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TITLE: INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: Self-Confidence as a Question of Focus

Abstract

When looking at the history of foreign language teaching, one could suppose that teachers have been much concerned with the various range of approaches and methods rather than with their content within a context. Recently, factors involving the individuals' self are in vogue in research on applied linguistics and language pedagogy. A number of studies have shown that a possible correlation may result from connecting learners' self with achievements. To put it differently, affective factors may be considered as one of the vital issues which may determine success in academic performance in general, and learning a language in particular. This article will take into consideration individual differences in language learning and its impact on learners' academic achievements.

Key-words:

Individual Differences, language learning, achievement, self confidence

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1. INTRODUCTION

In language learning and teaching, many educational psychologists place a heavy emphasis on some personality traits that may influence learning a foreign language. It is often assumed that learning a foreign language may be a distressing experience for individuals. For instance, Stengal (1939), discussed in Arnold and Brown (1999:21), used the term "language shock" to describe apprehension experienced by individuals learning a foreign language. Attention was then drawn to psychological variables such

as anxiety, motivation, apprehension, self-confidence and self-esteem within the classroom setting

As language teachers, sometimes a feeling comes to our minds that our lesson did not really succeed notwithstanding the careful planning, good preparation and knowledge of the subject. Teachers often ask themselves questions like: "where is the problem?" is it related to the teaching performance? Or is it because of the learners' interests and motivation? Or because of other influencing factors? Answers to these questions might be crucial for a better teaching experience. Hence, a great number of studies strive to find out reasons behind learner's failure since learning a foreign language is believed to be a complex process (Young, 1999) influenced by cognitive and affective factors which result in individual differences (Tallon, 2009).

2. INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE ACHIEVEMENTS

Individual learner differences appear to likely affect various aspects of language learning in general, and may help determine what practical activities may be optimal for learners' achievements. Individual differences have been researched extensively; making this arena one of the most systematically studied psychological aspects in language research (Dörnyei 2008). The most important result from these investigations was the conclusion that there exist factors which help learners excel within the learning process through the application of individualised learning techniques. In this line of thought, Segalowitz (1997:85) wonders:

Why do individuals differ so much in second language attainment success? After all, every healthy human being in an intact social environment masters a first language to a degree of fluency that, in other skill domains, would be recognized as elite or near elite levels…

Thus, researchers emphasize individual differences from a person to another, merely to the extent that those individualizing traits display permanence over time (De Raad, 2000). With the shift towards more education-friendly and classroom-based approaches to language study, research has taken a new orientation since the 1990s and

turned its attention towards more cognitive theories of learners' *self*. Therefore, bringing language learner identity and personality research more into the line with the cognitive revolution in the field of psychology has created the philosophy that shapes learners' psychological engagement while learning. These patterns of thinking may encompass for example, self-perceptions, self-efficacy beliefs, self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence (Pintrich and Schunk, 2002).

The affective dimension of learning is probably one of the most significant variables which may influence language learning success or failure (Oxford, 1996). Successful language learners often appear to be those who know how to control their emotions and attitudes about learning (Naiman, Frohlich, and Todesco, 1975; Wenden, 1987). Negative feelings can stunt learning process and thus, its progress. Conversely, positive emotions and attitudes may facilitate language learning and make it more effective and enjoyable.

3   Another idea revolves around the "vicious circle" of learning problems where self-confidence and anxiety seem to be at the heart of the issue. Cheng et al. (1999:437) for instance, attempt to unveil the different elements of anxiety in speaking and writing. They estimate that learners with low level of self-confidence are likely to feel little assurance about their abilities to learn another language; they concluded the study by stating that in order to enhance learners' self-confidence, non-threatening and supportive classroom atmosphere is compulsory.

Nonetheless, it is often reported that EFL learners may feel much anxiety and lack self-confidence in the process of language learning. What seems to be noticeable from a number of studies is that speaking and listening seem to be the greatest source of anxiety among students. This point is made particularly strong by Horwitz (1986).

Therefore, quite a number of researchers and language teachers seem to be aware of the urgent need to boost EFL students' self-confidence, both in terms of their general linguistic abilities and also their oral achievement. It is worth pointing out that self-

esteem is one of the primary affective elements (Oxford 1996). It is a self-judgment of worth or value, based on a feeling of efficacy and a sense of interacting effectively with one's own environment. Learners with high self-esteem maintain positive evaluations of themselves (Tesser & Campbell, 1982). Amber (in Tyacke & Mendelsohn, 1986) found that unsuccessful language learners had lower self-esteem than successful language learners.

