



## ON INFLUENCING FACTORS OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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### Abstract

There are many factors of individual difference that influence second language acquisition, such as aptitude, age, intelligence, cognitive style, motivation, learning strategy, learning belief and personality, etc. The study mainly explores the motivation, learning strategy and learning belief as the key influencing factors of individual differences (IDs) in second language acquisition. It can be concluded that motivation influences the choice of learning strategies and affects learning belief which affects motivation in turn and influences the use of learning strategies. Besides, the three factors interact with each other in second language acquisition. This study aims to help second language learners improve the efficiency of language learning and provide some suggestions about foreign language teaching.

**Keywords:** Second language acquisition; Individual differences; Influencing factors

### 1. Introduction

China has increasingly played an essential role in globalization, which has stressed the importance of learning English in China. A large number of studies have explored English learning in Chinese context. And more and more attention has been concentrated on the Individual differences (IDs) of learners learning English as a foreign language (EFL). However, researches on IDs of learners have focused

mainly on one certain variable such as gender, motivation, learning strategies, etc. The combined effects of several influencing factors in IDs have not been attached great importance to. In fact, only a few attempts have been made to investigate the interaction of different influencing factors.

Although there are many influencing factors of individual differences, the study analyzes the key influencing factors of

individual differences and their interaction in second language acquisition. Here, the second language refers to English. From an applied standpoint, on one hand, this study aims to help English learners make achievements in second language acquisition. On the other hand, it is expected to provide helpful information for English teachers. It helps teachers learn about the characteristics of different second language learners and give them effective guidance.

## 2. The key influencing factors of individual differences (IDs) in second language acquisition

Individual differences (IDs) refer to dimensions of enduring personal characteristics that are assumed to apply to everybody and on which people differ by degree (Dörnyei, 2006). Individual differences play an important role in second language acquisition. The factors of individual difference that influence second language acquisition are aptitude, age, intelligence, cognitive style, motivation, learning strategy, learning belief and personality, etc. In the following, the key influencing factors of individual differences are introduced, that is motivation, learning strategy, learning belief.

### 2.1 Motivation

Motivation is an important influencing factor in second language acquisition. According to Dörnyei (2006), L2 motivation has been conceptualized as a multi-faceted construct that comprises a number of more general, trait-like and more situation-specific, state-like components that direct and energise learning behaviour. Research on language learning motivation was launched first by Robert Gardner. He divided motivation into integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. A learner with integrative motivation studies a language in order to get familiar with the culture of the target language or become a member of the target social community. On the contrary, a learner with instrumental motivation learns a language for

the purpose of better mastering a language to get a satisfactory job or pass the exams, etc. Some researches show that learners with integrative motivation are more likely to master a second language than learners with instrumental motivation, because learners with integrative motivation are interested in learning a language itself. While learners with instrumental motivation are more likely to succeed in second language acquisition than learners with integrative motivation, because they have more passions for learning a language.

Motivation can be also classified into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Learners with intrinsic motivation usually feel happy and satisfied in the process of learning a foreign language, not affected by the external environment. However, learners with extrinsic motivation want to win a reward, such as money, a praise or positive feedback by learning a foreign language, rather than the activity of foreign language learning itself motivates learners. In fact, only if the intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation act together can the efficiency of learning be improved and the better effects can be achieved.

### 2.2 Learning strategy

There are different definitions of learning strategies. According to Oxford (1999: 518), the learning strategy refers to "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students use to improve their own progress in developing skills in a second or foreign language." Similarly, "Learning strategies include any thoughts, behaviors, beliefs or emotions that facilitate the acquisition, understanding or later transfer of new knowledge and skills" (Weinstein, Husman and Dierking 2000: 727). Therefore, learning strategies can be considered as methods adopted by language learners to improve their second or foreign language proficiency, which are used throughout the whole process of language learning and practice.

There are four classifications of learning strategies according to different theories by the scholars.

