A Consideration of Individual Learner Differences in Japanese EFL/ESL Contexts

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief overview of some of the individual learner differences shown to influence second language acquisition in Japanese EFL/ESL contexts. In addition to learner variables, the Japanese learning style, teacher variables and task variables are also examined. The purpose of this paper is to inform language pedagogy in the Japanese EFL context. With a broader understanding of how individual learner differences and classroom variables influence learning outcomes, it is the writer's modest hope that teachers would not only be more aware of, but also more equipped to cater their lessons to the individual needs of their students.

Keywords: Individual Learner Differences, SLA, Learner Strategies, Learning Styles, Task Variables, Japanese EFL/ESL Contexts,

1. Introduction

EFL/ESL teachers may sometimes be perplexed as to why some of their learners are able to immediately acquire features of language targeted in their instruction, while others in the same class show no improvement at all over time. It is tempting to simply conclude that some learners progress better than others due to an innate predisposition for foreign language acquisition; however, due to the complex and multifaceted nature of this issue, this would not adequately tell the whole story. Undoubtedly, there exist a great many other factors that can influence learning outcomes in the foreign language classroom to varying degrees. In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), the study of individual learner differences (IDs) has become an area inspiring a great deal of research attention and scholarly discussion (Fewell 2010). In this paper, the writer considers how various IDs might affect learning outcomes in the Japanese EFL/ESL contexts. The following sections describe how (2) learner variables, (3) the Japanese learning style, (4) teacher variables and (5) task variables may influence the language classroom.

2. Learner Variables

There are several learner variables which are likely to influence L2 performance. Ellis (1994: 472) offers us a general outline of the some of the learner variables by listing the results of three well-known surveys in this field.

Altman (1980)	Skehan (1989)	Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991)
1. Age	1. Language Aptitude	1. Age
2. Sex	2. Motivation	2. Socio-psychological factors
3. Previous Experience with	3. Language Learning Strategies	a. motivation
Language Learning	4. Cognitive and Affective Factors	b. attitude
4. Proficiency in the native Lan-	a. extroversion/introversion	3. Personality
guage	b. risk-taking	a. self-esteem
5. Personality Factors	c. intelligence	b. extroversion
6. Language Aptitude	d. field independence	c. anxiety
7. Attitudes and Motivation	e. anxiety	d. risk-taking
8. General Intelligence (IQ)		e. sensitivity to rejection
9. Sense Modality preference		f. empathy
10. Sociological preference (e.g.		g. inhibition
learning with peers vs. learn-		h. tolerance of ambiguity
ing with the teacher)		4. Cognitive Style
11. Cognitive Styles		a. field independence/dependence
12. Learner Strategies		b. category width
		c. reflexivity/impulsivity
		d. aural/visual
		e. analytic/gestalt
		5. Hemisphere specialization
		6. Learner Strategies
		7. Other Factors e.g. memory, sex

Many of the above-mentioned variables are found in all three surveys and will be discussed further below. Gardner and MacIntyre (1992) divide ten such variables into two categories: cognitive and affective. The cognitive variables described in Section 2. 1 include language aptitude, intelligence and language learning strategies. The affective variables described in Section 2. 2 include attitudes, motivation, language anxiety, self-confidence, personality and learning style. Besides these cognitive and affective variables, there are several other learner variables which merit discussion. The two variables that will be described in Section 2. 3 are age and sex.

    .   Cognitive

    Language Aptitude: Clearly, there is evidence to suggest that learners do indeed differ in their innate ability to acquire new languages (Skehan, 1990). Carroll and Sapon (1959) and Pimsleur (1966) developed some early tests measuring this, namely the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) and the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (PLAB) respectively. These tests involved measuring learners' abilities to recognize and memorise new sounds, to identify new syntactic patterns, to detect similarities and differences in form and meaning, and to relate sounds to written symbols. This research initially showed great promise, and the empirical work involved in developing these tests was very rigorous; however, unfortunately, research involving this work has not been followed up more extensively in recent years.

