Raising awareness of an individual in teaching English as a foreign language

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Abstract

Understanding the ways in which learners differ from one another is a fundamental concern to those involved in foreign language acquisition, as researchers or books synthesizing and evaluating research on foreign language acquisition have tended to concentrate on the study of similarities. The article argues that greatest importance should be attributed to the awareness of learners as individuals as well as members of a group and differentiation of instruction to satisfy the needs of the very many learners in a learner-centered foreign language classroom. It has to be a holistic process, in which the learners both as individuals and in groups can receive maximum opportunity to learn and develop.

Based on Ellis' classification of individual learner factors, this article considers matters as group dynamics, learning strategies, age, language aptitude, intelligence, motivation, personality and a few others, which have been distinguished to explain differential success among foreign language learners. The article explores the roles of teachers to accomplish a challenging task to satisfy the very many different learners in a foreign language classroom, which would secure the learners' sustainable development for them to become versatile and integrated personalities.

Key words: group dynamics, learning strategies, aptitude, intelligence, cognitive style, sustainable development

Introduction

In the past years, the field of foreign language learning has grown enormously, with the quantity and quality of published research increasing annually. The main thrust of this research has been towards establishing what processes of learning are universal. Studies of learning sequences or of error types are some examples of this. There are also other research traditions concerning the study of the differences between foreign language learners. Individual differences research has been an area of neglect and has not been sufficiently integrated into the mainstream of foreign language learning studies. However, teachers feel the necessity and importance of the studies that might lead to a better understanding of the foreign language acquisition process, because there is a much smaller amount of time for the foreign language learning in comparison to acquiring one's first language. Furthermore, language proficiency is not often the outcome of foreign language learning. In many classes, even where the teacher has devoted much time to teaching, the results have been disappointing. Some might argue that greater consciousness of the complex process of language learning will not guarantee more effective teaching, but, still, it will stimulate critical thought, challenge old principles and, maybe, suggest a few new ones.

There are a number of individual factors that have been distinguished to explain differential success among foreign language learners, to explain why some learn a foreign language with facility while others struggle and only meet with limited success. It is not implied that these are the only factors that have an influence on the foreign language learning process. The effects of the learner's first language on foreign language learning and input variables, for instance, are among those factors that are not related to individual variables that have been widely discussed. There are

some problems, however, that make it difficult to reach firm conclusions about the individual differences that have impact on language proficiency:

1. How should we define and measure proficiency in a foreign language?
2. How should we measure the non-linguistic factors or individual differences that we consider likely to affect language learning?
3. Even if we are satisfied with the various tests and find a correlation between proficiency and a non-linguistic factor, can we be sure that a direct cause-and-effect relationship is involved?
4. If we are satisfied that a direct cause-and-effect link exists, can we be sure which is the cause and which is the effect?

Littlewood (1984) reported these difficulties in investigating causes for differences. With these notes of caution in mind, the author will deal with some non-linguistic factors, which many researchers believe influence the rate and success in foreign language learning.

Individual Differences: Learners' Personal Factors

The learner factors that can influence the course of development are infinite and very difficult to classify in a reliable manner. The theoretical framework for the study is provided by Ellis' (1985) classification of individual learner factors. An initial distinction is to be drawn between personal and general factors. Personal factors are highly idiosyncratic features of each individual's approach to learning a foreign language. General factors are variables that are characteristic of all learners. We will consider personal factors grouped under the headings: (1) group dynamics; (2) attitudes to the teacher and course materials and (3) individual learning techniques.

Group dynamics is related to the learners' behaviours, which definitely affect language learning. The learners tend to make overt comparisons of themselves with other learners. The learners match how they think they are progressing against their expectations. These comparisons often result in emotive responses to the language learning experience. The learners' self-image in comparison with other learners can either impair or enhance foreign language learning. Where the comparison results in an unsuccessful self-image, the effect may be debilitating or facilitating anxiety. In the case of the former, the learners may reduce or abandon learning effort. In the case of the latter, the learners increase their efforts in order to compare more favourably with other learners, and, as a result, learning is enhanced.

