

# Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition

By

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## Abstrak

Artikel ini menyajikan perbedaan-perbedaan individu dalam mempelajari dan memperoleh bahasa kedua. Sebagian pembelajar berhasil belajar bahasa asing dengan cepat sementara yang lain merasa frustrasi. Gradman dan Hanania (1991) menyatakan ada 22 macam perbedaan individu dalam mempelajari bahasa asing. Dalam makalah ini akan didiskusikan lima faktor perbedaan individu. Setiap faktor diharapkan memberikan kontribusi terhadap pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa kedua. Selanjutnya, variabel-variabel perbedaan individu ini diharapkan dapat memberikan bimbingan pada guru-guru untuk mengajarkan bahasa kedua secara efektif dan efisien.

Key words : Individual, differences, language, acquisition.

## 1. Introduction

This paper outlines the review of individual differences in second language learning and second language acquisition. In learning or acquiring a second language, language learners have a variety of differences. Some learners are successful in learning another language whereas others are frustrated in achieving the target language. Some learners can learn a new language quickly without too much help from others while the others are very slow. Many factors affect the learners in order to be successful in learning the other language. Gradman and Hanania (1991) listed 22 individual differences that may affect success in second language learning. In this paper, five individual differences variables (motivation, age, field dependent/independent, learners' strategies, and anxiety) will be reviewed by looking at the researches done by researchers.

## 2. Factors on individual differences

### 2.1. Motivation

Motivation is probably the key for explaining the success or failure in learning another language. But increasing learner's motivation is not really an easy job. Gardner and Lambert (1972 cited in Brown, 1980) do the study dealing with motivation in learning a second language. The finding shows that motivation is related to success in second language learning. Learners are assumed to be successful in learning if they have instrumental or integrative motivation.

Brown (1980) notes that instrumental motivation is a motivation to acquire a language as a means of achieving instrumental goals such as passing the examination, getting a better job etc. People with instrumental motivation can be good language

learners and they are successful in learning another language. Instrumental motivation can lead them to master and acquire the second language. They make a lot of efforts in order to be successful in achieving the language. The research shows that students with higher instrumental motivation have higher scores in test of English proficiency (Lukmani, 1972, Kachru, 1972, cited in Brown, 1980). The students are successful in this study for instrumental reason.

Studies done by Spolsky (1969, Lambert, 1972, cited in Brown, 1980) showed that integrative motivation affected learners and made them to have higher scores on proficiency test in a foreign language. Based on these studies, the integrative motivation is likely to be important factor for successful language learning.

Oxford and Nyikos (1989) found out that motivation influenced the learners in language learning. Motivation affects learners to actively involve in learning. It is assumed that they will be successful in learning language. High motivation will cause language learning better. It is true if learners learn better, they will have strong motivation as well. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) state that there is a relationship between motivation and strategy used by learners.

Ely (1986) also do a study toward the motivation in the second language classroom. The subjects of the study were students enrolled in first year university Spanish classes. Ely found out that learners with stronger motivation will have stronger desires to learn the second language. Learner's motivation toward language class is likely to be a positive predictor of language participation.

However, some researchers disagree with the primacy of integrative motivation in second language learning. Horwitz (1990, cited in Oxford and Ehrman, 1993) argues that instrumental motivation is more predictive rather than integrative motivation in second language learning in Philippines. The result from the on going Foreign Service institute study indicated that instrumental motivation plays a crucial role than integrative motivation for some language skills. Oxford (1992, cited in Oxford and Ehrman, 1993) found that both instrumental and integrative motivation are of the same important factor for students in learning another language.

In conclusion, the motivation factor plays a crucial role in the success or failure of second language learning. The results of the studies show that motivation integrated with the success in second language learning. It is hoped that future study will give more contributions to the role of motivation in language learning.

## 2.2. Age

According to research findings, age also is one factor in determining the success in second language learning. Many researchers argue whether age differences will affect learner in learning another language. Are really younger learners better than older learners? Are older learners faster than younger learners? In order to answer these questions we have to refer to research findings done by researchers. The research finding shows that older learners depend on more general learning abilities which they may also use to learn other kind of skills. Older learners are more efficient rather than younger learners at the early stages of second language acquisition.

