

Individual Differences in EFL: The Impact of Learners on Classroom Teaching and Learning Processes

Sun Yawen

Faculty of Humanities, Yantai Institute of Science and Technology, Yantai, China
ssyywwok@yeah.net

Abstract: As the most important component of language learning, the crucial role that learners play in the process is self-evident. Different learners have different learning features in English learning. As individual learner differences are shown to affect the degree of success in second language (L2) acquisition. However individual differences (IDs) are extremely complex and dynamic as its a large number of variables. Additionally, its different variable changes as time goes by. The relationship between IDs and learning processes is always changing as well. For this reason, in the industry of language learning in past few years, the publications and researches range from a broad scope of theme collections to a specific focus of topics. IDs contains, such as age, gender, cognitive style, personality, learners' style and strategies, motivation and so on. In this paper, it mainly discusses aptitude, age, learners' strategies and motivation and finally explore why learners are an important consideration for English language educators.

Keywords: Individual Difference, Aptitude, Age, Learners' style, Motivation, Learning Process

1. Introduction

One of the most difficult thing in the world that throughout the life is language learning^[1]. The process of the learning includes professional educators' guidance and students individual systemic understanding for language as well as active engagement in the classroom. So, as a result, learners take over an important position in foreign language acquisition. Considering the individual differences what learners bring to language classroom how it influences the teaching is very important^[2]. In addition, the popular idea of education is one teacher deliver the information and learners are happy to accept it. Therefore, exploring what individual-difference variables mean to EFL teaching and how it can contribute to successful EFL classroom raising more and more concerns in global world. In many individual differences (ID) researches, ID contain many components, such as age, gender, personality, beliefs, aptitudes, learners' strategies and motivation and so on. The dynamism of these components aligns with the progression of one's character^[3]. In former studies, many studies explored learners' aptitudes and strategies, their age, and motivation. Therefore, this paper mainly discuss mainly aptitude, age, learners' strategies and motivation and finally explore why learners are important consideration for English language educators.

2. Aptitude

Carroll pointed out the notion of the FL aptitude which is still the classical definition in present society^[4]. It is considered as a potential, relatively stable and inborn trait, so it indirectly acts on the process of FL learning and it is also a little influenced by past learning. It plays an important role in FL learning or EL learning. By Carroll's research, it has four sub-factors are included in it: phonemic coding ability, associative memory, Grammatical sensitivity and inductive language learning ability^[5]. These factors are relatively independently and play their roles by itself. Different learners have different FL aptitude advantage aspect. Thus, it need to be take into consideration is personal differences during instruction. Because, in fact, FL aptitude is not general and universal, it is a cognitive ability which related to psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology. Diverse learners may show different FL aptitude profiles lead to different natural consequences of the FL development. If teacher take less concern about their FL aptitudes, it cannot be an effective EFL classroom. What is more, In the classroom, some learners tend to be pattern-making problem, the others are tending to be

memory-dependent for the language learning. So, language success may be finally obtained through distinct routes, different types of learners play their own language aptitude and strengths to acquire language. The teacher need to concern every students' aptitude, "some FL learners might possess strengths in abilities that are facilitative under specific learning conditions but prove to be ineffective in others". Therefore, EFL teacher need to create favourable learning conditions and environment to facilitate every student's language learning. Additionally, FL aptitude should be combine with suitable teaching methods. That requires teachers using appropriate teaching method to identify learners' advantage and disadvantage^[6]. Combining learners' aptitude profiles and relevant learning conditions, in this way, no matter the learners whether they are analytical-oriented or memory-oriented can achieve high learning efficiency and quality.

