

## ***An Overview on Foreign Language Learners' Individual Differences***

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### **Abstract:**

The foreign language teaching learning process had been subject to extensive research that aimed basically at finding out causes of failure in learning a foreign language.

In the twenty first century studies began to consider that these causes can not be limited to the teaching methods since learners present a sum of aspects among them we can cite : prior knowledge, psychological, social, biological and cognitive abilities which are all at work in the learning process.

In the present paper, we'll give an overview of foreign language learners individual differences and their different classifications.

### **المختص:**

ان البحث في مجال تدريس اللغات الاجنبية قد اثمر عن عدة نظريات حول العوامل التي يمكن ان تؤثر على تقديم الدرس او استيعابه من طرف الطالب و قد اعطي المنهج و طريقة الشرح اهمية كبيرة بينما لم يحظ المتلقي او خصائصه بنفس الاهمية حتى القرن العشرين.

من خلال هذا المقال ارتائنا تقديم بعض الدراسات التي حاولت تسليط الضوء على الاختلافات الشخصية للمتعلم سواء كانت نفسية او ذهنية او اجتماعية حسب تصنيفات مختلفة

**Introduction:**

Foreign language learners' problems can be grouped under three elements: first, the problem of dominance of the first language as a reference system as opposed to the new underdeveloped system. Second, paying attention simultaneously to the linguistic forms and Communication and third, the problem of having to choose between intuitive and rational learning.

These problems were subject to extensive research in the twentieth century; researchers tried to understand the psycholinguistic process that enables the human being to gain control over the complex system of communication. However, research on foreign language acquisition led to the study of some general findings in terms of drawing analogies between first and second language acquisition. On the surface, it appeared worth studying how different is the child first language acquisition and the adult second language learning . The process of second language learning was replaced by the second language acquisition on the basis that the natural way a child acquires his mother tongue can be reflected on the second language learning to ensure the same success.

Research on second language acquisition led later on to the investigation of how language instruction can be successful and then to the learner as part of the teaching learning process.

Over the last few decades, a gradual but significant shift has taken place, resulting in less emphasis on teachers and teaching and greater stress on learners and learning. This change was clearly visible through the Northeast Conference (1990) entitled: "Shifting the

Instructional Focus to the Learner” and the annual “Learners’ Conferences” held with the TESL Canada convention since 1991, to key words on the learner-centered curriculum, and “Learner-centeredness as Language Education”.

### **1-Research on the Foreign Language Learner:**

Brown, 1987 considered that second language learners characteristics deserve much investigation and consideration as instruction variables. He states that the ethnic, linguistic, religious heritage, native language, levels of education, socioeconomic characteristics, intellectual capacities, strengths and weaknesses all are crucial factors affecting both learners’ success in acquiring a foreign language and teachers’ capacities to enable learners to achieve this acquisition.

Other linguists, psycholinguists and instructors as Dorniey (2001), Oller(1977) and Stern (1977) tried to find out the effect of learners differences on the learning process of a second/foreign language and how can consider them affect instruction design and cause either failure or success.

As far as the effect of learners motivational and attitudinal variables there are researchers as Dorniey who ratified the importance of these variables in the learning process and outcomes while others had simply underestimated it as Savignon and both presented here with their arguments.

## **2. Classifications of Foreign Language Learners' Individual Differences:**

The study of learners differences varied according to researchers domains and interests we could find studies where cognition , mental abilities and learning strategies are highlighted and others where the psychological features of learners, their ethnic, sociological characteristics, age and gender and motivation or attitude toward the second/foreign language are focused on.

### **2.1.Gardner's Model:**

Gardner's model on second language learning (1979, 1985) is perhaps one of the most acceptable of its kind. It is empirically tested and found reliable. There are three clear stages to this model :

#### **2.1.1 Individual Differences**

This stage comprises four major variables - intelligence, language aptitude, motivation and situational anxiety. Gardner's reasons for listing these four variables are:

intelligence determines how well or how quickly individuals understand the nature of any learning task or any explanations provided language aptitude concerns the degree of talent specific to learning any while motivation concerns desire, effort and the result situational anxiety would have an inhibiting or promotional effect on the individual's performance.

### **2.1.2 Social and Cultural Milieu**

In a sense the model begins with this stage. The child grows up in a community and every community transmits beliefs about language and culture. For example, in many white communities in England, the transmitted belief is that bilingualism is unnecessary. It is difficult to achieve, and if achieved, it is often at the loss of other achievements. Such communities tend to share the traditional United States philosophy of assimilation of minority cultures and languages. In some Canadian communities, quite the opposite beliefs about French English bilingualism and biculturalism exist, thus allowing the establishment and evolution of bilingual schooling. Thus, the psycho-social inference of home, social group and types of language group (e.g. majority or minority feeling) have considerable influence on language learning.acquisition.

