Learner Variables Contributing to Differences in the Success Rate of Learning English as a Second Language

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Abstract: *English has become a global language and a language of science and technology. Without this language a person cannot survive in the world of trade and commerce. It has also become a medium of instruction in schools, colleges and universities all over the world. It has helped nations to come closer by narrowing down the wide gap through the use of English as a common language of communication and understanding. This importance of English has led Learners to master the language for various purposes. Learning English as a second language apart from one's own mother tongue is not an easy task. When time comes a child has to learn English as a second language at school or an adult at some learning centre to meet the demands of the work place.*

Keywords: English as a Second Language (ESL), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Second Language (L2), Mother Tongue (L1), Variables, Attainment, Syntax, Morphology, Pronunciation.

1. Introduction

ESL has become a medium of communication in most countries over the world. Countries like USA, UK, India, Nigeria, Singapore, Philippines have regarded English as second language officially as it fulfils many important functions including business of education and government. Second language is learnt in these and many other countries for the purpose of survival and participation in the political and economic life of the nation. Acquiring a SL is different from picking up a mother tongue that is learnt automatically by a child at a particular age in a natural setup without any instructional classrooms. SLA begins at a later stage than the first language. Everyone masters their mother tongue easily but gaining mastery in a second language is not the desired target. SL is learnt for various reasons and the success and failure rate depends on various characteristics of Learners that are often beyond control. Second language learners either gain the set target or experience utter failure in achieving the desired goal. The question of this differential success rate in SL learner is one of the major issues in SLA. This paper aims at looking into those internal variables in learners that help few to pick up English as a second language (ESL) easily, some struggle and few only meet with limited success.

2. Learner Variables

It is undeniable that important individual differences exist in SL learners. Learners acquire ESL at different levels of success rate. Some gain unbelievable proficiency and few still struggle with the various aspects of ESL. Personal characteristics contribute a lot in determining the differences in the success rate among the ESL learners. These personal factors mostly interact with one another exerting great impact on the learning process during SLA. Selinker opines that a theory cannot be acceptable if it does not provide a central place for individual differences among learners in SLA (Freeman and Long, 153-154). Linguists believe that individual differences on the factors of age, aptitude, social-psychological factors, personality, cognition and learning

strategies become transparent in the process of acquiring English as a SL for different reasons.

3. Age

A number of research has been conducted in the area to find out whether age affects the acquisition of a SL. There has been generated a good deal of controversy regarding the specific age when a learner should start learning a SL. According to the theory of Critical Period (Lennenberg 1967), complete mastery of a language is impossible. Acquiring English as a SL is not same as the acquisition of a learner's mother tongue (L1) which is learnt automatically through exposure in a natural environment without a classroom instruction. Critical Period Theory often extended to SLA, states that the early-to-mid (age 5-puberty) constitutes the time during which language develops readily and after which language acquisition is much more difficult and ultimately less successful. Lamendella (1977) pointed out that there is at least a sensitive period during which language acquisition is most efficient. Payne (1980) considers 6 or less as the appropriate age to acquire native – like accent in a SL, after 6 a learner will attain communicative fluency but not native accent. Though these results are found to be confusing and ambiguous, scholars do agree on the effect of age on SL learning. Few studies supporting the effect of age on SL learning are:

a. The successful rate in learning a SL is the same whether the learner begins as a child or an adult because adult pick up language faster.
b. Adults were not found to do better especially in phonology as compared to young learners.
c. On the ultimate levels of attainment, such as accent-free SL performance younger learners were at advantage and adults were good at vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation and intonation.
d. Some studies revealed that older is faster, but younger is better. In long- term studies, younger learners were found better in most crucial area, young child starters

were able to achieve accent-free, native-like performance in SL.

e. In short -term studies, older learners were at advantage in rate of acquisition as they could exploit their greater cognitive development. Adult proceed through early stages of syntactic and morphological development faster than children.

f. Older children are found to perform better than younger children on measures of listening comprehension, reading, free writing, pronunciation and speaking. Older children outperformed young children on syntax and morphology and younger group did better on pronunciation.

g. Older children are able to transfer the academic skills they acquired in L1 to the L2 and thus the process of SLA occurs at a faster rate than for younger children.

