

Language aptitude in Second Language Acquisition

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Annotation: the article defines the term language aptitude and to some degree attempts to answer the question if language educators are capable of instructing language learners to fully acquire a foreign language no matter what learners' language aptitude level is.

Keywords: second language acquisition, individual differences,

1.0 Introduction

The empirical studies in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) highlight that the main factors contributing to the learning process, such as age, motivation, learning style, ability, gender, aptitude, intelligence, and learning strategies, comprise the individual differences (IDs) of learners (Fillmore, 1979; Skehan, 1991; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Ehrman et al., 2003). Moreover, these studies also confirm the critical contribution of IDs to achieving ultimate attainment, aiding the development of primary and secondary skills of L2 or other foreign languages. Later, Dörnyei (2009) claims these individual variances have a significant impact on learning processes, dispositions, and eventual success by referring to such personal variations as “persistent personality traits” (p.230). He defines this term as a set of characteristics of an individual which varies to different degrees from person to person, and it is assumed to apply to everyone. Regarding the importance of IDs, Dörnyei and Skehan (2003), in harmony, believe that they are the driving forces behind the entire learning and teaching process, without which language acquisition would not be successful. Based on the research in the field, one of the much-attributed traits among IDs is language aptitude. Frequently it is referred to as ability in linguistic contexts, yet, how genuinely is its value assessed?

Nevertheless, how genuine is this concept? If it is the case, can language instructors help students improve their aptitude? Alternatively, can we help our students outgrow this so-called excuse/fear/stereotype/misconception that vastly influences language learning? What does science have to say about it?

Thus, the rationale behind this study entails understanding and relating the scientists' theories on language aptitude, its measurement, and how to apply it to the personal and educational institution teaching context.

2.0 Literature Review

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The research body in SLA regarding language aptitude has started to enrich from the second half of the last century. Even though it was of less interest in the late 90s, it was revitalized relatively recently, indicating its fundamental role in achieving proficiency. One of the pioneers in the field, Carroll (1974) defines language aptitude first, and establishes a widely used measuring tool for gauging language aptitude. He also defines the term language aptitude as an individual trait that, at a particular point in time, affects the pace of learning at which a learner advances (p.30). Another provision of language aptitude was unfolded by Dörnyei, and Ryan (2015) much later suggests it as a capacity of one's cognitive potential to master a foreign language to use in purposefully set or unprepared circumstances. Throughout the history of L2 aptitude research, the most common argument that has been made is beginner learners with higher L2 aptitude are capable of learning a foreign language. Now that capability of learning a foreign language is being discussed, a series of researchers have rightly pointed out how likely it is important in the process. For instance, Sparks et al. (2011) suppose that L2 learning capability is a partial concept that includes the formation of different cognitive competencies rather than just one attribute. According to Dörnyei (2009), second language capability and competence are a hybrid construct with various sub-components working together in a series of interrelated processes to promote foreign language acquisition. As the terms such as competence, capability, and ability came into the scene in SLA contexts, as mentioned above, scientists established a few testing tools that measure these elements to advance language acquisition. The first and by far the most famous L2 aptitude test was the Modern Language Ability Test (MLAT), developed by Carroll and Sapon (1959/2002). The MLAT has been broadly used in the adjacent realms of education and psychology, demonstrating its validity and reliability (Depue & Bailey, 2014). Pimsleur's (1966) Language Aptitude Battery, another famous L2 aptitude test, further uses a fixed component-based strategy to use L2 abilities. This L2 aptitude battery also measures, like its predecessor, students' linguistic intelligence and listening ability in foreign languages; however, it redefines L2 knowledge in the broader sense by encompassing motivation as a crucial construct. Nevertheless, in applied linguistics, only some empirical studies have compared Pimsleur's (1966) PLAB with its more famous counterpart, the MLAT. Sparks and Ganschow (1991, 2001) propose the following theoretical insight on second language competence. Their model of language coding differences (LCDH) is based on the assumption that L1 literacy can largely forecast FL performance. Although claims of practical value for the test developed by test developers are based on the LCDH model, and despite its theoretical appeal, it cannot replace the MLAT and PLAB, which cannot be compared with those in applied linguistic research. Nevertheless, the LCDH model laid the foundation for advancing several other theoretical approaches to L2 ability, including the information processing insight and

the Macro-SLA ability model, as well as the successful information insight. The principal CANAL-F (The Cognitive Ability for Novelty in Acquisition of Language - Foreign) test argues that L2 competence must primarily be conceptualized in terms of the language learner's ability to process new aspects of language that include acquiring lexical relations, grammatical rules, and L1 systems that are entirely or partly distinguished from them as a student. Looking into these aptitude measuring tests, it is noteworthy to mention that these tests are not publicly available. However, Tagarelli et al. (2016) claim that MLAT is considerably complex in design and fitter to measure the learning capability of difficult languages such as Arabic or Chinese; however, CANAL-F is more suitable to predict the learning capability in terms of easy-to-learn languages such as Spanish. Later, Skehan proposed and revised the information processing insight and the Macro-SLA capability model. This model attempts to relate L2 competence to levels of development established through the study of a second language; thus, an attempt is made to give a more realistic picture of how L2 competence is related to other cognitive problems such as input, attention, automaticity, and emphasis. For instance, phonological ability and working memory are associated with the early phases of input processing and verbal attention. Skehan (2015, 2016) also long-drawn his macroscopic SLA competency model by studying the association between SLA levels, L2 cognitive procedures, and competency elements. Although all the important features of this L2 aptitude model have yet to be studied empirically; therefore, additional research was required to confirm its advantages and uncover its weaknesses.

