

論文

Social Factors in the Rate, Type, and Ultimate Level of Attainment of Second Language Proficiency*

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Abstract

Second language (L2) learners vary in how fast they learn an L2, in the type of proficiency they acquire, and in the ultimate level of attainment. This paper aims to explicate these differences by taking social factors into account.

Keywords

Social Factors, Rate and Type of Second Language Acquisition, Ultimate Level of Attainment, Second Language Proficiency

1. Introduction

Learning a language is affected by many factors such as a learner's aptitude, social-psychological factors (motivation and attitude), personality, cognitive style, brain hemisphere specialisation, learning strategies, as well as some other factors (memory, awareness, will power, learning disability, interest, sex, prior experience) (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Ellis (2004, pp. 529-546) lists the factors responsible for individual differences (IDs) in second language (L2) learning, which are 1) *abilities* (intelligence, language aptitude and memory), 2) *propensities* (learning style, motivation, anxiety, personality, and willingness to communicate), 3) *learner cognitions about L2 learning* (learner beliefs), and 4) *learner actions* (learning strategies). Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) argue that the ID components that have shown most consistent relations with L2 learning success are *aptitude* and *motivation*. This has been verified by various correlational studies showing that there have been, even though not significantly strong, fairly strong correlations between aptitude or motivation and language achievement ranging at between 0.20 and 0.60, and the two ID features combine to yield multiple correlations which are frequently above 0.50 (p. 589). Thus, it seems precipitate to conclude that one of the factors is responsible for the language learning outcome, for language learners develop their linguistic skills every day and it appears natural that when chosen conditions change (the factors mentioned above), so do the results, i.e., different pairs of comparisons will produce different views.

A lot of between-speaker variation has been found in the success rate of acquisition. Indeed, there is a much broader range of language proficiency achieved among second language learners than first (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991, p. 153). One of the factors that influences the outcome of L2 learning is a social factor. Barkhuizen (2004, p. 553) states that language learning takes place in a social context which consists of a number of influential social factors. Social factors that have been said to influence the outcome of second language acquisition (SLA) and investigated by a large number of applied linguists, SLA researchers, and sociolinguists are age, gender, social class, ethnic identity (Ellis, 1994, pp. 201-210), language learning contexts (pp. 214-229), learner attitudes (p. 197), acculturation (social distance and linguistic distance) (Ellis, 1994, p. 231; Schumann, 1978, 1986), L2 settings (Siegel, 2003), and educational programs (pp. 193-197).

The following sections will overview the social factors which may affect the variation in the speed of learning, the type of skills they acquire, and the ultimate level of attainment, and how the factors make the learning outcomes inconsistent.

2. Social factors which affect the rate, type, and level of attainment of L2 learning

Research aimed at determining the sources of individual differences in L2 acquisition rates and ultimate attainment has explored various factors ranging from internal psychological and cognitive characteristics to external variables such as the social context of target language input (Paradis, 2007, p. 395). In this article, the following social factors will be dealt with as the most influential factors which have been investigated in SLA research so far: (1) *age*; (2) *sex and gender*; (3) *social class*; and (4) *ethnic identity* (Ellis, 2008, p. 311).

2.1 Age

Empirical studies on the effect of age of L2 acquisition indicate that individual differences in ultimate attainment emerge depending on what age in the pre-puberty years L2 learning begins (Paradis, 2007, p. 397). Paradis cites Jia's (2003) study on differences in the acquisition of plural [-s] in English among child speakers of Mandarin (their first language (L1)) based on their age when they were exposed to English for the first time. There have been several other studies which investigated gradient age effects on English language attainment in both phonology and morphosyntax during the puberty period (Bialystok & Miller, 1999; Flege, 1999; McDonald, 2000; Weber-Fox & Neville, 2001). It appears that age has an impact on the rate and ultimate attainment of L2 acquisition. Nonetheless, there have been controversial debates on its effect that demonstrate that older learners end up being better than younger learners (e.g., Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978), whereas younger learners have advantages over older learners in terms of pronunciation and vocabulary learning (e.g., Tahta et al., 1981a, 1981b; Yamada et al., 1980). There are still others who have shown no significant rate differences between younger and older learners (e.g., Slavoff & Johnson, 1995). As pointed out by Long (1990, p. 274), initial rate advantages for older over younger learners in early morphosyntax should be interpreted as just that - a short-lived rate advantage (cited in Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003, p. 547).