    Intelligence: Genesee (1976) found a correlation between intelligence and academic skills

such as reading, grammar and vocabulary; however, no correlation between intelligence and oral proficiency was found. Further, it appears that intelligence is strongly correlated with instruction of the L2, and, in less formal situations, this variable seems less important. In comparison to other variables mentioned, relatively little research attention in SLA has been given to the role of intelligence.

Learner Strategies: It is generally accepted that learners who actively engage in the learning process are more likely to be successful. Ellis and Sinclair (1989) offer the following patterns of behavior associated with successful language learners. Good language learners are generally a-ware of their own positive or negative feelings to learning, have a genuine interest in learning the language, are curious and want to learn more about the language, monitor and assess their own progress, set themselves short attainable objectives, explore strategies to find the ones that best suit them, take risks by experimenting with the language, organize their time effectively, and use resources available to them inside and outside the classroom.

.   Affective

Motivation: This area has received a large amount of research attention, and the consensus seems to be that motivation is related to success in language learning (Skehan, 1989). However, the research does not tell us whether it is the success that leads to motivation or whether it is the motivation that leads to the success. Further, as can be seen in Gardner's Socio-Educational Model (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993), the multifaceted nature of motivation can be quite complex and deep-seated within learners, and thus more research into this area seems warranted.

Attitudes: Positive attitudes towards the target language and culture generally enhance learning, while negative attitudes generally impede learning. Keeping this in mind, the relation-ship between attitudes and SLA is extremely complex. It is unclear whether it is achievement that causes positive attitudes or whether positive attitudes cause achievement. In his Socio-Edu-cation Model, Gardner (1985) suggests a reciprocal causation.

Language Anxiety: Much of the early research (Chastain, 1975; Kleinman, 1977; and Scovel, 1978) into this area was difficult to interpret due to contradictory results. Part of the reason has been attributed to the general measurement techniques taken in the earlier studies. Kleinman (1977) and Scovel (1978) found that a certain amount of language anxiety actually helped learn-ers' performance in the L2. Conversely, in more recent studies using a more specific approach to measurement, Gardner and MacIntyre (1993), Gardner et al. (1976) and Horwitz et al. (1986) found evidence to support the widespread view that language anxiety generally has a debilitating affect on L2 performance. Similar to the other affective variables, language anxiety is complex and likely affected by a host of other factors such as motivation, personality and self-confidence.

Self-confidence/Self-esteem: On the basis of the research in the field, Oxford and Ehrman (1993) contend that positive beliefs about oneself and one's learning make a definite contribution to learning success. Self-confidence can be broken down into two types: trait or state. Trait confi-

dence generally will not vary according to the situation and is based on positive self-perceptions in broad areas such as athletic ability, physical appearance, and academic achievement. State confidence, on the other hand, is related to feelings of self-confidence in a specific situation. This variable may help to explain the great variability learners often exhibit in self-confidence and proficiency in different tasks.

Personality: The widespread view that extroverts make better language learners than introverts has not necessarily been supported by the research (Ellis, 1994; Naiman et al., 1978). The effect of personality on SLA has proven to be difficult to measure, as many of the studies in this area have produced inconclusive and contradictory findings. Difficulties arise when we look at what exactly is measured in terms of proficiency in these studies. Further, the methods used to measure personality traits in many of these studies have been questioned, and thus any results related to SLA will be of limited value.

.　Age and Sex

Age: There is general agreement that older learners tend to exhibit an initial advantage in rate of acquisition of the L2; however, ultimately, younger learners tend to achieve a higher level in the language than older learners. Long (1990) suggests that learners who begin studying the L2 after six years old cannot achieve a native-like accent. In contrast, Scovel (1988) argues that the critical period for acquiring native-like competence is twelve years old.

Sex: There have been many claims that females tend to learn languages more effectively than males. Research into this area may provide us with some of the reasons. Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Spolsky (1989) report that females seem to have more positive attitudes towards L2 learning than males. Moreover, Gass and Varonis (1986) and Bacon (1992) have shown that women actually approach language learning differently than men. That is, they tend to be more active strategy users than men and may be more sensitive to input.

