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Factors Affecting Second Language Acquisition: A Discussion

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Abstract: The study of the processes through which learners acquire second language is called second language acquisition (SLA). SLA is an important branch of Education, as well as Applied Linguistics. Nowadays, people have to learn one or more second languages in addition to their mother tongue or first language. There are different approaches to learning a second language. Several factors play a role in second language learning. In order to make the SLA a success, it is critical to identify the negative factors that affect the SLA. For example, anxiety, lack of appropriate environment, etc. prevent SLA from being successful. Therefore, SLA can be successful if such negative factors can be eliminated. This research paper highlights the various factors that effect in second language acquisition such as Cognitive biological Factors, Affective and Personality Factors or Attitudinal factors, Time and Environmental Factors etc.

Key Words: Second language learning, language aptitude, Affective factors.

1. Introduction

Language acquisition is the lifelong and complex unconscious process by human beings. In the present era of globalization, people have to acquire one or more second languages, foreign languages as well as their mother tongue or first language. Any language acquired after a first language, typically in a community where that language is widely spoken or has official status is called second language. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is an intricate, multi-dimensional process. According to Troike "A second language is typically an official or societally dominant language needed for education, employment and other basic purposes. It is often acquired by minority group members or immigrants who speak another language natively, in this more restricted sense, the term is contrasted with other terms in this list. "(Troike,4)

Troike mentioned again,

“Second language acquisition refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to the learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language. The additional language is called a second language”. (Troike,2)

People acquire a first language, second language and foreign language if necessary. A second language is the language acquired by a person after the acquisition of the first language. A foreign language is a language spoken in a foreign country that people learn to meet a need or for any other reason. A foreign language can also be a second language depending on the place and circumstances. For example, English is a foreign language for Assamese speakers but it is currently functioning as a second language. SLA is one of the core areas of practice of Applied Linguistics. Many factors influence SLA. Some of these factors have a positive impact on language acquisition and others have a negative impact. SLA is an intricate psychological, cognitive, and sociological phenomenon. This paper systematically analyses the major factors affecting SLA, categorizing them into cognitive, affective, environmental categories and so on.

2. Cognitive biological Factors

Cognitive and neurobiological factors represent the internal, hardwired infrastructure that the learner brings to the SLA process. These variables dictate how linguistic information is perceived, processed, stored, and retrieved.

2.1 The Age Factor and the Critical Period Hypothesis

Children usually understand and speak their mother tongue between the ages of 1.5 and 2 years. Children's ears become accustomed to listening to their parents or other people in the environment in which they grow up. Gradually, the child is able to learn the language. Children usually learn a second language after acquiring their mother tongue or first language. This means that the learner is comparatively older when learning a second language. Second language learning is influenced by the pressure of acquiring the mother tongue left in the child's mind and the habits of vocal organs required to speak the mother tongue. Children do not judge everything when it comes to acquiring their mother tongue and speak what they have acquired or understood. However, children are relatively older in second language learning and different aspects of language learning can be explored. As a result, second language learning is slow.

Perhaps the most heavily debated topic in SLA is the effect of age on ultimate attainment. The Critical Period Hypothesis, originally proposed by Lenneberg in the context of L1 acquisition, was extended to SLA by researchers like Krashen, Scarcella, and Long. The hypothesis is frequently applied to learning a new language. Children exposed to a second language before puberty are more likely to master complex grammar and develop a native-like accent. The human life cycle progresses through childhood, puberty, and adulthood. High brain plasticity of childhood gradually decreases in adulthood. Natural acquisition of childhood also changes into analytical learning. Once this sensitive period concludes, the brain loses its neural plasticity, and language acquisition shifts from an implicit, natural process to an explicit, analytically driven cognitive task.

2.2 Language Aptitude

Language aptitude refers to an individual's specific natural talent or psychological capability for learning a second language. Unlike general intelligence (IQ), which correlates primarily with academic language skills like reading and grammatical analysis, language aptitude represents a distinct cluster of cognitive sub-abilities. Language aptitude makes mapping, decoding and retaining a new linguistic system easier or faster.

