

## **Lecture 5**

### **Individual Learner Differences and SLA (Beyond the Domain of Language)**

#### **5.1. The methodology of individual difference research**

Skehan (1989) distinguishes two general approaches to the study of IDs: the hierarchical approach and the concatenative approach. The first has as its starting point a theory that affords predictions about how particular IDs affect learning. The second approach is a research-then-theory one. Its starting point is the identification of a general research question as ‘to what extent does motivation account for L2 achievement?’.

#### **5.2. Aspects of SLA Influenced by Individual Learner Factors**

There are two basic possibilities regarding which aspect of SLA is affected by individual learner factors. One is that differences in age, learning style, aptitude, motivation, and personality result in differences in the route along which learners pass in SLA. The other is that these factors influence only the rate and ultimate success of SLA. There are stark disagreement about the role of IDs in SLA. As Fillmore (1979) points out, on the one hand IDs are seen as an all-important factor, while on the other they are treated as relatively insignificant. Research which has concentrated on accounting for differences in the proficiency levels of learners has tended to emphasize the importance of individual learner factors. Research which has tried to examine the process of SLA has tended to play down their importance.

#### **5.3. Identification and Classification of Learner Factors**

The identification and classification of the different individual factors has proved to be problematic. The main difficulty is that it is not possible to observe directly qualities as aptitude, motivation, or anxiety. These are labels for clusters of behaviours and, not surprisingly, different researchers have used these labels to describe different sets of behavioural traits. As a result, it is not easy to compare and evaluate the results of their investigations. Each factor is not a unitary construct but a complex of features which are manifest in a range of overlapping behaviours. It isn't therefore, not surprising to find that a host of terms have been employed to describe the phenomena (affective, cognitive, and social factors/ affective and ability factors/ ; attitudinal/ motivational characteristics).

In an attempt to impose some order on this plethora of terms and concepts, Ellis (1985) proposed to make a distinction between personal and general factors. The former are highly idiosyncratic features of each individual's approach to learning

a L2. And the latter are variables that are characteristic of all learners. They differ not in whether they are present in a particular individual's learning, but in the extent to which they are present, or the manner in which they are realized.

### 5.3.1. Personal Factors

They are difficult to be observed as those identified by Schumann and Schumann. Moreover, they are by definition heterogeneous. They can be grouped together under three headings: (1) group dynamics, (2) attitudes to the teacher and course materials, and (3) individual learning techniques.

#### 5.3.1.1. Group Dynamics

It seems to be important in classroom SLA. Bailey's (1983) study was about recording in some detail the anxiety and competitiveness experiences by a number of diarists. Some classroom LLs make overt comparisons of themselves with other LLs. Another type of comparison, LLs match how they think they are progressing their expectations. Competitiveness may be manifested in a desire to out-do other language LLs by shouting out answers in the class, or by racing through exams to be the first to finish. McDonough (1978), also, reported that group dynamics as an important set of personal variables. He noted that although rivalries can promote confusion, they can also serve as a stimulus for learning.

#### 5.3.1.2. Attitudes to the Teacher and Course Materials

Learners will inevitably have very different views about the kind of teacher they think is best for them. Some prefer a teacher who creates 'space' for them to pursue their own learning paths. Others prefer a teacher who structures the learning tasks much more tightly. Bailey (1980), for example, states a definite preference for a democratic teaching style (the diarists' preference). Schumann, also, expresses a desire for a personal learning agenda in language learning. However, Pickett's (1978) study of successful language learning reveals greater diversity in attitudes towards the role of the teacher. Some LLs wanted the learner to act as 'informant' but others praised teachers who were logical, clear, and systematic (who imposed a structure on the learner). The main generalization to emerge from Pickett's study is that LLs need to feel sympathy for their teacher, and also want him or her to be predictable.

LLs also vary in their attitudes towards teaching materials. In general, adult LLs dislike having a coursebook imposed upon them in a rigid way. They prefer a variety of materials and the opportunity to use them in ways they choose for themselves.

#### 5.3.1.3. Individual Learning Techniques

There is tremendous variety in the techniques employed by different LLs: those involved in studying the L2, and those involved in obtaining L2 input. Researchers (Naiman et al., 1978 ; Pickett, 1978) identify numerous study techniques:

1. preparing and memorising vocabulary lists (LLs have highly idiosyncratic ways coping with this as keeping notebooks).
2. Learning words in context.
3. Practising vocabulary.

