GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNERS ARE BORN, NOT MADE?

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ABSTRACT

Learners who attempt to learn a foreign language vary dramatically in their rates of acquisition and in their ultimate attainment. Many of us believe that some learners have certain innate characteristics which could lead to more successful language learning. There is some evidence in the research literature which seems to suggest that some individuals have the 'aptitude' for learning foreign language successfully. This article discusses the aptitude factor in influencing success in language learning and how far it can be trained so as to facilitate successful foreign language learning outcomes.

Introduction

One of the major questions in the second language acquisition area that has been posed frequently is the question why some people are better at learning languages compared to others. A popular belief is that some people have a flair for learning second languages while others are quite poor at it. Given that some learners come from the same background, and learn under the same conditions and have similar motivations, why are there differential success rates among them? Well, from various studies that have been carried out, we know there is a host of factors which have an influence on language learning success such as age, aptitude, motivation, personality, degree of acculturation and cognitive style. However, it has been proven from quantification-based studies that aptitude is at least as important and is usually more important than any other variable investigated.

Skehan (1989) indicates that a number of studies demonstrate a positive relationship between measures of aptitude and measures of achievement with correlations of between 0.40 to 0.60. Correlation values from learner traits such as personality and cognitive style are considerably lower, i.e. less than 0.30. As Robinson (2001) points out, among the variables studied to date, "language aptitude is the one that contributes most to accounting for differential success rates of individual learners."This argument is supported by robust findings from a number of classroom language learning contexts showing substantial positive correlations between measures of language aptitude and second language outcomes. Studies by Carroll (1963), Pimsleur (1966), Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Bialystok and Frohlich (1978) found a relationship between L2 aptitude and L2 learning in grammar-based

instructional settings. Horwitz's (1987) study suggests that language aptitude is related to measures of both linguistic and communicative competence. Skehan's research (1986, 1990) found significant relationships involving measures of L1 development and aptitude. As a whole, these studies showed that language aptitude was strongly related to language proficiency achievement.

Characteristics of Good Language Learners

As the topic of discussion in this article is 'Good language learners are born and not made', let us look at the "Good language learner" model proposed by Naiman, Frohlich, Todesco and Stern (1978) as part of the good language learner study. The model (see Fig. 1) consists of five boxes which represent classes of variables in language learning. The three boxes on the left hand-side i.e. teaching, the learner and the context are three independent causative variables. The other two boxes, i.e. the learning and the outcome boxes are the caused variables. The independent variables, i.e. teaching, the learner and the context are then subdivided into various aspects. One of the drawbacks of this model is that although it shows the range of the potential influences on language learning success, it does not really explain much about second language acquisition.
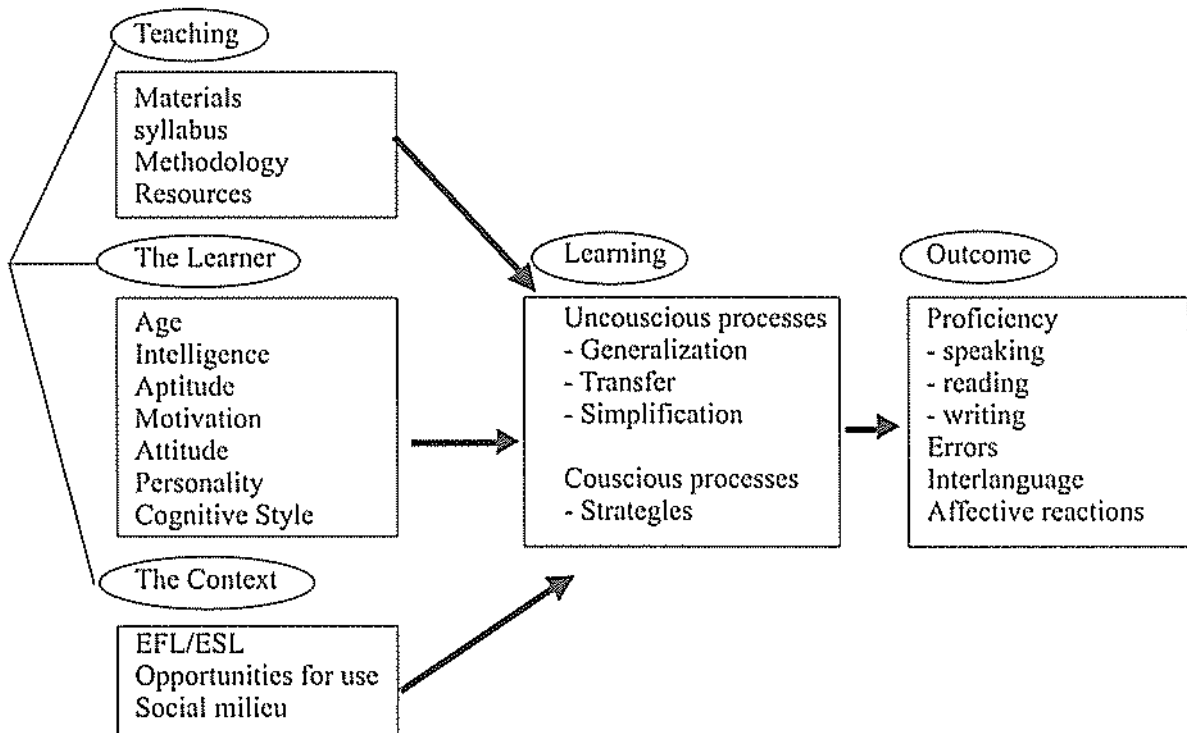
Figure1: The good language-learner model

