Foreign language acquisition and individual learner traits
A look at some spectacularly successful language learners

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Abstract
Although foreign language teaching pedagogy is essentially a twentieth century phenomenon, people have been learning foreign languages throughout history. Some, extraordinarily capable individuals like Cardinal Giuseppi Mezzofanti, Jean-Francois Champollion, Sir William Jones, and Sir Richard Francis Burton learned not one or two, but many foreign languages. Their lives and careers illustrate character traits and learning strategies that modern linguists have associated with successful foreign language acquisition. Their self-teaching methods, some of which are described in biographies, are especially interesting in the light of current discussions about foreign language pedagogy. The example of these polylinguals reaffirms the capacity of all human beings to learn foreign languages, and highlights the central role of the learner in the acquisition process.

Key words: Second language acquisition, Polylngualism, Cognitive and affective learner variables.

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Introduction

A most embarrassing fact about today’s foreign language teaching profession is that it can offer learners no real assurance of success; this after a century of intensive research and theoretical development in the field of applied linguistics. Yet prior to the twentieth century – in the prehistory, so to speak, of foreign language teaching – countless men and women mastered foreign languages without leaving their native lands and typically without benefit of formal instruction. Certainly none of them enjoyed the advantages of modern language teaching methodologies or sophisticated pedagogical materials.

History records many examples of spectacularly successful language learners. Mithridates, first century B.C. king of Pontus, was said to be fluent in at least twenty-two languages. Plutarch relates that the Egyptian queen Cleopatra “could pass from one language to another; so that there were few of the barbarian nations that she answered by an interpreter”. The English philologist, Sir William Jones (1746-1794) drew upon his mastery of twenty-eight languages to postulate the existence of the Indo-European language family. Jean-Francois Champollion (1790-1832), translator of the Rosetta Stone, had taught himself twelve ancient and modern languages by the age of twenty. Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890), whose translations of the “Thousand and One Nights” and the “Kama Sutra” first brought these works to the attention of Europeans, is credited with proficiency in twenty-nine languages. Vatican librarian Cardinal Giuseppe Mezzofanti (1774-1849) was said to speak fifty languages fluently and to understand another twenty.

That these essentially self-taught individuals could do for themselves what modern pedagogy cannot do for masses of foreign language students raises important questions about the nature of second language acquisition. Are all people capable of learning second/foreign languages? What techniques have proven effective in learning/teaching foreign languages? What can learners do to maximize their chances for success?

That mastery of several languages was not, in past centuries, considered a rare achievement is attested by the scarcity of contemporary literature relating to language learning. However, a few intellectuals did leave written accounts of their learning experiences and the techniques they used. One of these was the orientalist, Edward Granville Brown (1862-1924), author of “A Literary
History of Persia”. Browne’s account of how he learned Turkish, Arabic and Persian makes an interesting comparison with similar accounts left by Sir Richard Burton and others. These accounts will be examined here, together with other biographical information concerning celebrated polylinguals whose lives and careers cast light on the traits shared by successful second language learners and the nature of second language acquisition.

Variables that affect second language learning

Are certain types of people especially apt at learning languages? Individual learner variables can be broadly classified as cognitive, relating to intellect, and affective, relating to emotion. Among those cognitive variables most often cited as affecting second language acquisition are such quantifiable ones as age, intelligence and aptitude, and other, less quantifiable ones such as personal learning styles. Affective variables include such factors as extroversion/introversion, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, motivation, and socio-cultural attitudes.

Cognitive factors

Age is indisputably a crucial factors in second language acquisition. Stephen Krashen and others have postulated that language acquisition occurs most easily during a “critical period” that ends with the onset of puberty. However, while research has supported the critical period hypothesis with respect to phonetic aspects of language, it has not with respect to lexis and grammar. In fact, adults may surpass pre-adolescents in their capacity to perform most of the cognitive tasks related to second language learning. Adults often achieve native proficiency in a second language while retaining a foreign accent. The Polish-born Joseph Conrad, after acquiring English as an adult, become, in one critic’s words, “one of the greatest of English novelists and perhaps the finest prose stylist of them all” without ever losing his Polish accent. Walsh and Diller suggest that “lower-order processes such as pronunciation are dependent on early maturing and less adaptive macrochirural circuits, which makes foreign accents difficult to overcome after childhood”. Yet it appears that some exceptional adult learners do achieve native-like pronunciation. Sir Richard Burton carried out delicate intelligence tasks for the British army by imitating perfectly the dress, customs and speech of native Indians.
Intelligence necessarily figures in language acquisition as in any other kind of learning. But what is intelligence? The traditional concept of IQ (intelligence quotient), measured in terms of mathematical and verbal reasoning, has been discarded in favor of the “multiple intelligences” proposed by Howard Gardner, Robert Sternberg and others. In any case, research has found no relation between intelligence (traditional or otherwise) and foreign language learning success. According to Douglas Brown, “people with both high and low IQ’s have proven to be successful in acquiring a second language”.6

