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**THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN LEARNER ACTIVATION OF
LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES**

PART I. THE AGE FACTOR: AN OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

Key words: individual differences (IDs) (cognitive and affective), ‘good language learners’, language learner strategies, age, language teaching/learning, strategy training

Introduction

For about four decades, it has been clear that second/foreign language teaching (L2/FL) methodologies or special learning agendas, no matter how thoroughly planned and how well designed, can neither be considered complete nor prove effective if researchers and teachers do not attach equal importance to the variety of notions that come under the umbrella concept of *individual learner differences*. Apart from age, these concern two domains: (1) *the cognitive domain* of language learning with its two aspects of human learning in general and individual cognitive variables that comprise general intelligence (IQ), language aptitude, varied processes, styles and strategies, and (2) *the affective domain* with its intrinsic aspect of learner attitudes and beliefs, perception of the self and others, motivation and personality traits, as well as its extrinsic side of sociocultural variables (Brown, 2000; cf. Komorowska, 1978; Arnold, 1999).

Psychology shows that both domains are actively involved in all learning processes, condition and complement each other’s functioning, and that learners differ with respect to these spheres considerably. In fact, all acts of learning and language learning, and, essentially, learner choice and application of strategies for language learning and use, remain under complex impacts of age-related characteristics and a host of interrelated individual factors (IDs) of a cognitive and affective nature. These, in turn, determine the course of language learning, its rate, and the degree of ultimate success or failure in the language learning venture (Skehan, 1989; Ellis, 1994; Oxford, 2002; Dornyei, 2005).

In the 1970s, research on features and behaviours of ‘good language learners’ triggered the search for the most effective ways of supporting their development in all learners, while studies concerning the role and impact of individual differences (IDs) within the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and issues centered around language learner strategies

have become vital incentives stimulating the search for new forms of work, new teaching and learning solutions which could help all the different learners become more successful, or more effective language learners (Komorowska, 2000). This does not only require a thorough understanding of learner age characteristics and their role in the learner's choice and activation of language learning strategies, but also necessitates equal treatment of *both* the learner's cognitive and affective domains and their impacts on language learning and use, including the learner's strategic decisions and behaviours. In this series of three articles, the author will, therefore, explore the issue of individual differences and their influence on language learners' strategy use, focusing on the role of learner age and selected factors of each domain in L2/FL learning separately, as well as suggest implications for L2/FL teaching and learning.

Individual learner differences: definition and classifications

Individual learner differences (IDs) or, as Dornyei (2005) emphasizes, dimensions of enduring characteristics of a person which make him/her unique and distinct from other people, and which appear to be the most consistent predictors of success in language learning, do not constitute unitary constructs, but behavioural clusters. Each of them is "a complex of features which are manifest in a range of overlapping behaviours" (Ellis, 1985:100). This makes them particularly difficult to identify, describe, and classify. In an attempt to categorize this diversity of factors, which may affect L2/FL learning by influencing the learner's strategy choice and use, researchers propose certain criteria.

Most generally, IDs can be divided depending on whether they belong to the human *cognitive domain* or *affective domain* (Brown, 2000). In fact, the criterion informs the discussion of the role of selected IDs in this series of articles. However, it must also be noted that Ellis (1985) distinguishes between *personal* and *general* factors, which is related to the range of factor appearance. Thus, personal factors are learner-specific and refer to all the highly idiosyncratic ways in which individuals tend to approach the task of language learning. These include both *cognitive* factors (e.g. individual learning techniques) and *affective* features (e.g. attitudes to teachers and materials, learners' overt comparisons of themselves to others in a group). General factors, on the other hand, characterize all learners and comprise age (and therefore the stage of learner physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development), intelligence and

apptitude, cognitive styles, motivation, and personality traits. In fact, both types have their *social*, *cognitive*, and *affective* aspects. Social factors, external to the learner, are conditioned by his/her relationships with other people. Cognitive factors, internal to the learner, are related to the problem-solving strategies which he/she typically activates. Affective factors, also learner-internal, are associated with emotional reactions to varied language learning tasks. Additionally, Ellis (1985) divides IDs into factors that are *unmodifiable* in the course of language learning (e.g. aptitude, age, sex), and those that are *modifiable* (e.g. learning aims and strategies, attitudes and beliefs, motivation). (This last division seems particularly crucial for language teachers and learners alike, since it is relevant to the idea of helping learners become more successful via purposeful strategy training.)

