

## *Cognitive Factors Affecting Language Learning and Acquisition of Native and Non-Native Speakers*

**Ahmed Mohamed Ahmed Elgamal**

Instructor of English

Faculty of Arts & Humanities,

Suez Canal University, Ismailia, Egypt

### **Abstract**

**T**his study aimed to identify the factors that affect first language acquisition for its native speakers. It also aimed to investigate the effect of cognitive factors, and metacognitive strategies on second or foreign language learning. In order to achieve the study objectives , 30 English major students were drawn from the Faculty of Arts, Suez Canal University to be the participants of the study during the academic year 2017/2018. They were given a questionnaire to respond to. It consists of 30 items covering three dimensions including: (1) factors affecting first language acquisition, (2) cognitive factors affecting language learning, and (3) metacognitive strategies affecting language learning. Responses were collected and analyzed. Based on the study results, it is concluded that the innate ability and social experience or surrounding environment are factors affecting first language acquisition. Cognitive factors including memory (its forms and types), attention and awareness, and forgetting, affect second or foreign language learning. Metacognitive strategies, such as planning, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and setting priorities also play a significant role in language learning.

**Keywords:** EFL, Cognitive factors, First Language Acquisition, Second or Foreign Language Learning, Native and Non-Native Speakers

### **Introduction**

There are individual differences not only between speakers of two languages or more, but also between those who speak the same language. Perhaps the main factors causing such differences are natural, environmental, or cognitive. The factors responsible for acquiring a first language are different from those of learning a second or a foreign language. For example, a person's natural ability and the surrounding environment are responsible for acquiring their first language, whereas there are

cognitive factors responsible for learning a second or foreign language.

Troika (2006) further indicates that a child starts to acquire his/her mother tongue before the age of three up to the age of puberty, and that the factors affecting first language acquisition are: (1) the role of innate ability, and (2) the role of social experience. In other words, any child, regardless the language to be acquired, possesses a natural ability to acquire his/her language. A child's language acquisition is also affected by the people who surround and socialize with him, e.g. parents, relatives, and neighbors. Thus, both the roles of natural ability and social experience are very important in acquiring a child's first language.

It is worth noting that the period in which a child acquires his/her first language is called "Critical Period", and if the child does not acquire the language during this period, language acquisition becomes language learning. Accordingly, the term "Second Language Learning" (SLA) emerges to refer to the language that a child learns after his/her first language acquisition process is/not completed. In SLA, a person is cognitively affected by factors as he/she need to exert cognitive effort in order to learn this language, unlike the first language acquisition process, which is spontaneous and discrete, and there is room for any cognitive effect (Leaver et al., 2005). So, the difference between first language acquisition and second or foreign language learning is that acquisition takes place autonomously and spontaneously at an early age, while learning - which involves direct instruction and guidance - takes place when a child has/not already acquired their first language. In language learning whether it is second or foreign, cognitive factors play a big role.

There are many cognitive factors that affect language learning. Among the cognitive factors, there are memory, attention and awareness, forgetting, and context or environment in which the learning process takes place. Memory plays a part in bringing about a higher or lower level of language mastery. If the

individual is better at understanding the role of memory as well as the role of attention and awareness, and the role of forgetting, he/she will be able to achieve a higher rate of language proficiency (Leaver et al. 2005).

In addition to the cognitive factors affecting language learning aforementioned, there are some other metacognitive ones that refer to the strategies that the learner is to be fully aware of during the learning process. They are planning for learning, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and setting priorities.

## **Statement of the Problem**

From what has been tackled, it can be claimed that the factors affecting first language acquisition for its native speakers, and those affecting second or foreign language learning for its non-native speakers need to be further elaborated.

## **Questions of the Study**

In order to handle the aforementioned problem, the study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the factors that affect first language acquisition for its native speakers?
2. What are some cognitive factors that affect second or foreign language learning for its non-native speakers?
3. What are some metacognitive factors that affect second or foreign language learning for its non-native speakers?