3 . Japanese Learning Style

Having looked at some of the general variables affecting EFL learners, I will now focus more specifically on the learning styles of Japanese EFL learners. The learning preferences of the Japanese EFL learner will be presented according to the following learner style dimensions, which Oxford and Anderson (1995: 204) describe as ' the most significant for second or foreign language learning' :

- Global and Analytic
- Field Dependent and Field Independent
- Feeling and Thinking
- Impulsive and Reflective
- Intuitive-random and Concrete-sequential
- Closure Orientated and Open Styles

- Extroverted and Introverted
- Visual, Auditory and Haptic

Global and Analytic: Global learners typically employ a holistic approach to learning in which they search for the general idea rather than accuracy, and tend to favour experiential learning and learning through communication. Conversely, analytic learners typically focus on the details rather than the overall picture, and tend to prefer rules focusing on the step-by-step presentation of materials. Research suggests that Japanese EFL learners are analytic learners who prefer formal, individual learning in a classroom environment (Oxford and Bury-Stock, 1995). This can be largely attributed to what Peak (1991: 107) describes as 'unconscious cultural structuring' pervasive in Japanese society in which the educational practices are highly structured and promote continued repetition of routines indicative of the analytic style dimension.

Field Dependent and Field Independent: A learner employing a field dependent learning style typically tends to think holistically, values ideas over facts before arriving at their own conclusions, and exhibits good social skills. In contrast, a learner employing a field independent style tends to think analytically, values facts over ideas, and prefers to work in isolation. Research has shown that Japanese EFL learners possess qualities belonging to both learning styles. Japanese learners can be seen as field independent, as they have been shown to think analytically, and as Tudjman (1991: 239) notes, they tend to 'communicate according to the confines of their own environment'. On the other hand, as evidence that Japanese are field dependent learners, Nelson (1995) points to the fact that the Japanese, particularly in Japanese settings, seem to prefer authority figures and demonstrate a high degree of sensitivity to group relations.

Feeling and Thinking: Students employing a feeling style tend to prefer to study in personalized settings and place a high value on harmony and relationships. Conversely, students employing a thinking style tend to study more effectively in impersonal settings and base their decisions on logic and analysis. While there has been much research to suggest that the Japanese speaking style tends to be indirect and favors harmony in communication (Barnlund, 1974), research focusing more specifically on Japanese EFL learning styles seems to suggest that Japanese EFL learners are generally employing a thinking style. For instance, Harshbinger et al (1986) illustrate that Japanese learners prefer to talk about their thoughts rather than their feelings in the EFL classroom, and Tudjman (1991) demonstrates that Japanese EFL students prefer to base their decisions on organizational demands rather than personal feelings.

Impulsive and Reflective: Impulsive learners tend to behave impetuously in classroom settings and tend to sacrifice accuracy for fluency when producing the L2. In contrast, reflective learners prefer systematic investigations of hypotheses and generally put a much greater emphasis on accuracy over fluency in producing the L2. Research suggests that Japanese EFL learners are more reflective than impulsive. For instance, in examining comparative research, Peak (1991) notes that Japanese students, though usually the slowest in completing tasks, typically produced the least amount of errors.

Intuitive-random and Concrete-sequential: Intuitive-random learners prefer to develop a mental picture of the L2 in an intuitive and random fashion. They typically use speculative and predictive strategies in order to make sense of the underlying language system. Conversely, concrete-sequential learners require a great deal of structure and rigidity to make progress in acquiring the L2. They generally prefer lessons which are strictly planned and adhered to and taught sequentially. The research supports that Japanese EFL learners are generally concrete-sequential learners. Oxford et al. (1992) report that, when offered an alternative teaching style, Japanese EFL learners clung to concrete-sequential preferences with great force. Further, Harshburger et al. (1986) demonstrated that Japanese EFL learners reported feeling distress in the absence of step-by-step instruction.

Closure Orientated and Open Styles: Students employing a closure orientated style tend to perform better when given structured activities and specific tasks which are required to be completed within a certain period of time. In contrast, students employing an open style tend to favor flexibility, a free and open schedule and can tolerate a high degree of ambiguity. Research has shown that Japanese EFL learners generally conform to the closure orientated style (Oxford et al., 1992; Harshburger et al., 1986).

