area task, with all meaning and all demonstration of knowledge expressed through oral and written forms of language as students move from one grade level to the next. Some researchers made comparisons on the performance of students of different ages on language tasks associated with school skills, including reading and writing. Some researches have been conducted by comparing the performance of students of different ages on language tasks associated with language skills, including reading and writing. In some of these studies, both short-term and long term, it was found that students between the ages of 8 and 12 are faster in early acquisition of L2 skills, and over several years' time they maintain this advantage over younger students at the age of 4 to 7 years (Collier, 1988). From these studies, it can be asserted that older students between the ages of 8 to 12 are faster, more efficient acquirers of school language than younger students between the ages of 4 to 7. In many of the studies, young children beginning the study of a L2 between the ages of 4 and 7 take much longer to master skills needed for academic purposes than older children do. The reason why students acquire the language skills better is that children who enter school at the age of 5 or 6 have not completed acquisition of their first language, which continues through at least age 12. From ages 6 to 12, children still are in the process of developing in first language the complex skills of reading and writing, besides, continuing acquisition of more complex rules of morphology and syntax, elaboration of speech acts, expansion of vocabulary, semantic development, and even some subtleties in phonological development (McLaughlin, 1984).

2. Motivation

Motivation is a kind of desire for learning. It is very difficult to teach a L2 in a learning environment if the learner does not have a desire to learn a language.

In the 1990s, researchers in the field of applied linguistics called for an expansion of the motivational construct in L2 learning (Skehan 1991; Oxford & Shearing, 1994; Dörnyei, 1994). Preliminary evidence has emerged in recent research, which not only demonstrates the relevance of the new motivational constructs (such as goal-setting, causal attributions and so on) in language learning, but also shows that incorporation of such new elements into the existing theoretical models is likely to result in more elaborate models of language learning motivation (Tremblay & Gardner 1995). Reece & Walker (1997), express that motivation is a key factor in the L2 learning process. They stress that a less able student who is highly motivated can achieve greater success than the more intelligent student who is not well motivated. Sometimes students may come highly motivated and the task of the teacher is to maintain motivation of the students. The task of the teacher is to maximize the motivation.

Shulman (1986) expresses that students' learning is facilitated most effectively when students are motivated, and that motivation can be enhanced through the creation of a positive affective climate. Crookes & Schmidt (1991), defines the motivation in terms of choice, engagement and persistence, as determined by interest, relevance, expectancy and outcome. Motivation depends on the social interaction between the teacher and the learner. To be

able to create an effective learning environment having highly motivated students necessitates strong interpersonal and social interaction. According to Cooper & McIntyre (1998), if it is accepted that learning is claimed to be dependent on certain types of interpersonal and social interaction, it follows that circumstances that make these forms of interaction desirable or at least congenial become a necessary prerequisite of effective.

The importance of the teacher-related factors in having a high level of motivation in L2 acquisition cannot be neglected. The success of a teacher in L2 acquisition in school affects directly the success of learners. Cooper & McIntyre (1998) underline the importance of the teacher factor in students' achievement. They add that the more successful the teacher is in focusing and facilitating effective pupil calibration, the more effective the teacher will be in facilitating effective pupil learning. The choice of teaching strategy on motivation is emphasized by Reece & Walker (1997). The choice of teaching strategy has an effect upon the motivation and interest of the student. The manner in which the teacher approaches the teaching strategy will have an effect upon motivation: an enthusiastic approach is more likely to motivate than a dull approach.

Attitudes can also play a significant role in the language-learning classroom. They have a close relationship with motivation. Krashen (1985) proposes that attitudes can act as barriers or bridges to learning a new language and are the essential environmental ingredient for language learning. Krashen (1985), states that learning can only happen if certain affective conditions, such as positive attitudes, self-confidence, low anxiety, exist and that when these conditions are present input can pass through the affective filter and be used by the learner. Davies (1996), states how students can learn a language effectively as follows:

"In learning how to use a language effectively, students must be actively engaged in using language. The teacher of English must create opportunities within the classroom situation, which enable students to think through language and to express their learning through the language modes of speaking, listening, reading and writing. A variety of strategies have been developed which encourage students as active meaning-makers, using language to go beyond the literal in investigating how language works and is used as a form of thinking and communication."