## **Objectives of the Study**

1. Identifying the factors that affect first language acquisition for its native speakers.
2. Identifying the cognitive factors that affect second or foreign language learning for its non-native speakers.
3. Identifying the metacognitive factors that affect second or foreign language learning for its non-native speakers.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Factors affecting first language acquisition**

There are many terms for first language, such as *native language, mother tongue*, but these terms are compatible with

one another in a common feature that the first language is the language or languages "...which are acquired during early childhood – normally beginning before the age of about three years – and that they are learned as part of growing up among people who speak them." (Troike, 2006, p. 4)

Although there is no cognitive influence at the stage of first language acquisition, or what is known as the critical period hypothesis, Troike (2006) points out that there are other factors affecting the individual's first language acquisition during the "Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). Robinson (2013) explains that the "critical period hypothesis" is the period in which the individual is exposed to their mother tongue for the first time. According to this hypothesis, first exposure to a language that takes place within the critical period results in normal levels of attainment in the case of first language (L1) acquisition and (in most cases) native like levels of attainment in the case of second language (L2) acquisition. However, if first exposure to a language takes place after the critical period, the end result will be non-normal/non-native like in the case of L1 and L2 learning, respectively.

Abrahamson (2012, p. 146) claims that if the individual at that age is exposed to a second language, in most cases, the rates of acquiring this language are almost as close as the first language proficiency. But if the individual is exposed after this "critical period" to either the first or second language, there will be no natural rates to acquire the first language or the second. Slabakova (2016) supports this view: "If language is not acquired by puberty, some aspects of language such as the lexicon can be learned, but native like mastery of grammatical structure cannot be achieved" (p.84).

There are two main factors that affect first language acquisition in the critical period: the roles of natural ability and social experience. Troike (2006, p.13) states that man is born with natural or innate ability to acquire language. This readiness refers to the following set of facts:

1. Children begin to acquire the first language in the same age, and in the same way as English, Korean or other languages in the world.
2. Children can master basic language skills such as pronunciation and grammar at about the age of five or six, regardless of the language acquired.
3. Children can understand and create novel utterances, so they do not have to repeat what they hear.
4. Children cannot acquire a language after a certain age, that is, the critical period. In this respect, it can be said that genetic factors affect the individual's first language acquisition.

The social experience or social context in which the language is being acquired is also significant. Having possessed an innate ability does not guarantee that a person can acquire his/her first language. However, a person has to acquire specific features of the language that enable them to achieve proficiency. This supports Troike's view, "Children will never acquire such language-specific knowledge unless that language is used with them and around them..." (p.15).

In addition to the roles of natural ability and social experience, Ellis (1994) points out that the social factors, such as socioeconomic factors, ethnic background, and other factors, indirectly affect an individual's learning of language. The geographical distribution, in particular, influences the pronunciation of the children. So, it can be concluded that if the child is surrounded by individuals who speak more than one language, their natural ability to acquire these languages is possible rather than through direct and systematic instruction.

### **Cognitive factors affecting second/foreign language learning**

Second or foreign language, however, refers to the language or languages that an individual learns at some point after the completion of the first language acquisition. If the individual has the ability or high level of proficiency in a second or foreign

language, besides his first language, he/she is called "bilingual". Cook and Basity (2011, p. 144) further point out, "This probably corresponds best to the everyday concept of bilingualism, namely that a bilingual has a high level of proficiency in both languages."

Just as there are factors affecting first language acquisition, there are also cognitive factors that affect second or foreign language learning. Richards and Schmidt (2002, p.82) define *cognition* as "the various mental processes used in thinking, remembering, perceiving, recognizing, and classifying. Leaver et al. (2005, p.38) suggests that *cognition* means thinking or using mental processes, such as observing, paying attention, making guesses and assumptions, observing what is being said, interpreting what is being read or heard. Tavakoli (2013, p.62) connects cognition and thinking and logic, defining cognition as "The use or handling of knowledge; hence, (a) the faculty which permits us to think and reason and (b) the process involved in thought and reasoning. Richard and Schmitt (2002, p.84) further define cognitive process as "any mental process which learners make use of in language learning, such as inferencing, generalization, deductive learning, monitoring, and memorizing."