### **2.1.3 The Context**

Gardner (1979, 1985) makes a distinction between formal and informal contexts of language acquisition. An example of a formal context is the classroom where the primary objective is language acquisition and competence.

Drill and practice, audio-visual methods, translation, and grammar exercises are examples of a formal, manifest, directed approach to language teaching. Informal contexts are where language learning is not a primary aim. Watching a French language film may be motivated by entertainment needs and hence extending skills in that language may be an incidental outcome. However, formal and informal contexts may overlap. For example, talking to the teacher

in the classroom at the end of a lesson or watching a film/listening to a radio programme both for learning and pleasure are cases where the formal merges with the informal. Gardner (1985) suggests that all the four individual difference variables influence the formal learning context.

In informal contexts motivation and situational anxiety are the principal determinants.

## **2.2- Skehan Classification:**

**Skehan** had classified foreign language learners differences into five major areas:

- 1- Language Aptitude.
- 2- Motivation.
- 3- Learning Strategies.
- 4- Cognitive and Learning Styles.
- 5- Personality Traits.

Skehan considered” Personality Traits “as a relatively less researched area that has importance because it encompasses many features that may directly or indirectly influence the foreign language learning process (Dewaele and Furnham 1999) : like learners background, psychological characteristics and culture .

**2.2.1. Language Aptitude** had seen its most significant development through the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT), (Carroll and Sapon 1959) 7. This device has theoretical and practical importance.

Theoretically, it represents Carroll's views of four aptitude components. These are:

-Phonemic coding ability: which is the capacity to code sounds so that they can be retained for more than a few seconds.

-Grammatical sensitivity: the capacity to identify the functions that words fulfill in sentences.

-Inductive language learning ability: the capacity to take a corpus of material in a target language and make generalizations from that material.

-Associative memory: a capacity to form links between native and foreign language words. Practically, the MLAT represents a method of assessing foreign language aptitude, although it is now hardly used.

**2.2.2 Motivation** has been the other major area for research into individual differences. Skehan refers to a recent research by Dornyei (2001) who has proposed a dynamic account of motivation, based on Action Control Theory. In this model, clear distinctions are made between the pre-actional phase (where Dornyei locates much of Robert Gardner's work), the actional phase, where learning activities are situated, and the post-actional phase, where important attributions about success and failure are made.

**2.2.3 Learning Strategies.** Early work suggested that learners use strategies extensively, and held out the promise that identifying the

strategies used by good language learners would enable them to be taught to less successful learners, and more successful learning would result. But early promise was not fulfilled. Dornyei and Skehan 9 attempt to resolve this issue simply by synthesising the systems which are available. The key issue with strategies seems to be the operation of metacognitive strategies - what distinguishes good learners is their capacity to use appropriate strategies and to select the most effective strategy for a particular learning problem.

#### **2.2.4 Cognitive and Learning Styles:**

Cognitive and Learning styles concern the ways learners prefer to acquire and represent language. Such styles contrast with aptitude, in that aptitude is seen as more of an invariant attribute, whereas styles imply scope for malleability. There is also the possibility that different styles may contrast with one another, but each style may have its own advantages. The major style difference which has influenced the language learning field is the field independent vs. field dependent contrast.

#### **2.3. Lee and Richard Classification:**

**They** investigated the interaction between learning abilities and instructional treatments (Aptitude Treatment Interaction or ATI) should proceed. Previous research related to ATI is evaluated in the context of the ATI premise that characteristics of learners affect their attainment of educational goals (outcomes from treatments). Previous research was found to be inadequate because of weak methodology,



inappropriate hypotheses, and lack of replication. In relation to two ATI goals which are: different instructional methods for different kinds of students should be employed to achieve the same educational goals, and personality dimensions as well as aptitude should be a criterion for placement rather than for rejection or selection in a program), research evaluation uncovered the following: learning rate is a false issue; general ability is related to learning in conceptual tasks; rote and meaningful instruction may serve different kinds of students; the principles governing the matching of learner to individualized instructional environment are not yet known; and the thinking on personality variables as they relate to instruction is in a primitive state.

On the other hand there are many other researchers like Savignon who believe that there is no substantial correlation between the attitudinal and motivational criteria and the achievement criteria. She argued that motivation and attitudes were identified by Gardner as as predictors of success in foreign language learning.

Savignon's view is also backed by Brown who states that we deal with an extremely complex process within a complex organism; countless variables are interacting and it is difficult to identify even the most salient factors.

**Conclusion:**

The above studies had brought to our attention variables that may directly or indirectly affect the foreign language learning process such as learners' social and psychological criteria that can define the

readability of the target language learner to adopt a new behavior typical to that target language ; factors like attitude, personal convictions, social and cultural contexts may affect either positively or negatively the foreign language learning process though there is no total agreement on the degree of the effect.

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