

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 3.9

Vol. 3 Issue 5 Oct. 2017

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 3.9)

www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132



ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

Learning a language varies from each learner be it first language (L1) or second language (L2). It is because not all the learners follow the same strategy in learning a language. In the case of L1 children acquire language with the help of environment whereas L2 the learner faces many problem in acquiring it. According to Rod Ellis these differences can be broadly divided in to three categories: social, cognitive and affective. In applied linguistics there are many researches in the recent history about this Individual Difference (ID). However, this paper focuses on how the individual interest can help in acquiring the language.

Keywords

Listening Skills, Reading Skills, ELT, SLA, Receptive Skills, and Language Acquisition, Individual Differences.

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Introduction:

Recent researchers have made a detailed study to overcome the fear of learning a new language. Many researchers found that the learners of a different mother tongue finds it difficult to learn a new language altogether and master over it. These differences between L1 and L2 learning is mainly because of the following factors: motivation, language aptitude, learning strategies and learner styles (Peter Skehan). Horwitz (2000a), in *The Modern Language Journal* from the 1920s up to the end of the 1970s shows the L2 learners differences evolved over the decades. *"The terms good and bad, intelligent and dull, motivated and unmotivated have given way to a myriad of new terms such as interactively and instrumentally motivated, anxious and comfortable, field independent and field sensitive, auditory and visual"* (p. 532, original emphasis). She characterizes the changes as the abilities of the individual. This change of learner's ability shows the development in the role of Individual difference research in language learning.

Earlier the researchers focused on teaching the language and they did not concern about the role of individual learner. They taught the language to the mass and not for an individual which means the teaching of a language was not taught to the individual they followed various methods to teach L2 to name a few: Grammar Translation method, Bilingual method, Direct method, Audio – lingual method, Structural method etc., All these methods helped a mass of learners to learn a language but it does not focus on the individuals response over learning a language.

According to Rod Ellis, in his *Individual Differences in Second Language Learning* he suggests that, the main purpose of individual difference research was to *predict* which learners would succeed. He also talks about selecting the learners to receive foreign language acquisition. In order to select the learners there are many tests of language aptitudes are available such as

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Modern Language Aptitude Battery (Carroll & Sapon, 1959). Here Motivation plays an important role. This motivation test identifies the characteristics of good language learners.

Since 1970 IDs has become a major area of enquiry in SLA (Second Language Acquisition). Many researchers has focused on this area of study and published various articles in SLA journals (e.g., Skehan, 1991) . The primary concern was to teach L2 but it also has the sub streams such as listening - rethinking, reading – reframing. Each individual learner differs in the way how they put it across what they have learnt. As Breen (2001) emphasizes, an essential feature of psycholinguistic processes is that they are selective. The task facing researchers, therefore, must be to identify not just what the psycholinguistic processes involved in L2 acquisition are or what motivates individual learner selectivity, but how selectivity and processes interact in the performance of different tasks.

Individual Difference Factors:

There are many factors responsible for SLA. According to Rod Ellis, There are a number of key factors that figure repeatedly. The following table suggest that these are grouped according to whether they constitute “abilities” (i.e., cognitive capabilities for language learning), “propensities” (i.e., cognitive and affective qualities involving preparedness or orientation to language learning), “learner cognitions about L2 learning” (i.e., conceptions and beliefs about L2 learning), or “learner actions” (i.e., learning strategies).

These ID factors are very much employed in the process of acquiring a language. Language learning is closely connected with receptive skills, as these skills play an inevitable role. Receptive skills consist of Listening and Reading. Through listening and reading a language learner learns the basic components of a language. These skills teach the learners the usage of language and its application.

Individual Difference and Receptive Skill

In all the skill development learning, the strategy of learning varies from each learner. To know how the learner acquires the skill and masters over it, he needs to be analyzed with various tests according to the level of learning. To evaluate every individual in terms of their learning progress, it is time consuming. Based on the interest of the individual learners the language can be taught. To identify the interest of the learners, a small aptitude test may be observed. The individual interest level can motivate the learner to learn the language swiftly. There have been many methods of learning this receptive skill from the aspect of a teaching. The learner can adopt their own style of learning their language.

Methods of Teaching Reading:

There are various methods in teaching the reading skills to the learners of a language. Marlow Ediger broadly classifies the methods into two groups: ‘atomistic’ and ‘holistic’. He indicates that these groups as the two sides of a scale. Starting from the atomistic end the following methods constitute the scale.

1. **The Alphabet Method** – emphasis is on learning the names of the letter in their sequential order. Students are then made to memorise the words with the sequence of letters, e.g., matter – em ei tee tee ee ar

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2. **The Phonic or Syllabic Method** – emphasis is not on the names of the letters but on the sounds of those letters. Non-English speakers and also English speakers find it very useful since it helps them to learn the pronunciation of a new word.
3. **The Whole-Word Method** – In this method the learner is taught to read each word as a word picture, without attention to individual letters.
4. **The Sentence Method** – This method relies heavily on the principle of situational teaching. It also focuses on the conditions like the context and structure.
5. **The Story Method** – This method is an extension of the sentence method and regards the entire discourse as the unit of thought.
6. **Intensive Reading** – In this method, the readers read not only for detailed comprehension of meaning but also for mastering the structures and vocabulary. It is regarded as highly potent means of learning language since a learner can practise the language even without the help of a teacher.
7. **Extensive Reading** – In this, the readers read for information or simply for the pleasure of reading. The primary object is general comprehension; not language study. This enables the learner to ignore certain paragraphs or passages and concentrate on the ones he is interested in.

Methods of Teaching Listening

1. **Word level** – In this method, a word or two is repeated and asked the students to find how often they hear it.
2. **Sentence level** – In this method a sentence or short phrase is repeated and the students are asked to find the number of words
3. **Listening for comprehension** – the students are made to listen to a familiar text which is aided by visuals.
4. **Listening and short response** – The students are given instructions and asked to follow the directions.
5. **Listening and making longer response** - The students are given instructions and asked to follow the directions.

According to Rubin "For second language/foreign language learners, listening is the skill that makes the heaviest processing demands because learners must store information in short term memory at the same time as they are working to understand the information" Peterson defines top-down processing as the higher level process "driven by listeners' expectations and understandings of the context, the topic, the nature of text, and the nature of the world". On the other hand, he defines bottom-up processing as the lower level process "triggered by the sounds, words, and phrases which the listener hears as he or she attempts to decode speech and assign meaning"

Conclusion

Every learner of a language has their own style of learning with regards to the motivation, strategy and their interest. Teaching of the mass may not sometimes be able to produce the end result. Based on the interest of the learner if a language is taught, the learner can acquire the

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language comparatively soon. Time consumption has been a great limitation in this method. Identifying the interest, selecting topics with regards to the individual interests may be a burden on the role of a teacher. But, this care on individual learner can make the learner acquire the language and master over it effectively compared to teaching for the mass.

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