### 5.3.2. General Factors

#### 5.3.2.1. Age

It is a biological factor. According to specialists, there is a critical period for language learning.

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) is the claim that there is a biological determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily, beyond which language is increasingly difficult to acquire.

CPH was first introduced by neurologists ‘Wilder Penfield’ and ‘Lamar Roberts’ in their work ‘Speech and Brain Mechanisms, 1959’ and further developed by Eric Lenneberg, a neurologist and linguist, in his seminal work ‘Biological Foundations of Language, 1967’. These researchers, the critical period generally takes place between the ages of two and puberty, which is around 12. Suggesting that primary language acquisition occurs during that age span. SLA will be relatively fast, successful and qualitatively similar to first language ‘only’ if it occurs before puberty.

#### Reasons

According to Penfield and Roberts (1959), a child’s brain is more plastic compared with that of an adult. Before the age of 9, a child is a specialist in learning languages, just like a sponge with water, his brain soaks them up. But, progressively the brain becomes stiff and rigid (9- 19), as Penfield and Roberts (1959) claim. For Lenneberg (1967), language learning blocks rapidly after puberty. So, age influences second language learning as Singleton (1989) states ‘young is better in the long run’. Why? If children learn a second language naturally and unconsciously, it is rather a laborious and conscious process for adult learners due to some neurological changes.

Others’ views:

For Pinker (1994), CPH is not about discourse but mostly about pronunciation (the latter is effected). As a result, A distinction is made between:

1. lower-order processes: it concerns pronunciation which is effected positively when you learn a second language before puberty.
2. Higher- order processes: it is about other aspects as meaning, semantic relation and coherence. Such aspects can be acquired after puberty and we get better results.

Piaget argued that ‘ abstract thinking/ thought’ is developed after puberty. Schumann (1975) states that the affective changes during puberty have a negative effect on L2 learning. Dulay and Burt (1978) claim that The role of ‘ socio-affected filter’. In some situations, the learner is shy and the more he becomes aware of himself, he becomes aware of being a learner, afraid of making mistakes, and afraid of being wrong. Also, the socio-affected filter depends on the reaction of other students ( language and culture).

Other problem (puberty) : learner’s queries

Who am I? Am I going to change if I speak/ learn English? Am I not going to be Algerian anymore? (Language and Identity).

Ausubel (1964) compared between children and adults. The adult learner has a cognitive and affective advantage over the child.

Why?

An adult learner has a greater memory storage (to store in a connected organized way); greater analytic reasoning, greater instrumental motivation (long-term memory).

#### 5.3.2.2. Intelligence and Aptitude

It has been suggested that people differ in the extent to which they possess a natural ability for learning an L2. this ability is known as lge aptitude. Rod Ellis (1997) claims that it is related to general intelligence but also to be in part distinct. For Lightbown and Spada (1993), Learning quickly is the distinguishing feature of aptitude. Peter Skehan (1998) states that what distinguishes exceptional learners from the rest is that they have unusual memories, particularly for the retention of things they hear. John Carroll claims that ‘Aptitude’ is composed of different types of abilities:

1. The phonemic coding ability ( auditory ability): to idetify and memorize new words.

2. Grammatical sensitivity: To understand the function of particular words in sentences.
3. Inductive language learning ability: To figure out grammatical rules from language samples.
4. Rote learning ability: it stands for the memory of new words.

Jeremy Harmer(2001) asks the following queries in the second edition of his outstanding book ‘ The Practice of English Language Teaching’:

Are there different kinds of learners?

Are there different behaviours in a group?

How can we tailor our teaching to match the personalities in front of us?

Reid (1995) claims that we only have to glance for a moment at any class to realize the number of different ways in which students are learning.

