

Factors Influencing Learners of English as a Second Language:

An Overview

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Abstract:

English as a language had grown and gained importance over the centuries since the time of the Anglo-Saxon period. Numerous factors influence the growth of this colonial language and contribute to its learning process. Many investigations and reviews have been done related to these two domains by educationists, psychologists and researchers. Language learning is a continuous and comprehensive process. The study of the English language both as L1 and L2 is a vast and wide-ranging procedure. The purpose of the paper is to analyze the various factors affecting a learner while acquiring English as a second language.

Keywords: L1, L2, SLA, acquisition, cognition, metacognition, affective and demographic factors

With the advancement in scientific and academic disciplines, English language teaching has emerged as a major discipline with the demands of globalization. Its continuous evolution indicates the growing awareness of English as an International Language. Since the beginning of the 1970s, English language teaching had witnessed changes with reformations in teacher training and the evolution of advanced curriculum designs. Several researchers have conducted sociological investigations in this field to ensure smooth and substantial restructuring of the teaching-learning process. Its progression has been intensified by the formulation of different theories by well-known linguists and theorists. The role of a learner primarily depends upon the successful execution of an effective teaching-learning program.

A learner's native language is his first language (L1) and the second language (L2) is the one which he tries to learn in addition to his native language. In the case of the first language (L1), a learner acquires it from very childhood. Second language acquisition (SLA) or learning is the process by which a learner tries to learn a second language.

There is an enormous disparity between 'acquisition' and 'learning'. It is affirmed by Stephen Krashen that 'acquisition' of a language is naturally acquiring it, whereas 'learning' is a conscious process and a learner has to participate in a curriculum and systematic stages of development. The monolingual approach supports the concept of using the 'target language' as the singular medium of communication, with the elimination of the native language. This procedure maximizes the efficacy of learning the target language. Using a native language while learning the target language reduces a learner's exposure to English. To quote Lightbown and Spada in their book, *How Languages are Learnt*, "Children who learn more than one language from earliest childhood are referred to as 'simultaneous bilinguals', whereas those who learn another language, later on, may be called, 'sequential bilinguals'." In a classroom of English Language, there are learners of a diverse level and aptitude. Bilingual learners who have grown up in an environment where more than one language is used are more compatible in comparison to those who have learned only one language i.e. the native or vernacular language.

Learners of English can fairly be divided into two categories: New learners and Advanced learners. Among the advanced learners, some learners learn rapidly while some take more time to acquire and learn the basics. A study and interpretation of the theories and how they affect the conscious and unconscious mind of a learner in English as a Second Language (ESL) is very challenging with many aspects involved in it. A learner needs time, support and academic help to develop his proficiency in the language.

There are several factors that involve and encompass the learning process of a learner of English as a second language (L2). These factors, internal and external, help in the learning of the colonial language which necessitates the modern age and hour. The velocity of the language development regulated by these factors differs from country to country, region to region, society to society and level to level. In the case of the second language, learners find it intricate to acquire expertise compared to the first language. When the external factors like the classroom activities, the assignments, the evaluations, are organized and synchronized to assist the learners, the outcome is exceptional. The degree of proficiency and personality traits are the internal factors that influence and characterize a learner's capacity. It has been perceived that extrovert and sociable learners become skilled at second language more adeptly compared to introvert learners.

The importance of grammar in the English Language can by no means be ignored. The paradigm of the whole English language depends on the fulcrum of grammar which not only balances the language but also organizes the sentence. The next considerable factor is the implementation of an active curriculum designed to meet the requirements of the students' current academic and scholastic level. It is supposed to be challenging and engaging with activities to provide comprehensible input in a learner. Learning English as a second language is not only challenging but also cognitively demanding. Language proficiency also means to congregate the requirement of a wide range of vocabulary.

