
Individual Differences in English Language Acquisition: A Study of Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK) Undergraduates

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Abstract

Second language learning outcomes vary among individuals due to a variety of factors, such as; personality factors, social effects, strategy usage, age and individual differences. The study examined these factors and how they interact to influence language acquisition, as well as their relationship in the acquisition of a second language using the English language situation in Nigeria. Data were obtained using self-administered questionnaires distributed among students of the Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria. They were represented on tables, and analyzed using the descriptive statistics of simple percentages. The results showed that there are factors that influence individual differences in the acquisition of English language as a second language. The strategies to manage these differences for a successful acquisition of the English Language were recommended.

Keywords: English Language, Acquisition, UNIZIK, Undergraduates

Introduction

Learners vary enormously in how successful they are in acquiring a language. This is especially true in second language (L2) acquisition. In the case of L2 acquisition (SLA), learners vary not only in the speed of acquisition but also in their ultimate level of achievement, with a few achieving natives like competence and others stopping far short. Why these differences occur is what some explanatory factors identified in this study seek to achieve. Individual difference research has a considerable history in applied linguistics. Horwitz (2000), reviewing publications in *The Modern Language Journal* documents how interest in L2 learners' differences evolved over the decades. She notes a marked change in the labels used to refer to individual differences: "The terms good and bad, intelligent and dull, motivated and unmotivated have given way to a myriad of new terms such as integrative and instrumentally motivated, anxious and comfortable, field independent and field sensitive, auditory and visual". Horwitz characterizes these changes as evolutionary rather than revolutionary, but they seem to reflect a radical shift in the way learners are viewed; "whereas earlier they were seen in absolute terms, as either innately endowed with or lacking in language learning skills, in more recent research they are characterized in more relative terms, as possessing different kinds of abilities and predispositions that influence learning in complex ways". This change of perspective over the years reflects a development in the role of individual difference in language acquisition. To this end, the main purpose of individual difference research was to predict which learners would succeed. In more recent times, research on age, social effects or on learning strategies, however, has sought to explain why some learners succeed more than others. It has been used to identify the characteristics of "good language learners" as a basis for acquisition training.

Individuals acquiring a second language rarely reach the same level of competence as native speakers of that language, such is the use of English Language as a second language in Nigeria. Some may stop studying it before they have fully internalized it, and others may stop improving despite living in a foreign country for many years. It also appears that children are more likely than adults to reach native-like competence in a second language. Having observed these situations there is need to attempt an explanation of this phenomena.

The study examines why some people acquire the English Language as a second language better than others. It seeks to identify the distinctive factors characteristic of successful second language acquisition since there are obviously a number of factors affecting language acquisition. The purpose of this study therefore, is to identify what motivates individual learner differences, and how these factors affect their performance in language acquisition. This study will consider a number of factors that have been found to contribute to individual differences in acquiring a second language and will provide a review of the main research findings relating to each factor.

Individual Differences

According to Skehan (1998), “Individual differences have major relevance for language development, inasmuch as this development requires a certain capacity to process and restructure input”. Indeed, “Individual differences such as personality factors, age, social effects, and learning strategies, have been shown to influence L2 processing and achievement” (Dörnyei, 2006; Juffs & Harrington, 2011). There are considerable differences in the rate at which people acquire second languages, and in the language level that they ultimately reach. “Some learners learn quickly and reach a near-native level of competence, but others learn slowly and get stuck at relatively early stages of acquisition, despite living in the country where the language is spoken for several years”. The study of language learning aptitude in the 1950. More recently research has focused on a number of different factors that affect individuals' language learning, in particular strategy use, social and societal influences, personality, motivation, and anxiety. The relationship between age and the ability to learn languages has also been a subject of long-standing debate

Apart from those factors that influence the acquisition of a foreign language in general (Eddy, 2011), “there is a set of such influences that vary from one learner to another and differ according to a learner’s inner characteristics.

From the above overview, several assumptions can be made. Within individual learner differences, there are a number of factors that influence second language acquisition. Most authors state that age, motivation and attitude, learning style/strategy and attitude/intelligence are of determinate importance. According to some sources, personality and cognitive style play an

important role, too. In this study, the relevant factors are presented in more detail and research findings in favour of as well as against their importance in second language acquisition are introduced. These are important as they are considered the key aspects in acquisition of a second language.

Second Language Acquisition

A second language (SL) is a non-native language that is widely used for purposes of communication, usually as a medium of education, government, or business. English for example, has foreign language status in Japan, but second language status in Nigeria (David Crystal 2004). It is “the language learnt after the mother tongue, or first language(s) has or have been acquired. It may be an indigenous or non-indigenous language. In support of these definitions by these authors, The Wikipedia Free Online Encyclopedia states “the term second language is used to describe any language whose acquisition starts after early childhood (including what may be third or subsequent language learnt). The language to be learned is often referred to as the “target language” or “L2” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/second-language>).