There are other terms that is associated with cognition, such as 'metacognition'. This does not mean that it is far from the cognitive influence that occurs when learning a language, but has a big role. So, Richard and Schmidt (2002) and Lever et al. (2005) view 'metacognition' as thinking of the cognitive processes, that is, the individual's awareness of his behavior and progress, self-monitoring his performance, and self-planning when learning the language.

By reviewing the definitions of cognition, cognitive processes, and metacognition, *cognitive influence* in this study can be defined as the process that involves various cognitive factors such as memory (its forms, types and strategies, attention and awareness), interpretation of what is read or heard, or metacognitive factors such as planning, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and setting priorities when learning a second or

foreign language the language resulting in either a high or low level of language performance.

Memory is one of the cognitive factors affecting second or foreign language learning. Cambridge Dictionary (2008) defines *memory* as "the ability to remember information, experiences and people." Richard and Schmitt (2002, p. 327) define it as "the mental capacity to store information, either for short or long periods". Thus, it is clear that memory plays a big role in the process of storing information and retrieving it when needed. There are different forms of memory, three of which Leaver (2005, p.43) refers to according to the type of information it deals with: *episodic memory*, whose task is to remember events and situations, *procedural memory*, which relates to the recall of normal operations and *semantic memory*, whose task is to remember the main information or language lexical and structural forms and their meanings. These forms affect the process of language learning, particularly the semantic memory (the memory of the language). Thus, the learner needs the episodic memory to store learning situations, procedural memory to make the learning process automatic and semantic memory to remember the lexical and structural forms in order to build a knowledge base about language.

Richard and Schmitt (2002) point out that there are two basic types of memory: (1) short-term memory which is responsible for storing information for a short time (up to 20 seconds) and where information is analyzed and interpreted. Working memory is another term for short-term memory, and refers to the active system of storing and using information temporarily for complex mental tasks such as learning, reasoning, and understanding. Working memory plays a role in language learning as it uses information from short-term memory, long-term memory, and also permanent memory for the purpose of understanding, remembering, reprocessing and

building information, and (2) *Long-term memory* that acts as storing information for a long time (up to three years). In addition, the information may not be stored in the same format when it was received. After receiving information through sensory memory, one of the following processes occurs: the information is transferred to short-term memory and then to long-term memory, or transferred from sensory or short-term memory to long-term memory.

Another type of memory is called the *permanent memory*, where the information is stored forever, but information requires activation or refreshing when needed. This helps the leaner when learning the language as the more information about the language becomes fixed in the permanent memory, the easier it is to retrieve it through activation. Hence, it can be assumed that memory affects language learning because:

1. a great deal of information about language, especially if not organized, can be lost.
2. focusing attention on the information you want to retrieve is important to ensure transferring this information to the long-term memory.

Attention and awareness also affect second or foreign language learning. Unlike first language acquisition, which is acquired implicitly, language learning involves attention and awareness, and therefore requires cognitive effort (Robinson, 2013). Given the notion that attention and awareness take place within the sentient memory, they are considered the first step in the process of storing information in memory and make it available when needed later.

Leaver (2005) noted that the process of attention and awareness should be accompanied by an understanding of what is going on, and therefore it is of great importance to learn the language by:

1. paying careful attention to the environment in which you learn language elements;

2. paying attention to as many aspects as possible of the language you hear and see;
3. trying to use as many senses as possible in learning a new language; and attempt some sort of rehearsal.

Forgetting, which is an aspect of cognition, also affects language learning. This goes in line with what Lever et al. (2005) state: "Understanding why we forget is every bit as important as understanding why we remember. Both help us become better learners. In fact, forgetting is, surprisingly, essential to good learning. This is because if you forget something you have learned, you can relearn it in a somewhat new context, and it will be combined with traces of the previous learning." (p.48)

Lever et al. (2005) further point out that there are a number of things that can go wrong in the storage, recall and reconstruction process. Some of the things that can go wrong are retrieval errors, lost data, and overwritten information. Retrieval errors, as stated by Harman and Asher (2001), occur when the information loss over time results from storage capacity limitations due to a passive process of time-based decay and/or displacement of weakly activated information by more strongly activated information. Lost data occurs when the information is not settled in the permanent memory as it is not left long enough in the short-term memory, and then lost and cannot be retrieved. Overwritten information occurs when new information will erase the old information, and thus the old information became distorted.

