Factors Affecting Second Language Acquisition: The Role of Personality and Age as a Case

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Abstract

The paper is to introduce second Language acquisition (henceforth SLA) and second language learning in general and the factors have the impact on SLA as (Cognitive, Affective, and Social factors). It also lays very much emphasis on the role of personality and age, among different factors affecting SLA. In addition, it sheds light on the first language acquisition (hereafter FLA) and how distinct it is with SLA. The present paper aims at introducing the importance of the factors affecting SLA and how pivotal the role of learners' personality and age is for guaranteeing the acquisition of a second language. There are some problems in the local gap that have not been referring to such as ignorance of teachers about personality types and learners' age. Teachers may be unaware of personality types and haven't enough information about developing personalities; for example, introvert and extrovert learners, which is better to acquire a second language. Besides, teachers are probably not taking the age of learners into consideration in teaching

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English as a foreign language. Students may also not know their exact age or level to acquire second Language.

Key Word: SLA, Factors, FLA, Personality, Age.

العوامل التي تؤثر في اكتساب اللغة الثانية (دور الشخصية والعمر)

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الـمـسـتـخـلـص

هذه الدراسـة تركز على اكتسـاب اللغة الثانية وتعلمها بصـورة عامة، مع إبراز أهم العوامل التي تؤثر فيها من الناحية المعرفية و الاجتماعية. كما أظهرت الدراسة أثر الشخصية والعمر من بين العوامل فقد ركزت الدراســـة في البداية على تعلم اللغة الأولى مع أوجه الاختلاف في اللغة الثانية . وتكمن مشكلة البحث في دور المعلم الذي يهمل جانب العمر و الشخصية بأنواعه المختلفة لا سيما المعلم الذي لا يهتم بهذين الجانبين الآنف ذكرهما في عملية تعلم اللغة الثانية أو الأجنبية.

1. Introduction

Possessing a language is one of the most important characteristics that distinguishes human beings from animals. It is known that the human brain is very creative and can take or get everything with the passing of time. Before going to school, a child is absolutely mastered a language and can speak, and think in that language. He can use a system of language, which is crucially different from everyone and even no one can match or come close to it, to operate his communication.

To be clearer, language acquisition is the ability of human beings to acquire a language without any (or with a relatively small amount of) effort. It is a fast process at the early ages of human beings. The process of acquisition is not consciously happening but it unconsciously occurs through implicit learning. That is, no explicit instruction is needed for children acquire their first languages but rather seem to just pick-up language naturally in the same way they learn to roll over, crawl, and walk.

We can reach to the fact which asserts that second language is not acquired at all, and it should be taught and learnt, or it's just like the first language that is acquired. The paper is to be undertaken is divided into sections and subsections; they introduce differences between acquisition and learning; first and second language acquisition. Then factors affecting second language acquisition (cognitive, affective, and social) are presented. Next, personality and its relation to SLA is presented. After that, the notion of age as an internal factor and its role in SLA is explored.

2. Acquisition vs. Learning

It's difficult for most of people to differentiate between acquisition and learning. The term acquisition refers to the process of acquiring and understanding the language through socializing with native speakers without using materials. While the latter refers to the

process of learning language through practicing or understanding it from teachers who teach the target language.

Krashen (1982: 10) asserts that "language acquisition, a process similar, if not identical, to the way children develop ability in their first language. Language acquisition is a subconscious process". To Krashen, the process of acquisition is conceptualized as picking-up something. Unlike acquisition, learning is to refer to conscious knowledge of a second language. That is, studying and knowing the rules, being aware of them and having the capacity to give talk about them. To put it the other way, Krashen (1982) claims that learning is "knowing about" a language; knowing structural rules of the language being studied. That is, acquiring language is effortless being compared to language learning as one needs to be aware of studying the rules effortfully.