There have been a number of attempts to specify the qualities of the 'good language learner', based on studies carried out by Rubin (1975), Naiman *et al* (1978). These studies found that "..good language learners take advantage of potentially useful learning situations, and if necessary create them. They develop learning techniques and strategies appropriate to their individual needs."

Basically, there are four basic strategies which good language learners employ:
* active planning strategy
* 'academic' learning strategy
* social learning strategy
* affective learning strategy (Stern, 1983)

Good language learners, according to Stern (1983), are prepared to study and practise. As they are aware that language is a formal system with rules and regular relationships between language forms and meaning, they will pay more attention to these features. They also develop the second language as a consciously perceived system which they constantly revise until the learning process is completed (Stern, 1983). Furthermore, they analyse the language and use appropriate techniques of practice and memorisation. The features that language aptitude research has identified relate very well with the application of this strategy.

The Nature of Language Aptitude

Cook (1991) defines aptitude as "the ability to learn from teaching". Aptitude has also been defined in terms of the tests that have been used to measure it, i.e. Carroll & Sapon's Modern Language Aptitude Test (1959) and Pimsleur's Language Aptitude Battery (1966). These tests measure the learner's ability to discriminate the meaningful sounds with written symbols and to identify the grammatical regularities of a language. This view of aptitude assumes that learning words by heart is an important part of L2 learning ability, that spoken language is crucial and that grammar consists of structural patterns. Language aptitude tests have been developed as practical instruments to diagnose learners' levels of proficiency and to identify their strengths and weaknesses for the task of language learning. In a more recent review article, Carroll (1981) states that aptitude as

> "a concept corresponds to the notion that in approaching a particular learning task or program, the individual may be thought of as possessing some current state of capability of learning that task – if the individual is motivated, and has the opportunity of doing so. That capability is presumed to depend on some combination of more or less enduring characteristics of the individual." (1981, as cited in Skehan, 1989)."

Carroll proposed that foreign language aptitude consists of four independent abilities:
* Phonemic coding ability – an ability to identify distinct sounds, to be able to make a link between sound and symbol, and to retain these linkages;
* Grammatical sensitivity – the ability to recognise the grammatical functions of words in sentence structures;
* Inductive language learning ability – the ability to infer or induce the rules governing a set of language materials;
* Rote learning ability for foreign language materials – the ability to learn associations between sounds and meanings rapidly and efficiently and to retain these associations.

(1962 in 1981, p.105)

Language Aptitude and Language Learning Achievement

The effects of aptitude on language learning are usually measured in terms of the levels of proficiency achieved by different classroom learners. Aptitude scores are obtained by using either MLAT or LAB tests and proficiency scores consisting of the results of a language test or teachers' grades. These two sets of scores are then statistically correlated using the Pearson Product Moment Coefficient. By using this statistical tool, it is possible for us to state the degree of variance in the proficiency scores that can be accounted for by aptitude. For instance, results of a study carried out by Gardner (1980) showed a median correlation of $r = 0.41$ between the Modern Language Aptitude Test Scores of English speaking Canadian school children in different classes throughout Canada and their grade levels in French. In other words, approximately 16 per cent of the total variance in the grade levels can be accounted for by aptitude. The results of Gardner's studies support the argument that aptitude is an important factor in predicting performance in foreign language courses. This view is also supported by Krashen (1981) who believes that aptitude can predict language learning achievement in formal classroom situations.