Long (1997, p.319) claims that second language learning is a process that occurs in a social context, and this learning process is a combination of cognitive processes and the social context." According to Goodwin (2003), being part of the learning context helps the learner to produce correct and suitable responses. Doughty and Long (2003, p.4) also argue that researchers recognize that SLA takes place in a social context, and accept that it can be influenced by that context. However,

they also recognize that language learning is ultimately a matter of change in an individual's internal mental state. Atkinson (2011) makes clear the relationship between the cognitive factors and the role of the context or environment in which the learning process occurs claiming that second language learning process involves the leaner's mind and body, and the surrounding environment.

## **Meta-cognitive strategies affecting second/foreign language learning**

The term metacognition has already been referred to as a learner's awareness of the cognitive processes associated with language learning in terms of planning for learning, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and setting priorities (Schunk & Ertmer, 2000). First, planning for learning refers to the ability of the learner to develop a plan to learn the language, for example, what the learner wants to learn and how to learn and interact with others, both inside the classroom or outside. Second, self-monitoring is a strategy in which the learner is to pay attention to what he/she is doing while learning the language, that is to follow the tracking of the language aspects to be learned, which makes him/her aware of the strengths and weaknesses so that the learning process becomes easy and fast. Third, self-evaluation refers to the learner's ability to evaluate their overall progress, specific successes, learning strategy, materials, time, and level of satisfaction. Fourth, "setting priorities will be far more effective if you base your priorities on the results of monitoring and evaluating....Setting priorities may also lead to redoing your learning plan. A self-regulating learner plans, monitors, evaluates, and replans (setting priorities, in that process)" (Lever et al., 2005, p.61)

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The study sample ( $n = 30$  English major students) was randomly drawn from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Suez Canal University, Ismailia,

## Instrument

A three-part questionnaire was developed by the researcher to achieve the study objectives. It includes:

1. The factors that affect first language acquisition (10 items),
2. the factors that affect second language learning (12 items), and
3. the metacognitive strategies the affect second language learning (8 items).

## Results and Discussion

The questionnaire was applied to the study sample in March 2018. Having collected the data, they were treated statistically. Following is the results of the study.

**Table 1. Factors affecting first language acquisition**

Items	5	4	3	2	1
<b>A. Factors affecting first language acquisition</b>					
<b>My parent used to play a role to help me acquire my first language.</b>	53.3	16.6	16.6	10	3.3
<b>When I was a child, I remember my parent asking me to pay attention to the correct pronunciation of words.</b>	43.3	33.3	20		3.3
<b>When I was young, I remember myself speaking my native language fluently.</b>	26.6	16.6	40	13.3	3.3
<b>During my nursery school, I used to talk with my peers more than the teacher.</b>	33.3	33.3	30	3.3	00.0
<b>When I went back home from school, I used to transfer the language that I heard from my peers.</b>	33.3	26.6	26.6	10	3.3
<b>My nursery school teacher taught me the alphabet better than my parent did.</b>	26.6	26.6	26.6	13.3	6.6
<b>I remember the stories told by my parent before bed better than those of the teacher at school.</b>	36.6	30	16.6	6.6	10
<b>I used to construct new phrases and say them to my parent.</b>	3.3	20	30	13.3	00.0
<b>My older brother/sister helped me to acquire my native language.</b>	20	23.3	16.6	16.6	23.3
<b>My school teacher played a role to help me acquire my first language.</b>	30	43.3	16.6	10	00.0

Note: 5 = always , 4 = often , 3 = usually , 2 = rarely , 1 = never

As seen in Table 1, the majority of the items receive high responses on the scale whereas few items receive low responses. The high frequency of responses to the items indicates that both the role of natural ability and social experience play an important role to help the individual acquire his/her first language. However, the students' low responses to item 3 might explain the idea that attaining a higher level of first language fluency involves not only the role of natural ability, but also the surrounding environment, and this might not be achieved at an early age as, in some cases, a child may be described as a late talker. The low responses to item 8 might explain the notion that an individual's natural ability is not enough to help them acquire the first language. Although the individual is born with an innate ability to learn his/her language spontaneously, the role of social experience or the surrounding environment is also important. So the responses to item 8 confirm the idea that a child finds it difficult to construct new language structure alone and unassisted, he/she needs someone from the surrounding environment to help them create such novel structure.

