

THE INFLUENCE OF AGE, BILINGUALISM, CULTURAL IDENTITY AND EMOTIONS ON THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Summary of PhD Thesis

This thesis is inspired by a sort of awe and admiration at the beauty, uniqueness, and magic of the miracle that is termed ‘language’. Language and thought are inherent and most defining traits of the human being, in the absence of which evolution and humanity wouldn’t have been possible. Second language acquisition, which is the main focus of the thesis, represents the study of how second languages are learned and the factors that influence the process. SLA researchers observe how communicative competence, that is, the ability to interpret the underlying meaning of a message, to understand cultural references, to use strategies to keep communication from breaking down and to apply the rules of grammar, develops in a second language; research in SLA also involves examination of linguistic and nonlinguistic variables in SLA.

After a few years of teaching ESL in higher education, some questions on how to make the teaching and learning environment more productive emerged, based on the learning differences and individual particularities of different language learners observed during ESL classes: that language learners possess a wealth of personal experiences that they bring to the language classes; that they filter all information through their personal experiences; that there are differences in the abilities of learners to learn a second language; that all language learners can become proficient in a foreign language, given enough opportunity, time, exposure, and adequate teaching.

The **Introduction** of the thesis describes the attempt to find methods to improve SLA, which included the investigation of the factors that affect and influence English language learning and teaching, and eventually (following the difficult path of analyzing and considering a multitude of variables identified as interfering with and influencing language teaching and learning) the decision to focus on the following: age, bilingualism, identity and emotions. Consequently, I set up to examine existing research in the field of SLA and to plan and organize a research strategy that would help me investigate the influence of age, bilingualism, identity and emotions, find out how these factors can be used to the benefit of

the language learner, make some pertinent suggestions on how to improve higher education second language learning and teaching and draft some considerations for further language learning and teaching practice.

Chapter 2, 'Introduction to second language acquisition' represents an overview of Second Language Acquisition Theories (the behaviourist theory, the cognitivist theory, the generativist theory, the interactionist theory, the sociocultural theory and the emergentist theory), which revealed that there are fundamental differences in the way SLA is perceived and defined in the specialty literature, and that sharp divisions among SLA researchers do exist, but there are limitations as well as strong points in any approach. Investigation of research literature also exposes a number of variables, commonly believed to influence SLA, broadly categorized as external and internal. The external factors are those that characterize a particular language learning situation, such as curriculum, instruction, culture and status, extrinsic encouragement, access to native/English speakers, whereas the internal factors refer to those factors that the individual language learner brings with him or her to the particular learning situation, among which the following can be included: age, personality, identity, motivation, self-esteem, experiences/bilingualism, cognition, native language, affect/emotions. The influence of these variables is examined theoretically at first, then four of these variables and their effect on SLA are examined thoroughly by means of four empirical questionnaire and interview-based research studies.

Chapter 3, 'The influence of age on second language acquisition', investigates the age variable as a relevant factor in successful language learning and teaching. This is an important aspect from the point of view of teaching practices and approaches. What we attempt to understand is the way in which maturational effects interact with environmental and attitudinal factors in the acquisition of ESL. Adulthood leaves a strong impression on the language learning ability, and this chapter summarizes the characteristics of adult language learners, examining the question of optimal age to learn a second language first from a theoretical perspective and then by means of a study on ESL development in adult language learners. A theoretical review of Children, Adolescent, and Adult language learners, of Older learners' stereotypes, and of Age-related factors in language learning provide insight into variables that play the role of a filter or barrier in the language learning process of young and adult language learners, making them more or less successful in second language acquisition.

The theoretical aspects of the age factor were reinforced and tested by a research study of 214 English language adult learners (organized in 7 groups/classes), and their 5 ESL teachers. The study consisted of classroom observation of the 7 groups and interviews with all

teachers and one third of the students, and focused on four main areas: application of principles of adult learning in ESL contexts, second language acquisition theory and practice, diversity and working with heterogeneous ESL adult groups, and instructional approaches that support ESL development in adults. The results of the study emphasized that young age may act as a facilitator of language learning in some situations, but adult age also brings about a number of advantages. Therefore, it is correct to say that there are some age-related learning differences that reflect the differences in affective, sociocultural and input variables, but the consequence of the existence of such differences cannot be translated into advantages of young language learners over adult language learners or vice versa. The study is not intended to be comprehensive, rather, it provides an overview of basic aspects, suggests some strategies to use, and provides resources to consult, as well as some considerations for practice.