Acquisition is ‘a subconscious and intuitive process of constructing the system of a language. It is a conscious process in which ‘learners attend to form, figure out rules, and are generally aware of their own process’ (Brown 2007). Second language learning is a conscious learning activity by a person who has already acquired a first language or mother tongue. The L2 learner may be seen as a “linguistic Adult” in the sense that he is already with the knowledge of the working of language and has learned to use language to communicate using the system operating in his mother tongue (L1)”. It is the process by which people learn a second language (s),” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/second language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/second%20language)). Second language learning is what takes place in classrooms when following a structured course with a teacher” (Crystal 368). Second language learning could arise from social or political factors. For instance, colonization, trade and commerce could create a conducive atmosphere for the development of a second language. The colonization of Nigeria, Ghana etc. by Britain must be seen as the primary factor that gave rise to the adoption of the English language as the second language in these countries.

The definition of second language acquisition and learning is learning and acquisition of a second language once the mother tongue or first language acquisition is established. It is the

systematic study of how people learn a language other than their mother tongue. Second language acquisition or SLA is the process of learning other languages in addition to the native language. For instance, a child who speaks Igbo as the mother tongue starts learning English when he starts going to school. English is learned by the process of second language acquisition. Second language (L2) acquisition outcomes vary considerably. The source of these differences appears to be multifaceted, stemming not only from individual differences in age, social effects, strategy usage, but also from differences in affective factors like personality and motivation (e.g., Grey, Williams, & Rebuschat, 2015; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). While examining these factors in isolation can inform the nature of L2 acquisition, it can also investigate how multiple factors interact to mediate language acquisition processes and outcomes. This study aims to contribute to our understanding of these differences in L2 success by focusing on factors such as personality factors, social effects, strategy usage and age.

Personality Factors

Personality factors vary from person to person. According to Saville-Troike (2005), personality variables sometimes belong to cognitive style (p.89). Among all variables, anxiety and self-confidence, introversion and extroversion are frequently researched and debated by many linguists. Saville-Troike (2005). “A widely-held belief claims that extroverted learners learn more rapidly and are more successful than introverted learners” (Krashen, 1981) The learner's attitude to the learning process has also been identified as being critically important to second-language acquisition. Anxiety in language-learning situations has been almost unanimously shown to be detrimental to successful learning. “Anxiety interferes with the mental processing of language because the demands of anxiety-related thoughts create competition for mental resources. This results in less available storage and energy for tasks required for language processing” (Ashcraft and Kirk, 2001). Also, “anxiety may be detrimental for SLA because it can influence a learner's ability to attend to, concentrate on, and encode language information. It may affect speed and accuracy of learning” (Piechurska-Kuciel 2011). Further, “the apprehension created as a result of anxiety inhibits the learner's ability to retrieve and produce the correct information”.

There has been discussion about the effects of extravert and introvert personalities.” Extraverted qualities may help learners seek out opportunities and people to assist with L2 learning, whereas introverts may find it more difficult to seek out such opportunities for interaction” (Vega, 2008). Ellis (1985) argues that “an outgoing personality may contribute to acquisition.” Likewise, Rossier (1976) found out that his subjects’ oral fluency correlated significantly with extroversion/introversion. However, it has also been suggested that, while “extraverts might experience greater fluency, introverts are likely to make fewer linguistic errors”. Further, “while extraversion might be beneficial through its encouragement of learning autonomously, it may also present challenges as learners may find reflective and time-management skills to be difficult” (Studenska, 2011).

Other personality factors, such as “conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness influence self-regulation, which helps L2 learners engage, process meaning, and adapt their thoughts, feelings, and actions to benefit the acquisition process” (Studenska, 2011). SLA research has shown conscientiousness to be associated with time-management skills, metacognition, analytic learning, and persistence; agreeableness to effort; and openness to elaborative learning, intelligence, and metacognition. Both genetics and the learner's environment impact the personality of the learner, either facilitating or hindering an individual's ability to learn.

Motivation

Also, the motivation of the individual learner is of vital importance to the success of language learning. “Motivation is influenced by goal salience, valence, and self-efficacy” (Piasecka 2011). In this context, “goal salience is the importance of the L2 learner's goal, as well as how often the goal is pursued; valence is the value the L2 learner places on SLA, determined by desire to learn and attitudes about learning the L2; and self-efficacy is the learner's own belief that he or she is capable of achieving the linguistic goal” (Piasecka 2011). Studies have consistently shown that *intrinsic motivation*, or a genuine interest in the language itself, is more effective over the long term than *extrinsic motivation*, as in learning a language for a reward such as high grades or praise. Piasecka further stated that “Learner motivation can develop through contact with the L2 community and culture, as learners often desire to communicate and identify with individuals in

the L2 community”. More so, “a supportive learning environment facilitates motivation through the increase in self-confidence and autonomy’.