Based on information-processing theory, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classified learning strategies into cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, and social/affective strategies. Cognitive strategies are applied in the process of learning a second language, which usually include repetition, elaboration, deduction, induction, transfer, reasoning, imagination, keyword method, note taking, etc. Meta-cognitive strategies enable L2 learners to understand and reflect how to learn a second language, which consist of planning, monitoring and evaluation. Social/emotional strategies help provide the opportunities of interaction for L2 learners, such as cooperation, request notes and self-talk, etc.

Based on learning strategies and language materials, Oxford (1990) divided learning strategy as indirect and direct strategy. Direct strategies include cognitive strategies, memory strategies, compensation strategies, which require cognitive processing of the language. Indirect strategies consist of meta-cognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies, which help language learning by some ways. These six kinds of strategies are interrelated and indispensable.

Cohen (1998) believes that language learning strategies can be divided into language learning strategies and language using strategies according to the purpose of using strategies. Language learning strategies include identifying materials for learning, distinguishing the materials from others, organizing materials for easier learning. Language using strategies compose of rehearsal strategies, retrieval strategies, communication strategies and cover strategies.

Wen (1995) divided learning strategies into management strategies and language learning strategies based on the previous researches. Management strategies are related

to the learning process, including setting learning goals, planning learning, selecting learning strategy, self-evaluation, self-identification and self-adjustment. Language learning strategies are related to language learning materials, which consist of formal practice strategies, functional practice strategies, and mother tongue-dependent strategies. Formal practice strategies mainly refer to traditional activities emphasizing intensive reading and listening to learn words and grammar. Functional practice strategies mean adopting communication activities of listening, speaking, reading and writing to learn English. The mother tongue-dependent strategies incline to translate in language learning.

### 2.3 Learning belief

Learning belief influences one's learning behavior to a certain degree. It is an important influencing factor of IDs in SLA.

Horwitz (1987) proposed five types for the beliefs of language learning: foreign language aptitude, learning and communication strategies, the nature of language learning, the difficulty of language learning, and motivations and expectations. Wenden (1999) believed that beliefs of language learning are learners' meta-cognitive knowledge in the process of learning foreign language. Learning beliefs are divided into three aspects: use of language, understanding the language and the importance of personal factors.

In China, Wen (2001) held that learning beliefs referred to the ideas that learners have of the language learning and it had a subtle and stable effect on English learning. She classified learning beliefs into language learning beliefs and management beliefs. Language learning beliefs are their ideas of how to acquire language knowledge and skills and communicative competence better. Management beliefs refer to learners' opinions on the importance of various activities of management, such as setting learning goals,

making study plans, selecting and adjusting strategies, etc.

Learners have different learning beliefs about second language acquisition. In this study, the belief of autonomous learning is mainly involved.

### 3. Analysis of the interaction of influencing factors of individual differences (IDs) in second language acquisition

One's success in learning English is not affected by only one factor. In fact, several influencing factors interact with each other and make effects on second language acquisition.

Motivation, learning strategy and learning belief do not play a separate role in second language acquisition. Actually, the three factors interact with each other and work out together. They are correlated and interactive. For a SLA learner, the motivation of learning a foreign language is necessary and fundamental. The positive learning motivation can encourage the learner to choose some learning strategies and have correct learning belief. The learning belief would promote the learner to learn the foreign language autonomously. Therefore, the learner may become highly motivated in SLA and would select more appropriate learning strategies to better learn a foreign language. In other words, motivation, learning strategy and learning belief interact with each other in SLA. Motivation influences the selection of learning strategies and affects learning belief which affects motivation in turn and influences the use of learning strategies.

In the following, an example is taken and how motivation, learning strategy, learning belief interact with each other is demonstrated.

Motivation influences the choice of learning strategies. Suppose that a SLA learner from a junior high school of China is highly motivated in English, he enjoys learning English. He is interested in western cultures and wants to study abroad one day. He also wants to be a translator in the future. His parents are proud of

him performance and expect him to get good grades. Accordingly, he adopts a variety of English learning strategies. In order to realize his goal of being a translator, he practices his oral English voluntarily. He goes to the English corner and chats with English speakers online. To pass the final English exam and perform best in class, he monitors the effectiveness of his learning strategies and adjusts his strategies in time. When he does reading comprehension, he can guess the meanings of new words according to the context, which saves his time and helps him get more points in exams. He used to learn words by rote, but now he remembers words in the contexts.