Chapter 4, ‘The effects of bilingualism on the acquisition of English as a third language’, investigates the effects of bilingualism and the acquisition of ESL and focuses on the relationship of cognition, education, bilingualism and proficiency in third language acquisition in bilingual students. It also attempts to assess the existing evidence related to cognitive development, linguistic proficiency, and other more wide-ranging advantages found by research in bilingual students and make a description of their development and proficiency compared to monolingual students. The initial working hypothesis of this study is that there is a direct connection between bilingual language learners' overall linguistic ability (competence) and their different uses of linguistic knowledge already acquired, and their cognitive development, particularly third language acquisition. It is important to emphasize that bilingual speakers have a unique psychological profile: the two languages that they master are constantly in different states of activation, so they are able to call upon their linguistic knowledge and resources depending on the context they find themselves in, and adapt their linguistic behavior to the task in hand. The findings and results of the study confirm and evidence the advantages presented by bilingual learners, over monolingual ones, both in acquiring a new language and in other cognitive areas that are closely related to creativity: greater mental flexibility, an enhanced problem-solving capability, metalinguistic awareness, and superior interpersonal abilities. In addition to these cognitive advantages, there are two more aspects that can be related to the enhancement of the memory function, which relates to academic achievement and even to the diminishment of age-related mental decline.

Chapter 5, ‘Cultural identity and communication’, proposes a short review of different types of identity, with an emphasis on cultural identity and identity formation.

Moreover, it attempts to design a framework for the analysis of identity as constituted in linguistic interaction. The need to design such a framework has become emerged in recent years, as linguistic research investigating identity issues has become an important concern of Sociolinguistics, Linguistic anthropology, Discourse Analysis, and Social Psychology. But the accompanying development of theoretical approaches to identity remains at best a secondary concern, not a focused goal of the field. This study argues for the analytic value of approaching identity as a relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in contexts of interaction rather than as a constant, solid structure which can be traced primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories. The approach proposed in this study attempts to bring together insights from a variety of fields and theories, and to advance a discussion of identity based on the articulated theoretical assumptions about identity, avoiding the criticism of this concept that has arisen in the social sciences and humanities in the past two centuries.

This chapter also puts forward five principles seen as fundamental to the study of identity: the emergence principle, the positionality principle, the indexicality principle, the relationality principle, and the partialness principle. The author argues for a view of identity that is intersubjectively rather than individually produced and that emerges in interaction, rather than being a priori assigned. Research conducted on the relationship between second language acquisition and identity agree that the individual cannot be separated from the social environment with respect to language use. The study described in this thesis explores the role of personal, cultural and social identity in second language learning. It looks at second language acquisition (SLA) and culture from a general perspective but with application on a personal, individual level, in an attempt to construct a framework for describing how language, thought, gender, culture, and motivations for learning a foreign language combine to create personal identity in SLA. The study includes data collected through class observation, oral interviews or from essays of 16 English Language Learners (whose language proficiency profiles varied considerably); and it revealed some common patterns as well as distinct individual needs.

Among the results of this study we mention the need for language teachers to try to help the learners have positive attitudes so that they can learn the target language successfully. They should also know that everyone has both a positive and negative attitude and that negative attitude caused by false stereotyping can often be changed by exposure to reality. Therefore, teachers need to help their students to be exposed to the realities of the target

culture through language classes. It will help students become more motivated to learn the language, and it will finally result in successful second language learning.