#### 5.3.2.3. Inhibition

It has been suggested that ‘inhibition’ discourages risk- taking which is necessary for progress in language learning. This is often considered to be a particular problem for adolescents, who are more self-conscious than young learners (Lightbown and Spada, 1993). In the same idea of inhibition Arnold and Brown say that when we are children we were not inhibited and could participate freely in the learning adventure, taking risks as needed . When we learn we have to gamble a bit, to be willing to try out hunches about the language and to take a reasonable risk of being wrong. Inhibitions develop when small children gradually learn to identify a ‘self’ that is distinct from others, and their affective traits begin to form. With greater awareness comes the need to protect a fragile ego, if necessary by avoiding whatever might threaten the self. Strong criticism and words of ridicule in the class can greatly weaken the ego; and the weaker the ego, the higher the walls of inhibition. Dufeu (1994) Speaks of establishing an adequate affective framework, so learners, ‘ feel comfortable as they take their first, public steps in the strange world of a foreign language. To achieve this one has to create a climate of acceptance that will stimulate self-confidence, and encourage participants to experiment and to discover the target lge, allowing themselves to take risks without feeling embarrassed’.

#### 5.3.2.4. Attitudes and Motivation

In fact, attitudes and motivation are two problematic concepts to be defined separately. Any one’s actual performance is ruled by particular needs and interests. But the latter cannot be directly observed ; they can only be inferred

from that actual observable production. In SLA research, the distinction between these concepts is not always crystaline. For example, Schumann (1978) considers 'attitudes' as a social factor, and motivation as 'an affective one'. And Gardner and Lambert (1972) think that motivation has to do with the LLs' global goal or orientation, and 'attitude' is that perseverance from the part of the language learner achieve/ reach their goals. The researchers claim that there is no particular cause to predict any association between the two concepts, because the attitudes attributed to variant learning tasks are distinct from motivation and its types. In contrast, Gardner (1979) states that both concepts are linked and serve as supports to the learner's general orientation. After what has been presented, it seems that there is no overall approval about what each concept includes, nor is the relation between both constructs. The abstractness of the latter paved the way to this controversy in the field (Ellis, 1985).

Stern (1983) makes a clear distinction between : (A) Attitudes towards the community and people who speak the L2 (group specific attitudes) ; (B) Attitudes towards learning the language concerned, and (C) Attitudes towards languages and language learning in general. And concerning the link between attitudes and L2 performance, Gardner and Lambert (1972) explain that the learner's "motivation to learn is thought to be determined by his attitudes towards the other group in particular and by his orientation towards the learning task itself" (p. 3). As a result, researchers believe that affective language teaching strategies can encourage students to hold more positive attitudes towards the learning process in general and learning EFL in particular.

In addition, although it has a powerful factor in SLA, 'motivation' is a sophisticated phenomenon to be defined. Two aspects are to be taken into consideration : the first is the communicative needs and wants of LLs ; and the second aspect has to do with the LLs' attitudes towards the second/ foreign language community (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). What is more important is that the effects of motivation are not to be seen on the route of acquisition but rather on the success of second/ foreign language acquisition. One of the lacking confirmations in correlational studies is whether motivation that leads to successful learning, or successful learning that engenders motivation (Ellis, 1985). Moreover, investigation has shown that instrumental motivation and integrative motivation are linked to success in second/ foreign language learning. These concepts were coined by Gardner and Lambert (1972). Instrumental motivation happens when the learner's goals for learning the L2 are 'functional, i.e., this has to do with the more immediate or practical goals. Instrumentally motivated learning examples can be demonstrated in passing an exam, further career opportunities, or facilitating study of other subjects through the medium of

the L2. And language learning for personal growth and cultural enrichment is the integrative type of motivation.

#### 5.3.2.5. Personality

Affective factors such as learners' personalities can influence the degree of anxiety they experience and their preparedness to take risks in learning and using an L2, according to Rod Ellis (1997). And in the second edition of 'How Languages are learned', Lightbown and Spada (1993) claim that it's often argued that an extroverted person is well suited in language learning. James Arnold and Douglas Brown, in an article entitled 'A map of the terrain', state that extroverts are often stereotyped as out-going and talkative and, therefore, better language learners. Since they are more likely to participate openly in the classroom, and seek out opportunities to practise, and this is what Lightbown and Spada (1993) refer to as assertiveness and adventurousness. Arnold and Brown continue to say that introverts, by implication, might be less apt language learners, since they are too reserved, and too self-restrained. They go further to say that extroversion has to do with the need of receiving ego enhancement, self-esteem and a sense of wholeness from the other. While introversion has to do with the degree that individuals derive this sense (of wholeness) from within themselves. Introverts can have a great inner strength of character. And here comes the role of the teacher who 'must' be sensitive to learners' reticence in participating in tasks that require expansiveness and overt sociability as drama, role-play and the like. And they can lead them towards these very useful activities in a suitable manner.