Similarly, *in* the search for psychological variables that might characterize "*good language learners*", a significant number of researchers in the 1980s and early 1990s focused on one facet of the primary personality trait "*extraversion*" (Beebe, 1983; Ely 1986, 1988) which could be most relevant to foreign language learning, namely risk-taking. The interest in that particular variable at the time was probably not just a coincidence. A few years earlier, Naiman *et al.* (1978) failed to confirm their hypothesis that good language learners (as defined by their test scores) would be more extraverted. This disappointing finding reverberated through the world of applied linguistics (Dewaele and Furnham, 1999) and reduced the initial enthusiasm about the predictive power of this personality dimension on success in foreign language learning (FLL).

From another intricate level, within the hierarchy of personality traits, a further facet which may have an influence on learners' success in FLL is the degree of risk-taking. There is a *prima facie* evidence that the extraverts are more inclined to take risks in using the FL in class (Ely, 1986: 3). Besides, extraverts tend to be more optimistic and hence more confident in the pay-off of their risk-taking. The conclusion drawn from these studies is that whenever learners are called on to perform a task, a number of psychological manifestations come into view.

3. SELF-CONFIDENCE and LANGUAGE LEARNING

In language learning and teaching, many educational psychologists place a heavy emphasis on some personality traits that may influence learning a foreign language. From a motivational perspective, the most important factor studied by the Canadian

social-psychologists Gardner and Lambert was *self-confidence*, which was introduced by Richard Clément who added this motivational subsystem to Gardner's motivation model (Clément, 1994; Gardner, 2001; and Dörnyei, 1999). The concept of *linguistic self-confidence*, in general, is a vital variant that promote either failure or success in language learning. It is often argued that language learning entails much more than acquiring a body of knowledge and developing a set of skills, it is fairly crucial to consider the "self" of the learners and thus, their psychological state to overcome their difficulties in language achievements.

Noels (1994), in his part, expands the applicability of the concept of self-confidence by demonstrating that it is also a crucial motivational subsystem in foreign language learning situations where there is little direct contact with the target language members. Thus, EFL teachers need to be aware of their learners' affective domain when dealing with a task.

Discussing the affective factors unambiguously may help us explain the fact that there is a general consensus among researchers that it represents the emotional side of human behaviour, and it is a vital factor in the learner's ability to overcome setbacks or mistakes that may take place in the learning process. Affective factors denote a very important impact on students' outcome. For this reason, it is important to understand students' feelings and know more about these factors. Many studies were conducted to examine factors that may affect EFL learners' performance; indeed, there are manifold psychological factors that most pervasively obstruct the learning process.

For instance, Krashen (1981) believes that self-confidence appears to be a central aspect of the '*affective filter*' which is defined as a psychological factor which filtrates the amount of language received by learners' brain. This filter may enable learners encourage intake, or valuable input. Thus, the affective filter hypothesis represents Krashen's (ibid) view that a number of 'affective variables' play a "*facilitative, but non-causal, role in second language acquisition*". Krashen (ibid) assumes that well motivated, self-confident and positive learners are more successful language learners. On the other side of the corner, demotivated, anxious and low self-confident learners

can help raising the affective filter and create a '*mental block*' which impedes comprehensible input from taking place.

When affective factors are explicitly discussed, there seems to be a general agreement among psychologists that the notion of self-confidence may be considered as a key-factor in the learners' ability to overcome their language setbacks; it is normally assumed to have an influence on successful language learning. In this respect, Krashen (1981: 75) claims that: "*Not surprisingly, nearly all the available literature suggests that self-confidence is very much related to second language development…, the self-confident, secure person is a more successful language learner*".

Nonetheless, one should be aware that the lack of self-confidence may be an inhibiting factor for learners and this idea is shared by Naiman *et al* (1978) who believe that poor learners, in all probabilities lack self-confidence. Moreover, the higher anxiety learners experience, the lower scores they get, the less confident learners become. On the contrary, the more confident learners feel the higher scores they get. The more confident a learner feels, the less anxiety he experiences in learning as well.

Affective Filters in Language Learning

Krashen's affective filter, mentioned earlier, consisting of the variables of anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence seems to strongly enhance or inhibit second language acquisition by playing a critical mediating role between the linguistic input available in the educational setting and the students' ability to learn. He (1981:75) gathers them as following:

> *Self confident people have the advantage of not fearing rejection*
> *as much as those with high anxiety levels and are therefore more*
> *likely to put themselves in learning situations and do so*
> *repeatedly…[they] are less hampered by the conscious operation*
> *of the monitor because they are not so worried about how they*

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appear.

Thus, it appears essential to have a look on anxiety, motivation and self esteem as significant affective filters.

- **Anxiety**

Like any other affective factors, anxiety is not easy to define, it is has been in the limelight of language research for decades. It is associated with "*feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension or worry*" (Scovel, qtd. in Brown, 2000:151). Anxiety seems to be recognised as one of the most highly examined variables in psychological research (Horwitz, 2001: 113).