Strategy Usage

The effective use of strategies has been shown to be critical to successful language learning, so much so that (Canale and Swain 1980) included "strategic competence among the four components of communicative competence". Strategies are commonly divided into” learning strategies and communicative strategies, although there are other ways of categorizing them. Learning strategies are techniques used to improve learning, such as mnemonics or using a dictionary” (Canale and Swain 1980). “Children use their own strategies of cross reference to learn second languages” (Anderson, Raquel 2004). They observed that “mere immersion and rehearsal was an effective way for the children to increase their proficiency of their second language”. More so, “Learners from different cultures use strategies in different ways. Related to this are differences in strategy use between male and female learners. Numerous studies have shown that female learners typically use strategies more widely and intensively than males; this may be related to the statistical advantage which female learners enjoy in language learning” (Hadzibeganovic and Cannas 2009).

Some strategies are effective, while some are more appropriate in particular contexts (Saville-Troike, 2005, p. 91). Although selections of learning strategies hinge on learners’ consciousness, their motivation, cognitive style, personality, specific contexts of use and opportunities for learning should also be considered (Saville-Troike, 2005, p. 91). Beyond that, O’ Malley and Chamot (1987) classifies learning strategies into three factors, which are metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social/affective strategies. Specifically, metacognitive strategies mean to plan and monitor language learning to achieve language proficiency; cognitive strategies take advantage of direct analysis or synthesis of linguistic material; and social/affective strategies conclude to interact with others (Saville-Troike, 2005). They are all of great importance in learners’ SLA process and should be used in a judicious way.

Social Factors

The process of language learning can be very stressful, and the impact of positive or negative attitudes from the surrounding society can be critical. One aspect that has received particular attention is the relationship of gender roles to language achievement. Doman notes in a journal devoted to issues of Cultural effects on SLA, "Questions abound about what defines SLA, how far its borders extend, and what the attributions and contributions of its research are" (Doman 2006). Thus, there is a great amount of heterogeneity in the entire conceptualization of SLA. Community attitudes toward the language being learned can also have a profound impact on Second Language Acquisition. "Where the community has a broadly negative view of the target language and its speakers, or a negative view of its relation to them, learning is typically much more difficult". Frequently, "people adopt a certain style of language or register in a certain environment because it helps them to fit in better or because they hope to gain an advantage in using a 'better' kind of speech. Often, there are also certain conventions that force us to adopt a specific register" (Leung, 2011).

"Other common social factors include the attitude of parents toward language study, and the nature of group dynamics in the language classroom" (Leung 2011). Additionally, early attitudes may strengthen motivation and facility with language in general, particularly with early exposure to the language. All these sums up to "affect learners' acquisition of the target language and learners' language/ code choice when multiple varieties of a (second) language are involved" (Leung, 2011).

Age

The learner's age is another variation in learning a second language. Many studies have been conducted to study the influence of age in L2 acquisition. These studies have led researchers to develop a hypothesis which stages that there is "a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which time language is increasingly difficult to acquire" (Brown, 2000, as cited in Wagner, n.d.). This hypothesis is known as the "Critical Period Hypothesis" (CPH). The critical period is said to be between birth and adolescence, or when the child enters puberty (Moore, 1999). During this period, it is hypothesis that children can acquire a L2 easily. The second language acquisition competences among adults seem to

differ significantly from the way children acquire their first language. According to (Brown, 2007) “Critical point for second language acquisition occurs around puberty, beyond which people seem to be relatively incapable of acquiring a second language”. David Singleton (2004) points out that” only few studies that deal with success and age-related issues between young and old learners, show that the younger learners perform better than adult L2 learners”. Furthermore, Seright supports her claims by citing an experiment on the learning of Esperanto that was conducted by Thorndike in 1928. Singleton says that this study shows young learners performing better than the old ones. Singleton’s conclusion and summary regarding this matter is that it is not possible to conclude, based on current studies that younger l2 learners are more efficient and successful language learners than the older ones (Singleton 2004). On the other hand, Singleton does mention that “there is extremely reliable evidence to support the hypothesis that over the long run, those who begin learning an L2 in childhood generally gain higher level of proficiency than those who begin at later stages in life”. (Singleton 2004).

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted the survey research design.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Twenty undergraduates were sampled and the researcher used a simple random sampling technique to select sample students for the questionnaire in the study.