Though scholars agree on the effect of age on SL learning, few have suggested four major causes of these age related differences given as below:

a. Adults who identify themselves as firm native speakers feel more inhibited in acquiring SL as compared to children who love to socialise in the process of gaining success in SL. Adults may speak accented English to get identified with their mother tongue. Children also do not look at the target group negatively as their negative attitude is yet not formed. This attitude hinders SLA in adults (H. D. Brown 1987; Taylor 1974; Lambert 1967).

b. Cognitive development in adult learners is strong as compared to children. Adults utilise their abstract faculty of brain to solve problems in SLA whereas, children make use of the knowledge they acquire while learning their native language. This ability to think abstractly places adult second language learners into an advantage over children lacking this abstract thinking (Rosansky 1975; Felix 1981b; Krashen 1982b).

c. Younger learners are said to be receiving simple and clear second language input which allow them to learn syntax easily. They also enjoy opportunities for language play with their native peers, through which they get phonological practice (Hatch 1976; Snow 1983; Peck 1978).

d. Some scholars believe that with age there sets in loss of flexibility in the brain making it difficult to perform specific function in the process of SLA in adults as compared to young learners where the plasticity and flexibility of brain still exists. (Scovel 1981; Seliger 1978).

4. Aptitude

There is very large variation between learner learning a second language. They differ greatly in speed, manner in which they pick up the new language and means by which they learn an additional language. According to SLA researchers there is something in learners' cognitive abilities, their motivations and their personal predispositions that could help explain such a wide variation (Ortega, 2009).Linguists believe that an individual is born with a natural ability to a learn language as in case of acquiring mother tongue (L1). How far this is true in SLA is still confusing. According to Carroll (1981) an individual possesses some innate state of ability of learning a task

provided he is motivated and has the opportunity of doing so. To Lightbown and Spada (1999), one can hypothesize that a learner with high aptitude may learn with greater ease and speed, but that other learners may also be successful if they persevere. On one hand, Skehan (1982) believes that it is one's ability to learn language in a natural way that assess language processing ability and various aspects of language. While on other hand, Neufeld (1978) points out that one's ability in a second language is not innate, but rather is dependent upon prior learning experiences. Scholar like Carroll (1965) observes that high quality of instruction may help SL learners to achieve higher levels of success. The absence of high-quality instruction makes aptitude differences most apparent.

5. Social-Psychological

Motivation and Attitude are the two important socio-psychological factors that high lights the differential rate of success in learners of SL. Learners differ in their motivation towards learning a second language and they display many different attitudes towards learning a second language. Alpetkin (1981) believes that teachers should motivate and train learners to work hard in picking up the various aspects of English language. He identifies two types of motivation-integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation is based on the extent to which a learner is interested in the country or the culture represented by the target language group. To be interested in learning an L2 and to have the desire to learn or get associated with the people who use the language you are learning is an example of integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation is connected with a desire to learn a language to increase occupational or business opportunities and also acquire prestige and power. According to Alpetkin (1981) teachers should not encourage students to assume new identities through integration into the target culture in a second language context. He suggests teachers to follow ESP (English for Specific Purposes) approach in which language is taught for specific reasons either to prepare for higher studies at American University or for other utilitarian reasons that would motivate learners to achieve proficiency due to a set goal in front of them. Ellis (1997) claims that motivation is not something that a learner has, or does not have, but rather something that varies from one moment to the next, depending on the learning context and task. Lukmani (1972) investigated the relationship between the English proficiency of Marathi-speaking high school students in India and their motivational orientation. Lukmani determined that those students with need to learn English for utilitarian purposes outperformed those with integrative motivation on a test of English language proficiency. Clement and Kruidenier (1983) observes that the type of motivation is more likely to depend on who learns what in what environment. Someone studying a target language as foreign language would less likely aspire to integrate with the target-language community than someone who is studying a target language as a SL. Attitude towards a target language culture is also very important. Attitude of learner, teacher, peers, parents and the speakers of the language is important in a typical language learning situation. Spolsky (1969) and Hermann (1980) pointed out the fact that the lower-proficiency learners showed more prejudice towards the target language group than the higher- proficiency group who were less prejudiced. Hermann also rightly pointed out that the success achieved

by the learner may also influence his attitude from negative to positive. In other words student's attitude may change seeing the advantage brought by learning a new language and the attitude towards that language and the speakers of that language may change from negative to positive.