As indicated in Table 2, the majority of the items receive high responses on the scale whereas few items receive low responses. The high frequency of responses to the items indicates that cognitive factors including the role of the memory, attention and awareness affect second or foreign language learning. Students' responses to items 12, 13 and 14 indicate that the process of attention is the first step the learner should take when learning the language, and accordingly, the higher the rate of the learner's attention, the higher the level of language proficiency, and the lower the rate of the learner's attention, the lower the rate of language proficiency level. Also, attention requires the learner's understanding of what is going on around him/her during the learning process. Students' responses to

items 15 and 16 indicate that the forms of memory, i.e. episodic, procedural and semantic affect language learning, particularly the semantic memory, which is largely responsible for language learning.

**Table 2. Cognitive factors affecting second/foreign language learning**

Items		5	4	3	2	1
<b>B. Cognitive factors affecting second/foreign language learning</b>						
1	I seem focused and attentive when I hear, speak, read and write the foreign language.	53.3	33.3	13.3	00.0	00.0
2	The more I listen attentively to my teacher, the more I learn my foreign language.	46.6	23.3	20	10	00.0
3	The more I visually focus my attention, the more I learn my foreign language.	60	26.6	13.3	00.0	00.0
4	The more I visually focus my attention on different things, the more I learn my foreign language.	36.6	36.6	20	6.6	00.0
5	I find it easy to recall the meaning of a word.	30	30	30	10	00.0
6	I find it easy to recall the correct pronunciation of a word.	26.6	46.6	20	6.6	00.0
7	I find it easy to recall the order of events for a story.	33.3	33.3	26.6	6.6	00.0
8	I find it easy to recall the verse-lines of a poem.	20	23.3	43.3	10	6.6
9	I find it easy to apply the rules of certain grammatical structures that I learned.	33.3	33.3	30	3.3	00.0
10	I find it easy to link new knowledge about language to the knowledge I gained before.	40	33.3	20	6.6	00.0
11	When it comes to learn something about language for the second time, I learn it fast.	46.6	26.6	20	3.3	3.3
12	I guess the meaning of a difficult word from the context.	50	26.6	23.3	00.0	00.0

Note: 5 = always , 4 = often , 3 = usually , 2 = rarely , 1 = never

The students' relatively low responses to items 16 and 18 might explain the notion that memory plays a positive as well as a negative role in language learning.

Students may not be able to recall information they have learned before if they do not refresh or activate this piece of information. In other words, in order to make memory an effective factor in language learning, a person's memory needs some sort of rehearsal.

A possible explanation for students' responses to item 21 is that sometimes the learner may forget a piece of knowledge about language because things may go wrong in the memory, such as retrieval errors, lost data, and overwritten information, which is something good as this makes the learner to relearn things in a new context in a better and deeper way.

**Table 3. Metacognitive strategies affecting foreign language learning**

Items	5	4	3	2	1
<b>C. Metacognitive strategies affecting foreign language learning</b>					
1 I develop a study plan before I start to learn.	36.6	26.6	16.6	16.6	3.3
2 While studying anything about language, I pause for a while and ask myself: Is this method suitable?	30	30	30	10	00.0
3 While studying, I pause every now and then to think of the ideas contained.	40	33.3	20	6.6	00.0
4 When studying new words or expressions, I think of examples for more clarification.	53.3	36.6	6.6	3.3	00.0
5 When I find it difficult to study something, I skip it and focus on something else.	16.6	30	26.6	23.3	3.3
6 I outline, diagram, summarize the main points of language lessons that I study.	33.3	33.3	23.3	10	00.0
7 I use what I learn about language in realistic and authentic situations.	26.6	26.6	43.3	3.3	00.0
8 I tend to prioritize my language tasks.	36.6	36.6	23.3	3.3	00.0