The learners vary in their *attitudes to the teacher and teaching materials*. The learners need to feel sympathy for their teachers and also want them to be predictable, knowledgeable, inventive, resourceful, patient and helpful. These characteristics that good teachers must possess seem countless. As far as teaching materials are concerned, the learners report they dislike having one course-book imposed upon them in a rigid way and prefer a variety of materials and the opportunity to use them in the ways they choose for themselves. A predetermined syllabus that underlies one course-book can bypass the learners' needs. Though there is an enormous variety of language teaching course-books, and some of them rely on such a methodological procedure which assumes that the students "learn in 'straight lines' – that is, starting from no knowledge, through highly restricted sentence-based utterances and on to immediate production" (Harmer, 2003: 82).

There is a tremendous variety of the *strategies* employed by different learners.

Theoreticians and practitioners have begun to look more closely at the learners themselves in an attempt to discover how successfully they achieve their results prompted by the awareness that the learners may succeed despite the teacher's

methods and techniques rather than because of them (O'Malley, Chamot, 1990; Willing, 1988).

Studies of learners' strategies attempt to identify the specific techniques and strategies the learners use to facilitate their own learning. The focus is on the particular cognitive operations, processes, procedures and heuristics that the learners apply to the task of learning a foreign language. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) have distinguished between metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies involve thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring of comprehension or production while it is taking place and self-evaluation of learning after the language activity is completed. Cognitive strategies are more directly related to individual learning tasks and presuppose manipulation or transformation of the learning materials. Contextualisation – placing a word or phrase in a meaningful language sequence, imaginary – relating new information to visual concepts in memory, transfer – using previously acquired knowledge to facilitate new learning, note-taking, translation are some of the cognitive strategies. Social strategies concern cooperation, which entails working with one or more peers to obtain feedback, for instance.

A number of strategies are available to the learners to help them carry out any language learning task they are given. Good language learners seem to be successful because they have a better understanding of and control over their own learning than less successful learners. Use of inappropriate learning strategies has been found to account for the poor performance of the learners in many classroom learning tasks.

Individual Differences: Learners' General Factors

Age, aptitude, cognitive style, motivation and personality are general factors, which are characteristic of all learners. These factors differ not whether they are present in a particular individual's learning, but in the extent to which they are present or the manner in which they are realised. Some general factors are likely to change during the course of foreign language learning, for instance, motivation. There are also unmodifiable factors such as aptitude and personality that do not change in strength or nature as foreign language learning takes place.

Age is the variable that has been most frequently considered in discussions of individual differences in foreign language learning. Harmer (2003: 37) accentuates that "the age of our students is a major factor in our decisions about how and what to teach. People of different ages have different needs, competences, and cognitive skills (...)".

A question that has aroused a considerable interest is whether adults learn a foreign language in the same way as children. Adults have a greater memory capacity and are also able to focus more easily on the formal features of a language. These differences need not lead to differences in the route through which the learners pass that may be the product of a language faculty that does not change with age. Ellis (1985) separates the effects of age on the route of foreign language learning from the effects of age on the rate or success of foreign language learning. Most of the studies that have investigated the role of age have been concerned with the latter. It has been acknowledged that age does not alter the route of learning, whereas the rate and success of foreign language learning are strongly influenced by the age of the learners. Where rate is concerned, there is evidence to suggest that older learners are better. Where success of foreign language learning is concerned, the general finding is that the longer the exposure to the foreign language, the more native-like foreign language proficiency becomes. These generalisations, however, can be misleading since they ignore evidence from individuals within the groups.

Success in foreign language learning also appears to be strongly related to the age when foreign language is commenced. Ellis (1985) summarises the results of the research:

1. Starting age does not affect the route of foreign language learning. Although there may be differences in the acquisition order, these are not the result of age.
2. Starting age affects the rate of learning. Where grammar and vocabulary are concerned, adolescent learners do better than either children or adults, when the length of exposure is held constant. Where pronunciation is concerned, there is no difference.
3. Both number of years of exposure and starting age affect the level of success. The number of years of exposure contributes greatly to the overall communicative fluency of the learners, but starting age determines the levels of accuracy achieved particularly in pronunciation.