Data Collection Instrument

The data of this research are collected by questionnaires. Questionnaires are used to investigate different learners’ attitudes and views about individual differences and second language acquisition in this research. They are also well structured to give researcher the best possible information from the sampled population studied.

Procedure for data collection

The questionnaires were distributed to undergraduates of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria. The respondents completed the questionnaires and returned them to the investigator.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using percentages to determine the relationship between individual differences and second language acquisition. The questionnaires contained 10 questions and were categorized for easy assessment by the investigator.

Results and Discussion

The total number of respondents in this questionnaire is 20. These 20 learners have different knowledge backgrounds, ages, personalities, learning experiences, exposure, learning attitudes and strategies, which constitute the data variable.

Hypothesis 1: Personality factors do not affect individual differences in English Language acquisition.

S/N	Written text question	Number of those in agreement	%	Number of those in disagreement	%	Total
1	Do people differ in how they acquire the English language?	18	90%	2	10%	20
2	Are people always eager to acquire English because of opportunities it offers?	15	75%	5	25%	20
3	Do individual characteristics affect English language acquisition?	17	85%	3	15%	20

The above table illustrates response from students on Hypothesis 1. For question one, 18 students represent 90% of those who agreed that people differ how they acquire the English Language where as 2 students representing 10% disagreed. Also 15 students represent 75% of those that agreed that people are eager to acquire English because of opportunities it offers while 3 students represents 15% of those that disagreed. 17 students representing 85% agreed that individual characteristics affect English Language acquisition whereas 3 students representing 15% disagreed.

From all the above analysis, it is evident that personality factors affect individual differences in English Language acquisition

Hypothesis 2: Social factors do not influence individual differences in English Language acquisition

S/N	Written text question	Number of those in agreement	%	Number of those in disagreement	%	Total
1	Is English a well-accepted language of communication in your neighbourhood?	17	85%	3	15%	20
2	Does being male or female affect one's acquisition of English Language?	16	80%	4	20%	20
3	Does one's environment affect his/her attitude towards language acquisition?	18	90%	2	10%	20

The above displays responses of students to each of the questions. Question one shows that 85% represented by 17 students agreed that the English Language is well-accepted as a language of communication in their neighbourhood while 3 students representing 15% disagreed to this. In question two, 16 students representing 80% of the students agreed that being either male or female affect one's acquisition of English Language while 4 student which is 20% disagreed to this. In question three, 18 students which represents 90% of the population agreed that one's environment affects his/her attitude towards language acquisition whereas 10% represented by 2 students do not agree to this.

From the above responses, it is evident that social factors influence individual differences in English Language acquisition.

Hypothesis 3: Strategy usage does not determine individual differences in English Language acquisition

S/N	Written text question	Number of those in agreement	%	Number of those in disagreement	%	Total
1	Are the methods applied in English Language acquisition easy and simple?	4	20%	16	80%	20
2	Do strategies for acquiring English need to be improved?	17	85%	3	15%	20

The above evidently shows response to hypothesis 3. Question one shows that 4 students representing 20% of the population agreed that methods applied in English Language acquisition are easy and simple while 16 students which is 80% disagreed. In question two, 17 students

agree that strategies for acquiring English needs to be improved while 3 students representing 15% disagreed.

From the above analysis it can be concluded that strategy usage determines individual differences in English Language acquisition.

Hypothesis 4: Age does not affect individual differences in English Language acquisition

S/N	Written text question	Number of those in agreement	%	Number of those in disagreement	%	Total
1	Does age affect individual's ability to acquire English Language?	18	90%	2	10%	20
2	Do you think that anyone can acquire English Language at any age?	3	15%	17	85%	20

The above clearly shows response of students to hypothesis 4. In question one, 18 students representing 90% agreed that age affects individual's ability to acquire English Language whereas 2 students which is 10% disagreed. Also, in question two, 3 students representing 15% of the population agreed that anyone can acquire English Language at any age while 17 students representing 85% disagreed to this.

As shown from the above analysis, evidently age affects individual differences in English Language acquisition.

Recommendation and Conclusion

A general observation from the result of the findings of this study shows that people differ from individual to individual in how they acquire their second language. Hence, there are individual differences in English Language acquisition and that there are factors that are responsible for these differences.

Basically, Individual differences cover a wide scope, making researchers and society at large fully realize the close relationship between individual differences and second language acquisition. This is important to make them conscious of the various factors that determine these

individual differences so as to effectively manage them to reach a successful level for English Language acquisition.

Knowledge of individual's personality, adjustment of strategy usage to suit learner, group learner's efficiency, attention to learners' interests and developing good interaction to motivate effective communication, all these will have a positive impact on learners in acquisition of English Language a second Language.

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