Summary and Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to explain why some language learners do better and make more progress than their peers within the same classroom context. It was suggested that this is due to the individual differences which exist among different learners. These individual differences are too many to be discussed within the scope of a short paper. Therefore, this broad issue was narrowed down to five individual differences – aptitude, attitude, motivation, cognitive style and learning strategies – which were briefly discussed. Some of these factors are rather fixed and unchangeable. An individual's aptitude and cognitive style are among the variables which, apparently, do not change over time. However, it is possible to bring about change in an individual's attitude toward the target language people and culture. Moreover, it is equally possible to give motivation to demotivated learners in numerous ways. Finally, it is also feasible to teach language learning strategies to students who have poor habits of, say reading comprehension or learning vocabulary. Thus, it can be concluded that research studies on individual differences in language learning have revealed a number of fascinating facts on how teachers can promote their poor students' learning, irrespective of the methodology that they employ.

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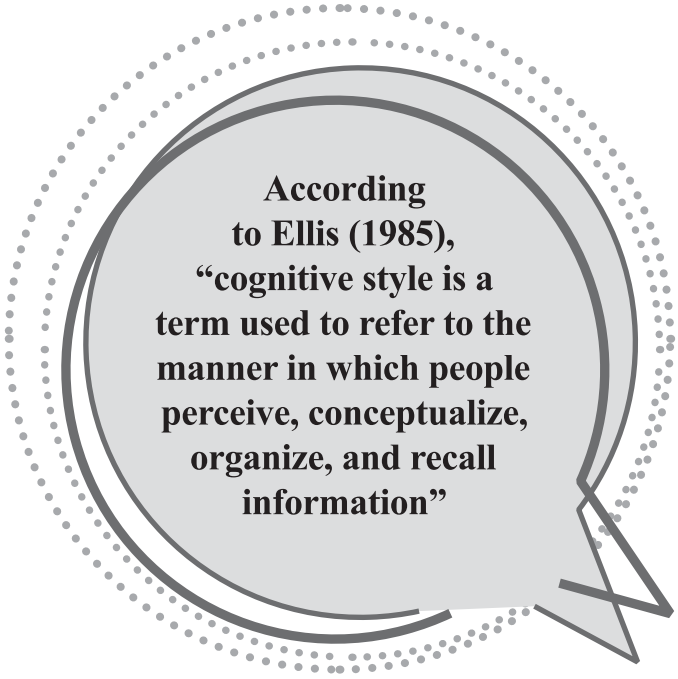


- use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of their first language, in learning a second language.
- use contextual cues to help them in comprehension.
- learn to make intelligent guesses.
- learn chunks of language as wholes and formalized routines to help them perform "beyond their competence."
- learn certain tricks that help to keep conversations going.
- learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence.
- learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language according to the formality of the situation.

Based on these characteristics, there have been many attempts to come up with different strategy taxonomies. One of them is Oxford's (1990) taxonomy consisting of six strategy classes: cognitive, metacognitive, memory, compensation, affective, and social strategies.

The existence of various taxonomies of learning strategies indicates that they are "still fuzzily defined and controversially classified, [yet] are increasingly attracting the interest of contemporary educators because of their potential to enhance learning" (Griffiths, 2006, p.7).

Now if there are certain strategies which determine the success of good language learners, can and should they be taught to other language learners? In reply to this question, we should remind ourselves of the old Chinese proverb which states, "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a lifetime." Within the context of language teaching, it means that if learners are provided with answers, the immediate problem is solved. But if they are equipped with the right strategies to work out the answer for themselves, they can manage their own learning. Thus, teachers can help learners through strategies-based instruction (Brown, 2001). This is achieved through learner training that is, equipping them with the necessary means to guide themselves by explaining learning strategies to them. In this way, the learners become more responsible for their learning. To facilitate teachers' job, textbook writers can also impart the knowledge of good learning strategies to both teachers and students. This is the approach that most modern textbooks adopt. That is, they entail guidelines which inform students on various strategies used for better employment of language skills. *Gateways* by Kimbrough and Frankel (1998) is a well-received textbook which provides students with valuable insights into using various strategies for vocabulary learning, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, etc.

A number of studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between FI/FD and second language learning. However, it is a pity that their findings are contradictory. Seliger (1977), for instance, found that FI learners had more interaction in the classroom than their FD counterparts. Thus, it can be argued that FI learners benefit more from communicative classes. Bacon (1987), on the contrary, showed that there were no differences between FD and FI learners in terms of how much and how well they spoke. Now what can be said, as a concluding remark, regarding the relationship between learning styles and SLA? Learners clearly differ in their preferred ways for learning, but it is impossible to say which learning style works best.