#### 5.3.2.6. Anxiety

It is associated with negative feelings such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension and tension. Heron (1989) makes reference to what he terms 'existential anxiety' which has three interconnected components: Acceptance anxiety: will I be accepted, wanted, liked?; Orientation anxiety: Will I understand what is going on?; and Performance anxiety: Will I be able to do what I've come to learn? Heron (1989) states that anxiety means, the 'repressed distress of the past- the personal hurt, particularly of childhood, that has been denied so that the individual can survive emotionally'.

#### Causes of Anxiety

They are not always clear. For some people it may be a case of having been ridiculed for a wrong answer in class. In many cases 'archaic anxiety' is the reason. The unhealed past wounds may impinge on present situations with potentially threatening elements. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) find that Anxiety is a response learned through early experiences, and that it can increase until the

whole process of learning is badly damaged. They emphasize the need for 'humanistic' approaches for teaching. Eysenck (1979) Concludes that;

‘ Anxiety makes us nervous, afraid, worried and thus contributes to poor performance. And worry wastes energy that should be used for memory and processing on a type of thinking which in no way facilitates the tasks at hand’.

#### 5.3.2.7. Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

It is defined as ‘the intention to initiate communication, given a choice’ (MacIntyre et al., 2001, p. 369). WTC is a complex construct, influenced by a number of other individual difference factors such as ‘communication anxiety’, ‘perceived communication competence’ and ‘perceived behavioural control’. It is of obvious interest to communicative language teaching (CLT), which places a premium on learning through communicating, further, it would seem that LLs’ willingness to communicate depends in part on their personality and in part on their intrinsic motivation to perform specific classroom activities.

#### 5.3.2.8. Learning Strategies

They help learners become more autonomous and autonomy requires conscious control of one’s own learning process. All lge learning strategies are related to the features of ‘ control, goal-directedness, autonomy and self-efficacy’ (Oxford, 2001).

According to Chamot and O’Malley (1994), language learning strategies can be described within the cognitive model of learning. The latter indicated that learning is an active, dynamic process in which learners select information from their environment, organize the information, relate it to what they already know, retain what they consider to be important, use the information in appropriate contexts, and reflect on the success of their learning efforts.

The term learning strategies refers to techniques, behaviours, actions, thought process, problem solving, or study skills taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to a new situation ( Oxford and Crookall, 1989 ; Oxford, 1990), and enable more independent, autonomous, lifelong learning (Allwright, 1990 ; cited in Ehrman et al. 2003). There are many other definitions of learning strategies. All of them imply learner’s conscious movement toward a language goal (Bialystok 1990; Oxford 1990; cited in Ehrman et al. 2003).

#### The Classifications

Cohen ( 2003) provided these main strategy classification schemes.



- 1.By goal: to learn a language or to use it.
- 2.By language skill (receptive; productive; skill-related strategies).
- 3.By function ( Oxford, 1990: cognitive, metacognitive, affective, or social)

Oxford (2001)

### Cognitive Strategies

They help students make and strengthen associations between new and already known information. They facilitate the mental restructuring of information. Examples : guessing from context ; analysing ; reasoning inductively and deductively ; taking systematic notes ; reorganizing information ?

### Mnemonic Strategies

They help students to link a new item with something known. Examples : body movement (TRP).

### Metacognitive Strategies

They help learners manage :

1. Themselves as learners : self-knowledge strategies include identifying one's own interests, needs, and learning styles preferences. 'Learning Styles' are the broad approaches that each learner brings to lge learning or to solving any problem visual ;auditory ; kinesthetic ; global ; analytic ; concrete-sequential ; intuitive-random ; ambiguity-tolerant ; ambiguity-intolerant). Knowledge of learning styles helps learners choose strategies that comfortably fit with their learning styles.
2. The general learning process : identifying available resources, deciding which resources are valuable for a given task, setting a study schedule, finding or creating a good place to study, establishing general goals for language learning. Others : deciding on task-related ( as opposed to general) goals for lge learning ; paying attention to the task at hand ; planning for steps within the language task ; reviewing relevant vocabulary and grammar ; finding task-relevant materials and resources, deciding which other strategies might be useful and applying them ; choosing alternative strategies if those do not work and monitoring lge mistakes during the task.
3. Specific learning tasks

