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Affective factors involved in learning a foreign language

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Abstract

Acquisition of a foreign language represents an intensively studied issue, its psychological foundation being based on the individual differences of various learners. The learning process depends on a series of factors: cognitive factors (language aptitude, learning strategies), affective factors (attitudes, motivation, anxiety), metacognitive factors, and demographic factors. We have chosen to analyze how affective factors contribute to first year Psychology and Educational Sciences students' English proficiency. They were tested with AMTB and an English language test. There were identified significant differences in how affective factors influence learning a foreign language between this category of students and those coming from a faculty of letters.

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1. Introduction

Robinson (2005) argues that explaining the process of learning a foreign language requires two complementary theories: the theory of transition and the theory of property. Transition theory refers to the relationship between cognitive abilities, learning processes and mechanisms used to transfer knowledge from point A to point B. The theory of property describes the features of knowledge from point A and point B. Interindividual differences in language learning play an important role in the theory of transition. Snow (cited in Robinson, 2005) proposes an interactionist approach to interindividual differences, namely the relevant aspects of the person and the situation in which the correlations between cognitive variables and outcomes are examined in relation to informational and

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processing requirements of different contexts of exposure. Researchers have attempted a classification of these interindividual variables, most of them (Olivares-Cuhat, 2010) agreeing with the following categories:

- a. cognitive factors (language aptitude, learning strategies);
- b. affective factors (attitudes, motivation, anxiety);
- c. metacognitive factors;
- d. demographic factors.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Affective factors

Research concerning the affective factors seems to have been extremely fruitful lately, as shown in the great number of articles on this issue, as it can be seen in the table below, which includes the number of studies on this issue published in the last 10 years (2002 – 2012) in 7 on-line international data bases (Science Direct, ProQuest, Ebsco, Cambridge Journals, Oxford Journals, Wiley, Springer-Link). The key words (motivation, attitude, anxiety) were only looked for in title, abstract and key words and there were identified 1311 papers on motivation, 1490 on attitude and 461 on anxiety in relation with the acquisition of a foreign language.

a. Motivation

As one of the affective variables that can influence language learning, it appears as predictor of the performance in a foreign language in a remarkable number of articles. Moreover, some authors (Dörnyei, 1994a) found it to be the main determinant in learning a foreign language. The socio-educational model of language learning by Gardner (1985) is the most common model in the research studied (Cochran et al., 2010; Robinson, 2005). The model is based on five motivational / attitudinal variables and their relationship with learning a foreign language: integralization, attitude towards the learning situation, motivation, integrative orientation and instrumental orientation. These relationships are verified through AMTB - Attitude / Motivation Test Battery. The model, as explained by its author himself, R.C. Gardner (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003), shows that integralization and attitude towards learning situation are two correlated variables that support individual motivation to learn a foreign language, but motivation is responsible for the results in learning a foreign language. In other words, the effects of the integration and attitudes towards learning situation on the results are indirect, acting through motivation. This complex consisting of integralization, attitude towards learning situation and motivation is renamed as integrative motivation. The research of the studies above mentioned revealed that motivation can predict about .35 of performance in learning a foreign language, regardless of the factors or strategies that have been associated, highlighting its importance. This enables us to include motivation among the factors with a decisive influence on the results in tests of language.

b. Attitude

Allport imposed attitudes as the most powerful determinants of behaviour. Investigations have mainly addressed the issue of training attitudes. For example, when an individual is faced with a new task, with an unusual object, this episode causes a series of reactions charged with value, meaning that the stimulus has the potential to cause positive or negative reactions. Negative attitude and lack of motivation of learners can become obstacles to language learning. Smith's view (cited in Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011) on attitudes can be summarized as follows: attitudes can be learned, hence taught; they are situational and hence can be generalized; they act in a certain frame of reference; if an event / object itself does not generate an attitude, the situation, the context will determine which will be the subject's attitude. Kormos et al. (2011) suggest that measurement of attitudes towards learning a foreign language can be done through questionnaires with Likert scales and provide an example of earlier researches (Kormos & Csizer, 2008).

Oroujlou & Vahedi (2011) emphasize that it is important to realize that it is mandatory to take into account the place of the English language in the world today as the foundation of an attitude towards this language. Also, if a student does not like to learn, does not like school, he can generalize this condition on language even before starting to learn it. Therefore, it takes positive attitude to increase students' efficiency in foreign language classes. Attitude is generally measured in tandem with motivation, especially by AMTB, which provides very little data particularized for attitude. Given that a single accessible database (ProQuest) shows over a hundred thousand studies where

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