Learning Strategies

The last variable concerning why some learners appear to be more successful than some other learners is related to the strategies that they employ in the whole language learning process in general and in doing individual learning tasks in particular. SLA researchers first noticed the importance of various learning strategies when they were examining characteristics of the good language learner in the 1970s (Rubin, 1975). The results indicated that it was not only a high degree of language aptitude and motivation that caused certain learners to progress but also the students' own active participation and application of specific strategies. Some of the strategies employed by successful language learners are summarized by Rubin and Thompson (1982).

According to them, good language learners:

- find their own way, taking charge of their learning.
- organize information about language.
- are creative, developing a "feel" for the language by experimenting with its grammar and words.
- make their own opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom.
- learn to live with uncertainty by not getting flustered and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word.

Almost all language teachers acknowledge that motivation is an important factor in language learning, and that students who lack motivation cannot reach high levels of language proficiency

- use mnemonics and other memory strategies to recall what has been learned.
- make errors work for them and not against them.

their students' motivation in language classes? Dörnyei (2001) offers 35 strategies, the most important of which are as follows:

- Demonstrate and talk about your own enthusiasm for the course material, and how it affects you personally.
- Develop a personal relationship with your students.
- Promote the development of group cohesiveness.
- Increase the students' expectancy of success in particular tasks and in learning in general.
- Increase your students' goal-orientedness by formulating explicit class goals accepted by them.
- Make the curriculum and the teaching materials relevant to the students.
- Provide learners with regular experiences of success.
- Help diminish language anxiety by removing or reducing the anxiety-provoking elements in the learning environment.
- Increase student motivation by actively promoting learner autonomy.
- Increase learner satisfaction.

Cognitive Styles

The study of cognitive styles in second language acquisition has often been an interesting puzzle. According to Ellis (1985), "cognitive style is a term used to refer to the manner in which people perceive, conceptualize, organize, and recall information" (p. 114). An individual's cognitive style is almost fixed and not easily changed. A number of cognitive styles have been identified, which are usually presented as dichotomies. Oxford and Anderson (1995) state that individual learners have a composite of at least 20 style dimensions, of which eight seem to be particularly important for language learning:

(a) field dependent vs. field independent;
(b) global vs. analytic;
(c) feeling vs. thinking;
(d) impulsive vs. reflective
(e) intuitive-random vs. concrete-sequential;
(f) closure-oriented vs. open;
(g) extroverted vs. introverted;
(h) visual vs. auditory vs. hands-on.

It is, however the distinction between field independence (FI) and field dependence (FD) that has attracted much attention in SLA research.

The usual test to distinguish between these two cognitive styles is discovering shapes in pictures. Those who can pick out shapes despite confusing backgrounds are field-independent; those who cannot are field-dependent. The following table, taken from Ellis (1994, p. 501), further illustrates the differences between FI and FD individuals.

Table 1. Differences between FI and FD individuals

Field independence	Field dependence
adolescents/ adults	children
males	females
object-oriented jobs	people-oriented jobs
urban, technological societies	rural, agrarian societies
free social structures	rigid social structures
individualistic people	group-central people

Motivation

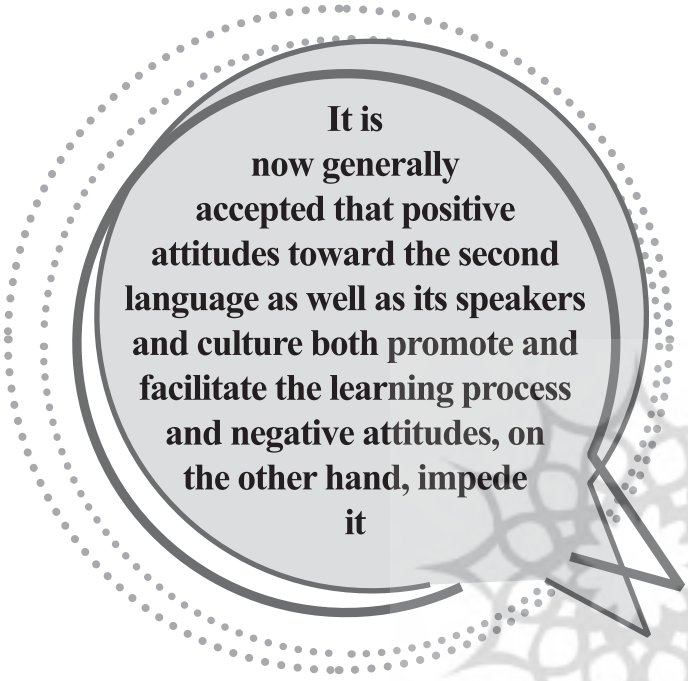
Almost all language teachers acknowledge that motivation is an important factor in language learning, and that students who lack motivation cannot reach high levels of language proficiency. But how can we define this often-heard term? According to Brown (1994, p. 152), motivation is "an inner drive, impulse, emotion, or desire that moves one to a particular action." This powerful force has been viewed in numerous ways in different schools of psychology. In B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning model, motivation is the reward which reinforces living organisms to pursue a goal (Brown, 2001). Cognitive psychologists like Ausubel (1968), on the other hand, argue that motivation is a force which is driven by six different types of needs: the need for exploration, the need for manipulation, the need for activity, the need for stimulation, and finally the need for knowledge.

