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Title: Age and motivation as the two major factors which influence my English language learning process and outcome

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Introduction

The last few decades have seen the ever-growing popularity of English language as the world lingua franca and the medium of instruction, communication, business, and science. It is, therefore, very common to see people around the globe learning English as a second or foreign language; however, their learning experiences may vary from one to another depending on their contexts. To exemplify this, my experience of learning English as a foreign language will be described in this paper, and then several factors involved in my learning process and outcome will be elaborated. The paper will place a primary focus on two major influential factors – *age* and *motivation*, both of which will be explored and discussed in relation to the research and literature in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

My English language learning experience

I began to learn English as my second language (L2) at the age of 16 when I was in grade 9 at secondary school. My learning journey began in 1997 when English was believed to be a useful and important language for communicating with foreigners or tourists who came to Cambodia. Moreover, everyone was convinced that having a good knowledge of English could bring them a decent and well-paid job. Since I started to learn English at age 16, I was considered to be a late starter because anyone whose age of arrival (AoA) in the target language setting is 12 or later is defined as late starters or late learners (Birdsong, 2004). The following is a brief chronological description of my English language learning experience.

To begin with, I attended my first English school at a pagoda in 1997. My first teacher was a monk, and I attended class one hour a day from Monday to Friday. The lesson was conducted in the evening and adopted a Grammar Translation Method (GTM) of teaching and learning where word-by-word translation from English to Khmer (my native language), drills, and repetition were the only major classroom activities. After studying English there for about six months, I quit because I was busy preparing for a grade 9 state exam. My next exposure to English was through English classes at my high school where all students were given two-hour English instruction per week. All lessons were taught based on a teacher-centered method with a central focus on the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, not the ability to use English communicatively.

Three years passed and I finished my high school in 2002 with a pre-intermediate level of English proficiency. After high school, I pursued a bachelor's degree in English literature and graduated in 2007 with a Bachelor of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. It was through my time at university together with my independent study that I gained a good deal of knowledge of English which enabled me to use English successfully for work and communication. However, despite the so-called success, I am now still not satisfied with some aspects of my English, particularly my pronunciation, accent, and speaking skills. I would regard my dissatisfaction and success as a result of my age and motivation respectively. In what follows, the effects of age and motivation on my learning process and outcome are discussed with reference to SLA literature where possible.

The effect of age on my English learning

As mentioned above, I began learning English as a foreign language at age 16 after I had fully mastered my first language, and the way I learned was mainly through repetition,

translation, and drilling. Thus, most of the linguistic elements were learned by heart, and translation from L1 into L2 and vice versa was absolutely crucial for the success of my learning. Since I was a later starter, it seemed that I was more disadvantaged compared to people who had started learning L2 at an earlier age. This claim is, in fact, supported by many research studies such as Johnson and Newport (1989), Larson-Hall (2008), Mitchell and Myles (2004), and Philp, Oliver, and Mackey (2008), just to name a few. Larson-Hall's (2008) study, for example, found that starting to learn learning English at a younger age had a beneficial effect on both phonological and morphosyntactic abilities. Similarly, a widely cited study by Johnson and Newport (1989) which supports the notion of critical period (CP) found that "human beings appear to have a special capacity for acquiring language in childhood, regardless of whether the language is their first or second" (p. 95).

With regard to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) which states that there is a limited developmental period for language learning and once this period is passed, the language learning ability suffers a gradual decline (Birdsong, 1999), I recall that I have experienced a number of obstacles and difficulties in learning English. For instance, I found it difficult to remember new English words or grammar rules I had learned and the only useful method at my disposal to tackle this problem was to repeat the words or rules many times in my head or to repeatedly write them down on a piece of paper. This learning experience clearly shows that I learned English through explicit learning, which is entirely different from the way I learned my L1 where language is learned implicitly. The contrast in how both languages are learned, therefore, might be due to the fact that I do not have access to the implicit language learning mechanism as DeKeyser found in his (2000) study that adult learners learn by using analytical, problem-solving abilities because the implicit learning mechanisms are now no longer available for them.

Another obvious disadvantage of age-related effects on my learning outcome concerns my dissatisfaction over my English accent and speaking skills. As described earlier, I began to learn English at age 16, meaning that I learned my L2 after the CP because, despite disagreements among researchers about "when the optimum period for acquisition ends" (Muñoz & Singleton, 2011, p. 8), the proposed offset or the end point of CP tends to range from age 1 to puberty (i.e. around age 15 or 16) (Singleton, 2005). As a result of learning my L2 after the CP, I speak English with a Khmer accent and my speaking skills are far from native-like in spite of my continuing effort and constant exposure to the target language. This undesirable leaning outcome, therefore, confirms many studies on age-related effects which have reported that young children tend to achieve greater success than adults in terms of native-like accent and pronunciation (see Ellis, 1994; Jones, 1997, Piske, MacKay and Flege, 2001). Long's (as cited in Flege, 1999) review of SLA literature, for instance, concluded that learners will speak with a foreign accent if their L2 learning begins after age 12 and without a foreign accent if learning begins by age 6.

The effect of motivation on my English learning

Unlike the negative effect of age on my learning outcome discussed above, motivation is considered to exert a beneficial influence on my successful L2 learning. In fact, there are a number of factors which play a pivotal role in the success of L2 learning such as age, sex, personality, aptitude, motivation, anxiety, learning styles and learning strategies, and these factors are termed individual differences (IDs) (Dörnyei, 2006; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Ellis, 1994; Robinson, 2002; Saville-Troike, 2006) or nonlanguage factors (Gass & Selinker, 1994) in SLA literature. However, a central focus of attention among many SLA researchers has been on motivation (Ellis, 1985; Yashima, 2000), and many researchers agree that motivation is a

predictor of success in second language learning (Dörnyei, 1994, 1998, 2006; Ellis, 1994; Gass, Behney & Plonsky, 2013; Gass & Selinker, 1994; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Mitchell, Myles & Marsden, 2013; Noels, Pelletier, Clément & Vallerand, 2000; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Saville-Troike, 2006; Wang, 2009).

Taking my L2 learning outcome into consideration, it is obvious that motivation has played a significant role in contributing to the success of my learning. I remember, for example, that my English proficiency had not remarkably improved during high school because I seemed to have no clear motive in learning English. However, this situation changed after I attended university when I began to realize and embrace the true value of English. Simply put, my motivation to learn English had quickly been generated due to my understanding of the importance of English knowledge for my future career, and this kind of motivation has so far remained unchanged. Thus, it can be inferred that instrumental motivation, that is, "motivation that comes from the rewards gained from knowing another language" (Gass, Behney & Plonsky, 2013, p. 526) has exerted a stronger influence than integrative motivation on my successful learning outcome. It is interesting that my experience is different from what many researchers have postulated that integrative motivation is a better predictor of second language learning success (Ellis, 1994; Gass & Selinker, 1994; Garder, 2007; Hernández, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Conclusion

Having described my L2 learning experience chronologically and discussed the two key factors influencing my learning process and outcome, it can be concluded that the success in language learning relies largely on a variety of different factors which differ widely from one person to another. One can, therefore, base his/her failure or triumph in L2 learning on various

sources of influence which shapes who a person is and determines how much an individual can achieve. Those influential factors may vary in terms of age, personality, motivation, learning strategies, input, or interaction, depending on the goals and contexts of the teaching and learning. To sum up, language learning, be it L1 or L2, is a lifelong process involving a large number of factors which are inextricably linked and directly or indirectly influence one another.

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