A study of foreign language aptitude carried out by Skehan (1989) also showed that aptitude has an influence on the success of foreign language learning. Skehan's study was conducted as a follow-up to the Bristol Language Project (Wells, 1985) in which the first language development of 125 children was studied longitudinally. 64 subjects out of the original 125 subjects were given a test of general verbal intelligence and a battery of aptitude tests. As the children went on to study in secondary school, Skehan found a high correlation between language aptitude and foreign language achievement. He also found positive correlations between first language development and foreign language aptitude. Skehan (1989) thinks that aptitude tests are good in predicting achievement as they tap relevant linguistic skills and knowledge and also

draw on examinees' ability to use decontextualised language. He states that "aptitude tests are effective predictors because both the component abilities (i.e. language processing ability and the ability to handle decontextualised material) are important for language learning success."

The current view on aptitude is that it is not something that a person either has or has not. Stern (1983) points out that aptitude is not a "single entity but a composite of different characteristics which come into play in second language learning". This view relates very well with the theory that proficiency is a composite and that language learning is "not monolithic". Language aptitude then consists of several elements which learners have in various levels.

Skehan (1986) studied soldiers learning foreign languages and found three groups of successful learners:

1. "Memory-based" learners were usually younger and were not particularly sensitive to grammar but had good memories.
2. "Analytic" learners were slightly older and were poorer at memory but had good grammatical sensitivity.
3. "Even" learners were good overall.

Therefore, there seemed to be two sides of aptitude: a memory-based side and a language-based side. Lack of memory capability in older students can be compensated for by greater grammatical sensitivity. Lack of grammatical sensitivity in younger students can be compensated for by better memory. Students do well if they have both attributes but they also do well if they have either of them.

Criticisms on Language Aptitude

There are a number of criticisms regarding language aptitude. One of the criticisms is that the MLAT and LAB tests are not measuring innate aptitude for language proficiency. Ellis (1985) argued that these tests do not explicitly assess the oral ability which is part of language proficiency. He points out that "SLA involves not only the ability to learn sound and grammar systems, but also the ability to use these systems to communicate meanings." It is also argued that language aptitude tests succeed in predicting success because there is a concordance of tasks between the test and formal classroom study, not because the test is measuring some innate linguistic ability.

Another criticism concerns what aspect of SLA is affected by aptitude. According to Krashen (1981), SLA can be classified into two aspects; acquisition and learning. Acquisition is the subconscious internalisation of L2 knowledge that occurs through

using the L2 naturally and spontaneously. Learning, Krashen says, is the conscious study of a L2 that results in knowledge about the rules of the language.

Krashen (1981) argues that aptitude relates only to learning. Aptitude, according to him, is only an important factor for formal language study associated with classrooms. He points out that the MLAT only tests the kind of skills which are associated with formal study. However, empirical evidence shows that this is not the case. Reves (1983) studied the role of aptitude, motivation, cognitive style, and learning strategies as potential predictors of language learning success, in formal and informal situations. Her subjects were L2 Arabic speakers in Israel acquiring Hebrew in informal settings and learning English under classroom conditions. She found that prediction was less effective in the formal learning environment. In informal situations, it was aptitude that was the most effective predictor of language learning success. This confirms the claim that the set of skills tapped by aptitude tests are relevant to both formal and informal settings.

Another controversial issue concerning language aptitude is whether or not it can be developed. Neufeld (1978) believes that one's ability in learning a second language is not innate, but dependent upon one's previous learning experiences. Neufeld suggests that we are all equipped to master basic language skills. However, the extent of mastery of the high level skills depends on one's intelligence. Oller and Perkins (1978) also share the same view. They do not accept the existence of aptitude for language acquisition. They argue that intelligence is responsible for most of the variance in a wide variety of language measures.

Carroll (1981) on the other hand, believes that intelligence and aptitude are not identical. He points out that foreign language aptitude measures correlate differently with foreign language achievement than does intelligence. In addition, he argues that learners' aptitude is difficult to alter through training. Carroll (1981) states that language aptitude is "relatively fixed over long periods of an individual's life span, and relatively hard to modify in any significant way." Skehan (1989) also shares Carroll's view. He explains that aptitude provides a more accurate assessment of language processing ability and the ability to handle decontextualised language as compared to intelligence. Therefore, aptitude is a more powerful predictor of language learning success than intelligence. Skehan (1989) cites that Politzer and Weiss's (1969) attempt to train learners to perform better on the component sub-tests of the MLAT was unsuccessful. Evidence reported in the follow-up research to the Bristol language project (1988) is consistent with this conclusion since it too suggests aptitude stability. Thus, this seems to indicate that aptitude is not particularly trainable.