Furthermore, Tudor (1997) discusses IDs in terms of two main types of *psychological* factors and *cognitive* variables. The former are the learner's psychological and affective responses to the interpersonal dimension of L2/FL learning. The latter imply learners' organization of their actual experience of the world, language and language learning, and their learning preferences, or ways in which they comprehend, store, and use information. Tudor adds, however, that his distinction cannot be treated as cut-and-dried, since the relationships between IDs tend to be complex, their dividing lines are often vague, and thus some (e.g. ambiguity tolerance) could belong to both categories.

Knowledge of these constructs and their role in learner use of strategies for language learning in general is still very limited, mainly due to the fact that they are not directly observable. Moreover, learner IDs, feelings and emotions are so intertwined within the processes of language learning and use that the impact of no one of them can be isolated entirely for investigation, comparison, interpretation and evaluation (Arnold and Brown, 1999; Brown, 2000). Nevertheless, referring to the SLA literature, in this series of three articles the author will venture to describe selected factors and provide their definitions and evidence of influence on L2/FL learning via learners' differing strategic behaviours.

Features and behaviours of 'good' and less successful language learners

The notion of 'language learner strategies' has become commonplace in SLA studies since the 1970s when theorists, researchers, and language teachers began to realize the impossibility of discovering or inventing a single, universal method or technique of teaching that could

guarantee all learners successful accomplishment of the complex task of second/foreign language learning. The earlier unexplained variability in ultimate levels of language learning success among learners was also associated with and attributed to a number of learner-specific behavioural patterns and thinking processes. These constitute the highly individual approaches that learners employ in order to obtain and process new information, regulate their own interaction with the incoming knowledge and new meanings, relate them to already existing, hierarchically organized cognitive structures, generalize the newly acquired entities, store them in long-term memory, retrieve them, and monitor their later use (cf. Drożdżał-Szelest, 1997).

Thus, cognitive science developments of the 1960s and 1970s and a growing interest amongst psychologists and linguists oriented mainly towards the cognitive strategies that people generally use to think, learn, and solve problems also stimulated the study of learner approaches to second language learning in and out of the classroom. Cognitive psychologists' conviction that learners are actively engaged in the process of learning accentuated the role of mental processes and triggered research into cognitive processing and the learner's strategies that are involved in L2/FL learning (Wenden, 1987; 1991; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Chamot *et al.*, 1999). Simultaneously, the issue of a 'good' or successful and, subsequently, autonomous, self-directed, or self-regulated language learner surfaced in the literature on the subject.

Research on the 'good language learner' (GLL), his/her traits and strategies can, in fact, be traced back to Aaron Carton's 1966 investigation of learner variability in the "ability to make valid, rational, and reasonable inferences" (Rubin, 1987:19). As a result of his studies, Carton (1971) concluded that L2 learning could not be discussed in terms of skills only, because it resembles complex intellectual processes, or problem-solving, in which varied kinds of learner knowledge and experiences may be involved in language processing. Moreover, he observed that learners' ability to draw good inferences altered in relation to their individual tolerance of risk (Rubin, 1987). Thus, it has become clear that learners differ in the way they approach and accomplish the language learning task.

Inspired by his work, Rubin initiated research in this area in 1971. She sought to identify those behaviours of GLLs which could be contributing to their ultimate success. In fact, most of the early research on learning strategies in SLA focused on attempts to identify, describe, and classify strategies activated by more and less competent students in order to determine which behaviours could be taught to less able learners and, in this way, proceed to the creation of effective schemes of strategy instruction. The results presented by Rubin in 1975

covered the following variables typical of self-defined good learners: *learner psychological characteristics* (i.e. risk-taking, tolerance of ambiguity and vagueness, willingness to appear foolish), *learner communication strategies* (circumlocution and gestures), *learner social strategies* (looking for possibilities to use language), and *learner cognitive strategies* (guessing/inferencing, practising, attending to form by analyzing, categorizing and synthesizing, and monitoring) (Rubin, 1987:20).