As stereotyped techniques are getting replaced by inventive techniques, language learning and teaching is no longer monotonous one. Students' needs and requirements are satisfied with effectual teaching methods and ground-breaking perceptions. Other than these, many determinants facilitate the acquisition and learning of any language. Several learners are successful from every point of view as they are categorically able to incorporate these determinants or skills in their life and enhance their academic life. While comparing these factors or determinants affecting the learning process in L1 and L2, one can categorize the key elements influencing the second language learners. All the factors or determinants can roughly be brought under two sections as internal and external. Apart from the determinants, teaching strategies, the classroom activities, the assignments, the evaluations, the attitude and aptitude of a learner, the literacy background, academic level, self-confidence and instinctual behavior all propel and induce a learner to survive the challenges in the learning procedure. These factors assimilate and contribute to the evolvment and progress of a learner.

The study of a language depends principally on cognitive, metacognitive, affective and demographic factors. An in-depth study of these factors pertinent to the learning of the second language establishes that the strategies and approaches used for L1 and L2 are different and so are the results. The strategies vary and along with it the outcomes also differ in each language type. Cognitive skills and factors aid in the psychological development of a learner and make the language all the more responsive. The word 'cognitive' means concerning the psychological progression of memory, judgment, and reasoning. An instructor needs to create a student-friendly atmosphere aiding the learners of a second language. As stated by Bley-Vroman (1989), "second language (L2) learning

often does not lead to success while first language learning, except in unusual cases, does".

The vital cognitive skills a learner needs in the second language are attention, memory, processing, and sequencing. These four skills work in synchronization to benefit the teaching-learning process. Mapping the learning procedure with an in-depth exploration of these skills reveal their purpose in enhancing a learner's ability and efficiency to a higher level. Compared to children, brain processing works efficiently in adults with their materialistic and corporeal knowledge, observation of facts, events and day-to-day activities. The cognitive skills effectively and competently work and help in recalling the previously gathered knowledge and information. It furthermore helps in identifying and understanding the newly gathered knowledge and information. In the process of learning of English as a second language (L2) these skills assist in understanding the subject matter more. The linguistic and cognitive skills facilitate in comparing, contrasting, and analyzing the target language with their language (L1) i.e. their native language. A learner learns his native language naturally unaware of the grammar and the culture involved in it but while acquiring a second language, the grammar becomes more imperative. Learners from different backgrounds while studying together learn a language efficiently as the instinctual skills become automatic and reflexive. A learner's adaptation to acculturation and adjustment with different personalities also aids him to understand the target language clearly and effectively.

In the learning process, the cognitive tasks especially those relying on reasoning augment the scientific development of a learner of the second language. The various sensory nerves in the brain develop while learning a language and the language, in turn, helps the cognitive factors to perform more expressively. It is reported, "Whether language has an impact on thought depends of course, on how, we define language and how we define thought" (Gentner and Goldin-Meadow 12). Associating language and cognition has helped in conceptualizing and spurred questions regarding speaking and comprehending as both of them equally influence linguistic development. Linguistic development always promotes the cognitive factors which help in developing higher Intelligence Quotient (IQ) as well as interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. The relation between language and cognition becomes more perceptible when the different

cognitive factors and their impact on the language are studied minutely. Language is a mirror of the world. The more refined and developed the language the more developed the cognitive skills are. The internal distinctiveness of a learner gets delineated in the form of cognitive skills.

Supplementary to the cognitive skills, there are the affective factors that activate a learner. They are attitude, aptitude, personality, motivation, anxiety, intelligence, preferences, and beliefs which predispose the learning procedure. These determinants either generate positive or negative consequences depending upon the situation. In Second Language learning, a learner has to subjugate many barriers and challenges which directly affects his affective skills along with his cognitive skills. All these factors are labels of behavior and greatly vary from each other. These factors have different effects on different learners. If the learners are compared among each other, then a high degree of diversity is found between them. Learners not only from different native backgrounds but also from the same background depict disparity and variation in their learning of the language. To state “Human cognitive abilities are remarkable. Our mental agility has allowed us to adapt to a vast range of environments and even to adapt our environments to suit ourselves” (Gentner 195). No learner is the same and produces the same effect in acquiring the language and the language also never impacts the skills of different learners in the same manner and level. Variation and inconsistent results are mainly seen in their assessment level, grammatical accuracy, task performances, fluency and writing complex sentences. The socio-economic factors, the multilingual factors and the skills develop the sensory nerves of the brain and contribute to the scientific development of a learner of the second language.

