

# Research on learners' Individual Differences and the Second Language Acquisition

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**Abstract.** It is undeniable that research in the second language acquisition has constantly drawn attentions among both educators and academicians. This paper mainly focuses on the relationship between five factors, including the age, personality, language aptitude, motivation, affection in individual differences and the second language acquisition and concludes some of achievements, problems, and the further tendency in this searching area. Although we cannot deny the variety in the study methods which consequently produce different searching results, they all play parts of significance in the second language acquisition. Thereby this paper also discusses the framework of the studying in this area.

## 1. Introduction

The creation of a term, *Second Language Acquisition*, based on the normal regularity in second-language learning takes a meaningfully didactic impact on English teaching. In the context of globalisation, second language acquisition has become more and more important. However, ways leading to a satisfying result in bilingual learning are proved less harvest. In the area of Second Language Acquisition where factors taking effects, such as mother tongue, personal indifference, and learning environment, were and continue attracting attentions amongst academicians. Since 1950s, the function that individual differences play in language learning has aroused a wide attention among academicians whose further study has achieved remarkable success, including Skehan, Larsen-Freeman, and Ellis, making the study of individual learning one of the mainlines in the Second-Language Requisition. In spite of inevitably coming across difficulties in this searching area, such as the obscure category and structure as well as the indistinctively draconian discrimination of its terms, the progress is onwards deeply. This essay focuses on the study methods and there main elements in providing aids in second language learning.

## 2. Views of the Classification and Approaches in the Study of Individual Differences

There are several main views in the category of individual indifferences in second language acquisition.

Altaman believes that factors contributing to individual indifference focuses on the branches of age and gender, while, besides which Larsen-Freeman and Long add some other elements including social psychology with motivation and attitude.

In addition, Ellis divides individual difference into two genres: personal factors and common factors. Personal factors are highly individualized characteristics for an individual in learning a second language while common factors are the traits of all learner rather than merely an individual, which are concluded into adjustable factors like motivation and ungovernable factors such as language aptitude, both of which contain social(outside characteristics), cognitive, and emotional contents(inside characteristics).

Moreover, Skehan claims that language aptitude is of the most importance who mentions the two main approaches in the field of studying personal differences in terms of hierarchical approach and concatenative approach which are respectively based on theoretical and practical studying. With regard to the former, hierarchical approach is more likely to use a theory to presume that how individual learning could influence the language studying, which, however, Skehan pointed out less useful because of the immaturely theoretical development in Language Learning. On the contrary, concatenative approach is proved more practical. The procedure of its fulfilment is to design a study question (an independent variable) and select a means of measurement, which notwithstanding poses no effectiveness in directly gaining the cause and effect, but it fuels the theoretical progress. Thereby the reason why the latter approach is widely used.

Furthermore, Skehan advocates that the concatenative approach owns a large room to develop, especially with the combination of the naturalistic research which is able to fully explain the idiosyncrasy of each learner as well as the modulatory factors in individual difference and some other motivated characteristics in learning-experience interaction between second-language learners, such as the dynamic changes in the distinction of each learner in terms of the motivation and feeling of caution. Another advantage of the naturalistic search is its ways of measuring studies which are based on natural language instead of designed examinations.

### **3. Individual Differences**

#### **3.1 Age**

Age is of significance among all the factors, playing a key role in language learning with individual difference. Despite remaining disputable for academicians in terms of psychology, applied linguistics, and education for years, the results have been proved less harvest or even sometimes controversial. Current research of this area done by Jiang Jianyun and Dai Yuncai pointed out the relationship of age and language learning and how the former affects latter. It manifests that adults stand on a vantage point of fast-learning at the primary stage, especially in syntax, whom nonetheless, baby language learners destine to surpass. To be specific, only the younger-age-language learners are capable of managing a given accent providing there are considerable second-language opportunities. Meanwhile, though the key stage of learning grammar takes place earlier than learning accents, children are unexceptionally more likely to achieve a grammatical success of a given language. Biologically, language is a cerebral product, of which the development is strictly harnessed by a biological factor-during the period when the brain is elastic from the age of two to the puberty, language learning is easy to be fulfilled, after which literalisation inevitably involved in propels the cerebral development and language learning is proved harder.

