

Factors Influencing the Learning of a Second/ Foreign Language

5- PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS: Motivation and attitude

Researchers in the psychology of second language learning have investigated a number of learner characteristics that have implications for language classroom. An understanding of such characteristics, “ variables “, can make it possible for teachers and material designers to adjust, and vary certain aspects of the classroom to allow for the different individuals in it. Among these psychological factors: motivation and attitude

5-1- Motivation

Motivation has been defined as the inner drive or desire that someone has to do something. Its intensity varies from one person to another because of environmental reasons. Motivation is the thoughts and feelings we have which make us want to do something, continue to want to do it and turn out wishes into actions. Learning a second language requires this drive in all its types. Success in learning L2 is closely tied to motivation.

Gardner (1985) proposed three components to define motivation in the form of equation:

Motivation = effort + desire to achieve a goal + attitudes.

In other words a motivated individual is the one who wants to achieve a particular goal, devotes considerable efforts to achieve this goal, and experience satisfaction in the activities associated with achieving this goal.

Two types of motivation have been distinguished: integrative and instrumental. When an L2 learner wishes to integrate himself with the people and culture of L2, he is said to be integratively motivated. But, when a person learns an L2 as a means to attain a high social or economic status, furthering a

career, or meeting an educational requirement, he is said to be instrumentally motivated.

Which of these two types leads to more success in SLA? At first, it was thought that integrative motivation leads to better achievement in language learning. Later on, it was discovered that instrumental motivation worked just as well. Note here that the distinction between the two is not always clear.

It is also the case that the specific context in which SLA occurs plays an important role in its success. If a student realizes that he has to learn an L2 for his study courses, he will learn it. Similarly, success in learning an L2 may also depend on whether it is a second or foreign language. Finally, we may mention that motivation increases with the increase in proficiency.

According to Naiman (1978), motivated learners have the following characteristics:

- 1- Positive task orientation: the learner is willing to tackle tasks and challenges, and has confidence in his or her success.
- 2- Ego-involvement : the learner finds it important to succeed in learning in order to maintain and promote his or her own (positive) self-image
- 3- Need for achievement : the learner has a need to achieve , to overcome difficulties and succeed in what he or she sets out to do
- 4- High aspiration: the learner is ambitious, goes for demanding challenges, high proficiency, top grades.
- 5- Goal orientation : the learner is very aware of the goals of learning , or of specific learning activities , and directs his or her efforts towards achieving them
- 6- Perseverance : the learner consistently invests a high level or efforts in learning
- 7- Tolerance of ambiguity: the learner is not disturbed or frustrated by situations involving a temporary lack of understanding or confusion; he or she can live with these patiently, in the confidence that understanding will come later.

5-2 Attitude

People form positive or negative attitudes towards a learning task. This certainly affects their success in achieving that task. In SLA, there are a variety of attitudes that the learner may have. These may be grouped under three main types : a) attitudes toward the speakers of the L2, b) attitudes toward learning a specific L2, and c) attitudes toward language learning in general) .It has been demonstrated that a positive attitude toward L2 and its speakers is a factor in successful SLA .

But it is also important to note that the context of SLA is significant in maximizing or minimizing the role of the attitude (positive or negative) of the learners in their success in SLA. Learners who maintain positive attitudes toward the L2 and its speakers, culture, etc..., show varying degrees of success depending on whether, to them, that language is a second or a foreign language. Like motivation, it has been found that learner's attitudes were positively enhanced with greater proficiency.

6- Socio-cultural factors

This is another class of factors that influence SLA. It has been long recognized that cultural differences and barriers may help or hinder learning a second language. A language is part of the culture of the people who speak it: they cannot be separated. To acquire a language means acquiring its cultural context. When dealing with the different aspects of this dimension and their relationship to SLA, we need to remember that the role of the cultural factors in language learning is indirect. Their impact on SLA is seen through their shaping of the psychological disposition (attitude, motivation, etc...) of the learners toward the activity of learning.

All of us have formed views of the societies and cultures that we are acquainted with. Some of these views are sweeping generalizations that might involve biased, exaggerated beliefs, called "stereotypes". We believe that Americans are this, the French are that, or Chinese is a most difficult language, and French is most civilized, etc... These socio-cultural stereotypes are usually based on some actual aspects of difference between cultures. Nevertheless, it

depends on the people whether they keep an open mind before these differences and accept them or not.

Although stereotyping is 'human', we need to be aware of its negative consequences on our views of the world cultures. It could lead to unrealistic views of the others and will, therefore, shape our attitude toward them, their culture, and all the products of their culture. Positive or negative attitudes toward a certain culture have been found to affect the success of learning its language, positively or negatively, as was mentioned above.

Another socio-cultural aspect of SLA is that of **acculturation**. Language can only be understood within its own social context. Thus, SLA is learning a second culture. That is, the learner must be adapted to the new culture.

After the first stage of euphoria, the learner may experience what is called a **cultural shock**, a wide range of anxiety forms, resentment, estrangement, anger, irritation, This is a crucial stage in the process of acculturation and needs to be taken into consideration by second language teachers, so that this cultural shock may become an experience of greater cultural awareness with positive influence of language learning.

We also need to take into consideration another cultural aspect which is of importance, here. This is the social distance between the two cultures that the language learner deals with: his native culture and the L2 culture. Some cultures are, or are perceived to be, similar or close, while others are taken to be distant. Germans think that they have much similarity with the English or the Americans. By comparison, Americans and Japanese are culturally dissimilar. What makes social distance wider depends on the dominance or subordination of one of the two cultures in relation to the other. If the social distance between the two cultures is perceived to be wide by the learner of L2, then we expect this to affect his attitude toward his L2 and would, eventually, affect his success in acquiring it.