3. Learners' age

With FL aptitudes occupy an important position in FL acquisition and EFL acquisition, learners' age is another influencing factor in ID that can impact or contribute EFL acquisition. It showed that there is a significant relationship between age and EFL learning^[7]. Different age groups students using different language learning strategies which could influence the performance in FL classroom. For example, high proficiency students are more likely to use social and affective strategies than other age groups, they are willing to using compensation strategies, for the young learners, like children, they first prefer to use receptive strategies, such as repetition and memorization. With the growth of age, when they become mature, learners prefer to conduct more in-depth study, communicative with classmates, practice their oral skills by interacting with native speakers as well as do self-correction, self-encouragement. Moreover, students at older age have higher level of anxiety compared to the younger learners, such as speaking English in the classroom, but they could accommodate and adjust by themselves^[8]. For young learners, teenagers are more easily begin a new topic when communicate with native-speakers than children, but older students may do better in conducting a conversation in a long time and have a better absorption of knowledge^[9]. As a consequence, because of EFL learning acquisition in class are associating with learners' age, and there is no only one universal teaching process, teachers need to learn about their children at different ages, adjusting teaching practices to affect students EFL classroom performance and overall learners' L2 development. Actually, some exports stated that age effects the FL learning mostly act on the opportunities that how many the learners get in learning context and the degree of exposure to the target language^[10]. But in recent years, some researches indicated that the learners starting FL learning at earlier age are better than who starting at older age in learning outcomes. However, some other scholars thought there is no relevance between age and learning effect. Therefore, further exploration needs to take specifically in age factor of the ID on EFL classroom learning.

4. Learners' style

As one of the component of ID, the issue of learners' style has been received more and more attention by scholars from the field of education. The concept of the learners' style firstly come from the field of psychology^[11]. It is defined as the learners immanent learning preference of how they participate in learning process, it reveals the psychological mode of learning habit by individuals and the ways to cope with the information. For EFL learners who are not native speakers of English, through Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ), it can explicitly explain the learners' style, concretely, for example, some students are listening oriented, prefer to hear information, some are visual-oriented, read words will learn better, and also some others enjoy do something with it. So, it is different from learner-to-learner. In addition, some researches observed this factor closely related to learner personality, such as introversion and extroversion. Extroverts are more likely than introverts to prefer a group learning style over an individual learning style. But this is not an absolute truth either. As a result, in order to provide children with the teaching that suits them, teacher need to familiar with the relation between learners' style and achievement in FL learning. Additionally, FL learners' style reflects personal learning preference when they face specific situation and the particular learning methods, as person's personality change all the time, learner's style is same as personality are changing time to time, depending on diverse learning situation. Therefore, in the class, students may have different learning style to learn linguistic knowledge, and they will change style when facing other factors during the learning. When teaching process satisfy learners' style and engage in classroom, they will learn FL best.

5. Motivation

Motivation is a key factor affecting language learning and it is a vital consideration element among ID variables, for the reason, it not only makes learners to notice the individual factor that enable them to grasp the L2, but also provide a view for people to know and comprehend the society as well as global world^[12]. For the comprehension of the motivation, it refers to several reasons which separate or combine each other and influence someone's action^[13]. The first and dominant theoretical frameworks that explained the children and adults learning the English as a foreign language is "Socio-educational Model of Second Language Acquisition" which proposed by Gardner and his colleagues^[14]. This model integrated social and cultural factors into second language acquisition, which is a social psychological phenomenon. It can be understood that the process of second language acquisition is a psychological process in which individual successfully grasp a second language by integrating various social factors. This model consists of four main components: the social environment, individual differences, the context of language acquisition and language output. Among these components, the intelligence, the attitude of language learning, motivation and language anxiety belong to scope of individual differences. In the social education model, learners' level of effort, desire to learn language, and motivation are considered important factors that reflect language learning motivation. In the social education model, learners' level of effort, desire to learn language, and motivation are considered important factors that reflect language learning motivation. Each element itself is not sufficient to reflect learning. Nowadays this model mainly implemented in the teenagers and adults learning English as a foreign or second language in formal and informal learning contexts.

Recent years, another outstanding theoretical framework for motivation is Dörnyei and his colleagues who proposed a theory of the L2 Motivational Self System(L2MSS) that give two possible L2 self: ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self^[15]. Ideal self means "representation of all the attributes that person would like to process"^[16]. For language learning, it indicates the person want to learn language and try his/her best from inner aspiration, it is the desire to become learner who have a high proficiency. On the contrary, ought-to self, it means "attributes that one believes one ought to process", it is more focus on such as responsibilities and duties that you should learn language. To be specific, it is the force from external of learners, maybe parents, teachers, friends or others. As a result, different learners have different motivation for foreign language, moreover, their motivation will also be influenced by personal learning experience, like the learning experience in institutions. whereas, a common point of two motivation is that they all expect to master the target language and become a proficient learner, in other words, they are all desirous to narrow the distinction between their actual self and their ideal self or ought-to self. Accordingly, because they bring different motivation to the class, teacher need know every student motivation and improve their language competence by making effort to reduce the distance from actual self to future self. Actually, L2 Motivational Self System has a greater influence and remains the predominant theoretical framework to investigate L2 motivation than Socio-educational Model of Second Language Acquisition as some researches suggested that L2MSS is more "integrativeness" than it. Therefore, teachers need to create imagery situations for students in class because when they imagine situations that they can use English, they will study very hard, no matter if it is positive or negative situations.

