LEARNER – SPECIFIC FEATURES AND L2 TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract: *There are numerous factors affecting foreign language learning, involving both extrinsic (environment and context) and intrinsic (learner-specific) features. Learner characteristics in applied linguistics have traditionally been investigated within the context of individual differences. Even though people differ from each other in respect of a vast number of traits, four factors have received special attention in second language (L2) research: motivation, language aptitude, learning styles, and learning strategies. Broadly speaking, motivation was seen to concern the affective characteristics of the learner, referring to the direction and magnitude of learning behaviour in terms of the learner's choice, intensity, and duration of learning. Language aptitude determines the cognitive dimension, referring to the capacity and quality of learning. Cognitive potential, i.e. maturity of an individual is described in literature as a significant factor of foreign language learning. It is considered that higher level of cognitive development could be a precondition for easier and more efficient foreign language learning. Learning styles refer to the manner of learning, and learning strategies are somewhere in between motivation and learning styles by referring to the learner's proactiveness in selecting specific made-to-measure learning routes. Furthermore, the four factors seem to significantly interact with learning setting and general context. In other words, most researchers dealing with individual differences would now agree that the role of learner characteristics can only be evaluated with regard to their interaction with specific environmental and temporal factors or conditions. Having in mind the complexity of foreign language learning context, the paper considers learner – specific features, outlining dynamic systems approach and paying special attention to the interplay among language, agent (learner specific features), and environment in the language acquisition process.*

Key words: *learner specific features, L2, dynamic systems approach.*

Introduction

Language permeating all spheres of human life and thought, along with the complex nature of human beings as both individuals and various social settings members, imposes the need for research on the issue of speech and language to have interdisciplinary approach, including a number of scientific disciplines, like e.g. psychology, psycholinguistics, social psychology, sociolinguistics, linguistics, phonetics, neurology, speech and language therapy, anthropology… At the same time, particular scientific disciplines have in the meaning time emerged, e.g. communication studies, which deal with the study of language, integrating contributions and results of research undertaken within the above stated scientific disciplines. Communication skills, speech and language development, bilingualism, language learning, as well as foreign language learning fall within a significant field of interest for both theoretical consideration, i.e. scientific research and the application of the findings in immediate life and working (professional) aspects. The importance of communication has been confirmed by the list of "promising and desirable" professions for 21st century, within which communication experts have their own significant position. Furthermore, in contemporary social circumstances, communication also refers to exchanges in intercultural settings, involving mastery of a foreign language, preferably English. In this sense a modern man is expected to have mastered at least one of the world languages, and, according to the modern trends permeating school curricula, even two foreign languages. As a consequence, foreign language teaching methodology is relentlessly searching for new high quality and more efficient methods, procedures, materials and ways of teaching and learning it. In order to improve foreign language teaching and learning quality, research has to be informed about a whole range of factors, i.e. the interplay among language, agent and environment, with all those crucial and unavoidable issues determining each of them, with the addition of the relations, i.e. similarities and differences between one's mother tongue and his/her foreign language. It should be pointed out that reconstructing a language is more complex than its initial induction because, during development, L2 constructions are in direct competition with those of the learners' L1, and these may represent alternative ways of construing the same reality (Ellis and Cadierno 2009: 112). Thus, it seems that both language (mother tongue and L2) and the

environment are in the context of foreign language learning and teaching actually closely related to the agent.

Learner-specific features

Advocating for the standpoint according to which language is a complex adaptive system, a group of authors (Beckner et al 2009) point out that, language as such is a system of dynamic usage and its experience involves the following key features: (a) The system consists of multiple agents (the speakers in the speech community) interacting with one another. (b) The system is adaptive; that is, speakers' behavior is based on their past interactions, and current and past interactions together feed forward into future behavior. (c) A speaker's behavior is the consequence of competing factors ranging from perceptual mechanics to social motivations. (d) The structures of language emerge from interrelated patterns of experience, social interaction, and cognitive processes. When foreign language teaching and learning is in question, it could be said that the speaker is the learner, i.e. the agent. It is beyond dispute that learner-specific features are significant factors of foreign language learning and teaching. Learner characteristics in applied linguistics have traditionally been investigated within the context of individual differences, which are conceived to be attributes that mark a person as a distinct and unique human being (Dörnyei 2009: 231). Even though people differ from each other in respect of a vast number of traits, four factors have received special attention in second language (L2) research: motivation, language aptitude, learning styles, and learning strategies.

In general, motivation was seen to concern the affective characteristics of the learner, referring to the direction and magnitude of learning behaviour in terms of the learner's choice, intensity, and duration of learning. Emotional, motivational and conative (volitional) processes are fundamentally related to learning and development of speech and language (Radoman, 2001). These psychological preconditions can have stimulating or disturbing role in formation and development of speech and communication. Well developed attention and high motivation, for example, can significantly encourage development of speech and communication, while, on the other hand, insufficient motivation or fear of inappropriately pronounced word (especially in the case of adults learning a foreign language) can discourage learning and development of speech, language and communication. Children and adults differ significantly in all segments of psychological life.