The literature of language learning and teaching is abundant with the terms *instrumental* and *integrative* motivation. As Brown (1994, pp. 153-154) puts it, instrumental motivation encourages a person to learn a new language to gain instrumental goals such as furthering a career, reading technical journals, translation, etc. Integrative motivation, on the other hand, is a drive which urges a person to integrate himself with the culture of the second language group and become part of it. Both types of motivation are essential for successful language learning, and it is difficult to say which one is a more important requirement. A number of studies (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991; Gardner, Day & MacIntyre, 1992) suggest that second language learning is not motivated by either of these two forces exclusively; rather, it is a mixture of both types which, in many cases, governs one's desire for learning a new language.

In recent years, a new type of motivation has received a lot of attention from language teaching professionals (Brown, 2001; Deci, 1975), namely intrinsic motivation. It is recommended that teachers give the learners language learning tasks that foster this kind of motivation. According to Deci (1975), intrinsically motivating tasks are activities for which learners receive no reward except the activity itself. People do these activities for their own sake; in other words, doing these tasks gives people a feeling of self-satisfaction. It is this type of inner reward which ensures success in learning a new language. As Brown (2001) observes, "if the learners in your classroom are given an opportunity to *do* language for their own personal reasons of achieving competence and autonomy, those learners will have a better chance of success than if they become dependent on external rewards for their motivation" (p. 77). Brown (2001) further goes on with the thoughtful comment that the consequence of extrinsic motivators is that schools teach students the "game" of pleasing their teachers "rather than developing an internalized thirst for knowledge and experience" (p. 78).

How can language teachers promote

concept of aptitude needs to be widened to take care of the communicative aspects of language learning, without which we will have an incomplete picture of what a learner's future success will be like.



Attitude

As Ellis (1994, p. 198) rightly observes, learners manifest their attitudes toward the whole second language learning activity in numerous ways. They show different attitudes toward (a) the target language, (b) target language speakers, (c) the target language culture, (d) the social value of learning the target language, (e) particular uses of the target language, and (f) themselves as members of their own culture.

Attitudes, irrespective of where they are pegged to, play a very important role not only in learning a second language but also in the level of proficiency achieved by an individual. Thus, it is now generally accepted that positive attitudes toward the second language as well as its speakers and culture both promote and facilitate the learning process and negative attitudes, on the other hand, impede it (Gardner, 1980, 1983; Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

Thus, if this is the case, then how can language teachers and language teaching programs contribute to building positive attitudes in learners' mind toward the second language they are learning? To answer this question, it would be necessary to draw a distinction between the terms *additive* and *subtractive* bilingualism (Cook, 2001). In additive bilingualism, the learners feel that they are adding something new to their personality, without taking anything away from what they already have. Children learning English in Quebec, Canada are proud of their native French values and traditions. Thus, they do not think that learning English is going to be a threat to their mother tongue. This is a representative example of an additive bilingual education context. In subtractive bilingualism, the learners feel that learning the second language threatens their native language and native culture values. In some parts of the United States, Spanish may be thought of as socio-politically less important than English. So native Spanish-speaking children who feel these humiliating societal attitudes toward their native language, turn against English and develop a negative attitude toward learning it.

talent for learning foreign languages. This special *talent* in technical terms is known as *aptitude*. Carroll (as cited in Ellis, 1994, p.494) defines general aptitude as the "capability of learning a task", which depends on "some combination of more or less enduring characteristics of the learner." With respect to language learning, this capability involves a tendency for learning a second language. According to Carroll, aptitude is a stable factor which is innate. In other words, it is a prerequisite for successful second language acquisition. Aptitude is normally measured through Carroll and Sapon's Modern Language Aptitude Test (1959). The Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) requires future learners of a second language to carry out second language learning on a small scale. This test incorporates four main factors that predict a learner's success in the second language. These factors, taken from Cook (2001, p. 124), are as follows:

- Phonemic coding ability: how well the student can use phonetic script to distinguish phonemes in the language.
- Grammatical sensitivity: whether the student can pick out grammatical functions in the sentence.
- Inductive language learning ability: whether the student can generalize patterns from one sentence to another.
- Rote learning: whether the student can remember vocabulary lists of foreign words paired with translations.

