

# Factors affecting additional language learning

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## Introduction

The factors that affect learning an additional language are numerous and some affect learners positively while others are detrimental. Not all factors affect an individual learner; in fact, some factors will not be relevant to an individual learner. There are also links between certain factors and feedback-loops, which increase or decrease affects that lead to language learning.

This article will list the main factors that affect learning an additional language under three broad headings: linguistic, social and cognitive. These factors interact because they develop simultaneously. 'Linguistic, cognitive and social development are interrelated. That is, cognitive processing factors may act to influence linguistic and social development. Linguistic development may act to influence social and potential cognitive functioning. In turn, the development of social competence influences directly the acquisition of linguistic and cognitive repertoires' (Ambert 1991: 106).

Studying the different factors and their influence on learners is beneficial to language teachers. The implications for learners are serious and consequently priorities for teaching and management are a part of language instruction that should not be overlooked. This paper further considers the main factors that influence learners in a Japanese University setting.

## Literature review

### Linguistic factors

Learners of an additional language have a system and parameters for using their first language and some properties of all language are the same (Cook 1988). Learners will be exposed to the additional language in some way and the learners are influenced by their first language acquisition. Metalinguistic awareness develops and improves with age but once past teens the ability to achieve natural like fluency becomes difficult.

Language acquisition is systematic and learners' development follows patterns. Although there is some variability in the way in which individuals acquire language, the stages each passes through are similar (Ellis 1997). It must be noted that some learners continue to use non-target language because of fossilisation. That is, they do not completely develop competence in the language.

Language input comes from spoken and written forms and from these linguistic factors, which influence learners, are derived. The usefulness of the language is important to the learner-

its meaning, how natural it is. In English, the use of rhythms and rhymes contributes to the development of sounds and stress (Lewis & Hill 1992).

Therefore, the main linguistic factors that affect learning an additional language are:

- learners' first language—similarities and differences to additional language
- exposure to the additional language
- age—stage of linguistic development
- stages—learners acquire language in stages
- systematicity—broadly the stages are similar for learners
- fossilisation
- usefulness
- meaning
- natural input
- rhythms and rhymes for sound and stress

### Social factors

The knowledge of an additional language is acquired from the environment around learners and through communication channels, some of which may be distant. The learners' social background plays a role in the acquisition of an additional language, and the status of the first and additional language will have influence. Cultural conditioning places expectations on learners. Options and opportunities for learners are dependent on their economic situation (Cummins & Swain 1986).

Learners are influenced by the immediate place where they live and learn. In a classroom seating, sight lines, space, air, warmth, light, and equipment are examples (Scrivener 1994). Additional language learning is also affected by events in the world at large: the neighbourhood, region, country, and climate.

The people that learners interact with, and those of the larger community, directly influence learners. Knowledge is acquired from friends, family, people who live or study with learners or any interlocutor. Communities have social rules, which are acquired by members. The policies and services for learners have affects on them. The way learners think people in the culture of the additional language regard them, affects learner acquisition.

Interactions with others create feelings, which need consideration and nothing should be taken for granted (Harmer 1988). People rough tune language to make it easier for learners. Movement can convey meaning. The psychological atmosphere affects learners and therefore empathy is a valuable quality for language teachers. When instructing learners the teacher's proximity, appropriacy, contact, audibility and variety are influential (Scrivener 1994). Instructors' characteristics, their interests and attitudes, judgement and self-control, enthusiasm, adaptability, personality and degree of training affect learners (Richards & Nunan 1994). Interactions of

feedback and correction vary but all affect learning.

Learners influence themselves and their motivation and reason for learning affect their success at acquiring an additional language. Two different types of motivation are: integrative; to take part in a culture and instrumental; to learn for a goal (Cook 1996). Having a purpose to use a language and the frequency at which learners use it provide stimulation and allow for experimentation and memory. Success is affected by how involved learners are in learning and being relaxed and enjoying the learning process is helpful (Lewis & Hill 1992). Social strategies used by learners, such as involvement, practice and expansion influence acquisition.

Therefore, the main social factors that affect learning an additional language are:

- status of the first and additional languages in the learner culture and in the culture of the additional language
- cultural conditioning
- economics
- physical surroundings
- community
- social conventions-behaviour
- politics
- cultural sensitivity
- rough tuned language
- physical movement
- psychological atmosphere
- empathy
- teachers' character and choice of language
- methods used to convey knowledge
- feedback and correction
- motivation
- reason for learning
- purpose for using language
- frequency of use
- involvement in learning
- practice
- expansion

### **Cognitive factors**

Learners develop learning styles in their first language and these are transferred when learning an additional language takes place. Learners use language in different ways to experiment. Learners transfer the rules from their first language and this can result in unnatural

utterances or phrases. Learners also try variability by using several phrases for one meaning. Although most learners are not aware of their cognitive style, it affects their learning. Field dependent learners are more personally and socially sensitive whereas field independent learners are more analytical (Ellis 1994).