Besides, his autonomous learning belief also determines his choice of learning strategies. He is responsible for his English learning. He behaves well in class, and does her homework independently after class. When he is little distracted, he always reminds himself to stay concentrated. After the teacher checks his composition, he can rewrite it and polish voluntarily. He makes his own study plan and finishes the tasks on time everyday. He makes full use of his spare time to study English. After class, he can study English by himself and take part in many English activities. When he meets new words in doing exercises, he will note the words down and look up their meanings in his spare time.

Motivation and learning belief affect mutually. On one hand, his high motivation in learning English impacts his belief in autonomous learning. His internal motivation is so strong that he believes he should take the whole responsibility for his English learning. He realizes the importance of autonomous learning. His strong autonomous learning belief makes him perform well in autonomous learning. On the other hand, his high motivation in learning English is also influenced by his autonomous learning belief. He believes that he should take the whole responsibility for learning English, so he tries his best to keep high motivation, which helps his English learning. His autonomous

learning makes him more interested in western cultures and more determined to study abroad. He also sets clear and specific long-term goal and short-term goal for himself.

Motivation, learning strategy and autonomous learning belief work out together dynamically. Motivation and autonomous learning belief affect each other and both influence the choice of learning strategies.

#### 4. Implications for SLA learners and teachers

Due to the relationship among motivation, learning strategy and learning belief, some suggestions are given for SLA learners and teachers in the following.

For SLA learners, the learning motivation first should be positive. No matter the motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic, the learners have to hold a correct attitude towards second language acquisition and tap the full potential. Generally, the extrinsic motivation can directly and effectively promote the learners' language learning, but cannot endure for a long time, while the intrinsic motivation is long-lasting and is difficult to move. Besides, the autonomous learning belief is also necessary. The learners should foster the awareness of learning autonomously. Finally, the learners need adopt some learning strategies suitable for themselves. Every language learner has different educational background, lifestyles and learning habits, etc. Therefore, they must adopt language learning strategies according to their personality and change or adjust the strategies in the process of second language acquisition.

Teachers should take appropriate measures to teach second language according to the learners' characteristics. First, teachers should make the learners keep the high motivation by encouraging. Teachers can design some interesting tasks or create more opportunities for students to speak foreign language. Modern information technology and teaching AIDS can be used to create a foreign language learning atmosphere, provide

sufficient learning resources for learners, and combine the learning needs of learners with different personalities to build a bridge between knowledge input and practice output in the second language teaching environment. Praise plays a more important role in second language teaching than criticism. Therefore, the teachers had better praise immediately when the learner makes a little progress. And when the learners make mistakes, the teachers should try to gently point out mistakes and comfort them.

Besides, teachers should help them construct the knowledge of learning strategies and instruct them to use appropriate language learning strategies under different circumstances. Some learners may be confused about the selection of language learning strategies, so the teachers need help them select proper language learning strategies in time according to their abilities. Meanwhile, teachers had better monitor their use of strategies from time to time and give some advice when necessary. If the learners adopt the strategies not appropriately, the teachers should find out the problems and help them adopt correct learning strategies.

Finally, if some learners are dependent on teachers' instruction and do not have strong autonomous learning belief, teachers should try to help them form a habit of learning autonomously and provide them with as much space as possible to study by themselves. When the learners have problems in the process of autonomous learning, the teachers should give them immediate help so as to make them keep confident and determined in the autonomous learning.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study has analyzed the key influencing factors of IDs in second language acquisition and taken an example to demonstrate. The three influencing factors are motivation, learning strategy and learning belief. And the three factors interact with each other and act together in SLA. Motivation influences

the choice of learning strategies and affects autonomous learning belief which affects motivation in turn and influences the use of learning strategies.

Regrettably, this study is completely qualitative without the support of data. It is easily influenced by subjectivity. It is suggested that a mixed-methods approach should be applied in this kind of study.

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