Together with the cognitive and affective skills, metacognitive factors contribute extraordinarily to the acquisition of the second language (L2). The prefix 'meta-' means 'beyond' or 'along with'. Metacognition refers to higher-order thinking skills which control the cognition progressions occupied in receptiveness and learning i.e. "thinking about your thinking". In 1979, the phrase was termed by American developmental psychologist, John H. Flavell. The metacognitive skills help in controlling and developing cognitive processes. Creating a positive learning atmosphere is the first step towards developing metacognitive skills. These skills regulate and monitor a learner and assist in

comprehending his or her self, evaluate and aid in self-control. The self-control further helps the learner in social adjustments in the group, checks, and aids in displaying pertinent behavior in the classroom and checks his or her impulsive behavior. The metacognitive skills not only facilitate the learner to manage the pressures and anxieties of the learning of a second language but also help in dealing with the frustrations and disillusionments developing in the mind due to a crisis or failure in achieving a target. It develops the thought process and constructs an optimistic learning process. It benefits a learner to become aware and learn from the past as well as present experiences. Knowledge of the past experiences impact and shape the perceptions in various sensory modalities and optimize future stimuli and effect.

All the perceptions of a learner of the second language affect his thinking, acquiring, interpreting, designating, arranging and rearranging facts and ideas. More the experience, the better the performance of a learner. In the process of learning, all the negative as well as positive experiences cast the mind of a learner and improve his metacognitive skills making him self-reliant and self-motivated. The psycho-social experiences cultivate self-awareness in the perception of a learner. Building self-efficacy and self-regulatory skills aid a second language (L2) learner to become more competent in the learning process. It further helps an L2 learner to judge his or her strength and drawback. The diversity in the social, cultural, racial and genetic background creates effective communication in the learners. The metacognitive skills impel the learner to make optimum use of the learning environment and benefit from it. Past experiences impact and regulate a learner's learning capacity. A successful learner creates and recreates his or her strategies to learn and acquire. To quote John Dewey, famous American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, "We do not learn from experience....we learn from reflecting on experience."

In the learning process of a second language, along with other factors, demographic factors also contribute to the linguistic development of the learner. Variation in demographic and socio-economic factors like age, sex, and education build up as well as facilitate in forming an inclination regarding the social and spatial distribution of learners of L2. Diversity creates a multidimensional perspective in the learners' intellectualism. A study of the determinants and their consequences provide a clear image

of the relationship of the demographic factors and the linguistic phenomenon. Several economic factors, social conditions, educational development, population change, migration, time management all contribute to the learning process of the learner. A successful learner recognizes time as a crucial resource and utilizes it the most. The learner optimizes resources with flexibility and makes himself or herself responsible and accountable for the performances irrespective of his or her age. But as Richard-Amato noted in her book, *Making it Happen*, "Second-language learners are usually older than first-language learners." Just as a child learns to speak, listen, and respond to a language spoken by the parents at home, in a similar manner, a learner of a second language struggles and learns the language in a diverse situation. Richard- Amato continues, "being older is not always advantageous in learning a second language."

Along with all the factors, the teaching-learning process, literacy background, intellectual development, academic level, self-confidence, instinctual behavior, and communicative competencies propel and motivate a learner to survive the challenges and acquire a new language. But sometimes a learner's obligations and high expectations obstruct the learning process. Learning L2 is cognitively demanding as well as challenging. Language adeptness demands a committed learner. The application of all the component factors and skills on a learner of the second language reinforces increasing communicative competence.

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