6. Personality

This is an internal factor of a learner that affects the success rate of SLA. Researchers like Madsen (1982) observed that students are of two types-introvert and extrovert in nature. He found introverts more occupied in themselves and showed no interest in interaction with others and surroundings. They are reserved and shy. Extroverts are those who love interacting and communicating with the outside world and are less occupied with own thoughts and emotions. They faced situations and showed courage in solving problems arising in front of them. Introverts are anxious and performed less in SLA as compared to students who were anxiety free and extrovert. Successful children were those who were talkative, outgoing and adaptable reported Metraux (1964). According to linguists, anxiety also plays a great role in either facilitating or debilitating language learning. Scovel (1978) comments facilitating anxiety motivates learners to fight the new learning task and debilitating anxiety in contrast, motivates the learner to run away from the new learning situation. For example a learner may interact with people and teacher in solving a problem without thinking that he may be laughed at for not knowing a thing and this in turn would facilitate a new learning in front of him. There are also those learners who might feel inhibited and scared to ask questions to teacher and others around him with a fear of being laughed at and hence drop down the idea of discussing problems and entering into shell. Rubin (1975) points at learners who are ever ready to take risks while learning a second language, ready to appear to be foolish in order to communicate, and willing to use what knowledge they do have of the TL in order to create novel utterances. Opposite to this there are those learners who are sensitive to rejection avoiding active participation in language class, fearing ridicule by their classmate or teacher. This lack of participation would then translate into less successful SLA.

7. Cognition

Cognitive psychologists viewed human beings as rational and believed that there are different mental activities that help learners to learn something new. A number of different cognitive styles have been identified in the psychological literature and few have been studied for their SLA implications. A learner is considered to learn a new language in the light of cognitive development. Hatch (1974) made a distinction between data-gatherers and those who are rule-formers. The former are fluent but inaccurate producers of the TL; the latter are much more halting in their use of TL but more accurate as well. Observing a similar distinction, Peters (1977) has demonstrated that children approach the SL learning task in different ways. Some children seem to take language word by word, analysing it into components; others approach language in a more holistic manner seeing language as a whole, which is not divisible into parts, such as grammatical structures or functional exponents, which can later become the content of a syllabus. A holistic approach

would focus on everything the learner needs to know to communicate effectively. In general, it seems that students with greater cognitive abilities will make faster progress. Some linguists believe that there is a specific, innate language learning ability that is stronger in some students than in others. Tumposky (1984) underscores the fact that cognitive style is a significant factor which must be considered in instruction. In order to be successful, materials and methodologies should be able to accommodate different dimensions of personality and cognitive style. If materials lack such flexibility, it may contribute to poor performance in a language learning process.

8. Learning Strategies

It refers to those conscious and unconscious activities which learners undertake to promote learning. Research efforts concentrating on the "good language learners" (Naiman et al. 1978, Rubin 1975) had identified strategies reported by students or observed in language learning situations that appear to contribute to learning. These efforts pointed out that students do apply some strategies while learning a second language and that these strategies can be described and classified. Rubin (1981) classified learning strategies into direct and indirect category depending on its influence on SLA. Strategies that directly affect learning include clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning and practice. Strategies indirectly affecting learning are creating practice opportunities and using communicative strategies. Rubin uses learning strategies to mean the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge. Good language learners according to her, are willing and accurate guessers who have a strong desire to communicate, and will attempt to do so even at the risk of appearing foolish. Apart from these learning strategies Wendon (1985) suggests that Learners must be independent and learn how to do for themselves what teachers typically do for them in the classroom. Some learning strategies followed by Learners are, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, note-taking, elaboration, inferencing, question for clarification etc. Employment of these strategies depends upon the level of TL proficiency, the learner's age, the task, individual style, the context and possible cultural differences. Furthermore these learning strategies keep changing over time according to Chesterfield and Barrows Chesterfield (1985).

9. Conclusion

Apart from learner variables there are also other factors such as memory, awareness and will, learning disability, interest, sex and command on mother tongue that influences SLA. Memory in a second language is considered to be more limited than in native language. Apart from memory, **awareness** and **will** to use this awareness is important in gaining proficiency in SL. F. Schumann (1980) maintains for success to occur, learners must persist despite of obstacles they may encounter during the learning process. Learners with **learning disability** like dyslexia or impaired hearing or vision would be adversely affected. Henning (1983) observes that successful SLA may be dependent on the **interests** that a language learner brings to the learning situation. In the area of **Sex**, no systematic investigation has been done. Farhady

(1982) observed that female outperformed male in English listening comprehension. Gass and Varonis (1986) studied conversational behaviour of male and female second language learners and found men dominated the conversation. Men have more benefit of receiving speaking practice in the outside world than female. Strevens (1978) suggests that the extent of **learners' command of their mother tongue** will also affect their progress in the SL.

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Author Profile

Fatima Sultan Shaikh received her B.A and M.A in English from University of Mumbai in 1998 and 2000 respectively. She has worked in India and in Middle East in various roles like Lecturer, Acting Principal, Head of the Department etc. She has more than a decade of rich teaching experience. Currently she is pursuing her Ph.D. from Barkatullah University.