Intelligence, another important variable, is the underlying ability to learn, which is involved in the learning of other school subjects as well as a foreign language. Intelligence governs how well the learners master a whole range of skills, both linguistic and non-linguistic. Gardner (1983) defines intelligence in a sophisticated way and argues it is the ability to find and solve problems and create products of value in one's own culture. He suggests that the traditional notion of intelligence, based on I.Q. testing, is far too limited. Instead, Gardner proposes seven different intelligences to account for a broader range of human potential in children and adults: Linguistic, Logical-Mathematical, Musical, Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Bodily-Kinaesthetic and Spatial. Later Gardner adds Naturalist intelligence to this list, and Goleman (1996) – Emotional intelligence. Although we each have all the intelligences, they are distributed uniquely in each of us. Following Gardner, our schools and culture focus most of their attention on Linguistic and Logical-Mathematical intelligence, but we should place equal attention on individuals who show gifts in other intelligences. Each personality comes into the world with unique potentials. If we accept that in each person one (or more) of the intelligences is more pronounced, the same learning task may not be appropriate for all the learners. The theory of multiple intelligences seems to be intriguing because it expands our horizon of available teaching and learning tools beyond the conventional linguistic and logical methods used in most foreign language classrooms.

Aptitude, which was initially defined in terms of linguistic aptitude tests, is not easy to define. The challenging line of criticism of the linguistic aptitude tests was that they measured general intellectual ability and favoured analytic-type learners. Aptitude is multi-componential. Carroll and Sapon (1959) identify three major components of aptitude: (1) phonetic coding ability, which consists of the ability to perceive and memorize new sounds; (2) grammatical sensitivity, which is the individual's ability to demonstrate awareness of the syntactical patterning of sentences of a language and (3) inductive ability, which consists of the ability to notice and identify similarities and differences in both grammatical form and meaning. This model concentrates on the linguistic as opposed to the communicative aspects of aptitude. Aptitude, as defined by Carroll and Sapon (1959), corresponds to overall cognitive and academic skills, rather than the kinds of skills involved in interpersonal communication.

One major area for the extension of language aptitude research concerns the nature of communicative competence. Aptitude research has only been concerned with linguistic competence and with the learner's capacity to handle sentence grammar. Contemporary views on competence are more likely to incorporate Hyme's (1972) discussion of communicative competence, which, in addition to including whether something is formally possible, consider whether it is appropriate, whether it is feasible psychologically and whether it is done. Canale and Swain (1980), building

on Hyme's work, propose a model of communicative competence, which draws on four component competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic. No doubt, there are stable aptitudes that predispose some learners to acquire competences other than the linguistic. According to Skehan (1989), for sociolinguistic competence, such aptitudes would probably concern sensitivity by some people to appropriate language use and social norms. For discourse competence, research would need to identify whether some learners are able to make their written or spoken language more coherent and cohesive and whether some people are predisposed to manage conversations more effectively. Finally, for strategic competence, one would have to investigate whether some learners are more able to improvise and to use language creatively.

Cognitive style is a term used to refer to the manner in which people perceive, conceptualise, organise and recall information (Ellis, 1985). The dimensions of cognitive style that have received the greatest attention are those of field dependence/ independence. Some characteristics of field dependence concern reliance on external frame of reference in processing information and social sensitiveness. The field-dependent learners will perceive a field as a whole and derive their self-view from others. Some of the principal characteristics of field independency concern reliance on internal frame of reference in processing information, social ignorance in a way. The field-independent learners will perceive a field in terms of its component parts, sense of separate identity. However, there is a problem in deciding to what extent cognitive style is separate from related learner characteristics, for instance, intelligence and components of language aptitude.

Motivation and needs have always had a central place in theories of foreign language learning. A basic distinction is drawn between an integrative and an instrumental orientation to foreign language learning. Integrative motivation comes from within the individuals and occurs when the learners wish to identify with the culture of the foreign language group. The learners might be motivated by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or by a desire to make themselves feel better. The learners who are interested in the social and cultural customs of native speakers of the language they are learning are likely to be successful. Instrumental motivation occurs when the learners' goals for learning the foreign language are functional. Learning directed at passing an examination, furthering career opportunities or facilitating study of other subjects through the medium of the foreign language are examples of instrumentally-motivated learning. Thus, a number of outside factors cause instrumental motivation. When the learners have a strong instrumental need to learn a foreign language, they will probably succeed. Similarly, the learners with little interest in the way of life of native speakers of the foreign language or with low instrumental motivation can be expected to learn slowly. Both types of motivation are not mutually exclusive. Foreign language learning rarely involves purely integrative or purely instrumental motivation. In most cases, the learners' progress is influenced both by a desire to do well in the foreign language as a study subject and by an interest in the native speakers of the foreign language and their culture. There is little doubt that motivation is a powerful factor in foreign language learning. This does not mean that better motivated learners will necessarily be more successful, but, on average, they are more likely to be so. However, there appears to be some problems regarding the direction of the relationship between motivation and learning. We do not know whether it is motivation that produces successful learning or successful learning initiates and sustains motivation. Anyway, we should not view motivation in isolation from other aspects of the learning situation. We need to take into account motivating agents, like the teacher and teaching materials that are working on the learners.

