

The Learner Factors: Guide for Successful Language Learning

SamananSudsard

*Language Institute
Thammasat University*

clair_samanan@hotmail.com

Abstract

Learner factors affecting to second language learning have a crucial influence to students' accomplishment in acquiring language. Several factors, including internal and external factors, result in students' ability to learn. Knowledge about learner factors contributes to understanding of how to manage suitable classroom environment for second or foreign language learning. Internal Factors—intelligence, age, personality and motivation, are likely to play a crucial role in students' language learning accomplishment, while External Factors including motivation, opportunity and environment can bring about students' positive attitude toward the instructor and subject. This paper attempts to present learner factors affecting to second language learning. Thus, the learner factors that help students to learn second language are emphasized. The introduction is provided for giving an overview of second language learners. The definition of good language learners is explained to give an overview of characteristics of those learners. Then, the teacher implication to Thai classroom is discussed to indicate the possible way to support second language learning of students.

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Introduction

In fact, human has special innate ability to speak or acquire at least one language, which is their first language. However, it is amazing that a large number of people can speak more than two languages. These people sometimes are called bilingual, trilingual, or multilingual children. Surprisingly, some of them can speak more than six languages, not including their native language, as perfectly as their native one. Clearly, acquiring or studying only one first language is not enough for children at present.

As we are now in the 21st century, second language, namely English, has played an important role as a requisite or core subject in most schools. One of the major reasons is that English is used as a mean for communication among people. As a result, it has become an important second or foreign language that students in many countries are required to study.

In order to succeed in English learning, several factors are involved in students learning development. According to Tomlinson (2007), first and second language development of learners cannot be succeeded without either practicing or learning. Thus, teachers, as a facilitator, have to understand the learner factors in order to support students' development in second language learning.

What is a Good Language Learner?

Learning a second language is an important and challenging task that learners need to accomplish. Knowledge of the characteristics of a good language learner can help students increase their language learning efficiency. Also, it can help teachers to understand their students better in order to facilitate their students' learning. The meaning of 'A Good Language Learner' may not be directly defined as the characteristics of good language learners cannot be obviously observed. Johnson (2001) summarized seven characteristics of good language learners based on the hypotheses of several researchers, including Rubin (1975), and Naiman et al. (1978) as follow:

1. The good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser.
2. The good language learner has strong drive to communicate, or to learn from communication. He/she is willing to do many things to get his message across.

3. The good language learner is often not inhibited. He/she is willing to appear foolish if reasonable communication results. He/she is willing to make mistakes in order to learn or to communicate. He/she is willing to live with a certain amount of vagueness.

4. In addition to focusing on communication, the good language learner is prepared to attend to form. The good language learner is constantly looking for patterns in the language.

5. The good language learner practices.

6. The good language learner monitors his/her own and the speech of others. That is, he is constantly attending to how well his/her speech is being received and whether his/her performance meets the standards he/she has learned.

7. The good language learner attends to meaning. He/she knows that in order to understand the message it is not sufficient to pay attention to the language or to the surface form of speech.

As personality variables relate directly to the accomplishment of second language learners, understanding learner factors is necessary for all teachers. In fact, many factors can influence the success of language learning. The following factors, including internal and external factors have a major effect on students' language learning characteristics and achievement.

Learner Factors

Internal factors (intelligence, age, personality and motivation)

Some students learn a new language more quickly and easily than others. Some of them are more successful than their companions. The reason is that these learners have differences depend on internal factors that lead them to accomplish in language learning. Therefore, teachers need to know the internal factors in order to create appropriate lessons and classroom activities that help to promote students' learning capability. These factors include learners' intelligence, age, personality and motivation

■ *Intelligence*

Every student has intelligent differences. As intelligence of learners tells limitations of individual learning ability, knowing students' intelligence or background can help to design appropriate content in learning and teaching. Most learners, who have high intelligence, are likely to reach the ultimate goal of learning objectives and can learn thing faster than those who has lower. However, everyone can be a successful language learner if they have a good facilitator and instruction that support their learning. According to Bennett *at all* (2004), the things that learners already understand have a significant influence on whether and how well they can learn something new. So, students' background is an important aspect that teachers need to know in order to create a suitable lesson with appropriate levels of different students.

Reddi, Usha and Mishra (2003) suggest in *A Handbook for Teacher-Developers* that it is important to know our learners so that we understand their;

- educational and social background,
- present knowledge level,
- learning needs and their learning styles,
- values, attitudes, and their cultural background, and
- motivation and desire for learning

■ *Age*

Age is another significant internal factor that influences to language learning. Researchers attempt to find supports and evidences of how children learn to acquire languages. It was found that children at different ages acquire language differently depends on their critical period. According to Birdsong (1999), 'Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) is a limited developmental period during which it is possible to acquire a language, to normal, native-like levels.' This is generally accepted by many researchers in the field of second language acquisition/learning.

loup (2006) claims that as there are some differences between child and adult language acquisition, the critical period can only be applied to child learners only. Young learners are likely to have different learning styles compared to adult learners. Thus, teachers should prepare lessons and materials that are suitable to students in different ages.