Extroverted and Introverted: Extroverted students work most productively in groups and tend to favor social goals, whereas introverted students often prefer working alone and tend to favor impersonal rewards. According to Call (1995) and Harshburger (1986), Japanese EFL learners would generally seem to conform to that of the introverted learner. Hofstede (1986) explains that introverted behavior is typical of such a culture which favors the needs of the group over the individual.

Visual, Auditory and Haptic: Visual students perform most effectively when the class involves visual materials such as textbooks, handouts, and board work. Auditory students perform most effectively in a classroom environment which involves auditory input such as radio, oral instruction, oral communication and audiotape. Haptic students tend to like to be physically involved in the activities and prefer tasks involving Total Physical Response (TPR), Mime and Role-play. Although several studies into this area have been attempted (Reid, 1987; Call, 1995; and Hyland, 1949), none were able to provide sufficient evidence grouping Japanese EFL learners into a specific perceptual/sensory learning style. Hyland's (1994) study, however, did offer some insights as the findings suggest that Japanese EFL learners' perceptory/auditory preferences increase with the amount of exposure to native speakers, thus corroborating Tudjman's (1991) claim that Japanese learners communicate according to the confines of their environment.

4 . Teacher Variables

There are several teacher variables that influence the EFL classroom. The following section will discuss some of the ones commonly mentioned in the research, which include the teacher's experience and education, knowledge of the teaching context, use of the L1 in the classroom and

approach to error correction.

Experience and Education: Conventional wisdom is that the more experience and education a teacher has in their field, the more effective they will be in teaching their students in the classroom. While this may indeed be true, there are several other factors which are related and may also affect how teachers develop over time. For instance, some research has shown that what teachers learn in teacher education programs is filtered by their prior experiences in the classroom (Lortie, 1975). That is, on the basis of their prior experiences, teachers subconsciously seem to develop beliefs about how languages are learned and taught, and, in some cases, this may negatively affect their ability to be open to new methods which are presented in training programs. According to Freeman (1991), the extensive body of research shows that if the teachers' beliefs are not made explicit, questioned and challenged, teacher training and other modes of self-improvement will have little impact on teachers' practices and development.

Knowledge of the teaching context: As the large amount of research into learner styles would seem to indicate, EFL teachers would be well served in adapting their methods to best suit their students' styles. While this may not be difficult for EFL teachers in monolingual settings who are of the same nationality as their students, this presents somewhat of a challenge for foreign instructors (Byram, 1997, 1998, 2001; Ruane, 2001). For example, in my experience teaching in Japan, I have come to learn that the educational practices here are quite different from what I have become accustomed to growing up in Canada. Many of my learners expect, and perhaps prefer, language learning to involve teacher reliance rather than self-regulation, rote learning as opposed to creative language use and an emphasis on accuracy at the expense of fluency. One option available to teachers is attempting to modify the learners' styles, as there is evidence to suggest that learners can change as they gain proficiency, or in response to pedagogical intervention in the form of strategy training (Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1993; Cohen, 1998; Skehan, 1998). With this in mind, there is always a danger that students will show resentment to teachers who try to change them (Brumfit, 1980, cited in Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984: 17). An approach useful for the Japanese EFL context, suggested by Anderson (1993), is one in which involves a combination of techniques that draw upon the dynamics of the Japanese classroom with strategies that promote a Western style of interaction.

Use of the L1 in EFL classes: Similar to the variable directly above, it is necessary to consider the nationalities of the students and the teachers. There has long been an assumption that English-only (i.e., immersion) classes provide the students with the best environment for learning English; however, the research to date has been largely inconclusive and arguments could be made for both sides. Opponents of the use of L1 in the EFL classroom such as Hawks (2001) and Phillipson (1992) argue that learners' exposure to the L2 should be maximized as it is limited in EFL settings, and that learners should be shown the importance of the L2 through its continual use. Meanwhile, researchers such as Critchley (1999) and Mitchell (1988) contend that using the L1 in the classroom does not hinder learning, and indeed has a facilitating role in the classroom.

