

PERSONALITY FACTORS IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Introduction

The Holy Qur'ān refers to language as follows in S_{arah} ar-R_{um}:22:

And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth and the variety of your languages and colours. Verily in these are signs for those who know.

Why are some learners more successful than others even within the same language environment with conditions for learning being more or less equal? Why do some learners fail to learn a second or foreign language satisfactorily? Do individual characteristics of learners play any role in the success or failure in second language learning? These important questions will be addressed in the paper which will also discuss the psychological characteristics of language learners that produce a particular type of behaviour which can make a difference in the language learning process.

The traits to be dealt with in the paper include the learners' self-esteem; how far they are willing to take risks, how motivated they are to succeed; the perseverance they can put into the learning task; how sociable they are; their attitude towards the target language, and their level of preparedness to get close to the culture of the speakers of the other language.

The paper will help teachers in language education to sufficiently guide their pupils, to make them aware of both positive and negative factors in second language education. It will also discuss the factors identified from an Islamic viewpoint.

Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), during his time, encouraged Muslims in one of the *–adTMths* to go even as far as China to seek knowledge. Implied in the *–adTMth* is that a seeker of knowledge must be prepared to learn languages other than his or her own.

Language learning refers to learning a second language among the host languages or learning a foreign language which is not indigenous to the country. Learning another language which is not native to one's own is

not easy. A second or foreign language can be learnt at any time in one's life, although normally it starts at school. A non-native language can be learnt in a variety of ways and to varying degrees of success. Depending on personality factors and the support learners receive, some of the learners become highly proficient in the target language (hereafter TL). Some others are satisfied with what they have achieved since they believe that they can get by with the basic communicative ability they have, while ignoring fluency and language accuracy. A second or foreign language is learnt basically in two different ways. One way is to acquire the language informally in a natural environment where the language used is authentic—real and not structured. The other way is to learn the language in a formal way with the help of instruction and books. The two ways are, however, not mutually exclusive, although the latter way is the more common way to learn another language systematically.

Second Language

The pursuit of knowledge is a lifelong obligation for Muslims. In fact it has to be for everyone. This cannot be completely successful with only one's own native language. Seekers of knowledge need to learn a second or foreign language, especially those which have a close association with scholarship.

Burt, Dulay and Krashen (1982) use the term second language to refer to foreign as well as host languages. A second language has a definite function which is officially endorsed. In many Commonwealth countries where English is not the native language of many people, English is considered a second language because it has an official role. It is used in schools from a very early grade; it is used in the judiciary, mass media, the private sector and also in tertiary education. Its use in both public and private is fairly widespread. Although English is not the host language of the country, just as it is not the native language of many people, it often has the official status of a strong second language.

In Malaysia, for example, the host languages include Bahasa Melayu (hereafter BM), Mandarin, Tamil, Kadazan and Iban. A Malay speaker may learn Mandarin as a second language. A Chinese Malaysian from Sabah may want to learn Kadazan as his or her second language. The learning of these languages could be in addition to learning BM (for non-Malay speakers) and English for all Malaysians. Learning one of the host languages is for greater national integration, cultural understanding and social interaction between the host communities. Learning a second language (it could be more than one) fulfils an educational, occupational and social role.

In the following sections let us discuss the various psychological factors reviewed in the literature on second and foreign language learning. We shall also look at them from a religious perspective.

Motivation

Motivation is an important personality factor to succeed in life here and the hereafter. Lack of motivation will make a person inactive and uninterested, and thus forget his or her role as the vicegerent on earth.

Learners need a good motive to be encouraged to acquire certain skills. In the absence of a sufficiently good reason to pursue an objective, learners may not demonstrate enthusiasm or the eagerness to set their mind to a learning task. What is the motivation for those whose native language is not Arabic, BM, English, Japanese or Tamil to learn the language?

The influential work of Gardner and Lambert (1972) with reference to motivation in second language learning deals with specifically two types of motivation—integrative and instrumental. Their studies indicate that there is a positive relationship between the learners' level of motivation and proficiency in a second or foreign language.