Respecting the role of psychological factors in learning and development of speech and language, while having in mind the interaction with other preconditions (organic and social) we can in these differences search for possible explanations in abilities for foreign language learning of children and adults. Thus, it could be said that motivation is interconnected with age as learner-specific feature, since, on the one hand, children who are naturally curious and intrinsically motivated, learn foreign language spontaneously, while adults, on the other hand, need to be extrinsically highly motivated in order to be successful in foreign language learning. Another significant precondition for language and speech acquisition refers to certain social factors – speech acts, speech encouragements and acceptable and appropriate speech models. The role of this group of factors seems crucial, having in mind the fact that if there is no adequate early stimulation in speech development of children, the effects of such negative conditions could be irreplaceable and irrecoverable at older ages (examples to be found in the literature illustrate the cases of isolated children showing the consequences of such isolation for general development of children, including speech development).

Psychological assumptions for speech and language learning and development are in powerful interaction with biological and social, and this set of preconditions is reflected in cognitive processes and aspects (observation, learning, memory, thinking, intelligence). Language aptitude determines the cognitive dimension, referring to the capacity and quality of learning. Cognitive potential, i.e. maturity of an individual is described in literature as a significant factor of foreign language learning. It is considered that higher level of cognitive development could be a precondition for easier and more efficient foreign language learning. Most attention, especially in psycholinguistics, has been paid to the following question: does higher level of cognitive maturity *ensure* more efficient language acquisition, and, accordingly, are adults ahead of children when foreign language learning is in question. Namely, higher level of cognitive development should facilitate foreign language learning of adults, having in mind that the ability of deduction is completely developed in adults, opening up possibility to explain grammar rules in teaching which might be exceptionally useful (Ausubel, 1964, as cited by Pilipović, 2008). On the other hand, a tendency has been noticed in the immediate teaching process that children master foreign language successfully without additional explanations on grammar rules, which are used in work with adults; on the other hand, in spite of

higher level of cognitive maturity adults often have numerous difficulties in foreign language learning. According to certain authors (Rosansky, 1975, as cited by Pilipović, 2008), answer to these questions might be found in the fact that children still do not have developed ability of diffuse attention, so that they approach a problem focusing solely on one of its dimensions. In line of this approach, a child who learns a foreign language is not aware of either difficulty of the task or its significance in social sense. Unlike children, adults are aware of both difficulty and significance of the task at any moment, approaching it with the engagement of all cognitive capacities they possess. In other words, cognitive maturity can be a facilitating factor in understanding of abstract rules and definitions in foreign language learning, but, on the other hand, it can at the same time be a factor impeding the learning process, having in mind that it deteriorates complete focus on acquisition of a single specific category.

Learning styles refer to the manner of learning, and learning strategies are somewhere in between motivation and learning styles by referring to the learner's proactiveness in selecting specific made-to-measure learning routes (Dörnyei 2009: 231). Placed within the context of creativity, cognitive style refers to a strategy or a group of strategies a person uses in his/her approach to problems. The basic point of this is the way thinking is structured – not only thinking – but even broader – personality features (Gojkov 1995: 6). The need for this dispositional term and hypothetical construct has been created due to research outcomes confirming the contribution of non-cognitive features in solving the riddle of personality structure and abilities. It is considered that cognitive style has spontaneously appeared as a response to the need to encompass the complexity of creative potentials, but also addressing the need to overcome the gap between personalistic and cognitive personality theories. However, what is significant for us is that according to cognitive style the ways to express the differences in individual functioning of individuals have been searched for, not neglecting idiographic feature of the structures. In such a way individual characteristics and differences in the way of perception, thinking, problem solving are synthesized. So, cognitive style could be considered an expression of a link between cognitive and personalistic theories. It is considered that, like the term "personality", cognitive style is generic term, as well as dispositional term, emphasizing the fact that through its logical structure it refers to the search for operational definitions and that its main feature is complexity. Complexity refers not only to cognitive activity of an individual, but also to the processes of

accommodation in their broadest sense. Therefore Allport holds that "cognitive style is the way an individual lives in the world and gets to know it" (Olport 1964: 246). One of the frequently stated definitions is the one emphasizing the habits of a learner to acquire knowledge according to specific ways of perception, memorizing, thinking and problem solving. When foreign language learning and teaching is in question, it seems that, apart from maturity and age, cognitive styles or learning strategies are closely related to four language skills to be acquired, i.e. listening, reading, writing and speaking and directly correlate to teaching and learning methods and techniques. Having analyzed a number of contemporary textbooks for foreign language learning, we concluded that they are designed in such a way to offer a whole range of learning procedures and strategies suitable for various learning styles of learners and developing research and creative learning (perceiving basic ideas and key words appearing in certain language material, independent identification of collocations, organizing vocabulary in lexical fields, noticing semantic relations, supposing meaning according to the context, paraphrasing…). It is not possible for all the teaching methods to be suitable for learning styles of all learners, but it is undisputable that such activities permeated by strategies putting learners in an active position, developing their cognitive abilities in general while putting them in the function of foreign language acquisition. What should be emphasized is the need to guide learners through activities in such a way that they are fully aware and awake when analyzing, perceiving relations and rules, similarities and differences, making comparison, abstracting, elaborating or paraphrasing while relying on their prior knowledge.