Isabel, Quedo and Cabello (2008) study Learning Styles Preference of learner in Peru and found that there are differences in learning styles between young and adult learners. The researchers found that ages have an effect to leaning styles of learners. Learners with the ages of 16-20 satisfy learning using body movement activity rather than the older ages as statistic showed. Moreover, it seems that learners have ability to learn best in this period. However, 21-31 ages of learners enjoy working with individual task.

However, other crucial factors such as motivation, personality and opportunities seem to be neglected from researchers who believe in this hypothesis. In fact, second language learning do not take place only on age of learners, yet it requires strong intention personality, motivation, exposure or opportunities in language usage as determiners of success in language learning.

■ *Personality*

Learners with clearly defined goals and a sense of positive self-efficacy engage in activities they believe will lead to goal attainment (Covington, 1992). Once learners have their personal goal and interest into language, they will learn the language faster, or even easier than others. Some learners will seek opportunities in which to use the new language and to take the risks involved in experimenting with English, for example. Others may prefer to wait until they know that they can get it right. Likewise, personality plays an outstanding role in terms of promoting or demoting native-like learning outcomes. Negative personality factors such as lack of self-esteem, inhibition, anxiety, introversion, and fear of risk-taking, can influence the second language acquisition process negatively.

Alexander Guiora (1972), whose research focuses on personality factors in second language acquisition, holds that “...second language learning in all of its aspects demands that the individual, to a certain extent, take on a new identity.” Since an individual’s identity is developed within a context of communication and interaction, language becomes central to the sense of self. Individual’s sense of self-efficacy or confidence in second language acquirers’ abilities is challenged in the process. Competence in communicating with others can be a key ability to the individual’s self-esteem.

Additionally, anxious learners usually make slower progress, particularly in the development of oral skills. They are less likely to take advantage of opportunities to speak, or to seek out such opportunities. More outgoing students will not worry about making mistakes. They will take risks, and thus will give themselves much more opportunity to practice.

Besides, learners who have personal interest in language learning are likely to gain more knowledge in language class than others. According to Krapp et al. (1992), personal interest in language learning refers to emotions such as love from one's inside leading to being intrinsically motivated to join in a language learning activity. Learners will find enjoyment in learning new language if they have personal interest in language itself.

■ *Motivation*

Another way that leads to succeed in language learning is having internal inspiration or intrinsic motivation which is closely linked with attention. Hussin, Maarof, and D'Cruz (2001) state that six factors influence motivation in language learning are attitudes, beliefs about self, goals, involvement, environmental support, and personal attributes. Students with high intrinsic motivation, a task orientation, and high self-efficacy are relatively active readers and high achievers (Guthrie, Cox, Knowles, Buehl, Mazzoni, & Fasculo, 2000).

According to Gardner, a highly motivated individual will want to learn the language, enjoy learning the language, and strive to learn the language (Gardner, 1985). Once children have their motivation to pursue goals, they will be able to achieve the goals because of their driving force. It is obviously that lack of motivation and enthusiasm denotes absence or deficiency in desire, interest and driving force.

Motivation and enthusiasm manifest as desire and interest that pushes to take action and pursue goals. Intrinsic motivation has been found to correlate strongly with educational achievement. Clearly, students who enjoy language learning and take pride in their progress will do better than those who do not. Gardner (1985) describes individual differences in motivation to learn a second language in term of instrumentalist and integrative goal orientation. Instrumentalist goal reflects a desire to learn second language for academic purposes such as for passing the exam, while integrative goal aims

to learn second language for communication or to become a part of a target community (Koul et al., 2009).

It is claimed that integrative motivated students would sustain their interest in learning and become more successful than others (Caizér&Dörnyei, 2005). This process is established intrinsically, namely, from inside the learners. Gardner (1985) explains simple description of intrinsic motivation that “when the desire to achieve the goal and favorable attitudes toward the goal are linked with the effort or the drive, then we have a motivated organism.” It means that students who have more enjoyment and intrinsic motivation in language learning are likely to reach their competency to the highest goal of the learning than those who feel anxious and uncomfortable in language class. In relation to intrinsic motivation, interest in language learning reflects love and enthusiasm as well as the desire to perform an activity simply for the pleasure and satisfaction that accompany the action and these feeling of pleasure derive from fulfilling innate needs for competence and self-determination (Deci& Ryan, 1985).

External factors (motivation, opportunity and environment)

■ ***Motivation***

Motivation appears not to be only as internal but also external factor affecting to language learning of learners. In fact, once learners lose interest in language learning, progress of gaining knowledge is no longer successful. Extrinsic motivation somehow helps to increase learners’ interest by linking enjoyable activities with positive attitudes toward learning and instructor.

Liu (2003) supports that “teaching content, teachers’ attitudes to students, teaching approaches and teaching methodologies all impact directly on students’ interest in studying the course.” It means that teachers should be as a motivator who encourages students to have positive attitudes toward the subject and instructor in order to gain their language acquisition. Teachers’ role, therefore, is to provide good instruction and materials to promote students’ learning achievement. According to Gardner (1985), instrumentally motivated students are basically not ‘interested’ in English but rather in material rewards that may result from learning English. Some language learners may not have their intrinsic motivation or personal interest in a language; however, they can learn language effectively by having enough support from instructors and materials provided

in class. Once they have enjoyment in language class, their learning will eventually be successful.

