

Individual differences in second language learning

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Abstract: Primary objective from conducting this case study is to underline the role of non-linguistic factors such as age, sex, personality, learning styles and strategies in learning second language and take the advantage of differentiated instruction to assist them to fill the gaps they have. For example, as an introvert learner I have always wondered to know why I always struggle to prosper as a fluent speaker, while some other learners in the same class with me sound rather fluent are making less effort even though we are being taught by one teacher, studying similar books we are all in the same atmosphere. Through carrying out this research I would like to reveal what distinguish them from each other to succeed in any aspects of the language and as an upcoming teacher how can I help them to bridge the gaps to make some noticeable improvements.

I. Introduction

As one of the representatives of human being we are all more or less able to learn to speak our first language except from some people who are innately impaired in speaking. However, when it goes about learning L2, it has always been intriguing why individuals present numerous differences. According to Cook (2016) “some students will learn a second language effortlessly, whereas, others will struggle forever”. Considering the results of teachers’ observations in classes, some people prosper in learning L2 with several efficient attempts, but some still cannot despite of their intense intentions and hard labor. In the same classroom, in the same atmosphere, via same teacher, teaching methods and learning opportunities learners demonstrate substantial differences in their L2 proficiency. The reason probably is that, as ShahilaZafar(2012) stated “people are not homogenous.” They are different in their ages and gender, they demonstrate unique personality and competence to learn language, depending on the type of personality the level of motivation the person has, learning style and learning strategies that person applies are determined. Therefore, individual is distinguished from each other in the progress of learning L2 according to these non-linguistic factors which are called individual differences. According to Dörnyei, (2005) “individual differences are enduring personal characteristics that are assumed to apply to everybody and on which people differ by degree.”

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II. Literature Review

Individual differences are rather consistent psychological characteristics which assist to identify individuality of each person and differentiate one person from another (Jeanine M. Williamson, 2018). She claims that learners are totally dissimilar in their personalities,

motivations, and aptitude for language and these all considered as key determinants of their success or failure in acquisition any foreign language. Moreover, learner can vary based on what they prefer to learn and how much they are willing to learn this thing.

According to John P.De (2010)” the psychology of individual differences is largely the study of group differences. This study classifies individuals by age, traits, sex, race, social class and so on, and observes the differences within and between those groups. In second language learning both, linguistic and non-linguistic factors, are contributory to achievement of the learner.”

Age

Age, as one of the influential factors in second language learning, has been causing hot discussions among linguists. On the one hand, some of them promote the assumption of sensitive period for language acquisition according to which the earlier someone begins to learn language, the better improvement he/she will achieve because of the plasticity of the brain, while others claim that adults are not inferior in language acquisition because of maturation process. Long (1990) remarks on the challenges of learning second language at a native-like level after 15 years of age, due to the assumption of critical period hypothesis. Krashen et al. (1979) hold the view that “the older is faster, but the young is better”. In contrast, Coppieters (1987), Scovel (1988), Johnson and Newport (1989) concluded that acquiring or learning the language will appear easier for children depending on how younger they begin to learn it. However, in Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohles’ (1978) view “that most children were ultimately more successful than adults in SLA but they were not always faster. Adults appear to progress faster than children in the early stage of processing, while children surpass adults and adolescents in eventual attainment.”

Sex

Research studies on sex by Oxford (1993) and Young & Oxford (1997) have emphasized the influential significance of the gender for the language learning. Despite the fact that, the gender is a new variable in language learning, research studies on the correlation of sex and language learning have revealed that representatives of female gender are relatively highly motivated and demonstrate rather positive attitude to learn L2, as well as, they tend to apply wider range of strategies than the members of opposite gender (Bacon & Finneman, 1992; Oxford, 1993; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995). To the problem whether there is a difference between men and women, Larsen-Freeman & Long (2000) provides solution claiming that females are superior than males, at least, in acquiring first language. However, Zhuanglin (1989) underlines that according to general beliefs male and female present various linguistic innate competence, since females are first to acquire their L1 they are able to learn a foreign language faster and better than males.

Aptitude

Skehan, (1989) notes that success in foreign language acquisition is interchangeably correlated with natural ability, nevertheless, aptitude is one of the areas of SLA, which is still being investigated with a great interest. Saville-Troike (2006) holds a belief that there is a special talent which particularly relates to language learning. Skehan (1989) declares from his further conclusions that our second language learning abilities is not totally distinguished from our general cognitive abilities; however, these capacities are rather similar to each other. Furthermore, potential success of the learner can be envisaged relying on the language aptitude she/ he possess, but, explaining the reasons behind this success is beyond our abilities.