Aptitude may be defined as an innate facility for learning foreign languages as measured by specially formulated tests. John Carroll, whose name is most associated with research concerning aptitude, describes it in terms of four factors: phonemic coding ability (the ability to identify and remember linguistic sounds) grammatical sensitivity (the ability to recognize the syntactic functions of words) inductive language learning ability (the ability to infer language patterns and relationships) and rote learning ability. Tests like the MLAT (Modern Language Aptitude Test) are used by government agencies in the U.S. and Canada, and have proven to be reliable predictors of success in foreign language learning. Presumably Mezzofanti, who reputedly mastered a language in 48 hours7, and Burton, who taught himself to imitate the speech of monkeys in order to “converse” with them8, would have obtained high scores on the MLAT. Yet such tests assume high levels of motivation, which may vary according to the language studied. For example, E. G. Browne seems to have had difficulty learning European languages like French and German9.

Learning styles, is a term used to describe variations in the way different learners take in, process and store information. Individuals are said to be right or left-brain dominant, analytical or intuitive, field dependent or field independent, etc. Despite efforts to identify certain combinations of these variables in relation to successful language learning, research has demonstrated little beyond the obvious: that certain tendencies correlate with ability in specific kinds of learning tasks. For example, learners whose styles are analytical and left-brain dominant perform well in tasks requiring accuracy whereas intuitive, right-brain dominant individuals excel in language fluency.

Affective Variables

Affective variables that are said to correlate with success in language learning include: high self-esteem, extroversion, tolerance of
ambiguity, risk-taking, empathy and motivation. However, research has yet to establish their usefulness as predictors of success in second language learning, and such a correlation may be unverifiable given the difficulties of defining and testing these qualities. Yet it is significant that Mezzofanti, Champollion, Jones, Burton and Browne were highly sociable, self-assured individuals who sought out adventure and challenges and could approach with sympathetic comprehension all manner of religious and cultural paradigms. Cardinal Mezzofanti, knew more of London street slang than the English poet Lord Byron, according to the poet’s own testimony. Jean-Francois Champollion was, by age sixteen, a university professor confidently defending unorthodox theories in the field of Egyptology. William Jones was renowned among British colonial administrators in India for his tolerance and sensitivity to native customs. As founder of the Asiatic society, he was instrumental in bringing Hindu sacred literature to the attention of European intellectuals. Richard Burton was a real-life Indiana Jones, whose passion for knowledge and adventure took him to many parts of the world. He investigated brothels in India as a spy for the British army, received a spear wound in the jaw while fleeing Somalian tribesman, and risked execution by entering the Kaaba in Mecca disguised as a Muslim pilgrim. E. G. Browne possessed a sincere love for Iran, a childlike curiosity and open-mindedness, a rare ability to treat with all classes of people, and a gift for remembering conversations almost verbatim. These qualities enabled him to become an expert on nineteenth century Iranian society and culture and endeared him to the Iranian people. In the words of a BBC correspondent, “he is still perhaps the best known and best loved English man or woman in Iran”.

Characteristic of these men was a keen interest in religion. Jones was instrumental in introducing Europeans to Vedantic Hinduism. Browne’s painstaking research and documentation of the nascent Bahá’í Faith was for him almost an obsession. Burton carried “tolerance for ambiguity” to extremes. As a professed Sufi, he memorized much of the Koran, underwent circumcision, and observed the fast of Ramadan. Later he visited Utah where, according to his biographer, “He was introduced to Brigham Young . . . but when Burton asked to be admitted as a Mormon, Young replied, with a smile, ‘I think you’ve done that sort of thing before, Captain.’ So Burton was unable to add Mormonism to his five or six other religions.”

Perhaps what is most strikingly similar about all of these individuals is their innate passion for acquiring knowledge in widely diverse
areas; that is to say, their high levels of intrinsic motivation (i.e. motivation characterizing an individual’s behavior). Jones’ interests embraced not only linguistics but also Indian literature and music, as well as botany and zoology. “I hold every day lost”, he wrote, “when I do not acquire some new knowledge of man and nature”14.

