

**Third Year**  
**LINGUISTICS – Lecture 2 – Part 1**

## **Factors Influencing the Learning of a Second/ Foreign Language**

The success of second language acquisition varies along a number of dimensions. Many factors seem to play a role in deciding the success or otherwise of learning a second/foreign language. Different people seem to achieve different levels of mastery in the second language they learn. While all children master their native languages, this is not the case in L2 learning. Some acquire L2 with facility and achieve a mother tongue, or close to mother tongue, competence; others are not so fortunate. Age usually comes to one's mind as an explanation. But there are other factors that enter into the picture. Besides age, we shall discuss the biological factors that play a role in SLA, the socio-cultural factors, personality factors, cognitive factors, and the linguistic factors.

### **1- Age**

The age factor has been the subject of research more than any factor in SLA. It is more easily measured than others, and more closely related to the issues of L1 acquisition. The main questions that have been raised in this connection are: does the age of the learner affect the rate of learning? Does it affect the route of the learning? And, does it affect the success of SLA?

Research has shown that age does not affect the route of SLA. Adults follow the same order of development in the acquired structures as that followed by children learning L2. Many studies have found that Children, adolescents, and adults who learn a second language go through the same stages. However, the age at which the learner starts learning the L2 affects the rate of the learning. It has been found that adolescent learners learn more rapidly than either children or adults. That is, when children, adolescents, and adults were compared for their rate of progress, it turned out that adults progressed more quickly than children, but teenagers (12 - 15 years old) were quicker than the other two groups. This is true with grammar and vocabulary. As for pronunciation, there doesn't seem to be any significant difference in the acquisition rate among the different age groups.

When we come to the success level of SLA, we also find that it is affected by the starting age, and of course, by the period of learning, or the length of exposure to L2. The longer the learner is exposed to L2, the more native-like his L2 mastery becomes, and the more communicative fluency he will attain in that language. The starting age greatly influences the success of SLA. Children learners of L2 seem to achieve a more native-like mastery of the language they are learning, particularly in pronunciation.

## **2- Neurological factors**

The discussion of the role that the neurological (brain) development plays in SLA is indistinguishable from the above discussion of the age role. There, we have talked about the critical period at which language acquisition is optimal and most successful. One of the reasons provided for the existence of such a stage is its association with neurological development -- i.e. with the beginning and completion of the process of brain lateralization. It was claimed above that language acquisition -first and second -before the completion of lateralization seems to be more successful, and that with lateralization the mind loses its plasticity and the task becomes more difficult.

Some researchers, however, have suggested that there are different age periods for the successful acquisition of the different aspects of L2. There are lower order processes, such as pronunciation, which are dependent on early neurological development. On the other hand, the higher order functions, such as syntactic and semantic relations and communicative functions, depend in their acquisition on later neurological development. This explains the different rate and success of SLA in two areas of pronunciation, on the one hand, and grammar and vocabulary on the other.

## **3- Cognitive factors**

Another domain that is closely related to SLA is the cognitive domain. The relationship between cognitive development and language acquisition has been long established by such cognitive scholars as Piaget. Each stage in language development is connected to a specific cognitive stage. A rather important cognitive stage occurs at puberty. Around this time, people develop their formal thinking and their ability for observation, and they can bring these newly-developed abilities into the task of language learning. This is responsible for the

noticeable difference between child and adult L2 acquisition. While adults approach learning L2 consciously and analytically, children do it unconsciously. It is said that very young children learning a second language do not realize that they are dealing with another linguistic system.

Three layers of cognitive variables can be taken into consideration:

- The cognitive processes such as signal learning, stimulus-response learning, problem solving.
- Cognitive style: the different ways, different people approach a learning problem.
- Learning strategies or techniques: these include good, accurate guessing, the wish to communicate, repetition, translation, note-taking, deduction, asking questions for clarification.

#### **4- Personality factors**

The learner's personality plays a big role in his acquisition of L2

##### **4-1- Self-esteem**

Learners who evaluate themselves highly in performing specific tasks have been found to be successful language learners

##### **4-2- Extroversion**

Extrovert people look for affirmation or self-esteem and fulfillment from others. Introverts do not seek affirmation from others. Generally, extroverts are believed to be better language learners than introverts. However, it was found that introverts were significantly better in their pronunciation.

#### **5- Anxiety**

Anxiety seems to impede performance. However, it has also been found that anxiety would motivate the learner to try again or fight the learning task. There are two types of anxiety: Facilitative anxiety, which makes the learner repeat his attempt at a given task, and Debilitative anxiety which inhibits the learner since it motivates him to avoid the new learning task.

### **5-1 Risk-taking**

It is seen as a good quality teachers favour in classrooms. People who are more willing to take risks, to guess, and to use the knowledge they have acquired, and are less hesitant to try than others, are better language learners.

### **5-2- Empathy**

It is the ability to put oneself in another's place. That is to say, understanding and feeling what others understand and feel. Successful communication requires empathy. In SLA, empathic learners are expected to be better language learners.

### **5-3 Inhibition**

It is closely related to self-esteem. Less inhibited persons are expected to be better language learners.