

Assessing Personal Characteristics in SLA: Obstacles and Limitations

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DOI: 10.65285/RET.V2I3.003

Abstract: Assessing the influence of personal characteristics on second language acquisition (SLA) represents a significant methodological and theoretical challenge within the field. This paper provides a conceptual exploration of the specific reasons underlying this persistent difficulty. Four key obstacles are identified: (1) insufficient in-depth research on causal mechanisms; (2) the wide diversity of relevant traits; (3) their inherent complexity and context-dependence; and (4) fundamental psychometric challenges in measurement. The paper concludes by suggesting refined methodological strategies for future empirical inquiry.

Key words: second language acquisition; personal characteristics; assessment difficulties; measurement complexity; learner individual differences

Introduction

This paper focuses on some of the significant reasons why the influence of personal characteristics in second language acquisition (SLA) is difficult to assess. The thesis will first introduce its meaning and importance in SLA, that is, if it is difficult to assess, then why do we still need to study it? Then in-depth factors that make it difficult to assess will be explored, with explanations and examples to illustrate them. Finally, we will summarize the whole paper and draw some insights from the research process, which will hopefully be useful for future studies related to this topic.

Significance of Personal Characteristics in SLA

In SLA, personal characteristics encompass learner physiology such as gender, age, etc. (Rukanuddi, Hafiz, & Asfia, 2016), and psychological characteristics such as personality, aptitude, intelligence, self-esteem, and so on (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

So why do we want to assess its impact on SLA? It is often observed that the level of second language acquired by different learners varies considerably, even though the context in which these learners acquire the target language is almost identical (Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012). Every person has his or her characteristics, and due to different personal characteristics, they may apply different learning strategies through which he or she learns or acquires the target language. These characteristics vary from learner to learner, and these are known as individual differences (Ellis, 2004). These differences have a significant impact on second language learners' learning or acquisition, and they are evident in the learning styles, learning tactics, and emotional factors of these learners (Skehan, 1991).

Implementing differentiated instruction to meet the learning needs of all students requires a good understanding of the individual differences of second language learners. Therefore, scholars need to assess the impact of individual characteristics on SLA.

Limited Empirical Evidence on Causal Mechanisms

First, most research on personal characteristics has been in the quantitative research paradigm (Zafar & Meenakshi, 2012), which means that the approach relies on measuring learners' scores on personality surveys and correlating these scores with language test scores. Zafar and Meenakshi (2012) believed that more qualitative research is needed to fully capture the depth and complexity of this relationship.

Second, most of the experimental studies on personal characteristics conclude that they are highly correlated with the differences in personal characteristics, but they are unable to give detailed explanations of the variables. For example, we can also see the findings in the study conducted by Fillmore (1983) at the University of California, Berkeley. One of the key findings of their study was that there is no single way to characterize good and poor learners.

In this study, Fillmore (1983) only used words like "seems to" and "neutralize" to express the effects but could not give a direct answer in the affirmative. In their study, they found that "good students" were sociable and outgoing; they were talkative and eager to communicate with anyone who could reasonably accept them. However, not all good students are like this. At least four of the "good students" were very quiet and rarely spoke unless they were stimulated. This is a clue to the existence of some variables, the origin of which is not further explained in the text, and it is also a clue to the fact that the actual attempt to study the influence of specific personal characteristics in the process of SLA is very limited.

According to Ożańska-Ponikwia and Dewaele (2012), the research conducted by Peter, Richard, Kimberley, and Zoltan (1998) also failed to elaborate on what aspects of personal characteristics may be related to willingness to communicate. Dörnyei and Skehan (2003) consider that the individual differences in personal characteristics, such as aptitudes, styles, and strategies, as a subfield of SLA, have not stimulated theoretical or practical interest. In recent years, higher level empirical research has been generated in other subfields, mainly those related to universal processes, such as the route of second language development or hypothesizing about the inputs or interactions that facilitate second language development characteristics, etc. Other SLA domains have more central theoretical developments, e.g., the processing theory.

Finally, more generally the field has developed a clearer understanding of the relevance of practical, classroom-oriented, e.g., task-based instruction (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). Thus, they conclude in their paper that research on most areas of individual differences in language learning (including personal characteristics) is simply not popular and has been avoided because other areas seem to hold more promise. Precisely, since this area of research is less practical for second language teaching and learning, there has been insufficient research attention in this area. And because there are fewer studies, it is not possible to give a standardized way to observe how learners' characteristics affect their language learning.

This section shows the gaps in the existing research in this direction, and this is one of the most important factors that make it difficult to assess the impact of personal characteristics on SLA.

Diversity of Personal Characteristics

Although some scholars now have summarized the personal characteristic factors that have an impact on language learning into The Big Five (Ożańska-Ponikwia & Dewaele, 2012) which includes openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeability, neuroticism (OCEAN), it took a lot of time and effort to prove that they have an impact as well as to summarize them into these last five and form such a framework.

Alpert (1936) and his assistants first identified 17,953 words describing personal characteristics or personal behaviour from Webster's New International Dictionary, and then Cattell (1947) kept streamlining them into 35 personality factors in his book, and it was only in subsequent research that Fiske (1949) streamlined them down from there to 22, which were then developed into the Big 5, and the framework was enriched by subsequent scholars' research. The framework has been used until now. This is a long process, in which they excluded many variables, leaving only the five traits that are always the first and most relevant to the current framework.