In his book *The Study of Language* Yule (1985: 191) states that "acquisition refers to the gradual development of ability in language by using it naturally in communication situation. The term learning however, applies to conscious process of accumulating knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of language". That is, learning normally occurs with teaching in different contexts, including schools, language centers, large classrooms, in group or pair works, or in face-to-face sessions. While the process of acquisition is experienced by a young child who lives in another country, or picks up another language through spending a long period of time in social interaction (daily use of language). Further, (Harold Palmer) qtd. in (Harmer, 2001) makes differences between 'spontaneous' and 'studial' capabilities in his book *The Principle of Language-Study* "The former described the ability to acquire language naturally and subconsciously. Whereas the latter allowed students to organize their learning and apply their conscious knowledge to the task in hand" (50).

Crystal (2003: 7-8) also delineates the terms as; acquisition refers to the process or result of learning (acquiring) a particular aspect of language, and ultimately the language as a whole. The term is used for child language acquisition, and also used in the context of learning a foreign language: 'foreign' or 'second-language' acquisition is thus distinguished from 'first-language' or 'mother-tongue' acquisition. To him, acquisition is opposite to learning; the former is viewed as a subconscious, natural process, which is the primary force behind foreign-language fluency; the latter is seen as a conscious process which monitors the progress of acquisition and guides the performance of the speaker.

Saville-Troike (2006) also made a distinction between an acquisition and learning he claimed that "Acquisition is subconscious and involves the innate language acquisition device which accounts for children's L1. Learning is conscious and is exemplified by the L2 learning which takes place in many classroom contexts" (45).

From the above-mentioned speeches, it can be concluded that there is an important distinction made between acquisition and learning. Being unaware of grammatical structures, an acquirer pickups language through unconscious process. In order to acquire a language, the learner needs a source of natural communication: the emphasis is on the forms. On the other hands language learning is not communicative instead it is the result of studying the rules of that language. In language learning learners own conscious knowledge of the new language and can talk about it respectively. That is, there are differences between learning a language and acquiring it. Learning are done by helping of proficient teacher or any material used to learn second language and they have role to help learning grammar and vocabulary. While acquisition is different as there are people whose acquisition comes from

surrounding or social interaction. In other way the learner imitates native speaker in communication and understanding what they utter.

3. First and Second Language Acquisition

First language acquisition can be defined as the process in which children acquire their first language. All human beings have an innate ability to acquire language (apart from exceptional physical or mental disability). First language also refers to speaking in mother tongue. Children are able to acquire more than one language and this depends on their surroundings; for instance, children who grow up in an environment in which the only input they have exposure with is English. Consequently acquire only English as their first language. However, if they grow up in an environment in which two languages are spoken will acquire both as their first language. Acquisition occurs unconsciously through implicit learning. Children don't need explicit instruction to learn their first language, but rather than seem to just pick-up language in the same way they learn to rollover, crawl and walk.

First language to (Saville-Troike, 2006) is "the language acquired during early childhood – normally beginning before the age of about three years – and that they are learned as part of growing up among people who speak them" (4). That, is first language acquisition occurs before the age of three and it is acquired naturally by children from the surroundings with a little endeavor, and without special instruction. If they live in a normal environment, they can acquire it easily, fluently and naturally. As (Brown, 2000: 20) declares that "all children given a normal developmental environment, acquire their native language fluently and efficiently; moreover, they acquire them naturally without special instruction although not without effect and attention to language".

Chomsky in his studies qtd. in (Nunan, 1999: 39-40) believes that the process of acquiring first language is an innate process which means that all humans are prepared to acquire their first language; he strongly suggests that "a first language is hard wired into the brain, in other words, that our first language is an innate endowment bequeathed to us by virtue of our membership of the human race". Brown (2000) on the contrary to this, claims that "children came into the world with tabula rasa, a bearing no preconceived notions about the world or about the language and that these children are then shaped by their environment and slowly conditioned through various schedules of reinforcement" (22). That is, human beings' mind from childhood is like a blank paper and affected by the environment gradually picking up the language they hear from their surroundings.