■ ***Opportunity***

Another meaningful supportive factor that leads learners to accomplish in language learning is the opportunity to use or deal with language. Most language learners who put themselves into the opportunities of using the language obviously attain their learning successfully. Opportunities allow learners to practice with language in different situations. For instance, English second learners who live in America have more opportunity that provides them to practice and play with the language much more than those learners who study English in their own country. Second language study in a native speaking country is beneficial because learners are likely to have more opportunities to face with different authentic circumstances both in classroom and in community.

■ ***Environment***

The environment in which opportunities take place also affects language learning. A supportive environment effects directly to learners' language competency. For instance, home environment is important to learners when they are supported from their parents with careful attention. Many parents take a good effort supporting their child to learn a language at home by which attempting to use English, for example, with child as much as they can. However, some children cannot develop their second language effectively if their parents lack of enough ability to teach the target language themselves. Parental educational background is, therefore, one of crucial aspects affecting second language learners. Most parents, who do not have enough capacities in teaching a target language, support their children by finding a good English school in order to provide more opportunities for interaction with native speaker teachers to their child. Facing authentic situations in English speaking context can facilitate children to learn second language effectively. Recent research suggests that:

“the language and literacy learning is deeply embedded in the social fabric of schools and homes and that school success is dependent upon a complex combination of home and school variables that may vary from child to child.”

(Hull & Schultz, 2002; Li, 2006)

Once children are put into an environment that supports their second language learning, they will eventually learn and acquire the language. As good environment provides good experience in learning, children will have more chance to participate with instructors and friends. In fact, learning occurs by playing or interacting with people. The more children interact with people using language in different kinds of situations, the higher effective outcome in second language acquisition occurs. Either school or home environment provides learners appropriate and effective learning experiences. Therefore, learners who have acquired general knowledge and experience are in a stronger position to develop a new language than those who have not.

Teaching Implication to Thai Classroom

1. Assess language learning styles of students

Learners' factors are clues that guide teachers in constructing their instruction. Learner differences need to be closely considered for all teachers. Each learner also has differences in intelligence. Teacher' roles, therefore, are observing and finding the most effective way for individual learners. For example, language learners who have high intelligence in visual-spatial skill should be provided with materials includes different kinds of pictures to promote their language learning. As these learners can remember and recall the lesson easily through pictures, visual aids should be used in classroom.

2. Select appropriate tasks with ages

Age is another factor that instructors need to concern. Learners in different age are different in learning ability. Teacher should know learners' ability in different age or level in order to find the most suitable way for instruction. Moreover, different kinds of tasks should be provided to support students' learning in various ways. However, too difficult tasks may decrease learners' attention and enjoyment in learning. Therefore, teachers need to create tasks that are suitable with ages of students as well. All learners should feel free in learning in order to have the best outcomes of learning. Once learners face with difficult time in class because of unsuitable tasks, they will feel uncomfortable and anxiety which may lead to failures of both learning and teaching.

3. *Motivate learners' aptitude and learning styles*

Teacher motivated learning is another factor that guides the students to successful language learning. Achievement of students learning seems to depend on teachers' teaching style as well. Teachers should have different teaching styles that can facilitate students' learning. Various kinds of activities, for example, should be used to support students with different learning styles. Once students are motivated to take advantages from their learning style, they will apply the strategies to perform their learning effectively.

4. *Prepare the learning environment and support learning opportunity*

Individual student characteristics should be observed to understand students' natures and nurtures. Classroom observation is necessary for most teachers before preparing their lesson plans and classroom activities effectively. Also, teachers should create a good learning atmosphere in class to gain students' positive attitude toward language learning. Learner differences that teacher observes in class can also help the teacher prepare a language learning environment that accommodates with age and intelligence. Teachers can use authentic material such as different kinds of magazine, travelling brochures, or local English newspaper to encourage language learners because interesting materials support good environment in classroom as well. Moreover, teachers should provide students opportunity to interact with native speakers, so that they have a good chance to face with authentic situations.

Conclusion

Language learning accomplishment of students undoubtedly deals with either internal or external factors. To support students' learning, teachers should respect the learners' present preferences and encourage their development. While at the same time, they should create opportunities for students to experiment with different ways of learning. In fact, learners have differences in learning ability. Teachers should observe individual behaviors in order to know their learning styles. Although language learners have linguistic performance higher than other intelligences, they still need others styles of teaching that encourage them to learn. Also, providing an appropriate environment and enough opportunity to interact with the language are required in learning. These can help to motivate students to have more interest which eventually leads to succeed in language learning. In order to create instruction activities and materials, teachers need to learn from their students. Learner factors, therefore, are tools that guide teachers to choose the right way of teaching. It is a teacher role to make understanding of these factors in order to help students to accomplish in second language learning. For learners,

intelligence, age, motivation, opportunity and environment are factors that influence in their language learning achievement.

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