Rubin's first generalizations about the traits and behaviours of good language learners were intuitive in nature and based mainly on teacher experience and observation. Thus, she described good L2 learners as willing and accurate guessers who seek opportunities to communicate and learn from communication, who are uninhibited about mistakes, focus on both structure and meaning, look for language patterns, take advantage of opportunities for practice, and monitor their own and others' speech (Rubin, 1975). She also noticed that their strategy choice and employment depended on the nature of the learning task in hand, the learner's proficiency level and age, contexts of learning, general learning styles, and learner personality traits (cf. Drożdżał-Szelest, 1997).

Many researchers describe strategies activated by successful language learners (see, e.g. Stern, 1975, 1983; Naiman *et al.*, 1978; Rubin and Thompson, 1982; Ellis and Sinclair, 1989; Cohen, 1998). Oxford (1990, 2002), whose definition and system of learning strategies will be focused on further in the article, divides the strategies of good learners into six classes. She claims that GLLs apply *metacognitive strategies* to manage their own learning by paying attention, actively looking for practice opportunities, planning, monitoring errors, or self-evaluating progress. Also, good L2 learners resort to *affective strategies* such as anxiety reduction via the use of music, laughter, meditation, or apply self-encouragement and self-rewarding to control their emotions. They activate *social strategies* to learn with others, ask questions, cooperate with native speakers of the target language, and develop cultural awareness. GLLs use *memory-related strategies* to organize new information and retrieve it when needed by grouping, rhyming, imagery, physical movement, and structured reviewing. They manipulate an L2 directly using *general cognitive strategies* of practising naturalistically, reasoning, analyzing contrastively or summarizing. Finally, they also use *communication*, or *compensatory strategies* to cope with linguistic limitations; thus, they guess meanings intelligently and actively employ synonyms, as well as other communication tricks (Oxford, 1989).

Less successful learners are often thought of as possessing underdeveloped strategy repertoires; however, they also apply learning strategies and sometimes do so actively.

Nevertheless, studies indicate that less effective students seem to follow different patterns of strategy employment (Abraham and Vann, 1987). In fact, they appear to lack appropriately developed and directed higher-order metacognitive, or self-regulatory, strategies needed to properly manipulate other strategies in response to the nature of the task in hand (Vann and Abraham, 1990). Good language learners, on the other hand, tend to be better at assessing learning activities, identifying task-related aims and their own learning problems and, as a result, resort to more effective strategies that enable them to complete different tasks and overcome difficulties. All the descriptive studies conducted so far confirm that both successful and less competent language learners do utilize certain strategies for L2 learning, but GLLs differ from their less effective peers in a more adequate choice and more skillful application of language learning strategies. Moreover, good language learners appear to employ more varied strategies and do this more frequently (cf. O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Drożdżał-Szelest, 1997).

An overview of attempts at specifying characteristics that distinguish successful L2 learners from less competent ones could, in fact, be reduced to eight major aspects of the issue, and shows that GLLs are aware of language as a system and as a means of communication and interaction; they are concerned about both language forms and functional practice, develop an awareness of the learning process itself and approach it in active ways, willingly seek opportunities for language exploration; use strategies flexibly in response to task requirements, utilize their prior linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world in order to learn and communicate, effectively manage the learning process, and know how to cope with its affective demands (Ellis, 1994). Dakowska (2001) adds that good language learners are eager to obtain feedback, seem most accurate using it to correct their errors, cooperate with their teachers, and respect teacher advice, while Siek-Piskozub (1997) stresses that highly successful learners use strategies consciously. All in all, as Dornyei (2005) concludes, good language learners excel because, among other factors, they participate in the learning process creatively, apply individualized learning strategies and, in this way, proactively contribute to the enhancement of their language learning effectiveness. Thus, they know how to learn.