There is a general conviction that *personality* strongly influences foreign language learning. One of the major problems of investigating personality is the lack

of objective testing instruments that can reliably measure different types. It leads to problems of identification and measurement (Ellis, 1985).

A preoccupation with *personalities and styles* has been an important factor in psycholinguistic research. It is believed that such personality factors as extroversion and self-esteem are likely to predetermine the development of general oral communicative competence, which requires face-to-face interaction. Extroversion is the extent to which a person has a deep-seated need to receive self-esteem and a sense of wholeness from other people as opposed to producing that affirmation within oneself. Introversion is the extent to which a person derives a sense of wholeness and fulfilment apart from a reflection of this self from other people. The learners with a high level of self-esteem are less likely to be threatened when communicating in a foreign language or in an unfamiliar situation, and they may also be ready to risk-making mistakes. When mistakes are made, a person with high self-esteem is not daunted by the possible consequences of being laughed at. The learners can really make progress by learning from the mistakes made. If the learners never ventured to speak a sentence until they are absolutely certain of its total correctness, they would likely never communicate at all. Brown (2007) argues, however, that mistakes can be viewed as threats to one's ego, and they pose both internal and external threats. Language learning always involves a number of forms of alienation, alienation between the critical me and the performing me. This alienation arises from the defenses that the learners build around themselves, and these defenses hamper learning.

There are certain types of social skills involved in foreign language learning that are related to the distinction between extroversion and introversion. Such social skills as talkativeness and responsiveness are significantly related to the acquisition of communicative competence. The learners who find it easy to interact with peers in a foreign language classroom or with native speakers of the foreign language progress more rapidly than those who do not. Inhibition is another major factor of personality that has been studied with regard to foreign language learning. The defensiveness associated with inhibition discourages the risk-taking, which is necessary for rapid progress in a foreign language.

Researchers have attempted to specify the qualities of a good language learner, which reflect the social, cognitive and affective factors that have been important in foreign language learning (Ellis, 1985; Naiman, 1978; Rubin, 1975). Ellis (1985), drawing on Rubin's (1975) and Naiman's (1978) studies, has worked out his own list of the characteristics of a good language learner. A good language learner will be able to respond to the group dynamics of the learning situation, so as not to develop negative anxiety and inhibitions, seek out all opportunities to use the target language, be prepared to experiment by taking risks, even if this makes the learner appear foolish, and be capable of adapting to different learning conditions. These are only some of the qualities that a good language learner should possess.

To conclude, the personal factors are to be seen as a reflection of general factors. The way the learner selects study techniques and responds to the group dynamics of the learning situation, the teacher and course materials is determined by age, aptitude, cognitive style, motivation and personality (Ellis, 1985). Both personal and general factors have social, cognitive and affective aspects. Social aspects are external to the learner and concern the relationship between the learners and native speakers of the foreign language as well as between the learner and other speakers of the learners' language. Cognitive and affective aspects are internal to the learner. Cognitive factors concern the nature of the problem-solving strategies used by the learner, while affective factors concern the emotional responses aroused by the attempts to learn a foreign language. Aptitude, for instance, is thought of as cognitive

in nature, but it also involves affective and social aspects. Age is the factor which may involve all three aspects.

Individual Differences: Roles of the Teacher

While national standards dictate what is to be taught and how it is to be assessed, foreign language educators still face a basic fact of classroom life: the learners learn in different ways. So, education primarily should be concerned about creating a learning environment corresponding to the needs and individuality of each learner. It has to be a holistic process, in which the learners both as individuals and in groups receive maximum opportunity to learn and develop becoming versatile and integrated personalities capable of life-long learning. Thus sustainable development is the most obvious characterisation of education that the teacher is looking for. Sustainable development cannot be introduced by anything but sustainable education. There is no agreed definition of sustainable development, and there may be no need for one as it is to be viewed as a process of change in the long term and evolves its wide implications for all aspects of our lives towards genuine understanding of the importance and value of diversity, which is regarded one of many key concepts of sustainable development, without which all our lives are impoverished.