In the words of Gardner and Lambert (1972:213) integrative motivation "reflects a strong motive to learn the language of another cultural group because of a desire to communicate with members of that community. Implicit in this definition is a positive effect towards that community."

Krashen (1981:22) describes instrumental motivation as "the desire to achieve proficiency in a language for utilitarian or practical reasons..."

Whether learners are integratively motivated or instrumentally motivated to learn a non-native language depends on their needs, which may be educational, occupational or personal. People learn languages for various reasons and these influence the type of motivation. For example, students who want to excel in a certain language for academic reasons to score well in final examinations and be able to meet the admission criteria for further studies could be instrumentally motivated. On the other hand, those who share the culture, religious and social values of the speakers of another language may want to be integratively motivated. An interesting study by Swanes (1988) from the University of Bergen in Norway brings out significant differences in motivation for learning the Norwegian language between students from Western countries and those from the developing countries in the Middle East, Africa and Asia studying in Norway. Students of the former group were integratively motivated while the latter were instrumentally motivated.

In the Malaysian context, there are compelling reasons for non-Malay students to be highly motivated to learn BM, the national language, primarily for educational reasons. English is needed widely in tertiary institutions, and used extensively in the corporate sector. Mandarin is useful in the private sector when dealing with business people in the Chinese community.

Attitude

People should have the right attitude towards the task they have undertaken in order to achieve the desired result. A healthy attitude is essential for success in this world and later. A good attitude shows a

person in a good light. Unhealthy attitudes are destructive, as they do not help people to develop their full potential.

A learner's attitude, i.e. his or her mental disposition towards the target language, is significant. Our attitude can determine whether we succeed or fail in our pursuit. In second language learning a learner can indicate various types of attitude—attitude towards the non-native language learnt; the person teaching the language; the native speakers of the language; the country where the language is chiefly spoken; the classroom where the language is taught; the physical atmosphere of the institution and the learner's fellow students.

A positive attitude towards the TL facilitates learning. It makes learning the language a beneficial and happy experience. Positive attitudes towards the language learnt, as a language that is rich, international and useful for personal and career advancement, are very helpful. A positive attitude towards the native speakers of a language as people who are polite, culturally rich, intellectually vibrant, with a strong literary tradition is also very helpful.

In a multiracial country such as Malaysia pupils should develop positive attitudes towards the Malaysian languages and their speakers as this helps to foster harmony and unity and eventually, hopefully, create a truly united nation.

Negative attitudes could be detrimental to successful language learning. Older adults should not encourage children to view and behave negatively towards certain languages and their speakers for any reasons, be they religious, cultural, educational, colonial or political. Brown (1987:57) has pointed out that "the learning of negative attitudes towards the people who speak the second language or toward the second language itself has been shown to affect the success of language learning in persons from school age on up." Negative attitudes are sometimes reinforced by the education system and/or parents. When English, for instance, is not a subject students have to pass in a final public examination, they tend to underestimate its importance which is only realized later in the post-secondary school stage.

Acculturation

Acculturation may be defined as adaptation to or getting close to a culture that is not one's own. In second language learning, the learner may want to follow some aspects of the culture of the TL native speakers whose language they want to learn. The learner may also want to seek social acceptance by native speakers. Schumann (1978:29) who put forward the Acculturation Hypothesis discusses two types of acculturation: "In type one interaction, the learner is socially integrated with the TL group and, as a result, develops sufficient contacts with TL speakers to enable him to acquire the TL ... Type two acculturation has all the characteristics of type one, but in this case the learner regards the TL speakers as a reference group whose lifestyles and values he consciously or unconsciously desires to adopt. Both types of acculturation are sufficient to cause acquisition of

the TL ...” Schumann is, however, careful to add that “the essential component in acculturation” is not “adoption of the lifestyle and values of the TL group”, but “social and psychological contact with the TL group” (*ibid.*).