In addition, teachers should make effort as much as possible to rise learners' interest in using English in above situations no matter in class or extracurricular contexts. For example, using participatory teaching, heuristic teaching or discussion teaching to guide learners actively access to language input and make actual production. In this way, learners' English learning motivation will be improved. In all stages of language development, even if they maybe make errors because of unfamiliarity for new vocabulary and grammatical patterns, that is the common process, there is no need to be panic or overemphasized which may make learners tense or frustrated. As a result, their participation would be suppressed and their motivation to learn English would be weakened. Teacher should create lively atmosphere and relation with learners and learners each other, for the evidence that social context combined with social experiences would determine language motivation level and further influencing language input rate and sequence. Besides, based on researches of second language acquisition, linguist Gardner divides motivation into two types: integrative motivation and instrumental motivation based on the classification of learners' learning purposes.^[17] Integrative motivation refers to learners who are interested in the localization of the target language, have a positive attitude towards the target language group or community, and aspire to become a member of that group by learning the target language. Contrary to integrative motivation, instrumental motivation refers to learners engaging in target language learning in order to obtain certain practical benefits. Therefore, learners with integrative motivation tend to be more targeted-focused and proactive in learning the target language

because they are more interested in the culture of the target language. In a long period of time, their motivation for English learning is stronger, the duration for learning behavior is longer, and the higher the learning intensity. In contrast, learners with instrumental motivation often have clearer learning objectives and are very engaged in learning the target language at a specific time. However, as the learning objectives are achieved, their learning motivation will gradually decrease, and their learning behavior will inevitably weaken or even disappear. So whether it is instrumental motivation or integrative motivation, teachers should play the role of “listeners”, “friend” with learners, understand their learning motivation and objectives, adjust teaching design and content in a timely manner. Actually, the two motivations are not mutually exclusive. Teachers should not only cultivate learners’ interest in learning English, but also pay attention to the practicality of teaching content, meet learners’ needs for self-improvement, examination, and employment. The combination of the two will ultimately help learners improve their English proficiency.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper mainly focuses on the learners’ factors on instruction and learning processes. The differences of a different learner plays a peculiar approach in their learning and English achievements. As a result, in order to explaining and understanding learners’ class performance and behaviors should first consider their IDs which are extremely complex, with a large number of variables. It is crucial for researchers to consider what the learners bring to the EFL classroom and learning processes. This paper especially focusing on individual differences factors, specifically, which are aptitude, age, learners’ style and motivation. These factors showed that when teachers setting up a teaching plan, using good materials, employing appropriate teaching methods, all of these influenced by and partly depend on learners’ differences, which would contribute to conduct the activities that students can be actively involved in, motivating them and giving them more confidence. Although this study reviewed the dynamic development of historical research on ID to the field of SLA in general and ESL/ESL teaching and learning in particular, it has some limitations. First, it just entailed four set of IDs which are not all-around. More research about ID need to be conducted as it is related to self and individual, it has many other variables in the reality of FL teaching that can influence the learning process and learning outcomes. For example, learners’ beliefs, learners’ strategies, gender. Further studies can utilize different research methods to obtain teaching experimental data can help EFL. Another limitation of the study is that ID are closely related to psychology, and researchers can study the impact of individual differences on learning from a psychological perspective and consider variables that can help improve EFL. In addition, as the class consist of a teacher and students, the educator group is also an aspect need to take into account, ID is not just one of the many factors which influence foreign language success. Only teachers be more aware of the learners’ needs and adjust the teaching to fit learners’ differences, it will achieve an effective FL classroom.

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