Having said that, we should bear in mind that aptitude is only one of the learner factors which influences language learning success. Other learner factors such as motivation, attitude and personality are just as influential as aptitude. Highly motivated

learners and learners with extrovert personalities are usually successful in earning language. Furthermore, variables such as teaching factors and the learning context also have a strong influence on successful language learning. Therefore, it is not necessary for us to accept that nothing can be done. With the information that we obtain about learners' strengths and weaknesses from aptitude tests, we can design language courses where the syllabuses and methodologies reflect the learners' needs. Since L2 aptitude has a direct impact on L2 learning outcomes, it is thus important for course designers to take aptitudinal differences into account in order to maximise learners' potential for success.

Enhancing the Abilities of L2 Learners
There are several ways in which L2 learning capabilities can be enhanced. The first is through training that might directly increase one or more of the abilities that comprise language aptitude. However, studies have shown that such training is not effective. Yeni-Komshian (1965) and Politzer and Weiss (1969) were not successful in improving phonetic coding ability.

Another possibility for improving language learning ability is to train learners' language learning strategies. Poor learners can be taught to practise the strategies used by successful language learners. O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 162) state that "individuals with a special aptitude for learning foreign languages may simply be learners who have found on their own, the strategies that are particularly effective for efficient language learning." The few studies of learner strategy training that have been published to date have not yielded impressive results. O'Malley *et al.* (1985) attempted to train intermediate level ESL learners on different types of vocabulary learning strategies. They found that neither the metacognitive self-evaluation nor the cognitive imagery and grouping tasks made any difference on vocabulary list learning.

Wenden (1987) conducted a learner training programme for advanced ESL students. The students took part in a seven-week intensive programme which was devoted to strategies instruction, through mini-lectures and readings on learner-strategies, with follow-up comprehension exercises and discussions in class, and practice tasks which focused on diary writing outside class. Wenden reported disappointing results as less than half of the students found that the learner training tasks had been useful.

In a more recent study, Cohen, Weaver & Li (1997) conducted experimental classes featuring strategies-based instruction which "includes not only the typical presentation, discussion, promotion, and practice of strategies, but also the added element of explicit integration of training into the very fabric of the instructional program." Cohen *et al.*

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(1997) found that the experimental classes performed significantly better on the aggregate ratings on the tasks tested.

Another suggestion is to stream learners into different classes for different levels of aptitude. Teachers could give graded exercises, i.e. easy, average, difficult within the class and if possible, incorporate self-directed learning. Skehan (1989) suggests that "different types of instruction may be effective with different types of learners using analytically oriented materials at appropriate levels. Memory oriented learners could similarly be provided with suitable materials which suit their predisposition to assimilate unanalysed material". He adds that we could use the information on learners' aptitude to "maximise the level of proficiency achieved and increase the rate at which different learner types progress."

Wesche (1981) reports that streaming led to greater student and teacher satisfaction. Indeed, when comparisons were made between 'analytic' students placed in the Audiolingual class, mismatched learners were found in both L2 achievement and in attitudes. However, given the emphasis of the communicative approach to L2 teaching, it is relatively unlikely that learners would have the option of taking a grammar-based or audiolingual course. Matching is most likely to take place daily as teachers choose the most appropriate learning activities for their students.

Robinson (2001) suggests that another approach to accommodate learners' aptitudinal differences is to adopt a compensatory approach and teach remedial lessons to address learners' weaknesses. Sparks, *et al.* (1991) studied L2 learning problems faced by individuals who have weak phonemic coding ability. They reported that learners who flounder in a naturalistic learning environment require some kind of structured approach. They should be given more direct forms of L2 instruction such as the multi-sensory structured language approach. This type of instruction was found to be effective for learning-disabled students studying Latin.

In addition, Skehan (1998) points out that in communication-oriented instructional settings, learners who are analysis-driven will be able to impose structure but will not be able to perform such structural analyses without assistance. They need to have a focus on form provided for them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, from the many studies of language aptitude conducted since the 1960s, we can see that conclusive findings are still rare. More research is needed to determine whether language aptitude is an innate ability and how far it can be trained so as to facilitate successful L2 learning outcomes. Personally, I believe that some people are born to be good language learners but others can be 'helped' to become good.

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