Language aptitude is the ability to identify sounds and patterns in a language and remember associations. These are helpful for carrying out tasks and assisting communication (Ellis 1997). Learning strategies assist learners to find uses for language and form rules from examples. The use of fillers gives learners time to speak and signals to the interlocutor not to interrupt. Topic-oriented interaction is another strategy that helps learners to acquire language (Ellis 1998). Self-correction also aids learners' development.

Therefore, the main cognitive factors that affect learning an additional language are:

- transfer
- variability
- cognitive style
- language aptitude
- learning strategies
- use of fillers
- topicalization
- self-correction

### Factors influencing learning

The table below summarises the three spheres of influence discussed. It includes sub-headings to clarify the areas however; each area may interact with another to affect learning.

Linguistic	Social	Cognitive
<b>Background</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learners first language</li> <li>• exposure to target language</li> <li>• age</li> <li>• stages</li> <li>• systematicity</li> <li>• fossilisation</li> </ul> <b>Target language</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• usefulness</li> <li>• meaning</li> <li>• natural language</li> <li>• sound &amp; stress</li> </ul>	<b>Background</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• status of first &amp; additional language</li> <li>• cultural conditioning</li> <li>• economics</li> </ul> <b>Environment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• physical surroundings</li> </ul> <b>Society</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• community</li> <li>• social conventions</li> <li>• politics</li> <li>• cultural sensitivity</li> </ul> <b>Teachers</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rough tuned language</li> <li>• physical movement</li> <li>• psychological atmosphere</li> <li>• empathy</li> <li>• choice of language</li> </ul>	<b>Background</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• transfer</li> <li>• variability</li> <li>• cognitive style</li> <li>• language aptitude</li> </ul> <b>Learning Strategies</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• use of fillers</li> <li>• topicalization</li> <li>• self correction</li> </ul>

- method of conveying knowledge
- character
- correction
- Learner**
- motivation
- reason for learning
- purpose of language
- frequency of use
- involvement
- self-correction
- Strategies**
- involvement
- practice
- expansion

### Factors influencing Japanese university students learning English

Most students at Japanese Universities have knowledge of English as they have studied it through high school. However, Japanese learners of English have problems with producing English language. Certain sounds are hard for them, and word and sentence stress cause problems (Swan & Smith 2001). Many of the students are therefore false beginners in the sense that they have a good understanding of the rules but are unable to produce language accurately using the rules. Some students' language has fossilised, and they do not develop beyond a certain stage of competence. Another linguistic problem is the input of natural language of which there is simply not enough. Extra exposure can be gained through multimedia or through an exchange programme.

Social background is a sensitive issue, but as the population in Japan is largely homogeneous, it is not a cause of major influence. Social conventions and conditioning are more problematic. Most universities are well equipped; however, some classrooms have fixed desks, making it hard to organise group activities. Most teachers are well qualified and empathise with the students but the students do not become proficient without making extra effort outside the class as large classes provide few opportunities for students to use the language.

Although English is accepted, it is still not widely used and Japanese may feel embarrassed when using English. Japanese students are not particularly aware of learning strategies and find it hard to engage with others and the language. Especially hard is their ability to expand or extend their own exercise; they prefer to be told what to do and only do that much.

It is obvious that some students do not have much motivation. This is mostly due to the lack of reasons for learning where it does occur. It is the case that many university students do not have a clear purpose for learning English as they are unsure how it will benefit them. Opportunities for learning can be created by asking students to prepare before class and then become involved in student centred activities. Testing systems such as TOEFL and TOEIC have been introduced into some curricula to set a clear standard for student achievement. The level students must accomplish by the end of university education is a motivating factor.

Transfer of Japanese and Japanese English lead to many errors. For example, the lack of a subject can be associated with students' cognitive background. The repetitive way of using some words instead of trying various words shows a lack of experimentation. It is extremely hard to effectively correct false friends (English used in Japanese but not in English) as students have memorised them through use. More emphasis on the correct use of English could encourage young students to minimise their errors.

Japanese students are good at some modes of learning and can memorise useful strategies. Old modes of learning such as pen friends can take on new life with technological advances. Some class time can be used for students to develop learning exercises from appropriate material to exchange with each other. Once they have understood how to apply strategies to expand their learning they will rapidly gain confidence and excel.

### Conclusion

Linguistic factors provide the base on which students can improve their English language competence. They should be encouraged to do awareness raising tasks when studying and to use a variety of input material. A large number of audio libraries are freely accessible on the Internet and selected reading always provides a rich source of meaningful input.

Social factors can stimulate linguistic factors by providing a supportive and challenging environment. Teachers must be aware of a variety of methods to motivate students. High standards can be hard to maintain but if realistic will encourage students to take control of their learning. Students should be involved in the learning process and shown ways to practice and expand activities to gain the most benefit.

Cognitive factors interact with social and linguistic factors as the students use old methods of learning and develop new ones. Students need to develop clear ideas on general topics and personalise these. As topics are revisited, students will have plenty of opportunities to reduce errors and maximise the use of material.

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