

The Practice of TESOL & The Effect of Individual Variables Upon TESOL Students

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When the term second language acquisition is employed, what is being indicated is one's capability of developing the facility to communicate spontaneously in a learnt foreign language in unplanned discourse.

Individual Variables

Individual variability consists of such factors as the age of students, their motivation for learning the target language, and their personality. All of which effect their language learning style.

It is essential to recognise that there are individual differences between learners. As a result different learning and studying approaches are exhibited by different cultures and individuals from those cultures. Additionally certain variables that effect language learning operate on individuals to different degrees. For example, 'transition anxiety' may generally hit one ethnic group more so than another. Developing this point further, the need for a secure and stable family life that provides support to the student, may not be present or present only to a limited degree. This sort of learning base for a student would impinge upon their ability and prove detrimental to their language acquisition. ESL teachers should be aware that students possessing this background may not progress quickly.

Certain learning characteristics are possessed by all learners of a foreign language, but there are also social and emotional factors to deal with. Social meaning interaction with the 'native' community and use of the target language (combined with the anxiety of having to learn this language). Emotional factors show concern for the handling of stress and the ability to cope with unknown situations that may arise as a result of exposure to, and interaction within the native (as well as their own language) community.

The variables within students themselves, effecting second language acquisition basically consist of personal and general factors that relate to all human beings.

Initially personal factors include interaction with a group, in terms of measuring ones own progression and fostering an environment of competitiveness for oneself. High interaction within a group for an individual may see that learner develop the target language faster as a result of continued use and practice of the language. Alternatively a student not saying anything may fall behind due to inadequate practice and use of the language. The use and perceived ability of other class members for an individual student may provide them with a framework in which to locate their own language ability in relation to the rest of the class. Another personal variable that may arise is that of conflict between a student and teacher, resulting from the preference of the student for another teaching method or teaching materials other than those presented by the teacher. In this case within reasonable expectations the teacher may look at modifying their lesson style, along with the methods they use to approach the teaching of a second language. A final variable within personal factors involves the techniques employed by an individual in their language learning, in this case the implication for the practice of TESOL may be to initiate a successful program of self study along with a mode of achieving motivation for students to approach this. Self-study may be guided through lessons and the course of study the student is participating in.

General Variables that Affect All Human Individuals

Alternatively general variables that affect all human individuals when learning a language consist of such things as age, intelligence, aptitude and cognitive ability, in addition an individuals personality also plays a role.

There is a general belief that aptitude for developing a second language dissipates as a learner gets older, contrary to the results of some studies. This notion would have psychological affects upon learners, retarding learning ability. What may be affected by age however is the rate and success of second language acquisition, with older learners able to concentrate on actively learning structures

of language in a context. Linked to this notion is the intelligence and aptitude of the learner, as active learning of a second language in a classroom context requires the use of cognition and intelligence. These cognitive factors relate to problem solving strategies employed by the learner in language development; stemming from this and the ability to acquire the second language, comes motivation and the attitude of the learner to the importance of acquiring the target language. Obviously when high importance or desirability is attached to the acquisition of something then the learner will desire to acquire the article as fast and as soon as possible. A variable in language acquisition concerned with the attainment of a second language is an individual's personality. Elements of the personality include the learner's social and interactive skills, where the more interactive and outgoing a learner may be leads to higher use, exposure and hence quicker acquisition of the target language.

The Implications for TESOL

The implications for TESOL as a result of reviewing the general variables that effect the acquisition of a second language, show that for adult learners there should be a strong focus on the teaching of grammar so that language can be placed structurally and syntactically within their minds. Also communicative teaching and learning tasks should be encouraged to initiate students use and practice of the target language, along with the development of a self-confident personality in terms of giving students the confidence to continually use the target language within and outside of the classroom and its context.

What must be remembered by the TESOL teacher is that the acquisition of a second language not only alters the learner's current linguistic state, but alters their perception of the environment and the world around them.

Further implications arising from the exhibition of these variables within students, and the extent to which they may or may not be present within individual learners within a class group, poses a problem for the TESOL teacher. The teacher must be aware of the numerous variables that can effect students learning and be willing to assist students in their acquisition of the second language, as well as providing the support needed to aid students working through the difficulties of second language acquisition, and the problems arising from any of the variables discussed briefly in this paper. Teachers should also be prepared to modify their teaching programs within reasonable expectation to accompany and meet the needs, along with the expectations and desired goals of learners, whilst being conscious of the numerous factors that can improve or impinge upon second language acquisition.

1. ELLIS, R., *Understanding Second Language Acquisition.*, (OXFORD: Oxford University Press, 1992)., p. 105.

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