Concerning second language acquisition, it is the process of getting a nonnative language simultaneously or after the acquisition of your native language with little effort or and without formal training or learning. Putting it another way, a second language can be acquired at any time after a child has developed language skills; it can be occurred, if the acquirer would have exposure to a language which is different from their native language. According to Saville-Troike (2006: 2) "SLA refers both to the study of individual and group who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young child, and to the process of learning that language". Gass and Selinker (2008) also describe SLA as "referring to the process of learning another language after the native language has been learned sometimes the term refers to the learning of third and fourth language" (7).

In general, SLA like FLA (Johnson and Johnson, 1998: 131) proceeds in broadly systematic stages. A lot of evidence has accumulated to show that learners develop knowledge of phonological, morphological, and syntactic phenomena as a child do to have a rich language input.

Acquiring more than a language is a normal capability of almost all human beings. This depends on the environment and also on the age of learners. For example, children acquire the second language better than adults. For instance, if you go to a foreign language community in which no one speaks as you do, probably you need to acquire that language. This process can be fulfilled with having exposure to native speakers of the language in different settings.

In a nutshell, first language acquisition and second language acquisition are two different processes which occur within different levels. First language is a process in which children acquire their first language by the help of the environment in which that language is spoken, and it occurs at the beginning of the childhood till being three years old. Children's mind is like a white page. Therefore, they acquire whatever they perceive through hearing. Whereas, second language acquisition refers to the process of learning a language which is not like your native language; second language acquisition resembles first in depending on the environment in which that language is spoken. For example, Spanish people acquire French in France. It can occur after mastering the first language skills and after the age of three, through interacting with foreign people with a little of training.

4. Factors Affecting SLA

It is reported that SLA is influenced by many factors and second language learners are different according to those factors. There are many explanations for that issue. The general factors that affect SLA include age, personality, aptitude, motivation, anxiety, intelligence, and so on. But scholars characterize these factors into three main types which are *cognitive, affective and social factors*.

4.1 Cognitive Factors

Cognitive factor is one of the three main types of factors that affect SLA. It refers to the mental make-up of a person. According to Gass and Selinker (2008) "There are cognitive factors responsible for the inability of adults to learn successfully. Adults have greater cognitive ability than children. Ironically, adopting the cognitive ability in a language learning task has been hypothesized to result in less successful learning than found in children, who, according to the hypothesis, rely to a greater extent on a specific Language Acquisition Device" (413). That is, from the speech it can be construed that cognitive factor is obstacle or don't allow the adult to learn a language successfully although adults ability is greater than children. Adopting the cognitive abilities in language learning according to some theories has been found that results less successful than children.

Mostly cognitive factors divide into two forms, namely intelligence and aptitude. When a person tries to learn something, their success is partly depending on the mentioned two factors:

Intelligence is one of the forms of cognitive factors that impacts upon SLA. It refers to the mental abilities that are measured by IQ (intelligence quotient). According to Brown (2000) intelligence is "a term of linguistic and logical-mathematical abilities" (100). And "people within a wide range of IQs have proven to be successful in acquiring a second language" (ibid., 101).

Howard Gardner (1993) in *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* divides human intelligences into different types or forms, which are (Linguistic, Musical, Logical-Mathematical, Spatial, Body-Kinesthetic, and The Personal Intelligences 'interpersonal and intrapersonal'). Linguistic intelligence is the one intelligence which is regarded as the most essential one. People with significant linguistic intelligent are good at language and enjoy

reading and writing, for example, a student with strong linguistic intelligence may master the target language very easily and use it appropriately.

Regarding aptitude, it is individuals' natural ability to learn something and which has a high correlation to learning success. It has been referred to and defined by many scholars. For instance, Gass and Selinker (2008) state that "it refers to one's potential for learning new knowledge or new skills" (417). Skehan (1989) declares that "aptitude is consisting the best predictor of language learning success" (38). That is, aptitude has an important relation with SLA and not every individual has aptitude for language; the matter depends on the IQ of individuals. Thus, the individuals' abilities may vary accordingly.