According to the theory of SLA, learning a second language after the critical period hypothesis that is after puberty will be less successful. The reason is the plasticity in the brain decreases with age.

Felix (1985, cited in Ioup et al., 1994) posits a set of problem solving cognitive structures that develop at puberty and compete with the language cognitive structure in analyzing second language data. The result shows that adults have inappropriate of competing learning procedures to portions of the second language data.

White (1989) argued for intact UG in adult learners. He focused on the role of the first language in the second language acquisition process. He noted that older learners have difficult to reset the parameters correctly but may acquire negative evidence to do so.

Long (1990) notes there will be differences between children and adults in acquiring first language and second language. Long states children learning second language will find their task easier than adults. Adults will fail to reach a uniform of native standard in different skill areas including morphology, syntax, lexis, and pragmatic features.

Tahta et al. (1981) studied about foreign accents. In their study they examine some factors of transfer accent from the first language to the second language. The age of the subjects ranged from six to 15+. The result shows that if the age of acquired are six when they begin acquiring the second language, there will be no transfer of accent. If the acquisition is after 12-13, there will be transfer of accent from the first language. When the acquisition is between 7-11, the transfer will be slight.

Scott (1994) did a research by comparing younger and older adult's monolinguals English speakers and bilingual (English / Spanish) speakers on auditory perception and memory span. The study found that older adults had more difficulty in perceiving English sound accurately. However, there is no difference in English auditory memory capacity between older and younger bilinguals performed better than monolinguals on the tasks.

Based on those findings above, there is no doubt that age factor is important in the role of second language learning and second language acquisition. The biological factor such as maturation and plasticity of the brain affect the second language learning.

### 2.3. Field dependent/independent

Individual differences on the cognitive style of field dependent/independent give effects to the second language acquisition. Due to this individual style, there is some evidence that an individual prefers a certain style rather than other which suit for him/her. Some people may like to study alone while others prefer to study in groups. Some learners are successful when they have inductive method while others prefer deductive method.

Chapelle and Roberts (1984, cited in Abraham 1985) found that field independence is a significant predictor of success on a multiple-choice grammar test given to ESL students. Field independence is significantly related to scores on several standardized written tests to language aptitude and to use monitoring. Field independent students are more successful when rules are taught deductively. They are more adept at learning and using rules than field dependent students.

Abraham (1985) did a study toward field dependence/independence on the teaching of grammar. The subjects are 61 students in the high intermediate levels of the Intensive English and orientation Program at Iowa State University. The finding showed that field independent subjects performed better with the example lesson. Field independent students approach problem solving situation analytically, while field dependent students approach them in a global way.

Carter (1988) investigated that field independence took advantages for performance on both formal linguistics achievement and functional language proficiency tasks. Furthermore, Carter mentioned that the importance of focus on meaning correlated with performance on both the oral proficiency interview and the course final exam.

Those findings above show that field dependent/independent students have different styles in achieving the target language. It is true that field independent students are associated with greater articulation and competence in cognitive styles and restructuring. Field dependent students are associated with a more global approach and greater social and interpersonal competence. However, either style may have advantages for a particular task.

#### 2.4. Learner's strategies

Language learning strategies are specific techniques, behavioral as well as actions which are employed by students in order to enhance their own progress in storing, retrieving, internalizing and using the second language (Oxford, 1993:175). Oxford and Crookall (1989) listed terminologies which are commonly used by researchers in language learning strategies. They are as follows: cognitive strategies, memory strategies, compensation strategies, communication strategies, affected strategies, and social strategies.

Ehrman and Oxford (1989) did a study on the effects of sex differences, career choice and psychological type on adult language learning strategies. They found out that sex differences affect the learning strategies used by men and women. Women have been reported to use more strategies than men. This might be related to psychological type. Females are likely to choose intuition to sensing in this sample, while males have less preference for intuition. Furthermore, women show preferences for feeling than do the men (women, 23 feeling to 15 thinking, compare with men, 9 feeling to 22 thinking).