Almost every group of people which possesses a certain language has a certain identity. It is their language which gives them a distinct identity and culture. If a distinct group of people want to learn another language, the degree of acculturation will vary depending on the target learners and the TL. In a British school, for instance, white British pupils may acculturate much closer to white French people because of the many things common to both of them—religion, culture, social values, lifestyles, etc. However, white British pupils who may want to learn Bengali may opt for the first type of acculturation, and they may develop sufficient contacts with Bengali speakers and learn the language in a natural way.

In Malaysia and Singapore we have people of various faiths and languages, besides those who can speak foreign languages. Malaysians, as well as Singaporeans, belong to distinct cultural groups, but the cultural values are mostly compatible. We are socially integrated, and we should use this to our advantage to learn one another’s languages. Students must be psychologically open to the languages spoken by their fellow country people, and in the process learn to survive in another language.

For the learning of English, the learners must initiate social contacts with the speakers of the language who are here as expatriate staff, tourists and others. In this way, English is learnt in an authentic manner. Non-Malay learners need to socially interact with Malay learners to speak BM as this can be very useful in order to do well in the BM paper in the public examination and later follow lectures in BM with ease at local institutions of higher learning.

It is all right to adopt shared cultural behaviour and lifestyles which are healthy. Those which are in conflict with one’s own religious beliefs and practices may be ignored or modified. Second Language learners need not use the exact same words native speakers use if the language used is vulgar or blasphemous (see Haja Mohideen 2000).

Self-esteem

Allah has endowed all His creatures with some specific abilities. They need to have enough confidence in themselves to complete the tasks they have undertaken and been assigned to do.

Self-esteem or self-confidence, which involves a good opinion of oneself, has a lot to do with second language learning. All things being equal, for example, in the availability of the internet, good educational facilities, well-trained and qualified teachers, “the self-confident, secure person is a more successful language learner” (Burt *et al.*, 1982:75).

No language is too difficult for the self-confident learner. True, some language are rather difficult, Arabic and Mandarin, for instance. But a self-confident person is not about to give up easily. Such learners would consider it a challenge and tell themselves that they can do it. Learners of a

language other than their own should have the confidence that they will be eventually able to read, write, speak well and listen to the TL with understanding. This confidence is not limited to the general skills, but also the sub-skills.

Sociability

People by nature are outgoing, reserved or shy. In psychology we may broadly categorize people according to their feelings into two types—extroverts and introverts. An extrovert has the tendency to be sociable, likes conversation and companionship. An introvert, on the other hand, is more occupied with his own thoughts and feelings (Collins, 1987) and therefore does not communicate much. Burt *et al.* (1982) who reviewed the literature on effects of personality on learning a second language reported that extroversion is connected to success in language learning.

Extroverts get the benefit of using the language freely with their interactants. They are more relaxed and free from anxiety. They receive much input from their exposure to the spoken (or written language). Their communicative activities make them better language learners. For their part, introverts do not say much and as a result, others too do not talk much to them, so the opportunities for spoken interaction are minimal. Active exposure to the spoken language where an introvert is a participant is not available, although he or she may not be restricted to listen to the TL. Introverts may, however, not be bad writers, readers or listeners. Their introversion is often only an obstacle to fluent speech. Language camps organized by schools may be helpful to instill confidence in pupils who may be lacking in confidence.

In Islam, people are encouraged to speak about that which is good. A good communicator is not necessarily a talkative person. They should be seen as providers of information as well as good listeners. Sociability through communication provides friendship and companionship. We may regard a person's sociable nature as a form of *Badaqah*, indirectly.

Risk-taking

Taking risks is part and parcel of life. A person should be able to predict the possible outcomes of his or her actions. Only Allah knows the real outcome, but this should not stop us from trying to achieve what we believe will turn out to be beneficial to us.