Language learner strategies: a practical definition and typology

The research of the good language learner's characteristics and behaviours has, in fact, produced a number of overlapping sets of traits and strategies which, nevertheless, suggest that learners are far from being passive in the learning process, and which provide rich and useful insights into the nature of language learning and learner strategic behaviours. It has also contributed to the development of research directed at identifying, characterizing, defining, and classifying language learner strategies.

The literature on the subject, however, still seems highly speculative and theoretical. It provides a great variety of often confusing, overlapping, or even conflicting opinions on how to explain, define, and classify not only more conceptually complex issues in the area, but even key terms. The literature has not as yet offered a definite clarification or consistent usage of such terms necessary to understand what learners are doing when they are learning a language as *strategy*, *technique*, *tactics*, *plan*, *operation*, *process*, or even *skill* or *principle*. In fact, "strategies" have been referred to as "learning skills, basic skills, functional skills", "potentially conscious plans", "consciously employed operations", "cognitive abilities", "cognitive activities", "language processing strategies", "techniques", "tactics", or "problem-solving procedures" (Wenden, 1987:7). Thus, the task of arriving at a common definition and a unified classification of L2 learner strategies seems complicated; different researchers propose differing views as to their defining criteria, while the complex and elusive nature of learner strategies, and imperfect research methods still produce some conceptual and terminological problems.

Nevertheless, practitioners are likely to appreciate the work of Rebecca Oxford (1990). Oxford develops her own definition and classification of language learning strategies on the assumption that their goal is to develop the learner's communicative competence. She derives the term from the ancient Greek word *strategia* which means generalship, or the art of war. If applied to learning situations, the concept involves "a plan, step, or conscious action toward achievement of an objective" and learning strategies can be defined as "operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information" ; in fact, they are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990:8). Thus, strategies constitute learner tools for self-regulated learning (Oxford, 2002; Dornyei, 2005). Oxford's 1990 typology is, in fact, detailed, more comprehensive and systematic than earlier classifications (e.g. Bialystok, 1978; Rubin, 1981; O'Malley *et al.*, 1985, 1990), and, which is of special importance to teachers, less complicated terminologically, as the author herself stresses.

Oxford, like Rubin (1981), divides strategies into two main classes: *direct* and *indirect*, though she proposes a different further subdivision into six strategy groups. The first major class of *direct strategies* includes *memory*, *cognitive*, and *compensation strategies*. The second class of *indirect strategies* covers *metacognitive*, *affective*, and *social strategies*. Direct strategies, like O'Malley *et al.*'s (1985) cognitive strategies, involve the target language directly and require its mental processing, while indirect strategies support language learning indirectly through centering, arranging, planning, organizing, controlling and evaluating one's learning; lowering anxiety, encouraging oneself, increasing cooperation and empathizing with others. Thus, they correspond to O'Malley *et al.*'s metacognitive and socio-affective strategies. In fact, direct and indirect strategies support each other, and the six strategy groups can assist one another.

Each of Oxford's 1990 strategy groups performs specific functions in L2/FL learning:

- (1) *memory strategies* assist learners with storing and retrieving information via, for example, grouping, associating/elaborating, semantic mapping; using keywords, using physical response and/or mechanical techniques, or structured reviewing;
- (2) *cognitive strategies* facilitate the learner's comprehension and production of the new language through varied practising techniques (e.g. repeating, practising formally with sounds and writing systems, practising naturalistically, using formulas and patterns), using resources for receiving and sending messages, getting the idea quickly, analyzing contrastively, reasoning deductively, translating, or transferring;
- (3) *compensation strategies* enable learners to cope with their L2 knowledge gaps and continue using the language via intelligent guessing and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing (e.g. selecting the topic, coining words, using a circumlocution or synonym, switching to the mother tongue, getting help, using mime or gesture);
- (4) *metacognitive strategies* coordinate the process of L2/FL learning and enable the learner to control his/her cognition through overviewing and linking new data with the already known material, paying attention, finding out about language learning, setting goals and objectives, organizing, monitoring, or evaluating one's learning;
- (5) *affective strategies* help to regulate emotions and motivations by skillful application of progressive relaxation or deep breathing, making positive statements, taking risks wisely, listening to one's body, writing a language learning diary, sharing feelings;
- (6) *social strategies* intensify contacts and learning with others via, for example, asking questions for clarification, verification, or correction; cooperating with peers and

proficient users of the target language, developing cultural understanding and awareness of others' thoughts and feelings (for details, see Oxford, 1990).