There are some reports in the literature which demonstrate that there is a strong relationship between aptitude and language learning. The effect of aptitude on language learning has been measured in terms of the proficiency levels of different classroom learners (Ellis, 1985). Gardner (1980), for instance, reports a correlation of ($r_{=}0.41$) between the MLAT scores of English-speaking Canadian school children in different classes throughout Canada and their grade levels in French.

General aptitude is defined as the "capability of learning a task", which depends on "some combination of more or less enduring characteristics of the learner"

Research studies of this sort confirm that aptitude plays a major role in language learning. However, it is necessary to reflect, for a while, on the abilities measured through the MLAT or other tests similar to it. These tests, at their best, predict whether a person will be able to master grammatical structures, learn vocabulary and distinguish the differences between similar sounds. In other words, they predict success on cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), not on basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) (Cummins, 1983). To use less technical terms, aptitude tests address the grammatical competence of the learners not their communicative competence. Thus, as Ellis (1985) rightly argues, the

Abstract
The purpose of the present paper is to explore why some language learners, within the same classroom context and under the same teaching conditions, learn better than their peers. It is suggested that this is due to the individual differences among language learners. The individual differences discussed in this paper are aptitude, attitude, motivation, cognitive styles, and learning strategies. The paper introduces each of these variables and makes references to the teaching implications that they have for the classroom teacher. It is finally concluded that aptitude and cognitive styles are the two variables which are almost fixed over time. However, the other three, i.e. attitude, motivation, and learning strategies are likely to change. Hence, it is recommended that teachers help poor learners by changing their attitude, giving them motivation, and teaching them the right strategies.

Key Words: aptitude, attitude, cognitive styles, learning strategies, motivation

As experienced practicing teachers of English as a foreign language, we have often wondered why some of our classes are successful, while others seem to be a failure. Even within the same class, either successful or unsuccessful as a whole, there are some learners who, more often than not, do better and learn faster than their peers. Why is it then that some learners move like rabbits and some like turtles? This might be attributed to the methodology adopted by the teacher. Some learners apparently learn better with more innovative approaches to foreign language teaching, say the task-based language teaching, than the more traditional methods. However, even the so-called "innovative approaches" do not produce consistent learning outcomes with language learners who share a lot of things in common in terms of age, sex, and educational background. Thus, the answer to the puzzling question why some language learners outdo their peers may lie in the language learners themselves. In other words, success or failure in learning a foreign/second language may, to a great extent, be determined by learners' certain personal factors. These factors are too many to count. Hence, for the sake of brevity, only five of them are addressed in this paper. These five important personal factors are *aptitude*, *attitude*, *motivation*, *cognitive style* and *learning strategies*.

Aptitude

It is a commonly held assumption that some people are specially gifted for learning foreign languages, while others are rather poor at it. We all know people who have lived in a foreign country for a long time, say 20 years or so and are very fluent speakers of the target language. There are, however, others with equally the same background and living conditions who speak the same target language very poorly. What then could be the reason for such sharp differences? As mentioned before, some people seem to have a special

Individual Differences in Language Learners

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چکیده

هدف از نگارش این مقاله بررسی این موضوع است که چرا برخی از زبان‌آموزان در شرایط آموزشی و کلاسی یکسان از هم‌کلاسی‌های خود پیش می‌افتند و بهتر یاد می‌گیرند. این طور استدلال می‌شود که این به دلیل وجود تفاوت‌های فردی بین زبان‌آموزان است. تفاوت‌های فردی موردبحث در این مقاله عبارت‌اند از استعداد، نگارش، انگیزه، سبک‌های شناختی و راهبردهای یادگیری. مقاله‌ی حاضر، پس از معرفی هر یک از این متغیرها و بررسی دستاوردهای آموزشی آن‌ها، به این نتیجه می‌رسد که استعداد و سبک‌های شناختی دو متغیری هستند که در طول زمان ثابت می‌مانند، اما سه متغیر دیگر یعنی نگرش، انگیزه و راهبردهای یادگیری دستخوش تغییر می‌شوند. از این‌رو توصیه می‌شود که معلمان، به زبان‌آموزان ضعیف از طریق تغییر نگرش، انگیزه بدهند و آن‌ها را در آموزش راهبردهای صحیح یادگیری یاری دهند.

کلیدواژه‌ها: استعداد، نگرش، انگیزه، سبک‌های شناختی، راهبردهای یادگیری