Second Language Learning and Language Learners

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Abstract

This paper reviews the theories of motivation and attitudes towards second language learning introduced by Gardner and Lambert (1972) and other scholars. It is also worth noting Spolsky’s general model of second language learning (1989) which apparently states the relationship between contextual factors, individual learner differences, learning opportunities, and learning outcomes, where variation can lead to differences in success or failure in English language learning.

Second language learning is an immensely complex phenomenon (Mitchell and Myles, 2001). There are a lot of ELT principles to support the understanding of language teaching and learning. Based on a model of second language learning taken from Spolsky (1989), it is stated that there is a relationship between contextual factors, individual learner differences, learning opportunities, and learning outcomes, which it is believed are for learning, i.e., where variation can lead to differences in success or failure (see Figure 1). Spolsky’s model is more or less similar to Ellis’s (1994) review of research that show psychological factors such as language aptitude, learning style, age, motivation, strategy use and learner beliefs, and social factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, cultural background and settings for learning have all been extensively investigated.

Figure 1: Spolsky’s general model of second language learning (Spolsky, 1989: 28)
According to Ellis (1994), social factors have a major impact on L2 proficiency but probably do not influence it directly. Their effect is mediated by a number of variables and one set of variables which have been found to be of major importance is learner attitudes. Attitudes toward the learning situation refer to the individual’s reaction to anything associated with the immediate context in which the language is taught. It is found that there would be differences in attitudes among classes because of the nature of the particular classroom environment (Masgoret and Gardner, 2003). Ellis points out that social factors help to shape learners’ attitudes which, in turn, influence learning outcomes. Learners manifest different attitudes towards (1) the target language, (2) target language speakers, (3) the target-language culture, (4) the social value of learning the L2, (5) particular uses of the target language, and (6) themselves as members of their own culture. Learner attitudes have an impact on the level of L2 proficiency achieved by individual learners and are themselves influenced by this success. However, learners’ attitudes may predispose them to make efforts to learn the L2 or not to do so. Positive attitudes towards the L2, its speakers, the teacher and course materials, and its culture can be expected to enhance learning and negative attitudes may have a positive effect on L2 learning if the learners have a strong reason for learning. Depending on the learner’s attitudes, learning a second language can be a source of enrichment or a source of resentment (Lightbown and Spada, 2001).

In addition to social context, success in learning a second language is left to the research on individual learner factors to explain this differential success (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). Freeman addresses the learner contributions that underlie the success in language learning. Learners’ attributes include age, aptitude, personality, learning disabilities and social identity. Learners’ conceptualization of the process of language learning includes motivation, attitudes, cognitive styles and beliefs.

Since the study of attitudes and motivation in second language acquisition has involved the development of concepts specific to language learning (Ellis, 1986), it is worth noting the role of motivation in second language learning. According to Ellis (1986), it is not always clear what the distinction is between attitudes and motivation. However, Gardner and Lambert (1972) identify two types of orientations: an integrative orientation, which reflects a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture represented by the other group; and an instrumental orientation, which reflects the practical value and advantages of learning a new language. They found that an attitudinal and motivational sort play very important roles in the acquisition of a second or foreign language in a variety of North American contexts. Brown (1981, cited in Ellis, 1986) identifies three types of motivation: (1) global motivation, which consists of a general orientation in the goal of learning an L2; (2) situational motivation, which varies according to the situation in which learning takes place (the motivation associated with classroom learning is distinct from the motivation involved in naturalistic learning); (3) task motivation, which is the motivation for performing particular learning tasks.

Crookes and Schmidt (1991: 470) suggest how to increase levels of motivation for students. For example:
- Motivating students into the class: At the opening stages of lessons (and within transitions), it has been observed that remarks teachers make about forthcoming activities can lead to higher levels of interest on the part of the students.

- Varying the activities, tasks, and materials: Students are reassured by the existence of classroom routines which they can depend on. However, lessons which always consist of the same routines, patterns, and formats have been shown to lead to a decrease in attention and an increase in boredom. Varying the activities, tasks, and materials can help to avoid this and increase students’ interest levels.

- Using co-operative rather than competitive goals: Co-operative learning activities are those in which students must work together in order to complete a task or solve a problem.

The role of attitude and motivation have been conducted by many L2 researchers (Dornyei, 1990; Belmechri & Hummel, 1998; Noels & Pelletier & Vallerand, 2000; Spolsky, 2000; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Li, 2006). The overall findings show that positive attitudes and motivation are related to success in second language learning (Gardner, 1985, cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2001). For instance, it is found from Dornyei’s (1990) study that instrumental motives significantly contribute to motivation in foreign language learning contexts. Moreover, affective factors were found to contribute to motivation in foreign language as well. Noels, Pelletier, and Vallerand (2000) discuss in their research that those who naturally enjoy the feeling of learning L2 may not necessarily feel personally involved in the learning process; they may view language learning as a puzzle or a language game that has few repercussions in everyday life. To foster sustained learning, it may not be sufficient to convince students that language learning is interesting and enjoyable; they may need to be persuaded that it is also personally important for them. Therefore, increased perceptions of freedom of choice and perceived competence are linked to more self-determined forms of motivation. Conversely, low perceptions of freedom of choice and perceived competence are also indicative of higher levels of amotivation. Li (2006) examines motivation to learn English by Chinese research students in an informal setting. It is found that students perceive the importance of learning English and this exerts a positive influence on the learners’ motivation to learn the language.

**Conclusion**

The preceding sections review how social context, positive attitude, and motivation play essential roles in success in second language learning. It is, therefore, worth noting that the teaching and learning environment should be responsive to students’ affective domain. A language course should be designed based on meaningful and familiar content, supportive teaching methodologies, and alternative assessment.
References


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