In the face of so many personal characteristics, it is impossible to control the variables one by one or to include all of

them in one study to test them all together, so it is essential to choose one or a few personal characteristics for the study, which is what most scholars are doing. Then there will always be some personal characteristics that will be missed or considered unimportant, and then there will be fewer studies to assess that part of the personal characteristics.

The premise of this section is twofold: first, personal characteristics are numerous; second, while their assessment remains viable, universal coverage is unattainable. Hence, any practical analysis must confine itself to a reduced number of traits, which in turn demand careful filtering and systematic categorization. The difficulty in evaluating the influence of individual characteristics lies precisely in the fact that comprehensive assessment is unattainable.

Inherent Complexity of Personal Characteristics

Human beings are inherently complex, and the identification of individual differences is also a very complex task. Rukanuddi, Hafiz, and Asfia (2006) argue that personal factors and individual differences are closely related to genetic and environmental causes. Human beings are biosocial organisms because differences or characteristics are abstract phenomena.

As mentioned before, personal characteristics include physical characteristics, such as gender, age, ethnicity, class, social status, etc. These are collectively called “identities” in sociolinguistics (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Characteristics of this kind are more readily distinguishable, as they correspond to widely recognized social classifications - for example, gender (male/female), age (young/old), and ethnicity (Black/White) (Joseph, 2004), but even so, no one can put aside other variables at the same time and simply test the influence of a certain characteristic, because people are always composed of various differentiated characteristics. They can be a young black man at the same time. When testing on such superimposed characteristics, it is difficult not to consider whether it is due to another characteristic of people affects the results, so when we test, we can only refine the test questions as much as possible, classify the results and provide participants with as similar backgrounds as possible for research.

Even personal physiological characteristics with clearly differentiated definitions cannot ignore the influence of other factors, let alone psychological characteristics. From a psychological perspective, the main difficulty is that it seems to be hard to distinguish and observe (Rosenzweig, 1933) such qualities as ability, motivation, or anxiety. The psychological level of the person being observed undergoes dynamic changes at any time. He can have a strong motivation to learn, be anxious, be sad, be lazy, and have a strong self-esteem, all of which can exist at the same time. Only through more refined classifications can scholars conduct further research based on this classification. Otherwise, it is necessary to consider all the factors overlapping, and it would be a difficult task to set up many independent tests to practice the key role played by a certain factor. That is why different scholars use different terms to describe these phenomena. As Rukanuddin, Hafiz, and Asfia. (2016) presented some of them in their paper, for example, Hawkey (1982) categorized these phenomena as cognitive (affective) and social factors. Chastain (1975) describes them as affective and ability factors while Ellis (1985) categorized individual differences into two main groups: personal and social factors. However, there has been no standard answer regarding these classifications, so scholars conduct research with a framework based on their categorization, which can lead to biased results. This may be one of the main reasons why the influence of personal characteristics in SLA is difficult to assess.

Measurement Challenges

As a long-term observational task requiring large-scale data to isolate confounding variables, this approach is also exemplified in Fillmore’s (1983) study.

They observed and tracked the learning of English by children who were native speakers of Cantonese and Spanish for a full three years. Throughout the first year of the project, researchers examined the students’ language development in each classroom practically every day, using an even more complex methodology. Fillmore explains in this study how they ended up gathering a lot of language data, such as evoked and spontaneous speech samples that were collected regularly over the first two years of monitoring the study subjects’ language learning efforts; observational data on

the social and interactional styles of subjects and opportunities for use; and a significant amount of ethnographic data on the classroom environments in which their subjects acquired the majority of their language skills as well as their experiences at home and after school.

Second, they are spiritual concepts instead of entities that can be observed or seen, and there are no standards for data measurement. Unlike learners' writing and presentations, which can be assessed measurably and computationally, personal characteristics cannot be quantified and therefore have no criteria for assessment. For example, we can see that many scholars studying the psychological level of personal characteristics affecting second language learning use questionnaires like Liyanage's study (2004) on the ESL group using two questionnaires to test the language learning strategies and the learner variables to explore and their personality types. All these questionnaires have a premise that they need to depend on the real psychological description of the subject and his state at that time, in this case, we also need to consider whether the subject is in a stable psychological state and whether he has a clear perception of himself and so on, through which to conduct the research study, which is also a very complex task.

This section focuses on the fact that the measurement of personal characteristics on SLA is a long-term study with very large amounts of data, and even some psychological aspects of data collection need to be considered when the data sources themselves are not quantifiable data, taking into account a variety of situations of the subjects. It requires a lot of time and effort to conduct a study, which is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to assess the impact of personal characteristics on SLA.

Conclusion

In conclusion, assessing the influence of personal characteristics on SLA is not an easy task because it requires not only a long period of observation but also a careful selection of research subjects. Although it is not possible to completely exclude all variables, they need to be minimized as much as possible. Moreover, the method of data collection and the criteria of measurement need to be considered before the study, and more importantly, the study needs to consider the complexity of personal characteristics, and the complexity of the nature of human beings. Without being able to exclude all variables, we can only give relative, indicative opinions.

There is very little research on why it is difficult to assess personal characteristics. The more studies mentioned in this study are about a particular personal characteristic in the process of SLA. They all have their research methodology, but there is no mention of the fact that the process of assessing or measuring this personal characteristic is difficult. Therefore, this paper can only summarize and observe from the descriptions of their studies, leading to a slight lack of literature support for this study, and it serves more for the elaboration of one specific aspect presented. Hopefully, subsequent studies will fill in this gap.

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