Note: 5 = always , 4 = often , 3 = usually , 2 = rarely , 1 = never

As indicated in Table 3, students score high responses on the scale to the items whereas few items receive low responses. The high frequency of responses to the items indicates that metacognitive strategies including planning, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and setting priority affect second or foreign language learning. However, the students' relatively low responses to item 27 indicates that students consider planning as an important metacognitive as students do not prefer to skip any item about language learning and focus on something else. Item 29 receives relatively low responses, and this might indicate that students' self-monitoring is also important when it comes to use the language in realistic and authentic situations. One might say that through the metacognitive strategies, the learner can control the level and progress of language learning.

## **Conclusions**

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that there are factors, such as the individual's natural ability and the social experience or surrounding environment affecting first language acquisition for its native speakers. It can also be included that some cognitive factors, such as memory including its forms and types, attention and awareness, and forgetting affecting second or foreign language learning for its non-native speakers.

First language acquisition takes place at early age (before the age of 3 up to puberty). So, the circumstances of acquiring one's first language are different from that of a second or foreign language. What makes first language acquisition different is that children are born with an innate ability to speak a language, no matter what this language is, but the most important thing is that acquiring a language at an early age is almost universal. Just as the natural ability plays a part in language acquisition, the role of social experience or those who surround the child is also significant. For example, if a child, at an early age, does not find him/herself surrounded by people, he/she definitely will not be

able to acquire that language. This is because language maintains its existence wherever and whenever the dynamic relationships between people exist.

Second or foreign language learning takes place when the individual has/not acquired his/her first language. Therefore, the circumstances surrounding the learning process involves other factors, specifically, cognitive factors. Now, learning, unlike first language acquisition, becomes a conscious process. That is to say, the learner is supposed to exert some sort of cognitive effort in order to learn a language. Some of the cognitive factors are: memory including its forms and types, attention whether visual, auditory, or selective, forgetting with its different forms: retrieval errors, lost data, overwritten information.

As for memory, if information about language rests in the learner's permanent memory, his/her language learning will have a high rate of proficiency. Also, semantic memory is the memory of language. It plays a major role in helping the learner to recall information about language, i.e. lexical or structural forms of language. Memory also needs some sort of rehearsal, especially when it comes to information buried deep in the memory, and cannot be retrieved easily. In this case, this information needs activation or refreshing.

Attention with its different forms: auditory, visual, or selective plays a significant part in the language learning process. When it comes to learn something new about language, for example, a learner is to focus his/her attention on a specific area to be learned. That is to say, the more the learner focuses his attention, the more the information is permanently stored in the memory. This means that attention functions as the first step toward learning a language. Thus, attention should be accompanied by the leaner's awareness of what is going on during the learning process.

Just as memory plays a major part in learning a language, forgetting also an equal part. The quintessential function that forgetting serves is to help the leaner to relearn things in a new

context in a much faster and deeper way. Thus, the different forms of forgetting including retrieval errors, lost data and overwritten information can be overcome by strategies, such as association, clustering, and other strategies for storing information in memory.

Learning, which is based on context, is effective. That is to say, the role of social context is very important when it comes to learn a second or foreign language. Cognitive factors are not only responsible for increasing or decreasing an individual's language proficiency. However, the context in which the learning process takes place is also important. For example, a person who wants to learn English will achieve higher rate when he is surrounded by people whose native language is English. So, teacher should seek every possible means to bring about an appropriate classroom atmosphere to help the learners do well when learning a language.

Just as the cognitive factors affect second or foreign language learning, metacognitive strategies affect language learning. During the learning process, it is important for the learners to be aware of what is going on. He should first make a plan for language learning, that is, determine what language areas he/she wants to learn. He should also decide on which materials are suitable, and how much time is needed. While learning, the learner is to monitor his/her progress in order to see whether a progress in language learning is being made. After a while, a leaner is to make self-evaluation to determine the points of strengths and weaknesses, and set priorities accordingly. If these metacognitive strategies are taken into account, language learning becomes easier and more profound.

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