4.2 Affective Factors

One of the most important factors among the factors is affective, which largely affects SLA. According to American Heritage Dictionary, the word Affect is "a feeling or emotion as distinguished from cognition, thought, or action" (qtd. in Gass and Slinker, 2008: 398). Affective factors related to "language identity and attitude, motivation and emotion" (Silvina A. Montrul, 2008: 65).

One of the hypotheses which is developed by Krashen was *The Affective Filter Hypothesis* in (1982). In which he proposed that "when language learners with high motivation, self-confidence and a low level of anxiety, they have low filters and so receive and take in plenty of input, on the other hand, learners with low motivation, little of self-confidence and a high level of anxiety have high filter and therefore obtain little input" (31). Krashen related the affective filter with the success in learning and acquisition second language. He argues that affective filter is a psychological obstacle that does not allow the learner to understand and learn well.

According to some scholars, personality is also regarded as affective factors, such as extroversion and introversion, this will be taken up in more detail as an independent section. In brief, it can be stated that affective factors have a great role in the success of acquiring and learning second language. Individuals with a high motivation and self-confidence and with a little anxiety have the opportunity to acquire and learn faster and more fluently than those who have a little motivation and self-confidence with a high level of anxiety.

4.3 Social Factors

In addition to cognitive and affective factors that affect SLA, there is another one, which is called social factors. Social factors are associated with the society and culture the acquirer lives in. Generally, it includes (age, experience, education, desire, necessity and the amount of interaction between people).

There are people who immigrate to another country and they have to learn the language of that country in order to communicate with people there, so they acquire the language faster; most of those people have desire to learn or acquire more than one language for particular purposes, as Jeff Siegel (2003: 2010) pointed out "the factors that affect ultimate L2 proficiency appear to be related to the learner's opportunities and desire to use the L2 for particular purpose in social interaction". Bialystok and Hakuta (1999) confirm that "social factors conspire to ease the effort for young children by providing a nurturing environment, simplified input, educational opportunities, cooperative peers and other supporting aspect of a social context that facilitate the acquisition of any language" (178). To Siegel (2003), the one vital factor taken into consideration is "whether the L2 has a widespread or restricted functional role in the society, whether it is spoken as a native language by a significant section of the population, and whether most of society is

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monolingual or bilingual" (178). As the purpose of illustration, English language is an important language that exists in every country and global language in the world so that everyone has a desire and tries hard to learn English either through courses or acquire it naturally. One more factor that has a role in affecting SLA is "the amount of contact between the L1 and the L2 group" (ibid., 184).

All in all, social factor is mainly related to the environment. It is supported by the acquirer's age, gender, education level, experience, and so forth. People who use L2 in daily communication, who have desire and make every endeavor to learn a different language from their own, and who are educated will acquire L2 easily and properly.

5. The Role of Personality in SLA

Personality is one of the important and effective factors for second language acquisition. Personality is a feature or quality that can distinguish one person from another. It also refers to the individual differences in characteristics such as thinking, feeling and behaving. Gass and Selinker (2008) define personality as "a stable trait of an individual; a set of traits that characterize an individual" (432).

Ellis (2015: 51) asserts that "personality is generally conceived of as being composed of a series of traits such as extraversion/introversion and neuroticism/stability. An array of different personality characteristics such as self-esteem, openness to experience, and risk-taking have been claimed to be significant in language learning". He further states that the process of language learning and personality development mutually affect each other and consequently influences variations in learner's personality.

5.1 Types of Personality

5.1.1 Extroversion

Extroversion or "outgoing" (Krashen, 1981: 31) is a type of personality which plays a great role in acquiring second language. It generally refers to someone who is sociable, outgoing, likes to interact with others and likes parties; takes chance to speak, need to have many people to talk to and don't care of making mistakes while he/she speaks. It is generally an impulsive individual.