What is crucial to all practitioners is the fact that - when compared to other researchers' proposals - Oxford goes far beyond cognitive and metacognitive processes and thus considerably enriches the concept of language learning strategies. She emphasizes the interrelatedness and interdependence of cognition and the language learner's emotional self – an issue that cannot be neglected in any discussion of learner strategies, and offers a variety of affective and social strategies. As the author rightly stresses, the learner cannot be seen merely as “a cognitive/metacognitive information-processing machine”, but must be treated as a ‘whole person’ – an intellectual, social, emotional, and physical being (Oxford, 2002:128). Additionally, her taxonomy is conveniently related to a practical paper-and-pencil questionnaire designed to assess the learner's current strategy use, *The Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL)* (see Oxford, 1990:283-300).

It must be added that, as can be seen from the list above, and which Ellis (1994) stresses as a shortcoming, Oxford does not separate communication strategies, or strategies of language use, from learning strategies. Instead, she attempts to provide an extended system of all learner strategies and includes her own, reduced list of behaviours that other researchers would call ‘communication strategies’, locating them among the direct strategies, under the label of *compensation strategies*. However, Oxford does not refrain from admitting that future assessments of learner strategies through surveys such as *SILL* should reconsider Ellis's (1994) and Cohen's (1998) division into *strategies for language learning* and *strategies for language use* (see Hsiao and Oxford, 2002).

The age factor and its role in language learners' use of strategies

Age, as a general factor easy to identify and measure, is probably the most reliably evidenced individual variable described in the SLA literature. Learner age appears not to change developmental patterns concerning the route of language acquisition by both children and adults; however, it influences the rate of learning, ultimate levels of L2/FL proficiency, and language learning success (Ellis, 1994). Since age is a constitutive human property that determines stages of our cognitive, emotional, social, linguistic and communicative development throughout life, it governs what learners in particular age groups become cognitively and communicatively ready to do (Dakowska, 2005). Therefore, age may

influence the learner's choice of types and ways of application of strategies for language learning and use (Oxford, 1989; Oxford and Ehrman, 1993).

Research, though not abundant and mainly focused on the activation of strategies by adolescents and adults, shows that learners at different age groups employ different strategies. This conclusion can be drawn referring to developmental psychology and the research which indicates that adolescents can learn most rapidly of all age groups (Ellis, 1994). On the one hand, teenagers still acquire language like children, that is, naturally and spontaneously, while, on the other hand, the development of Piagetian formal operations and meta-awareness facilitates language learning through better organizational and planning skills and, thus, richer repertoires of strategies that are not yet available to children, and which enable adolescents to learn more consciously.

Furthermore, adolescents' memory span, memory organization, and memory strategies are also superior. Teenagers develop the ability to generate grammatical rules, make associations, cope in formal learning situations, and handle tests by increasingly more appropriate use of a widening range of testing techniques (Arabski, 1984). Additionally, Sternberg (1995) notices that age appears to affect the development of thinking and learning styles, and research shows that learning styles and learner strategies are closely interrelated (Oxford, 1989; 1990; 2002). All these facts testify to adolescent, and later adult, use of a considerably richer range of strategies of all categories that are not yet accessible to children (i.e. memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social). Obviously, the question of whether particular strategies are applied by an individual, which strategy types he/she uses, when, how, and how many of them, is another issue.

Wong-Fillmore, in her 1976 study of how five Mexican children were developing communicative competence in English, finds that younger learners rely on certain types of strategies more than on others. She shows that children, in their early stages of language development, actively employ social strategies that ensure peer acceptance, and help initiate and maintain social relations with native-speakers. They also seem not to be concerned about language learning itself, though in order to satisfy their social needs they activate some simple cognitive strategies as well (e.g. using formulas or repetitions). Thus, their strategy choices tend to be directed by their specific needs to join a group and become accepted, as well as rely on others' help (Skehan, 1989).