Career group differences, moreover, give influence to the language learning strategies. In this study, professional language trainer used more language learning strategies for two possible reasons. First, they are more proficient at these strategies due to their experiences. Second, they are intuitive and the intuitive of all career group use wider range of strategies than any other groups. Teachers show a significant preferences for authentic language use when compared with students.

Carrell (1989) did a study on metacognitive strategies in second language reading. Carrell investigated the relationship between reader's metacognitive awareness and their reading ability in both first language (L1) and second language (L2). The result has

shown some of these relationships. For reading in L1 "local" reading strategies (focusing on grammatical structures, sound letter, word meaning and text details) tend to be negatively correlated with reading performance. For reading in L2, some differences emerge between the proficiency levels. Some of the local reading strategies are positively correlated with reading performance. The ESL group tends to be more global or top-down in reading strategies. The Spanish group tends to be more local or bottom-up in reading strategies.

In short, the language learning strategies plays a crucial role in language learning and teaching. Many researches have been done on this field, but much more is still needed for the betterment of second language learning. Language learners are expected to choose their own style of using familiar strategies which suit for them. It is also good to employ those strategies which are used by good language learners to enhance L2 learning.

### 2.5 Anxiety

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) have identified three general approaches due to the role of anxiety in L2 learning. That is trait, state and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety refers to the stable predisposition to become anxious in a cross-section of situation ( Spielbenger, 1983, cited in MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994).

It is seen that in learning a second language, some learners have higher anxiety while others have lower anxiety. Anxiety in L2 learning sometimes may prevent learners to achieve the target language quickly and successfully. It sometimes appears in particular situation or event but it is commonly a certain character of learners. They have a fear to engage in many things such as doing test, doing assignments, talking in front of many people etc. Anxiety may also arrives from a certain experience which learners experience in particular time or place such as culture shock (Adler, 1987, cited in Oxford and Ehrman, 1993).

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) investigated that language anxiety is correlated with French language measures. The correlation of language anxiety and scores in French may indicate that this type of apprehension can disrupt concentration at the initial processing of linguistic stimuli at the input stage. This would limit the ability of anxious person to acquire a new language. The correlation between language anxiety and the French test scores shows the effect of anxiety on the output stage.

### 3. Instructional Implications

The research finding above contribute valuable implications for language teachers in teaching second or foreign language. Teachers need to find out several ways in order to help learners in learning the second language.

First, teachers have to seek several ways to enhance the student's motivation in learning the second language. It is the role of teachers to nurture high motivated students and to encourage low motivated students. Teachers should create well and relax

atmosphere in classroom settings in order to make learners feel unthreatening in learning the language. Teachers are expected to give tasks that enhancing learner's motivation.

Second, age as an important individual difference can be a valuable aid for teachers in teaching the language. Teachers may plan language learning goals based on the age differences which suit for certain learners. Moreover, teachers should be aware that young and adult learners have different achievement in second language learning as shown by research findings. Several attention and care must be devoted by teachers to this age differences.

Third, teachers should notice that students have different cognitive style in learning the language. Teachers have to prepare learning tasks which are suitable for both dependent/independent students. Teachers should vary language learning methods in the classroom by using either deductive or inductive method. Teachers might not force learners to employ a certain way in learning which is beyond the learner's ability or interest.

Fourth, language teachers must be aware that different people might employ different learning strategies. Teachers and learners should have good coordination to choose learning strategies that enhance the second language learning.

Fifth, teachers should give an aid to students to reduce language anxiety in learning the language. Language learning activities in the classroom should be less threatening for learners. Teachers should be aware of cross-cultural differences that might cause a certain fear or trouble in learning the language.

#### 4. Summary

This paper has reviewed five factors (motivation, age, field independence/dependence, learners strategies, and anxiety) in individual differences that might influence the success or failure in second language learning. Each factor is likely to give contribute to second language learning and teaching. Moreover, instructional implications of each factor have also been examined here. These individual difference variables are expected to give guidance for teachers to teach the second language effectively and efficiently.

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