Motivation

According to Gardner (1985) motivation is one of the key providers of achievement in second language acquisition and he presents a formula of motivation that was generated by the mixture of strong effort, aspiration to reach a goal and feeling positive towards a goal. Saville-Troike (2006) claims that motivation takes second place after aptitude to largely speculate to what extent the learner can succeed in learning L2. Besides, she explains that “motivation predominantly determines the level of effort that learners expend at various stages in their L2 development, often a key to ultimate level of proficiency.”

Psychological research conducted by Rotter (1966) point out that “highly motivated students are successful learners; they possess high self-esteem.” Additionally, they believe that their success is not caused by the scripts of fate or other external factors, but they can control their outcomes being

responsible for the actions they are taking to acquire the language because of intrinsic motivation, positive attitude toward learning and a constant need for achievement. (Bandura, 1997; Cramer and Oshima, 1992; Deci and Ryan, 1985; Weiner, 1986; Wigfield et al., 1998).

Gardener and Lambert (1972) distinguish two types of motivation which are integrative and instrumental; the former is defined with internal interest in getting familiarized with the culture of targeted language, whereas, the latter refers to purposeful learning to take the advantage of the language specifically for career or educational development etc. Even so, according to Gardener “learners who are integratively motivated can succeed more in learning than those who are motivated instrumentally.”

Learning style

According to Cornett (1983) the language learning styles are primary indicators of the methods or ways an individual mostly employs to learn L2. Brown (2000) argues 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 interaction with specific L2 social and learning contexts.” The importance of being conscious of own learning style is emphasized by Oxford (2003), still, he advises not to stick to or being restricted to only one type since styles do not totally contrast each other, but intersect at some points.

Learning Strategies

Upon learning any foreign language learners attempt to make a full use of learning strategies to make the process more meaningful and comparatively efficient. Learning strategies are grouped to cognitive, metacognitive and social and affective strategies which are also subcategorized into components such as note-taking, self-management, self-talk etc. As Brown (2000) states learners tend to address a particular type of strategies under unconscious control of their motivation, personality, opportunities for learning target language and context they are in. According to O’Malley and Chamot (1990) “strategies are the tools for active, self-directed involvement needed for developing L2 communicative ability.”

Personality

Ehrman (1996) underlines the connection between second language learning and personality traits since for all ages people show tendency to choose the learning strategies what their personality find effective or comfortable. Consequently, individuals apply the most appropriate ways of acquiring language and those that work best for them to improve in language and master the skills. Thus, needless to say, our choices of strategies stems from the type of personality we own

III. Participant Profile

I made up my mind to select two of my students out of fifteen as participants of my Case Study project whose topic is called “Individual differences in second language acquisition.” In order to reach an objective result, my choice has been the members of both genders. A representative of female gender is 16-year-old Feruza Murodova, who is an applicant for one of the international universities in Uzbekistan. She has been learning the target language for two years. Currently, her proficiency level is early intermediate, which is considered normal for her age. Since she is innately talented in learning she does not encounter any problem to comprehend the rules of grammar and employing them feasibly in her writing. However, as she is an introvert girl, this hinders her ability to improve her speaking skill. Although she seems somehow diffident and simultaneously shy, she is self-disciplined, quick-witted and diligent student. Because she is always on time with her homework, as a teacher I have not felt any difficulties to share her knowledge.

As for the representative of male gender participant, his name is Shakhzod Narbayev. He is an almost a peer of Feruza, that is, he is 17 years old. In the hope of getting enrolled in one of the prestigious universities in Uzbekistan he has been learning English for one and half year. Since Shakhzod’s desired field of study is not English, but math he is not as talented in the language as Feruza. Nevertheless, he is extrovert, sociable and easily risk taker learner. Moreover, sometimes he does not complete his homework before the lesson and he straightforwardly improvises because of his high self-esteem. Shakhzod tends to ask for many examples for the rules and clear

explanation in order to get the main idea and therefore, he will never forget anymore what he has learnt once.

But, the unity for both of my students is the strong motivation and intense desire to master the language and pursue, at least, their MA degrees abroad

IV. Research Design

With the aim of reaching out valid results the research was carried out in several steps. Since availability of reliable results will serve for further improvements and implications for both learning and teaching process opting for appropriate methods are decisive factor for this research. As a matter of fact, a case study focuses on the special distinctions in individuals in language learning process depending on their age, gender, personality and so on, thus, I applied a number of reliable adopted and adapted tests to gain necessary data. Below are steps that were taken to complete the research:

1. Selecting participants for the research:

So that I can possess distinct information as a proof for my research results I preferred to choose one representative from each sex: one of them with high result introvert girl and the other one is with relatively low result extravert boy.