Chesterfield and Chesterfield's (1985) investigation of longitudinal development of young children's strategies in their early stages of L2 development in bilingual settings further supports the observation that strategies for interpersonal interaction play a vital role in child

strategy repertoires. Moreover, it confirms that age *is* a determining factor in the L2 learner's development of strategies, and in their use. Analyses of changes in patterns of strategy use, which accompany the growth of learner L2 knowledge, reveal the existence of a kind of systematic and natural order in strategy emergence and development, although individual strategy variations occur as well. Thus, receptive and self-contained strategies that do not necessitate further social interaction have been found to prevail at the beginning of L2 learning (e.g. memorization, using formulas, repetition). With L2 advancement, more interaction-oriented strategies appear, which allows learners to initiate and maintain conversations, and do so more skillfully (e.g. verbal attention getting, appeal for assistance, asking for clarification, role-play). Finally, the emergence of elaboration and monitoring testifies to growing metacognitive awareness and abilities to study the language itself, though in Chesterfield and Chesterfield's research these strategies were evident in the case of only a few children.

Thus, age and increasing proficiency seem to be related to the widening of repertoires of learning strategies, which are, moreover, used in more sophisticated and demanding ways; the growth in number and rising complexity of strategies employed by learners with age appears closely linked to their cognitive development. This explains the fact that memorization and other strategies which deal with simple language units directly are activated at an earlier age than elaborate processing-based strategies, and strategies indicating learner grammatical error awareness and monitoring (Chesterfield and Chesterfield, 1985; cf. Dakowska, 2005). Last but not least, Brown (2000) mentions Krashen's 1977 claims that adults tend to use monitoring, or strategies for learning, more often and thus consciously attend to language forms, whereas children employ spontaneous strategies of acquisition and subconsciously attach importance to functions, which also seems to conform to Chesterfield and Chesterfield's (1985) findings.

Ellis (1994) adds that young children tend to activate strategies in a task-specific manner, while older children and adults use more generalized strategies and apply them more flexibly. In fact, human development from childhood, through adolescence, into adulthood, within its different aspects – cognitive, social, and physical - implies movements from “rigidity to flexibility”, which, in the cognitive aspect, concerns the growth of human skills, plans and strategies (Dakowska, 1995:105). Also, as Bialystok (1990) stresses, personal experience, which builds with age, determines the degree of effectiveness of strategies employed on particular occasions. She confirms that adults vary their strategy choices more freely and

display more flexibility in strategy selection. In her study, those who spoke at least three languages and travelled extensively were the best strategy users. Additionally, research shows that young learners make greater use of such simple strategies as rote learning in particular (e.g. rote repetition as a strategy of rehearsal), while more mature students employ more complex and sophisticated strategies (Ellis, 1994); in fact, children and adults differ in their activation of memory strategies and metaprocesses (Dakowska, 1995). Finally, as Rubin (1975) clarifies, children adapt better to new situations, act out and, as a result, perform better, while adults have a greater guessing potential grounded in their metalinguistic knowledge.

These findings conform to the facts presented earlier and may explain why teenagers and adults learn grammar and vocabulary much faster than children. The former seem to take advantage of their more advanced cognitive abilities, longer attention spans, abstract thinking, richer experience, and thus better developed strategy repertoires, more complex learning strategies, and more flexible strategy use. Children may not be so fast because they do not yet possess the same abilities or strategy sets as older learners, and tend to activate the strategies they do possess in specific ways – basically in response to immediate social needs. As Szulc-Kurpaska (2001) notes, in naturalistic and formal settings children tend to resort to transfer, imitation, simplification, overgeneralization; they use the strategy of self-talk, appeal for assistance, switch to the mother tongue, apply formulaic expressions, and show overlearning effects. Children may also be superior at pronunciation at least partly due to the fact that it is not connected with the use of many strategies – in fact, there are rather few of these (Drożdżał-Szelest, 1997).