In recent years, under the influence of the progressive pedagogy paradigm based on humanistic and sustainability values, greater emphasis has been placed on the learner-centered approach, which makes the learners' needs, strengths and weaknesses central to the educational process. However, the teacher needs special qualities, including educational skills, a greater tolerance of uncertainty and maturity in order to succeed in such learner-centered classrooms (Tudor, 1993). The teacher has to be provided with tools to identify learning differences, understand why those differences exist in the brain and in culture, make the learners aware of their learning differences and, most importantly, differentiate instruction to meet the needs of each individual.

The teacher can adopt different roles to accomplish a challenging task to satisfy the very many different learners in a foreign language classroom, teaching to the learners' individual strengths with activities designed to produce the best results for each of them. Yet the teacher wishes to address one's teaching to the group as a whole. Harmer (2003) identifies several roles of the teacher: a controller, an organiser, an assessor, a prompter, a participant, a resource, a tutor and an observer. In the past, a controller was the most common role, which the teacher was used to and was most comfortable with. The teacher is usually able to switch between different roles, judging when it is appropriate to use one or other of them. There are times when the teacher will need to act as a controller, as some activities are difficult to organise without this role of the teacher, whereas, on other occasions, the role of a resource would be more appropriate.

The teacher is initially an observer and investigator of the learners' behaviours. Relevant concerns for the teacher thus focus on the circumstances and conditions under which more effective teaching and learning are accomplished. The learners' capabilities should be highlighted and worked with to improve their motivation, self-esteem and academic achievement, in a word, to ensure a better quality of each learner's life.

One of the most important roles that the teacher has to perform is that of planning and organising the learners to do various activities. The awareness that there are different individuals in the class is vitally important if the teacher is to organise the kinds of activity that will be appropriate for learners. At the same time, the teacher needs to balance the interests of individuals against what is good for the group and to be aware of certain individual traits when putting the learners into pairs and groups. The first thing the teacher needs to do when organising something is to get the

learners engaged. It is equally important to initiate and sustain the learners' motivation throughout the course of study. The teacher helps the learners to explore their own multiple intelligences through self-assessment and group sharing using the theory of multiple intelligences as an organising framework. Consequently, the teacher responds to the learners' diversity and present the lessons in a wide variety of ways, using music, cooperative learning, art activities, role play, multimedia, field trips, inner reflection and much more, in a word, differentiate instruction to meet the needs of each kind of learner. The teacher does not have to teach something in all possible ways, just see what the possibilities are and then decide which particular pathways interest the learners. Moreover, the learners should be asked to respond to various activities and provide feedback on the kind of strategies that are most successful for carrying out specific learning tasks. Feedback will definitely help to build a picture of the best kinds of activity for the mix of individuals in a particular class or group.

When the teacher acts as an assessor, offering feedback on the learners' performance, correcting and grading them in various ways, the teacher must value the learners for those risks they take and encourage the risk-taking, which is necessary for rapid progress in a foreign language. The learners develop as a result of classroom experiences of success or failure.

At times, the teacher combines the roles of a prompter and a resource, acting as a tutor, working with individuals or small groups. Care needs to be taken to ensure that as many individuals or groups as possible are seen. In this more personal contact, the learners have a real chance to feel encouraged, and the general classroom atmosphere is greatly enhanced as a result. In fact, care must not only be fully integrated in classroom, but also all curricula have to be developed through care.

Conclusion

Being aware of the role of individual differences in foreign language learning leads to a better understanding of foreign language learning. However, the study of individual differences is overwhelmingly complex. The most difficult point is how these individual variables affect foreign language learning. This is partly because of the vagueness of many of the concepts that have been investigated.

The learners vary considerably, both in how quickly they learn and how successful they are. The explanation for this lays in the learners' general factors, which are characteristic of all learners, as well as the learners' individual factors, which highly idiosyncratic features of each individual's approach to learning a foreign language.

The teacher needs special qualities to accomplish the challenging task of meeting the needs of each kind of learner in a learner-centered foreign language classroom. Teaching approaches should favour the learners' sustainable development for them to become versatile personalities.

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