

## Explanations for differential success

### 6.1 Introduction

A major focus of debate in the SLA field revolves around the cause for differential success. In the case of first language acquisition, it is obviously true that some learners use the language better than others, but it is also obviously true that all normal learners achieve a considerable degree of mastery over their first language. It is equally obvious that second language learners fall considerably short of mastery. While some achieve mastery, many others do not. Various explanations have been offered for this variable success. There are native language variables, input variables, and individual variables. Here the focus will be on individual variables.

- First, and foremost is age.
- Others include:
  - language aptitude
  - social-psychological factors
  - personality
  - cognitive style
  - hemispheric specialization
  - learning strategies
  - others

### 6.2 Age

Age is the overriding variable. Despite apparent and puzzling disagreement in the literature, the data seems incontrovertible about the dominance of age. In some cases, it is argued that adults have an advantage in the rate at which they learn. However, insofar as it exists at all, the advantage for rate begins to disappear as the learning period increases. Once the focus is put on ultimate attainment, the advantage of age is clear. Early studies, such as Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1979) arrived at the conclusion *older is faster, but younger is better*, with the speed advantage of adults slowly evaporating over time. In fact, the rate advantage of adults is generally limited to early phonology and morphology and may only last a few months. Younger adults outperform older adults, too.

One source of data is the examination of learners of English who have immigrated to this country. If the sample is restricted to individuals that have been in the country at least five years, the ultimate attainment correlates, not with length of residence (LOR), but with age on arrival (AO), that is, the younger that they were, the better their English ultimately was.

Explanations for age-related differences:

- Social-psychological explanations (samples)
  - child are less inhibited
  - their self-image as speakers of Lx is less set at an earlier age

Cognitive explanations

- attainment of cognitive development might be interfering with acquisition

Input

- input to children might be different than input to adults

Neurological explanations

- hemispheric lateralization (p. 164)
  - Lenneberg (1967) critical period, onset of puberty, cerebral plasticity
- Sensitive period
  - not totally unrelated to the previous explanation
  - undoubtedly accounts for the differences between FLA and SLA

### 6.3 Aptitude p. 167ff.

“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, p. 84)

- the so-called enduring characteristics suggests that aptitude is multidimensional. Carroll, one of the authors of Carroll and Sagon’s Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT), wrote that foreign language aptitude consisted of four more or less independent abilities:
  1. phonetic coding ability — the ability to identify distinct sounds, to form associations between those sounds and symbols representing them, and to retain these associations;
  2. grammatical sensitivity — the ability to recognize the grammatical functions of words (or other linguistic entities) in sentence structures;
  3. rote learning ability for foreign language materials — the ability to learn associations between sounds and meanings rapidly and efficiently, and to retain these associations; and
  4. inductive language learning ability — the ability to infer or induce the rules governing a set of language materials, given samples of language materials that permit such inferences.

### 6.4 Socio-psychological factors

- motivation
- attitude

### 6.5 Personality

- Self-esteem
- Extroversion
- Anxiety
- Risk-taking
- Sensitivity to rejection
- Empathy
- Inhibition
- Tolerance of ambiguity

### 6.6 Cognitive style

- Field independence/dependence (p. 193)

“Naiman et al. administered the Hidden Figures Test (Naiman et al.), in which subjects are instructed to find simple geometric figures within complex designs. ...”

- Category width
- Reflectivity/impulsivity

- Aural/visual
  - Analytic/gestalt
- 6.7 Hemispheric specialization
- 6.8 Learning strategies
- 6.9 Others  
memory  
awareness  
will
- 6.10 Conclusions (page 207)

Diane Larsen-Freeman and Michael H. Long. 1997. Chapter 6: Explanations for differential success among second language learners. *An introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*. Longman. Pp. 153-219.