3.0 Discussion

Since the previous chapters have visited the term language aptitude and the means to measure it, this chapter will look into how aptitude-related theories can be applied to the personal teaching context. If we look into the term aptitude deeper, it is crucial to revise it in elements. As the tests described above measure different cognitive abilities of an individual, it is quite obvious that the term language aptitude does not comprise merely one element but several components that constitute it as a whole. Thus, the four components of language aptitude were proposed by Carroll (1981), namely:

- i) Phonetic coding ability – defines the ability to recognition of speech sounds, differentiating them in connected speech and associating them with their symbols;
- ii) Grammatical sensitivity – defines the ability to recognize grammatical functions of words and linguistic structures;
- iii) Rote learning ability – defines the ability to recognition of words and associate them with their meaning rapidly and efficiently;

iv) Inductive learning ability – defines the ability to induce rules and figuring the meanings, as known as discovery learning in contemporary SLA;

These given components are known as the main indicators of language aptitude level. This, at first glance, seems quite simple; however, all the tests that aim to test language ability lay their ground on these four components. If an individual with a high language aptitude, which suggests that the individual is good at recognizing phonemes, grammatical structures, words, and their pronunciation, elicits requires in-context information effectively and within the topic still actual period. Later studies linked their research to the above findings, and the founders of LCDH Sparks and Ganschow (1991) claimed that the degree of these abilities intertwined with individuals' L1 literacy. The reason a person is not decent at any components of language attitude, according to them, is tightly related to the underdevelopment of this/these components in their L1; thus, this has a huge impact on L2. For, it is recommended families hold broader interaction with children in their household to formulate decent language abilities from childhood. This, to a greater extent, sounds quite reasonable. If the case of Genie is compared against the hypothesis, it proves itself to be true as the feral child was not exposed to the language and eventually never developed adequate linguistic skills for the rest of her life as opposed to multilingual households' children who often grow up to be successful language learners.

One of the striking concepts that have been proposed in the realm of SLA regarding language aptitude is Skehan's Skehan's componential approach (1998. 2002). The concept unpacks the correlation of language aptitude components to the different phases of SLA. This appears to suggest promising results when applied in teaching, especially to identify where a student needs scaffolding.

Table 1. Skehan's proposal of SLA stages and aptitude constructs

SLA Stage	Corresponding Aptitude Constructs
Input processing strategies, such as segmentation	<i>Attentional control</i> <i>Working memory</i>
Noticing	Phonetic coding ability <i>Working memory</i>
Pattern identification	Phonetic coding ability <i>Working memory</i> Grammatical sensitivity Inductive language learning ability
Pattern restructuring and manipulation	Grammatical sensitivity Inductive language learning ability
Pattern control	<i>Automatization</i> <i>Integrative memory</i>
Pattern integration	<i>Chunking</i> <i>Retrieval memory</i>

(Adopted from Dörnyei (2009). Individual differences: Interplay of learner characteristics and learning environment. *Language learning*, 59, 230-248.)

By utilizing a table in explicit teaching, it seems particularly applicable to design the test based on the table above to specify a learner's weak spots. This, at the same time, might fairly be

advantageous for both ends in filling the voids. Doing so, it is totally realistic to alter the course of language aptitude in one's performance if only more effort is devoted by both parties.

4.0 Implications in Teaching

Assuming all the discussions above, several implications from the theories can be adopted in the teaching context described in the teaching context description part. One of the implications includes Skehan's componential approach to learning. His componential correlation of language aptitude and SLA phases allows us to infer the core problems in the learning process, and with the correctly selected method, both a phase and a component can be improved. Other suggestions, apart from the theories above, recommend refining learning strategies and boosting motivation, as language aptitude is only one factor that contributes to the process; however, if the rest aspects of FL are reinforced, the ultimate attainment appears to be achievable.

5.0 Conclusion

Regarding all discussed throughout the essay, it is evident that there has been a major study on the topic of language aptitude, which reveals that the individual approach with the language aptitude test can help identify learner's weak spots in language acquisition and can also propose the probable timeline to acquire a certain topic such as auxiliary system (Skehan, 2013). That means teachers are, in fact, in power to assist learners in achieving ultimate attainment when the teaching materials accommodate learners' needs properly.

Overall, the theories above are of great use in a language classroom; however, it does not deny the fact that there is always room for further study in order to create language classrooms and learning instances in which adult learners can gain more individual care to gain ultimate attainment in FL.

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