Approach to error correction: This continues to be a highly debated topic in EFL. In my EFL classes in Japan over the years, I have witnessed firsthand some of the issues associated with error correction in this context. While the majority of learners I have encountered stated explicitly that they wanted to be corrected as much as possible, their largely anxious reactions and subsequent taciturn behavior to overt error corrections seemed to indicate otherwise (Cutrone, 2003). Cathcart and Olsen (1976) report that ESL learners wanted more error correction than they are usually provided with, while Krashen (1982) has stated that error correction is largely useless to acquisition and dangerous in that it may lead to a negative affective response. Opinions abound as to what type of error correction is best, but there is little empirical support to make an informed choice. Presently, there are two methods that seem to be gaining support. One is that error correction should occur at an optimum time in learner's interlanguage development (Ellis, 1994: 586). That is, teachers would be well advised to correct only the errors that the learners are ready to eliminate and to wait until a certain level of trust has been established between themselves and the student. The other belief that is finding wide approval is that self repair is more conducive to SLA than other repair, as it is less likely to result in a negative affective response (Van Lier, 1988).

5. Task Variables

With recent support towards task-based syllabi in EFL, task variables have received a great deal of research attention (Long, 1985; Prabhu, 1987; Long and Crookes, 1992). This is of relevance to EFL practitioners, as they would have more control over the level of difficulty of the tasks they use in their classrooms. Some of the variables that have been suggested in the research include the following:

Code complexity: This is concerned with the traditional areas of syntactic and lexical difficulty and range associated with learning new languages (Skehan, 1996: 52).

Prior knowledge/Familiarity: Tasks in a domain which learners have prior knowledge of are easier than tasks in a domain in which learners have no prior knowledge of (Robinson, 1998).

Single versus Dual Tasks: A single task is one which makes only one demand on the learner. For instance, a learner sequencing the qualities belonging to a good worker would be doing a single task. A dual task, thought to be more difficult, is one in which more than one demand is made of the learner (Robinson, 1998). For example, a task requiring learners to think up a route on a map and describe it at the same time would be a dual task. A number of studies (Long, 1980, cited in Ellis, 1994: 596; Doughty and Pica, 1986) have shown that dual tasks result in an increased negotiation of meaning.

Planning time: Tasks that include planning time are generally considered easier than ones without planning time (Bygate, 1987). Furthermore, according to Long (1989: 14), who focuses on the impact interaction has on tasks, planned tasks 'stretch' interlanguages and promote

destabilization more than unplanned tasks.

Scale: This refers to a range of factors associated with the task such as the number of participants and the relationships involved in the task. Tasks involving more elements are more difficult than tasks involving fewer elements (Brown et al., 1984).

Modality: Speaking leads to more pressure than writing, and listening leads to more pressure than reading (Ellis, 1987).

Stakes: Tasks in which it is important to do the task correctly are more difficult than tasks where there are not any consequences that follow from task completion (Willis, 1993).

Control: Tasks in which the participants have a great deal of control are easier than tasks in which the participants have less control (Pica et al., 1993).

6 . Conclusion

This paper has served to examine some of the most important variables associated with the EFL classroom. Before any overall conclusions can be rendered, it is important for the reader to understand that the list of IDs presented in this paper is not meant to be exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. Further, many of the IDs discussed in this paper are presented in the literature as if they were meant to be measured on a binary scale (i.e., global vs. analytic, introverted vs. extroverted, etc.), which runs the risk of reducing complex realities to easy-to-control polar opposites. Thus, it is especially important for readers to understand that even within an ID category, there will be a great deal individual variation. In other words, teachers have to be careful not to fall into the culturist trap of attempting to predict learner behaviours based on what other learners did in the past. By exploring some of the learner variables, teacher variables and task variables found in the EFL classroom, I hoped to have developed a broader understanding of my own teaching context and that of my study into Japanese EFL learners' acquisition of English. Thus, in conclusion, it is the writer's hope that this paper has served to help other teachers to not only become more aware of, but also more equipped to cater their lessons to the individual needs of their students.

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