The focus of rate studies moved to long-term ages of onset (AO) effects, namely to investigate whether the age effects would emerge on eventual learning outcomes (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003, p. 547). A number of ultimate attainment studies have indicated a consistent pattern which is presented as a significant correlation between AO and ultimate L2 outcomes, e.g., pronunciation (e.g., Patkowski, 1990).

The most frequently cited study of this type is that of Johnson and Newport (1989), who showed that when factors other than starting age of L2 learning are controlled for, such as length of residence (LOR), motivation, or amount of formal instruction, AO turns out to be the only relevant predictor for eventual L2 proficiency (cited in Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003, p. 547).

Amending methodological weaknesses in their study, DeKeyser (2000) replicated their study and indicated, as with Johnson and Newport (1989), no significant correlations between test scores of their grammaticality judgement test and variables such as LOR, years of schooling, and age at the time when the learners were tested. However, as noted by White and Genesee (1996), studies that have used randomly selected learners with different AOs only indicate that children typically achieve higher ultimate levels than adults, but “leave unanswered the question of whether late L2 learners can ever attain linguistic competence that is indistinguishable from monolingual native speakers” (p. 235). The most important aspect argued by White and Genesee (1996) is that subjects in this kind of study should only be chosen from learners who seem to have achieved native-like L2 proficiency so that researchers can investigate whether they have indeed attained native-like competence (p. 234).

Age obviously seems to have a significant impact on the rate and ultimate attainment level of L2 acquisition between learners, however, it strongly depends on what kind of linguistic features learners are assessed, the level of attainment researchers set (e.g., advanced learners or native-like learners), how much exposure the learners have been given, and how they have been learning the L2. Therefore, it is necessary to be cautious when interpreting research results of the effect of age on L2 learning.

2.2 Sex and gender

The second social factor which has been said to contribute to outcomes of L2 acquisition discussed here is sex and gender. Previous studies of sex and its influence on the outcomes of L2 learning have shown contradictory results. Studies between the late 1970s and early 1990s argued that females were better at learning an L2, in terms of general English proficiency (e.g., Boyle, 1987; Burstall, 1975), vocabulary learning (e.g., Nyikos, 1990), and accent discrimination (Eisenstein, 1982). On the other hand, more recent studies illustrate that male learners are better learners, in terms of listening vocabulary (Boyle, 1987), on the other hand, that there is no difference in terms of listening skills between genders (Bacon, 1992). The researchers attributed these differences to the male and female learners' attitudes toward learning an L2. When they were claimed to be better learners, female learners were said to have a stronger motivation (e.g., Burstall, 1975) and be more instrumentally motivated (e.g., Bacon & Finnemann, 1992), while male learners were more instrumentally motivated (Ludwig, 1983) when they were claimed to be better learners.

Ellis (2008, p. 314) explains that the reason why there have been these mixed results is due to the fact that it is gender rather than sex that is important for language learning. It will not always be the case that females outperform males. Social contexts (e.g., workplace, communities, surrounding people) play a role in individual differences in L2 learning. Ehrlich (2004) argued that gender is not an attribute of the individual but rather something that emerges out of the social practices that males and females are engaged in. There are likely to be differences in whether it is males or females who prove to be the better learners, since there are variations of social practices from one social setting to another (Ellis, 2008, p. 314).

Hill (1987) and Harvey (1994), for example, describe communities in which women were less proficient than men in the dominant, postcolonial language of Spanish because of women's restricted access to Spanish and/or the cultural expectation that they would be the preservers of the indigenous traditions. An interesting example by Polanyi (1995) which shows how gender plays a role in these social practices and the effect on the outcome is described in Ehrlich (2004, pp. 321-322). Polanyi (1995) studied American university students in a Russian study abroad programme and illustrated different types of proficiency

they acquired through interpersonal communications with Russians during their stay. The female students in the programme acquired the linguistic skills to solve problems such as the sexual harassment they received from Russian men, on the other hand, the men enjoyed communicating with Russian females which contributed to their improvement in listening and speaking skills. Given the same length of stay in the L2 country, they indicated different developments in their linguistic skills, which might suggest that males can be quicker to improve their communicative skills through social interactions with the opposite gender group than females, especially when they are in their L2 speaking country and become more instrumentally motivated to use the L2. However, this could be also the case with females when they are in an L2 country where there are nicer males compared to those in their own country.

