

## **Personal Variables that Cause Error and Attitudes towards Error**

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*Abstract: With the appearance of error analysis in 1970s, which provides a new perspective for us to study the error itself, researchers' focus has shifted to errors themselves from the comparison between native language and target language. Error analysis corrects people's misunderstanding about errors and makes errors become the significant research symbols. So in the thesis, the author studies students' personal variables that cause error and he also makes a general explanation about the teachers' attitude towards the error.*

*Keywords: error, reasons, personal variables, attitude*

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### **1. PERSONAL VARIABLES THAT CAUSE ERROR**

#### **1.1 Intelligence**

Earlier in last century, intelligence was considered an important factor for foreign language learning. It was believed that a certain degree of intelligence was useful, if not essential, for success. This was a reason why learning foreign languages was often left until university level, so that only the most intelligent would take it on.

Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert, two Canadian researchers, by a research on the relationship between intelligence and foreign language proficiency, find that there is little correlation between intelligence and foreign language learning achievement. In the following years immersion programs mushroomed in Canada. Genesee (1976), another Canadian researcher, first, attempted to find out how good all the pupils in his study are at French, by giving them various tests, then he tried to measure their intelligence by other tests. Finally, he attempted to correlate French achievement with intelligence; using statistics to find out whether “being good at French” was related to “being intelligent” (and whether “bad at French” correlates with “not-so-intelligent”). His research suggests that being intelligent will help you to learn reading and writing, but not listening and speaking.

The distinction between communication skills and academic writing skills, basically speaking and listening, reappears in the work of Cummins (1979). The distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills and cognitive academic language proficiency was intended to draw attention to the very different time periods typically required by immigrant

children to acquire conversational fluency in their second language as compared to grade-appropriate academic proficiency in that language. Conversational fluency is often acquired to a functional level within about two years of initial exposure to the second language whereas at least five years is usually required to catch up to native speakers in academic aspects of the second language.

## **1.2 Language aptitude**

Smith&Tsimpli (1995) devote a 240-page book to discussion of a boy called Christopher who suffers from brain damage, having to live in an institution because of his inability to handle life outside. Yet in one area, he excels---he can speak sixteen foreign languages!

How can individuals like Christopher, with such gross cognitive deficits, be so good at just one thing---foreign language learning? His case seems to provide strong evidence for the idea that there is such a thing as an aptitude for foreign language learning that is separate from general cognitive ability. We have already noted that this idea was appealing to the Chomskyan way of thinking, because---at least as far as the L1 is concerned---acquisition is not regarded as intimately connected with general cognitive growth. It may be that this idea, though related to the L1, stimulated interest in the foreign language aptitude in the 1960s. Certainly we do find an upsurge of interest in the subject at that time.

A second reason for this upsurge in interest is the purely practical desire to predict---to be able to recognize who will succeed at language learning before they do any.

Language aptitude, according to Carroll (1973), is the ‘rate at which persons at the secondary school, university and adult level [will] successfully master a foreign language. It is believed that everyone can acquire; it is just that some people do it faster than others’. The Modern Language Aptitude Test developed by Cawoll and Sapon (1959) has five sub-tests. They drew up a long list of factors, which they thought might be related to language aptitude. Then, over time, they undertook research to see which of these factors actually correlated with actual language-learning performance. As a result, their list was reduced to manageable size. Four major areas were in fact identified: phonetic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, inductive learning ability and rote learning ability (Carroll, 1965).

## **1.3 Motivation**

In all areas of human activity, there are many reasons why people do things, and learning foreign languages is no exception. A distinction that is commonly made in motivational studies is between integrative and instrumental motivation. We say that someone is ‘integratively motivated’ if he is learning the foreign language through a desire to learn more about a culture, its language and people---to ‘integrate’ more within the target-language society. Instrumental motivation involves learning in order to achieve some other goal. So, if you learn French

because you will get a better job if you speak that language, then your motivation is instrumental.

## **2. ATTITUDE TOWARDS ERROR**

### **2.1 Attitude towards oral errors**

The teacher's attitude to errors determines the correction of errors. The attitude to oral errors is essential in the communicative activities. If teachers make corrections wherever an error occurs, it will surely inhibit communication and is likely to sacrifice fluency for accuracy. Meanwhile, learners may feel frustrated or discouraged and reluctant to communicate. Eventually, they will lose confidence, if they are frequently corrected, especially to beginners.

In China, learners of English cannot have sufficient opportunities to speak English. In order to encourage them to speak, and speak well, teachers need not be nit-picking to correct every error. What they should do is to focus on typical errors (for example, when they talk about events which happened in the past, some failed to use past tense) and wait until the learner has finished his talk. This doesn't mean to encourage him to commit errors, but rather, advocate the rule of fluency first and accuracy second in this peculiar situation, as in conversation, an effective oral communication is the shared purpose of the two sides, which focuses on fluency instead of accuracy.

### **2.2 Attitude towards written errors**

The attitude towards written errors is different from that towards oral errors in a way that written errors are less tolerable than oral ones. This is because, on the one hand, written work is permanent; on the other hand, they can in part reveal the errors in oral communication. Therefore, most teachers and researchers maintain that whatever a written error is, including spelling errors, it should be corrected.

In the EFL class of Wuhan University of Science&Engineering (WUSE), the students are asked to do much more homework, such as Chinese-English translation and composition in English after class, that the teacher may proofread and grade at least one third of the work at a time. While pointing out or correcting the errors on the exercise-books, the teacher will take them down, analyze the reasons and make clear the common ones to the students in class. As for the individual errors, he or she will get to the student and explain it to him/her after class. After a fairly long period of learning, the students will certainly achieve a lot in the foreign language learning.

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