Many studies identify the importance of this type in affecting SLA. It has been defined by many philosophers. Gass and Selinker (2008) extroversion means "someone happier with people than with a book" (433). That is, an extrovert person likes to interact and talks more with people than reading and getting information from the books. That is, extroversion is characterized by an outgoing and being sociable.

Thus, a point can be elicited from the speeches on extroversion that, an extrovert person is confident and can do what they want to do. The person who is extrovert or outgoing is likely to be better in speaking rather than writing; is someone who can get faster more than one language due to lacking of shyness or hesitation about what they want to speak; they have a chance to learn whatever they want.

5.1.2 Introversion

Introversion "analytic" (Krashen, 1981: 33) is the second type of personality which contrasts with extroversion. It also has a role in SLA. Introvert can be generally defined as someone who is quiet, shy, and doesn't like excitement, someone who is interesting in reading books rather than being sociable with people around them. They less interact with others and afraid of making a mistake while they are speaking. Gass and Selinker (2008: 433) describe introvert as "someone who is much happier with a book than with other people". Introvert, to (Zhang, 2008: 58) "is a person who is more interested in his own

thoughts and feelings than in things outside himself, and is often shy and unwilling to speak or join in activities with others. In other words, an introvert tends to remain 'in' oneself. If the same problem were to arise, that person might open a book or pace back and forth to come to a solution". That is, the person who is introvert doesn't like to interact with the surrounding; they are less confident about themselves and they depend on their own feelings. Those who own such personality probably have a less chance to acquire second language, they are hesitant and afraid to join others, but they are better in writing rather than speaking.

In general, personality traits and in particular extroversion and introversion seem to have an important role in the process of acquiring second language. It to some extent becomes obvious that the extroverted learners who aspire to learn and acquire second language, are more likely to interact with other people without inhabitation, talk more fluently without being shy or hesitant, tend to take action without reflection, they are easily communicate in the second language, even though they might not produce accurate output. Conversely, introverted people tend to talk less and reflect more before acting, like to be quiet, to work independently with one or two other people, but not in groups like extrovert person; they are more passive rather than actively social. Introvert students have difficulty with producing accurate grammatical sentences with a native-like accent. These characteristics of extroversion and introversion are influential in the ways of acquiring and learning a second language.

5.2 The Role of Personality in Classroom Participation and Oral Performance

Since personality regarded as a significant factor in acquiring a second language; it has been found that there is a relationship between its types and classroom participation. Participation is to be involved in classroom activities and having response to teacher's questions and actively discussing ideas. Some students are passive, who do not participate in the classroom activities, whereas some are active. The active students are extroverts, while the passive ones are referred to as introverts. That is, extrovert has tendency to learn through interaction; however, introverts tend to prefer individual work or pair work rather than being a part of a big group.

Zhengdong (2011) in a study lays emphasis on how personality and classroom participation related are, and how personality affects oral performance. The study found that extroverts are more likely to perform better in L2 use and communication situation. Additionally, being extrovert, a learner interacts with classmates more and communicate with them actively, thus, it may enable them to achieve a higher level of speaking fluency. Generally, extrovert individuals are risk takers and overcome anxiety better than introvert

6. Age of Learner and Its Role in SLA

Like personality, age is another significant factor that has influence on the degree of success in acquiring second language. Mackey (2006: 446) describes age as another individual difference, which plays a key role in second language learning. To Mackey, age is strongly related to the attainment in at least some aspects of language acquisition, as age shows itself to be the strongest predictor of success. That is, learner's age is one of the important factors affecting the process of second language acquisition. It is divided into three main parts: children, adolescents and adults.

The role of age in second language acquisition regarded as a very important issue that has been discussed so far. To (Lightbown and Spada, 2006) the age at which learning and/or acquisition begins is a characteristic easier to be defined and measured than

personality, aptitude, or motivation. And the relationship between age and success in SLA is hardly less complex or controversial (67).