According to the classic framework established by John Carroll, language aptitude comprises four distinct pillars:

- 1) Phonemic Coding Ability: The capacity to identify distinct foreign sounds, code them mentally, and retain them over time.
- 2) Grammatical Sensitivity: the capacity to recognise the functions of words in sentences (a skill strictly related to the ability to assess whether or not words in different sentences perform the same function).
- 3) Inductive language learning ability, the capacity to deduce and extrapolate rules about a language from language samples.
- 4) Associative memory, the capacity to form associations in memory. He also suggested that aptitude has to be considered as a fairly stable construct and maintained a neutral position as to whether aptitude exists within an individual from birth or is the result of early experience.

Recent studies show that being good at learning a new language has a lot to do with a learner's working memory. Working memory is like a mental notepad where the brain briefly holds and plays around with words and sentences in real time.

People with larger working memory, can easily handle complicated sentences, spot the differences between how he or she speaks and how a native speaker speaks, and actually absorb what his or her hear and read instead of just letting it go in one ear and out the other.

3. Affective and Personality Factors or Attitudinal factors

Attitudinal factors that relate to second language acquisition will be those that perform one or both of two functions – encourage intake and socio-affective filter. They are simply factors that encourage acquirers to communicate with speakers of the target language, and thereby obtain the necessary input, or intake, for language acquisition. Affective Filter Hypothesis says emotions act like filter -high affective filter and low affective filter. (Krashen,21-22)

While cognitive mechanisms provide the baseline tools for processing language, affective variables serve as the emotional gatekeeper. Language learning is deeply tied to a learner's sense of self and social identity, making emotional states critical factors in success or failure.

3.1 Motivation: Integrative vs. Instrumental

Motivation is widely acknowledged as one of the strongest statistical predictors of success in SLA. It determines the amount of cognitive energy, time, and perseverance a learner invests in the process. Integrative motivation, defined as the desire to be like valued members of the community that speak the second language, is predicted to relate to proficiency in terms of the two functions. (Krashen,22)

Instrumental motivation, defined as the desire to achieve proficiency in a language for utilitarian, or practical reasons, may also relate to proficiency. Its presence will encourage performers to interact with L2 speakers in order to achieve certain ends. For the interactively motivated performer, interaction for its own sake will be valued. For the instrumentally motivated performer, interaction always has some practical purpose. (22)

While instrumental motivation is highly effective for achieving localized targets (such as passing a university entrance exam), integrative motivation is generally correlated with sustained, long-term mastery and the acquisition of native-like phonological and pragmatic nuances.

3.2 Anxiety

Anxiety acts as a significant emotional and cognitive barrier to second language learning and performance. Anxiety exerts a powerful influence on oral production and communicative confidence.

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), a specific psychological construct identified by Horwitz et al., manifests as a combination of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation by peers or teachers. This anxiety creates a cognitive bottleneck: the mental energy required to process and produce a new language is instead redirected to self-monitoring and managing stress, causing communication breakdowns. A strongly motivated person also has to face a mental block against learning foreign or second language. Second language researchers and theorists have long been aware that anxiety is often associated with language learning. Teachers and students generally feel strongly that anxiety is a major obstacle to be overcome in learning to speak another language, and several recent approaches to foreign language teaching, such as community language learning and suggestopedia, are explicitly directed at reducing learner anxiety. (Horwitz, 125)

Foreign language anxiety concerns performance evaluation within an academic and social context, it is useful to draw parallels between it and three related performance anxieties; 1) communication apprehension ;2) test anxiety and 3) fear of negative evaluation (127)

A supportive teacher who will acknowledge students' feelings of isolation and helplessness and offer concrete suggestions for attaining foreign language confidence. To improve foreign language teaching at all levels of education, the learners must recognize, cope with, and eventually overcome, debilitating foreign language anxiety as a factor shaping students' experiences in foreign language learning. (132)

3.3 Personality Traits:

Personality factors influence how a learner interacts with the target language community. There are two kinds of people depending on their nature: Extroversion and Introversion

The extroversion-introversion spectrum plays a clear, dual-faceted role in SLA outcomes:

Extroversion: Extroverted people don't hesitate to talk in public places. They don't worry about making mistakes in pronunciation, grammar, etc. They can speak clumsily with deep confidence. Therefore, people of such nature can acquire a second language in a short period of time. These learners generally seek out social interaction, exhibit a high willingness to communicate and are comfortable taking risks.