Risk-taking is common to business ventures. No pain, no gain, it is often said. In learning another language, learners need to take some risks, but these of course do not involve monetary risks. These have to do with a person's ability to cope or put up with their inadequate or sometimes even embarrassing linguistic behaviour. A student may not be able to pronounce a particular word accurately, may produce an ungrammatical sentence or may choose a wrong vocabulary item. Such instances may evoke humour in the classroom, or the addressee may be unable to comprehend. These

responses could affect the morale of some learners. Risk-taking language learners will continue to try practising and using the language despite their inaccuracies in any of the components of language and they will learn from their errors. How else are they going to learn if they do not try! Trying something new or different does involve some risks and a learner who does not take risks in the sense of using the TL often, either spoken or written, is not likely to meet with much success in second language learning. A student should try to speak to a native speaker and find out if the latter understands him or her. A student should volunteer to do an oral presentation and evaluate the response of his or her peers.

Perseverance

Islam teaches people to work hard. The Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) has exhorted us to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.

Learners must continuously and consistently pursue their efforts to become proficient language learners. Some learners persevere while others may not do so as much. Perseverance these days does not require much effort from us. In the comfort of our own home, school or the neighbourhood library, we can watch programmes in the TL, read sufficient materials, chat on the internet, write to pen pals and listen to songs. All these activities are interesting, relaxing and the TL is learnt in a fun way. It is also acquired subconsciously in an indirect manner.

Empathy

Collins (1987:323) defines empathy as “the power of understanding and imaginatively entering into another person’s feelings”. A person has to imagine himself or herself in another person’s position when the person speaks, listens, writes or reads. A learner should ask oneself questions such as: Do I express myself clearly to the listener? Will the addressee be able to understand my accent? Have I written coherently enough for the teacher to understand me? Am I making much effort to figure out what the other person is saying? A language learner should be able to empathize himself or herself as a speaker, listener, writer and reader. Burt *et al.* (1982:76) opine that language learning “requires careful listening to others and caring more about communicating ideas than about avoiding speech errors”.

Islam teaches people to empathize with their fellow human beings. Through empathy we can understand them better and do things accordingly to our mutual benefit.

Inhibition

Islam views all human beings equally. They were created to look different for distinguishing one group from the other, and not for negative discrimination. The languages they speak have all roles to play. No

language is shameful to learn. An additional language is always an asset.

In psychology, inhibition is “a mental state or condition in which the varieties of expression and behaviour of an individual become restricted (Collins, 1987:519). An individual who is naturally shy and feels restrained to say something in a language which is not their own is preventing or hindering himself or herself from going on to learn a second language successfully. There is nothing to prevent persons from learning a language which they want to learn. Linguistically all languages are equal. For that matter a European language is not superior to an Asian language, nor vice versa. When learners feel inhibited they create for themselves a kind of mental block which discourages them from actively seeking to learn another language. Learning a foreign language or an indigenous language is not without its merits. Learners need not have too much shyness so as to restrict them from achieving their full potential in language learning.

Autonomy

Islam teaches people to be independent, not to expect too much help from others. Although getting assistance from others, in the case of students their teachers, is not undesirable, students should not become dependent on their instructors. Rather they should train themselves to be less reliant on others gradually, but steadily.

Students ought to practise learner autonomy. Besides getting help from language teachers in the classroom, they should initiate efforts which are independent of the teachers. They should look up reference books, be involved in self-study, practise a lot in all the four major areas of language—speaking, writing, reading and listening, including the various sub-skills of each of these four areas and also adopt successful language learning strategies. Good language learners have strategies that are very helpful in second language learning (Wenden 1991).

Conclusion

We have discussed various aspects of the personality of second language learners which can make a difference in their attempts to learn a second or foreign language. It is these psychological traits which play a decisive role in the success or failure of second language learning. The learner needs to adapt himself or herself and work towards successfully learning another language to his or her satisfaction. We do not live in monolingual societies, but increasingly multilingual and multicultural societies. Proficiency in certain languages is definitely an advantage at a personal and professional level. Being able to use second languages successfully may also give one a sense of accomplishment and togetherness with fellow citizens and those from other countries. Teachers need to make the learners aware of these psychological traits and personality factors which can facilitate or hinder their attempts to learn a second or foreign language. The acquisition of additional languages, especially international languages, will better prepare

students to participate in a global environment.

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