As regards pronunciation, Oxford and Ehrman (1995) explain that younger students stand a better chance to attain native-like pronunciation and fluency also because they use increased numbers of communicative practice strategies. Older learners, on the other hand, tend to employ more strategies for analyzing the language system itself. This tendency is linked to their wider world knowledge and the ability to think in the abstract way, which is, moreover, better adjusted to the context of learning. Furthermore, Ellis (1994), referring to Krashen's 1978 views, notes that adults activate communication strategies when the input they receive is not optimal in order to deal with difficulties and lack of the needed knowledge, and they manage to do this with great success. Children's input is simpler, features frequent repetitions, exaggerated intonation, and is accompanied by gestures; therefore, children do not have to behave in strategically-oriented ways of this type. As Oxford and Ehrman (1995:363) conclude:

Advantages of language learners at different ages are attributed to: one or more critical periods for language learning, prior experience in language learning, onset of formal operations, cognitive maturity, kind of input, affective factors, and sociocultural factors.

Children differ considerably from adolescents and adults in these respects and, as a result, activate different strategies in response to their differing needs.

Conclusions

All in all, the role of individual differences in language learning can by no means be ignored in any discussion of the process, its course, and results. Age is a factor that determines learner abilities to cope with different aspects of the L2/FL learning venture by influencing their choice and use of different strategies at different stages of their development. With age, learners tend to develop their repertoires of strategies for language learning and use, following a kind of natural order of strategy emergence. They begin to employ greater numbers of more generalized and more sophisticated, strategies, which become better adjusted to the contexts of their application, and do so more flexibly. Such changes seem to be related to each individual's personal experience and current L2/FL proficiency level, which, in fact, if grow, grow with age as well.

Apart from age, however, there are also many other variables which may influence the learner's choice and patterns of learning strategy activation. Research shows that these comprise a number of cognitive/learning styles and personality traits, learner motivation, attitudes, beliefs, learning goals, sex, nationality, degree of awareness, or task requirements. Therefore, each learner develops his/her own individual set of learning strategies which may lead to ultimate success, provided he/she knows which strategy to employ, when and how to do this. Experts agree that, for varied reasons, within the process of obligatory school education many learners do not succeed in developing sufficiently differentiated sets of efficient strategies for L2 learning and use, and many learners do not even know about such strategies (see, for example, Drożdżiał-Szelest, Nowacka, Porczyńska, 1999). Nevertheless, they also agree that learning strategies are *amenable to change*; they can be taught, learned, and modified, and thus they may become subject to purposeful and explicit learner strategy training.

Summing up the main research results, it seems worth re-emphasizing Oxford's (1990) observation that more mature, more aware, and more linguistically advanced learners tend to be more effective users of learning strategies, which does not remain without its impact on the

process of L2/FL learning and use. In consequence, it seems that well-targeted programmes of purposeful strategy instruction, preferably incorporated within language teaching curricula, or L2/FL teaching-and-learning environments rich in opportunities for strategic experimentation which must be adjusted to learner age-related needs, abilities and individual profiles, may, as Rubin assumed, help less successful learners achieve more by learning how to apply strategies of their more effective peers. Such age-adjusted language-learning-and-strategy-training programmes should, however, focus on and at the right time help learners develop not only different cognitive strategies for L2/FL learning, but also help them gradually expand varied metacognitive means for managing the language learning process, as well as encourage purposeful growth and active use of a range of available affective and social strategies. The last two strategy categories may prove particularly helpful in coping with and, ultimately, succeeding in the complex task of second/foreign language learning.

Abstract

Since the early 1970s, it has been clear that there is neither a single, universal method of foreign language teaching/learning nor a single, unified set of techniques that could guarantee all learners' successful accomplishment of the complex task of language learning. Learners are different and, therefore, even the most thoroughly planned and well designed syllabuses or learning agendas cannot prove fully effective if we ignore the crucial issue of *individual learner differences*. Apart from the age factor, which determines human cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional development, there are many other individual variables which seem to influence the learning process and its outcomes. These comprise the learner's cognitive/learning styles and personality traits as well as his/her repertoire of strategies for language learning and use. In this series of three articles, the author presents an overview of research studies which show correlations between selected cognitive as well as affective factors and the learner's individual choice and use of learning strategies. She also discusses implications for foreign language teaching/learning, focusing on the idea of learner strategy training.

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