Dynamic Systems Approach and L2 Learning

All of the above sketched factors seem to significantly interact with learning setting and general context. In other words, most researchers dealing with individual differences would now agree that the role of learner characteristics, i.e. individual differences, can only be evaluated with regard to their interaction with specific environmental and temporal factors or conditions. Having in mind the complexity of foreign language learning context, certain authors have recently proposed dynamic systems approach, paying special attention to the interplay among language, agent, and environment in the language acquisition process. According to this approach, a language learner is regarded as a dynamic subsystem within a social system with a great number of interacting internal dynamic sub-sub-systems, which

function within a multitude of other external dynamic systems. The learner has his/her own cognitive ecosystem consisting of intentionality, cognition, intelligence, motivation, aptitude, L1, L2 and so on. The cognitive ecosystem in turn is related to the degree of exposure to language, maturity, level of education, and so on, which in turn is related to the social ecosystem, consisting of the environment with which the individual interacts… Each of these internal and external subsystems is similar in that they have the properties of a dynamic system. They will always be in flux and change, taking the current state of the system as input for the next one (de Bot et al 2007: 14). Furthermore, what is characteristic for dynamic systems is complete interconnectedness. Complexity of dynamic constantly changing systems and dynamic interrelations between and among its subsystems makes it rather difficult to research and get valid insights into true nature of foreign language learning. Therefore the same authors admit that there are certain unresolved issues of the dynamic systems theory and point out that the literature on the application of the proposed theory in second language acquisition is still fairly limited (de Bot et al 2007: 8). However, it seems that such a theory, taking into account both cognitive (internal resources, i.e. capacity to learn, time to learn, conceptual knowledge, motivational resources, processes of perception, attention, learning, categorization, schematization, memory, etc) and social aspects (external resources, i.e. spatial environments to explore, time invested by the environment to explore, time invested by the environment to support learning, external informational resources, such as the language used by the environment, material resources…) of language development, and research based on such a theory would offer fully informative insights to various issues arising in the field of foreign language teaching and learning, providing grounds for establishing appropriate teaching methods and techniques. If we have a look at external resources, among other factors, frequency of exposure seems to be rather important, having in mind that it promotes learning to great extent. Psycholinguistic research shows how language processing is intimately tuned to input frequency at all levels of grain: input frequency affects the processing of phonology and phonotactics, reading, spelling, lexis, morphosyntax, formulaic language, language comprehension, grammaticality, sentence production, and syntax (Ellis, 2002, as cited by Ellis and Cadierno 2009: 118). Speaking of frequency of exposure, it is worth noting that, from the perspective of dynamic systems theory, language acquisition emerges through interaction with other human beings within a social context, where according to iterated learning model, the output of one

individual's learning becomes the input of other individuals' learning (Smith et al 2003: 371, as cited by de Bot et al 2007: 11). What seems important here, from the standpoint of foreign language teaching, is that we have to bear in mind that sometimes (due to inevitable occurrence of errors in language production while acquiring a foreign language) these interactions do not always have to be desirable ones.

On the one hand, it is sometimes suggested that individual differences, i.e. learner-specific features, seen as background learner variables that modify and personalize the overall trajectory of the language acquisition process, have been typically thought of as the systematic part of the background "noise" in second language learning (Dörnyei 2009: 231). On the other hand, what we need is theory with non-linear approaches, recognizing the crucial role of interaction of a multitude of variables at different levels: in communication, in constructing meaning, in learning a language and among the languages in the multilingual mind, i.e. one overarching theory that allows to account for these ever interacting variables, non-linear behaviour, and sometimes unpredictable outcomes, a theory that does not regard real-life messy facts as "noise" but as part of the "sound" you get in real life (de Bot et al 2007: 8).

Conclusion

What we were interested in here refers to learner-related factors (i.e. age, aspirations, previous learning experience, attitudes to learning, prior knowledge, etc) and extrinsic (environment and context) features in a dynamic system of foreign language learning and teaching. However, recent and current work in the field seems to be adding new factors and categories to the inventory, in the form of varied learning styles, communication strategies, personality factors, and psychological processes. The list of factors influencing the choice of method seems to be endless and all these factors are interconnected, interdependent and constantly changing in their interactions. So what we would suggest refers to a kind of amalgamation of a variety of methods adjusted to the context and learner-related factors, introducing certain knowledge and research based innovations into foreign language teaching and learning.

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