It has been hypothesized that children acquire second language better than adults. According to (Harmer, 2001: 82) children often take in information from all sides, since they learn indirectly rather than directly; that is, they learn from everything around them rather than laying emphasis on what they are being taught. Besides, their understanding comes not just from explanation, but also from what they see and hear and, crucially, have a chance to touch and interact with. Cameron (2001) also asserts that "children often seem less embarrassed than adults at talking in a new language, and their lack of inhibition seems to help them get a more native-like accent" (1).

Talking about adolescents, adolescent learners, despite of their relative success as language learners and having great ability for abstract thought; they often seen as a problem. "Adolescence is bound up, after all, with a profound search for identity and a need for self-esteem; adolescents need to feel good about themselves and valued" (Harmer, 2001: 83). That is, adolescent feel more embarrassed than children in the process of acquisition and one reason of this is their voice becomes not normal. They tend to be better than children in Grammar and morphology but not in pronunciation.

Unlike children and adolescents, adults seem to acquire the second language distinctively. The setting of learning an L2 for children is natural; conversely, the setting of learning an L2 for adults could normally be a formal classroom or through courses. Besides, adults can engage with abstract thought; they have a whole range of life experiences to draw on and unlike young children and adolescents. Besides, they often have a clear understanding of why they are learning and that they want to get out of it (Harmer, 2001: 84). To (Gass and Selinker, 2008) children are better language learners that adults in the sense that young children typically can gain mastery of a second language, whereas adults cannot. This is reflected in what is known as the Critical Period Hypothesis, which is defined by Birdsong (1999) "a limited developmental period during which it is possible to acquire a language be it L1 or L2, to normal, nativelike levels. Once this window of opportunity is passed, however, the ability to learn language declines" (405).

In their paper (Krashen, Long, and Scarcella, 1979: 573) present evidence for three generalizations concerning the relationship between age, rate, and eventual attainment in second language acquisition:

(1) Adults proceed through early stages of syntactic and morphological development faster than children (where time and exposure are held constant).

(2) Older children acquire faster than younger children (again, in early stages of morphological and syntactic development where time and exposure are held constant).

(3) Acquirers who begin natural exposure to second languages during childhood generally achieve higher second language proficiency than those beginning as adults.

Finally, teachers have to be aware that People of different ages have different needs and cognitive skills; it might be plausible that children of primary age to acquire a foreign language through playing while adults and adolescent through abstract thoughts. Harmer (2001) assumes that for adult learners teaching is neither difficult nor easy. Adolescents can be critical of teaching method so that teachers should have enough information about learning in order to be able to teach adult. And adults have a whole range of life experience to draw on and they came to classroom with a rich rang of experiences which allow teachers to use a wide range of activities with them. Therefore, teacher should be able to solve all

difficulty that they may face in classroom and be aware of their treatment toward students (81-85).

7. Conclusions

Being a successful second language acquirer is associated to a wide range of factors, either internally or externally; they can be the level of cognitive development, socio-economic and cultural background, and the ability to acquire the language. Three main factors affecting SLA which are cognitive factor, includes intelligence and aptitude; affective factors are many, chief among them is personality; and age as one of the important elements in social factors. To conclude the present paper, a number of points have been drawn. Learning a language is different to acquire it. People learn a language in classroom, courses or any special programs while they acquire a language through interacting with others people or mainly with native speakers in a foreign country. Acquiring a language relies on many factors, personality and age included. It has been shown that extrovert or more outgoing people acquire a second language easier and better than those who are introvert or shy. Another important factor is age, which has a great role in acquiring a second language. Age of learners is different. It has been suggested that children are the better and more proficient acquirers than adolescents and adults. Mainly because children's mind looks like a white page and they can acquire whatever proposed to them easily or whatever they have exposure with.

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