Chapter 6, ‘Emotions and ESL learning and teaching’, discusses contributions to the ELT literature which examine emotions and the way emotional experiences impact second language acquisition. This qualitative research also reports on a study that explores the effect of emotions upon university English language learning and teaching. The results evidence that Romanian English learners and teachers experience both negative and positive emotions during the teaching/ learning process. The study also suggests that effects of emotions depend on the interplay of different elements, but positive emotions lead to positive outcomes in most cases, whereas effects of negative emotions may be ambivalent.

The emotional or affective side of learning should not be regarded in opposition to the rational or cognitive side, but rather used together in the learning/teaching process in order to construct firmer foundations and erect, solid language proficiency. An understanding of emotions in language learning/teaching is important for several reasons. First of all, comprehending emotional reactions can improve language learning/teaching. Analysis of emotions of language learners/teachers can point to solutions in overcoming problems created by negative emotions as well as using positive, facilitative emotions. Negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, stress, anger, depression can diminish or even compromise learning/teaching potential. In such cases, optimal teaching/learning techniques, innovative, attractive materials may become insufficient or pointless. On the other hand, looking at things from the opposing point of view, positive emotions, such as enthusiasm, self-esteem, empathy, motivation, joy, or happiness can improve the language learning/teaching process.

After an introduction in the theories of emotions and literature focusing on emotions and language learning and teaching, this chapter proposes two studies based on qualitative research conducted through the use of semi-structured interviews and completion of questionnaires. The first investigates language teachers’ emotions and the research interests framing the semi-structured interviews are perceptual relationships between the role and effects of emotional experiences, the personal subjective component of English classes, and ideas of successful teaching and learning. These are considered in relation to the Romanian education system, and the general expectations and outcomes of an ESL class, on the one hand, and with respect to the range of personal contributions, involvement, and teacher identity, teachers bring, on the other hand.

The second study researches language learners’ emotions and focuses on two lines of research, one based on student’s perception of their own emotions, and another one based on

the ESL teachers' perspectives on language anxiety as the most common negative emotion experienced by students in the language classroom. Both studies follow a qualitative approach since the main research purpose was to gain a deep understanding of the emotional reactions produced during English language classroom instruction. The studies under discussion uncover a range of context-related factors that affect English language learning. It also provides evidence for understanding how language learners become more responsible as a result of reflection on emotional experiences during language instruction, and how they come to consider negative experiences as a natural process that they need to handle if they desire to speak a foreign language. The study also offers suggestions for teachers to address the issue of negative emotions and foster them into positive outcomes.

Chapter 7, 'Conclusions', is committed to drawing some conclusions related to the impact of internal variables on SLA (age, bilingualism, cultural identity and emotions, in particular), but also to drafting some considerations for practice, for each particular factor that might influence the SL learning and teaching process. In conclusion, language teachers need to remember that every student desires to be successful. Teachers therefore must provide ways to help students achieve their academic goals because they have the means facilitate student success. By incorporating a variety of teaching styles, accommodating instructional delivery, and motivating students to learn, teachers are able to help English language learners reach their goal of becoming competent and productive communicators in English.

Integrated approaches to teaching and learning are most effective when they respond to children's strengths, abilities and interests. Furthermore, this chapter focused on the implications for practice of the findings of the research studies in ESL learning and teaching: learning experiences, differentiated to fit the language learner's individual needs have the most positive outcomes; learner-centred practice allows language students to explore and experience the world around them in a variety of different ways that best suits their individual interests and learning style; extended interactions – where language teachers provide responsive feedback to extend learners' contribution are a foundation for language learning; learning outcomes are enhanced when language learners take an active role in students' learning through observation, listening, questioning, constructive feedback and open communication; the best ESL learning outcomes occur when there is a balance between learner-directed activities, guided activities and teacher-led learning; planning for a flexible and responsive language learning environment requires professionals to move to more integrated ways of approaching teaching and learning (this planning involves creating opportunities for learner-directed and teacher-led activities, ideally in small groups);

integrated teaching and learning approaches require language learners to reflect on their practice. The research evidence summarised in this paper shows that successful language learning and teaching requires effective planning, requires that language teachers know the strengths, abilities and interests of language learners, in order to build effective learning experiences. This requires reflective practice that informs the work of all language teachers/trainers.