There have been several researches on learners' motivation in L2 learning. In a laboratory study performed by Gardner, Lalonde and Moorcroft (1985) a French/English paired associates learning paradigm was used, and it was demonstrated that learning was faster for subjects classified as having relatively high levels of integrative motivation than for those with low levels. Subsequent studies have employed the same paradigm but have administered all material by computer. In one such study, Gardner and MacIntyre (1991), investigated the effects of integrative and instrumental motivation on the learning of French/English vocabulary, and found that both interactively- and instrumentally-motivated subjects learned the vocabulary faster than subjects not so motivated.

IV. Pedagogical implications on the effects of age of acquisition and motivation factors in the L2 learning process to Vietnamese EFL Context

1. Vietnamese EFL classrooms context

Until the year 1986, English was established its first step on education system of Vietnam. Vietnamese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners mostly began learning English upon entering secondary education. They learned English 6 – 8 periods (3 - 4 hours) a week through formal classroom instruction for four years in secondary schools. At that time, most of the learners had very little consciousness about English. It just was a compulsory subject in school. The teachers almost graduated with the degree of teaching Russian major. Then, because Russian was lost its favorableness quickly the teachers here were trained contemporarily to be English teachers in order to meet the needs. English teachers in secondary and high schools were almost always the Vietnamese who studied English as Second Language. Classes were largely dependent on written textbooks and learners did not have a lot of chances to interact with teachers because of large class sizes. Most classroom activities consist of listening and repeating simple words and sentences based on textbooks. The instruction, in general, consisted of teachers' explanations about grammar, reading, and translations. In addition, most learners seldom had the opportunity to use English outside the classroom, because they never went to English speaking countries, nor did they talk with native speakers of English.

Given this situation, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education made a decision to include English in the elementary school curriculum since the year 1996. Due to this innovation, English has been taught in all of the elementary schools in Vietnam from 3th grade. Elementary school teachers who finish the short-period training programs for FLES (Foreign Language in Elementary School) or FLHS (Foreign Language in High School) are assigned to teach the students. After finishing two years of studying English in elementary schools, they keep on studying English for four years more in secondary schools. Most high school students continue to learn English at school because it is one of their compulsory subjects like Math and Literature. After that, a number of students who entered the university continue to learn English during the first two years in a regular curriculum. The process of teaching and learning English in classroom more focus on learners' communication and interaction with the teacher and their classmates. Most classroom activities almost aim at improving students' listening and speaking skills. The situation of instruction is almost the same as that of secondary schools because of the large class sizes.

Nowadays, student-centred learning approach is being applied in teaching and learning English process in almost schools and universities in Vietnam. This approach focuses on each student's interests, abilities, and learning styles, placing the teacher as a facilitator of learning and requires students to be active, responsible participants in their own learning. In short, this approach is highly appreciated to apply in Vietnamese EFL context because it raises Vietnamese students' interest and motivation toward learning English at very early age.

2. Pedagogical implications

The following suggestions can be made regarding pedagogical implications applicable to the Vietnamese EFL environment based on the research reviewed here.

Firstly, starting to teach and learn English at early stage can guarantee more success in the Vietnamese EFL situations. As mentioned before, by comparing the performance of students of different ages on language tasks associated with language skills it was found that students between the ages of 8 and 12 are faster in early acquisition of L2 skills, and over several years' time they maintain this advantage over younger students at the age of 4 to 7 years. Therefore, it is much easier to teach English to Vietnamese students from the 3th grade in elementary schools than elder students when they are in the process of completing their complex skills of reading and writing in the first language as well as being able to recognize some simple rules of morphology and syntax, elaboration of speech acts, expansion of vocabulary in English. Besides, insufficient preparations seem to cause a loss of motivation and interest in learning foreign languages for students at early age.

Secondly, late beginners (secondary school students) who have more cognitive abilities than children can be more efficient in learning English in a Vietnamese EFL context. Therefore, improvement of the educational environment such as reducing the sizes of classes as well as applying student – centered approach is needed more than the practice of English education in elementary school.

Third, the critical period hypothesis is too inconclusive to provide any implications for practical issues of foreign language teaching. Although it proves that the critical period exists at least in the area of phonology, the hypothesis does not have significant implications because the problem of phonology is not the most important matter in foreign language education.

Last but not least, it is very necessary to raise students' motivation and awareness toward English. If we can make our classrooms places where students enjoy coming because the content is interesting and relevant to their age and level of ability, where the learning goals are challenging yet manageable and clear, and where the atmosphere is supportive and non-threatening, we can make a positive contribution to students' motivation to learn. Furthermore, more research on the age factor's and motivation's effects in the L2 learning process to Vietnamese EFL context is needed because most previous research mainly deal with acquisition in naturalistic L2 contexts.

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