2. **Test for level:** initially, level test was given to a group of graduate school students to select participants of the research according to their overall scores that helped to find out about their average level in a target language. The test (Appendix A) is adopted from reliable website offered by British Council.

3. **Test for personality trait & Test for learning style** -- in order to be precise about personality trait a student demonstrates and learning styles he/she exploits, specially designed tests were provided to students (Appendix B and C)

4. **Pre interview** – so as to identify learning duration, applied strategies, preferable learning styles and aching points, struggles and advantages, as well as to generally evaluate speaking competence some questions were asked in interview part(Appendix D).

5. **Implementation of research**–level test, tests for analyzing personality and learning styles were given to the whole class that consists of 15 students in order to have wider selection scale. Indeed, the process was admittedly interesting for student as they were feeling themselves as a part of research, furthermore, tests were helpful for them to be aware whether they are extravert or introvert; auditory or kinesthetic learner. Only selected students were interviewed to keep the practicality of the task. Particular duration was allocated for each task during subsequent lessons.

6. **Post interview** – having worked with selected participants for a particular period of time the last step, post-interview was conducted to know about students' attitude, feelings toward the research; the extent that their awareness was risen about the reasons of their learning patterns; cases of their weaknesses and strengths (Appendix E).

V. Data collection and Findings

Results of Level test: In order to adhere to validity, practicality and reliability of the aforementioned tests they were given to students one by one during lessons. As mentioned above, level test and tests for personality and learning style were taken by a whole group. Out of fifteen learners I wanted to select the ones who scored highest among the circle of girls and boys. The test consisted of 25 grammar and vocabulary mixed questions that were counted to overall 100%. Feruza Murodova happened to score 74% responding to 19 questions correctly, while, Shakhzod Narbayev took the lead among boys scoring 64% via 16 correct answers out of 25 questions. According to results, both students possess intermediate level despite a slight difference in scores. Below the results of both candidates are provided:

Results of test for checking personality trait: the test provoked great interest in students since it was psychological at the same time and therefore, pretty fun for students. The test involved 10 questions overall, so did not take too much time because of its practicality. Besides, the questions were admittedly authentic to engage students in the process easily (Appendix B). Results present that female participant is introvert, while, male representative

demonstrate extrovert personality. All students were familiarized with the descriptions of personality types as soon as they got the results and they confirmed the match of results and their personality types.

Results of “What is your learning style?” test: Explanation of the purpose of such type of test could grab the attention of students, which caused a pleasant willingness of students to take the test. Results reveal that female participant is visual learner that was somehow predictable from her personality trait. Since male student is extravert his result is defining him as a tactile learner.

In pre and post interviews two participants were asked 5 open ended questions for each step to gain information about background experience in language learning and their attitude and to check newly gathered knowledge after research was conducted.

Final stage allowed us to work on gaps and restrictions put by personality types depending on the reliable data gathered with the help of interviews and tests. After analyzing level in the language personality type and learning style I allocated to work with them additionally after lessons. Mostly, I focused on fixing limitations of students through introducing them appropriate learning strategies, teaching how to overcome struggles and providing differentiated instruction. For instance, with Feruza we worked on her fluency through applying some methods. Thus, in the end she confirmed that now she is feeling more confident after several attempts made on fluency adhering to suggested strategies.

VI. Conclusion/ Further Implications

In conclusion, via conducting this research I happened to realize the reasons why learners achieve different level proficiency in spite of being educated by the same teacher through similar textbooks, during some period of time. Observations during research study enabled me to find answers to many questions that has always been making me interested. Initially, results of level test were attention-grabbing since they were referring to superiority of female gender in acquisition language. Because the highest score noted among girls was 74%, whereas this percentage was 64% among boys. When it goes about personality trait test, although female participant overtook male student in grammar test, she failed to sound fluent in pre-interview because of her introvert type of personality, yet, male candidate was rather fluent and feeling free upon making himself understood as he is an extrovert boy, despite of his inferior results in grammar. Moreover, their learning styles stemmed from the personality type they possess: extravert boy- tactile learner; introvert girl- visual learner. Since participants of the research are equal in their age, the research failed to clarify the difference between ages, which put some limitations for the research. To put it simple, I can conclude that both genders, both personality traits, all learning styles have their advantages and disadvantages. However, teachers should avoid any biases like supporting only one type and ignoring others. Instead, mentors are suggested to evaluate weaknesses and strengths objectively and make adequate effort to fill the gaps through appropriately chosen approaches, strategies and methods. For example, directing student to apply efficient learning strategy and providing differentiated instruction will aid to compensate the limitations of his/her personality trait.

VII. References:

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