Introversion: Introverted learners, by contrast, tend to approach language learning through internal processing, conscious reflection, and structured observation. any of them have at least some commands of a second language. Regular practice of speaking a second language will enable them to speak the language well; But they cannot speak the language because of shame, fear, hesitation, lack of confidence.

4. Time and Environmental Factors

Time: Children have enough time to acquire their mother tongue or first language. This is because the child has no other work to do at that time and can spend more time acquiring the first language. On the other hand, children do not have the time available to acquire a second language. Therefore, parents have the opportunity to correct their children's mistakes. Children, on the other hand, usually do not have a conducive environment for learning a second language at home or in their surroundings. This language learning is limited to second language classes in schools. Other times outside of class, children speak their mother tongue with teachers or peers. The ability to speak a language depends mainly on practice. Children can learn language through repetition, mistakes, etc. Children are suitable for learning a second language

The environment is often not available. Therefore, there is no chance for anyone to correct his mistakes. Therefore, it is seen that most children remain immature in second language acquisition due to lack of sufficient time and favourable environment.

5. Teacher and teaching materials

In the case of a mother tongue, teachers and textbooks are needed only to teach reading and writing. It does not require special skills of the teacher. Here the textbook does not emphasize the judgment or sequencing of linguistic complexity except to present new content. In addition to being specially trained in second language teaching, teachers need to be extremely patient and enterprising. Teachers must be native speakers. His pronunciation should be clear; his voice should be fluent. He should not neglect to give exemplary lectures himself, to repeat them by word of mouth to the students, and to correct mistakes. He should be enthusiastic about listening carefully to students' reading and correcting mistakes, looking carefully at students' writing and correcting mistakes clearly. He must also know how to encourage the learner. A second language is taught through school discipline. Here children are 'action', not 'subject' The teacher or trainer is essentially the doer of this work. The second language is taught within a controlled environment, with certain rules and regulations. Second language teaching is done with specific methods for specific purposes. Second language education is only subjects like geography, history, sociology, etc. Language learning and language use are not the same thing for learning a second language; Education first, the use of language follows language learning. Second language learning is usually achieved through awareness and caution. Second language learning is governed by the interests of the learners, the subject matter and the quality of the teacher, the appropriateness of the teaching methodology, and the age of the learners. Second language education textbooks must be specially designed. Lessons should be arranged in a continuous order from easy to complex and from known to unknown. It should help the learners understand the previous lesson and the next lesson.

6. Try to speak accurately: Speaking or writing language correctly is a very important and auspicious aspect. Learners should learn and use their first language, second language, foreign language all correctly. After understanding the second language, the learner wants to speak it correctly. Many learners are hesitating to speak a second language because they fear that they will make mistakes in pronunciation, grammatical aspects, sentence structure, etc. However, he may make mistakes when using his mother tongue or first language. For example, an Assamese speaker usually makes mistakes in the use of inflection when speaking Assamese. For example,

“Ritu Bojar Gol .” The sentence is involucre; but some Assamese speakers speak the sentence with full confidence. The correct sentence would be “ Ritu Bojaroloi Gol.”

He is not afraid or ashamed to say it. However, many Assamese speakers are afraid of speaking English (SL) even if they have writing skill in English and want to speak accurately with full consciousness. In fact, learners master speaking a second language only after a few days of practice. Therefore, it is very important for learners to develop the habit of speaking a second language.

7. Conclusion

Ultimately, Second Language Acquisition is not merely a process of mechanical memorization or structural decoding; it is a deeply complex process. Looking at the factors that affect second language acquisition, some of them have a positive and some have a negative impact on the process. Depression, fear, lack of self-confidence, etc. have a negative impact on this. No single factor can fully predict ultimate attainment on its own. While a young age offers clear neurological advantages for native-like pronunciation and deep syntax, older learners can compensate effectively by deploying analytical aptitude, cognitive processing strategies, and structured learning habits. Internal affective factors like motivation and anxiety dictate how effectively a learner engages with input, while environmental interaction and acculturation determine the quality and depth of that input.

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