Psychologists like MacIntyre and Gardner (1991: 87-92) establish three approaches to study anxiety: *trait anxiety, state anxiety,* and *situation-specific anxiety*.

- *Trait Anxiety* is rather steady personality quality, it is "*an individual's likelihood of becoming anxious in any situation*" (Spielberger, 1983, qtd. in MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991: 87).
- S*tate Anxiety* is a temporary anxiety, a response to a particular anxiety-provoking stimulus such as an important test (Horwitz, 2001: 113).
- *Situation-Specific Anxiety,* refers to the constant and multi-faceted nature of some anxieties (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a: qtd. in Horwitz, 2001: 113). It is aroused by a specific type of situation or event such as public speaking, examinations, or class participation (Ellis, 1994: 480).

In this context, Gardner and MacIntyre (1999: 3) concluded: "*The results of these studies of language anxiety suggest that anxious students will have lower levels of verbal production ... and will be reluctant to express personally relevant information in a second-language conversation*".

- **Motivation**

There seems to be a considerable amount of research on motivation within the

learning process. It is one of the variables which have a strong impact on student's success or failure. The theory of the Canadian psychologists Gardner and Lambert (1972) was one of the most dominant motivation theories of the L2 field for more than three decades. Certainly, the role of others in developing motivation is central to teaching and education, in this fashion, Scheidecker and Freeman (1999:116) believe that "*Motivation is, without question, the most complex and challenging issue facing teachers today*". Motivation is an inner drive or emotions that move people to particular actions (Brown, 2000). Without ample opportunities for motivation, even individuals with outstanding abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, this is what Dörnyei (2008:65) deduces about motivation:

> *It provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process; indeed, all the other factors involved in SLA presuppose motivation to some extent.*

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From another layer of analysis, motivation is affected by many factors as mentioned by Danis (1993:3) "*…interest in the subject matter, perception of its usefulness, general desire to achieve, self-confidence, self-esteem as well as patience and persistence*". As a result, teachers need to be aware of their own possible prejudices with regard to individual differences and psychological variables to help their learners develop the feelings about themselves and be more positive.

- **Self-esteem**

Self-esteem is an umbrella term which covers other basic characteristics and traits. Branden (2001:252) defines it as *"the experience of being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and being worthy of happiness. It consists of self-efficacy….and self-respect"*. As any psychological facet, self-esteem has multi-dimensions which are according to Brown (2000: 145): *global*, *situational* and *task self-esteem*.

- *Global Self-esteem:* represents general assessment a person makes about himself,
- S*ituational Self-esteem*, on the other hand, refers to abilities in specific situation such as foreign language context.
- T*ask Self-esteem:* relates to particular tasks within situations, for instance, within the educational domain, task self-esteem might refer to one subject matter.

In a more comprehensive fashion, Lawrence (2006:6) puts them as follows: "g*lobal self-esteem refers to an all-round feeling of self-worth and confidence. Specific self-esteem refers to a feeling of self-worth and confidence with regard to a specific activity or behavior"*. What is more, self-esteem contributes to learners' failure or success, as put by Brown (1977: 352): "*A person with high self-esteem is able to reach out beyond himself more freely, to be less inhibited, and because of his ego strength, to make the necessary mistakes involved in language learning with less threat to his ego"*.

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In the present research, the researcher duplicates this division on self-confidence to ease the task of measuring learners' degree of confidence regarding speaking skills. In this respect, and in a personal communication with Dörnyei (2011), he states that "*whatever the concept on which you build success in language learning, it can be global, situational and geared towards task*". (Dörnyei, Zoltan. Message to the author. 13 Oct. 2011. E-mail). Therefore, self-confidence displays also a multidimensional facet assembling global, situational and task self-confidence.

Accordingly, global self-confidence might be put as test global self-esteem, i.e., general feelings about oneself, situational self-confidence might be specific feelings at specific situations (learning English for instance), and task self-confidence might be one's skills and competence when doing tasks (confidence in speaking).

4. CONCLUSION

Self-confidence, self-esteem, self-concept, self-image, anxiety, motivation,

language learning achievement, and other concepts are all key-concepts that should be coupled within the classroom setting to frame the relationship between learners' psychological health and some aspects of EFL language processing.

This paper depicts scenery of a theoretical framework to hopefully understand the place of individual differneces in language learning; its abundance of truly creative and humanistic goals supporting and encouraging positive self-confidence in EFL language classrooms as well. A great number of researchers believe that many teachers intuitively understand the importance of maintaining their students' psychological health. However, without offering a specific guidance, teachers may be at a loss as to how to provide this support while at the same time accomplishing more conventional language teaching goals.

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