#### **3.2 Personality**

The second major point accounts for the personality of a second-language learner, such as self-esteem, anxiety, depression, risk-taking, and extroversion-introversion. They pose a difference in learning speed and the level of second-language manipulation. Psychology parts the personality into an introvert personality and extrovert personality.

Apparently, extravert learners perform better in social skills like communication. Characteristics relevant to an outgoing personality, such as gregariousness, better reactions, and active participation in sports activities resulting in more interactions between a language learner and other individuals increase not only the linguistic input, but also the opportunities of learning language, both of which promote a language-learning process.

However, on the other hand, although extrovert learners are better at communication and reaction, they lack the attention of the linguistic expression while the introvert learners are good at manipulating their steady personality which is beneficial to the analysis of the limited input, and they focus on not only the linguistic expression, but also the linguistic rules. Research also proved that second-language learners with an introvert personality gain more knowledge, compared with their extrovert peers.

### **3.3 Language Aptitude**

The next factor makes contributions to learning a second language is the language aptitude, a special section in normal intelligence which remains relatively stable during the entire lifetime regardless of the practice and training. Harvard psychologist John Carroll (1973) defined it as the “rate at which persons at the secondary school, university and adult level learn to criterion”. Research carried out shows the inequity of the relevance between the language aptitude and other factors respectively in academic performance, such as IQ of a second language learning, which discriminates the language aptitude from individual intelligence quotient (IQ) and linguistic intelligence. In addition, beyond the language aptitude which remains an important status as a cognitive variable, emotional variables also take effects in language learning as a minor concern, such as tenacity and self-image. Wang Chuming, professor of the Centre for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, claims that so far among all elements facilitating the language learning, two of which are more vital that are emotions and mother tongues.

### **3.4 Motivation**

Motivation of learning plays an essential role in second-language learning, meanwhile as a factor of affective variable. The study of affective variable is originated from humanistic psychology, which owns a great number of factors, such as attitude, belief, emotion, self-efficacy, anxiety, etc. while the motivation of learning is paramount among all the factors.

There are three basic questions in the study of learning motivation. The origin and the number of motivation, where the study focuses on, and the impact of the motivation in second language learning as it is widely accepted that learning motivation fuels the progress in the second language acquisition. All of them are posed great importance in the Second Language Acquisition. During the teaching session of the Chinese in the United States, the first step is to continuously spark interests of students. Then, gaining some basic knowledge with interests would arouse their motivation so that finally, their learning would achieve a lasting effect.

### **3.5 Affection**

Affection refers to emotion, feeling, mood, and attitude during the learning process. Affection is a homo-cerebral function and a psychological situation, which reflects the psychological fluctuation and outside expression in the attitude of different objects. Expression of affection varies and the one which is closely related to studying and learning is their mental state and confidence. Mental state is a stable and lasting mood. Research shows that a well mental state makes individuals calm down, energetic, as well as produces tremendous encouragement to overcome difficulties.

Confidence is a precondition of realising self-values and achieving some targets, facilitating language input. Learners with strong confidence have little embarrassment, which is one of important sectors of affective filter as they grab more opportunities to contact with native language users and gain a large number of language input. For example, an American child who takes interests in Chinese may have some indolent mood because of the reason of being a child. However, their confidence would be motivated with a short encouragement, such as “well done”. By doing so, that child could be reinvigorated and continues his or her learning career.

## **4. Conclusion**

As what are mentioned above, factors, such as learning motivation, personality, age and affection are of tremendous importance in the second language acquisition. Individual difference is an objective psychological factor, providing second language acquisition with high efficacy. When coming to the situation of teaching second languages, one has to respect individual difference, manipulate motive teaching methods, and adopt conditionalized teaching approaches to motivate a student in studying a second language. A good studying atmosphere is an absolute necessity to improve the second language acquisition. From the analysis of some factors contributing to the second language acquisition, undoubtedly students should be the main entity while teaching a second language. Through some practical activities, the tendency of naturally absorbing a new language has attracted

more widely attentions. Of course, besides individual differences, social factors, cultural factors, environmental factors also make contributions. However, whether subjective factors or objective factors should all be taken into consideration when acquiring a second language for learners.

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