### Affective Strategies

They include one's feelings (anxiety, anger and contentment). Using a language learning diary to record feelings about language learning can be very helpful, as can 'emotional checklists' (deep breathing ; laughter ; positive self-talk ; praising oneself for performance)

### Social Strategies

They facilitate learning with others and help learners understand the culture of the language they are learning. Examples : asking questions for clarification or confirmation ; asking for help ; learning about social or cultural norms and values and studying together outside the class. They are crucial for communicative language learning.

### 5.4. The 'Good Language Learner'

After our own experience with language learning or that of our siblings, relatives or friends or other people around us, we come to conclude that the inherent individual differences are accounted for language learning success or breakdown (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). In the educational setting, extrovert LLs are stereotyped as successful language LLs as they are talkative, outgoing and search for opportunities to practise language skills. In addition to extroversion, as being a personality trait, intelligence, aptitude, motivation and age are believed to be other characteristics that are responsible for successful language learning and foresee its continuity (ibid). Moreover, a quick glance at any SL/ EF classroom can capture the countless differences among students. And even in the considered ideal conditions, the language LLs' learning pace is still contrasting : some progress rapidly (high achievers) but others continue to struggle in achieving a slow progress (low achievers) (Lightbown and Spada, 2006 ; Reid, 1995). Motivation, intellectual abilities, personality and learning preferences are some of the characteristics that have been thought to contribute to successful language learning by Naiman et al., (1995). Furthermore, LLs' attitudes to language remains an established fact in applied linguistic research because it determines to a large extent the degree of success in acquiring a second or a FL (Baker, 2001 ; Gardner, 2001 ; Gass and Selinker, 2001 ; Rastegar and Gohari, 2016).

### IDs' Instruction

The well-establishment of the study of individual differences in learning is discussed thoroughly in many researchers' works (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009 ; Robinson, 2002 ; Skehan, 1989). Also, it has been scrutinized that the impact that instruction has on the cognitive and social processes as well as language learning is mediated by individual learner factors (Ellis, 2012). Different scholars explore the relationship between individual learner factors and L2

learning (ibid). Indeed, it has been found that learning outcomes are influenced by a set of individual learner factors. The latter have been traditionally separated into three factors : cognitive, affective and motivational. However, from a neuropsychological perspective, Dörnyei (2009) finds it difficult to make such a distinction. In fact, Ellis (2012) distinguishes Six crucial processes that have been thought to be included in language learning and instruction is viewed as a tool or way to activate such processes (pp. 308-310) :

1. noticing : the learner consciously attends to a linguistic form in the input.
2. Rehearsing : the learner rehearses the form in working memory.
3. Semantic processing : the learner constructs a form-function mapping by assigning meaning to a linguistic form.
4. Comparing : the learner compares the form noticed in the input with her own mental grammar, registering to what extent there is a 'gap' between the input and her grammar.
5. Rule-formation : the learner constructs an explicit rule to account for the new information derived from the above processes.
6. Integrating : the learner integrates a representation of the new linguistic feature into implicit memory and, if necessary, restructures the existing mental grammar.

In addition, LLs' 'receptivity' to instruction is considered as a key concept to understand that mediating role played by individual differences to ensure the effectiveness of language instruction (Ellis, 2012). 'Openness to instruction' rather than defensiveness is another equivalent terminology to 'receptivity' given by Allwright and Bailey (1991). The way (s) LLs perceive the teacher as a person, their different preferences to the participatory-structures, the teaching method and instructional materials, and communication apprehension are some examples of LLs' openness to language instruction (Allwright and Bailey, 1991). Also, 'receptivity' urges the need to consider LLs' affective factors and their eminent impact on instruction. Allwright and Bailey (1991) give much importance to LLs' anxiety and competitiveness. In a nutshell, as Harmer (2001) states, "the moment we realise that a class is composed of individuals (rather than being some kind of unified whole), we have to start thinking about how to respond to these students individually so that while we may frequently teach the group as a whole, we will also, in different ways, pay attention to the different identities we are faced with" (p. 85).