2.3 Social class

Belonging to or being labelled as a member of a particular social class means that an individual will experience life in a particular way (Barkhuizen, 2004, p. 557) and social class has been reported to influence the outcome of L2 learning. In the 1970s, Burstall (1975) indicated a regular advantage among children from middle-class homes in learning French compared to those from lower- and working-class homes. Olshtain et al. (1990) also demonstrated differences between advantaged and disadvantaged groups based on their socioeconomic statuses in L1 (Hebrew) cognitive academic language proficiency and significant correlations between this ability with achievement in English as a second language.

It is important to state Milroy and Milroy's (1997, pp. 53-54) warning here as cited in Ellis (2008, p. 317) concerning the correlation between social class and L2 achievement, that there may be many aspects also underlying social factors that are subsumed under a label such as 'social class' (such as educational level), as they may sometimes yield more precise correlations than the main composite variable.

Two studies have examined the role of literacy, which is closely associated with social class, in L2 acquisition. Bigelow, Delmas, Hansen and Tarone (2005) showed that the learner variables such as educational and literacy levels among Somali learners of English had a

significant impact on their ability of recalling recasts of their erroneous utterances. The other study by Tarone, Sweirzbin, and Bigelow (2006) reported that more verbal morphology, more plural [-s] forms, more target-like articles, and more dependent clauses were observed among more literate learners compared to less literate learners.

Social class is, however, no longer a straightforward construct, at least in the complex urbanised societies of cities like London (Ellis, 2008, p. 318). Ellis (2008) borrows Rampton's (2006) argument that economic, social and cultural changes have made it less easy to provide water-tight definitions of what constitutes working class and middle class and some linguists have also suggested that class may be losing its clarity in everyday speech (p. 216), which may be especially true in the case of young people. Ellis (2008) concludes that class is less important for success in language learning than it has been in the past (p. 318). It may be true because the 'future' where we are now has become the place where anyone can obtain any kind of information about language learning and free resources for it on the internet regardless of their social class.

2.4 Ethnic identity

A brief overview of the final social factor, ethnic identity, will be presented here. Ellis (2008, p. 318) indicates three important points about the relationship between ethnic identity and L2 acquisition: (1) ethnic identity is both a social and an individual component and for that reason alone it is of special importance for SLA; (2) acquiring an L2 is likely to entail some change or addition to the learner's sense of identity; and (3) a change or addition to the learner's identity may necessitate the learner conquering a number of social hurdles and the extent to which this is achieved will affect how successfully the L2 is acquired. The influence of learner's ethnic identity on L2 acquisition has been investigated by measuring their attitudes towards the target-language culture (Rampton, 1995), the degree of ethnic affiliation (Gatbonton et al., 2005), and ethnolinguistic vitality (Ellinger, 2000). It was found that measures of subjective ethnolinguistic vitality predicted at a significant level reading comprehension scores and final grades among Russian learners of English as a foreign language at an Israeli university (*ibid.*).

3. Conclusion

The social factors which were described in this article: age, sex and gender, social class, and ethnic identity, seem to have various effects on the rate, type of linguistic features, and final outcome of learning an L2, even though, of course, some other factors such as critical period, maturational effects, psychological effects, puberty, and exercise effects are intertwined with those factors as demonstrated by Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson (2003, p. 573).

There are important issues as to the effect of social factors on L2 acquisition stated by Ellis (2008, p. 340): whether the social context has a direct impact on L2 acquisition; or whether its influence is felt only on the rate of acquisition and the ultimate level of proficiency achieved, as there is only limited evidence of a direct effect. It might be easier to examine what kind of linguistic features are acquired differently among learners than assessing a direct effect on how fast they acquire a certain level of proficiency and how high their proficiency eventually becomes because it usually takes years until an effect of a certain factor emerges, even though there is more evidence to show that the social context affects the rate of acquisition and ultimate achievement (*ibid.*). It seems to take a lot of time until L2 learning outcomes are found to be directly influenced by surrounding environments, namely social factors.

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