Socio-cultural considerations

Motivation is an affective learner variable insofar as it is intrinsic. But motivation may be related to specific tasks – for example, learning a language. It then becomes a socio-cultural factor related to the learner’s perception of and attitude toward the target language. According to Giles and Byre, learners identify more easily with the target language if they see their own culture as being equal or superior in status to that of target language speakers15. Lambert uses the terms additive and subtractive bilingualism, the former referring to acquisition of a second language while fully maintaining the native language and culture; the latter to situations where a second language displaces the mother tongue, as for example when learners have negative feelings toward their own culture and desire assimilation into the target culture16. He argues that additive bilinguals, having positive attitudes toward both first and second languages, are likely to be more highly motivated and thus more successful learners.

Motivation

Learners have instrumental motivation to acquire a second language when they pursue this goal as a means for attaining specific results such as career advancement, an ability to read technical texts, etc. They have integrative motivation when they identify with the speakers of the target language and seek integration with their society and culture.

Integrative motivation might appear to represent a stronger incentive to language learning than instrumental motivation. But it can, in fact, be limiting, since learners may satisfy themselves with a partial knowledge of the target language and a superficial identification with its culture. For example, most religions have a sacred language in which, ideally, scripture is to be read and prayers recited; yet Catholics are not generally fluent in Latin, nor Muslims in classical Arabic, or Hindus in Sanskrit. By contrast, instru-
mental motivation requires for its gratification at least some degree of language mastery.

Studies aimed at measuring the effects of integrative vs. instrumental motivation on language learning have produced mixed results\textsuperscript{17}. Furthermore, the validity of the integrative-instrumental construct has itself been challenged since the complex linguistic realities of many cultures make it difficult to classify learners’ motivations\textsuperscript{18}. To many third world peoples, English words possess a sort of mystical association with wealth and power. Mario Pei tells of New Guinea tribesmen who, coming upon packages of English-named products and believing the words to carry magical power, adopted these as names for themselves, the chief changing his name to “Oxford University Press”\textsuperscript{19}.

An ideal situation would be one in which the two types of motivation are somehow combined. Browne illustrates, from his experience as a fourteen-year-old language learner, a particularly felicitous marriage between instrumental and integrative motivation:

\textit{It was the Turkish war with Russia in 1877-8 that first attracted my attention to the East, about which, till that time, I had known and cared nothing. To the young, war is always interesting, and I watched the progress of this struggle with eager attention. At first my proclivities were by no means for the Turks; but the losing side, more especially when it continues to struggle gallantly against defeat, always has a claim on our sympathy... Ere the close of the war I would have died to save Turkey, and I mourned the fall of Plevna as though it had been a disaster inflicted on my own country. And so gradually pity turned to admiration, and admiration to enthusiasm, until the Turks became in my eyes veritable heroes, and the desire to identify myself with their cause, make my dwelling amongst them, and unite with them in the defense of their land, possessed me heart and soul... So wild a project will doubtless move many of my readers to mirth, and some to indignation, but, such as it was, it was for a time paramount in my mind, and its influence outlived it. Its accomplishment, however, evidently needed time; and, as my enthusiasm demanded some immediate object, I resolved at once to begin the study of the Turkish language\textsuperscript{20}.}

The motivation with which Browne, having learned Turkish, went on to study Persian, Arabic and other oriental languages illustrates resultative motivation; that is to say, the motivating effect of successful language learning as a stimulus to further efforts.
Individual learner strategies

The cognitive and affective factors that affect the rate and extent of language learners’ achievement find expression in learner strategies; i.e. individual approaches and techniques for learning foreign languages. Some of the strategies that are said to characterize successful learners are: recombination (formulation of new sentences by combining known elements) selective attention (selective focusing on specific aspects of linguistic input), monitoring (checking language output for errors), and soliciting of information from native speakers. Though all learners employ strategies, successful learners are distinguished by the variety and adaptability of the strategies they bring to learning tasks. Especially significant is their tendency to focus on the forms of the language while also attending to meaning. It is related that Mezzofanti was asked about a lesson he was going to give in Californian (an American Indian language). When asked, “How could you have possibly learned that out of the way tongue?” he replied, “From Californians themselves. And now I am teaching it to them grammatically”\(^{21}\).

Theories of second language acquisition

The systematic, self-assurance with which Mezzofanti, Burton, and Browne approached the task of learning languages contrasts with the groping hesitancy that has characterized the science of applied linguistics in its attempts to postulate theories of second language acquisition. It was long assumed that second languages are acquired through a process similar to that of mother tongue acquisition. During the 1950’s and 60’s the behaviorist theories of B. F. Skinner explained both first and second language acquisition as processes of imitation and reinforcement. This view found support in the work of structural linguistics, which saw grammatical structure as the essential element of language and blamed interference of first language grammatical habits for difficulties in second language learning. Ernest Lado, a noted advocate of this view, described second language acquisition as simply the replacement of L1 (first language) habits with L2 (second language) habits\(^ {22}\).

The observation that children are often incapable of imitating utterances they do not understand, yet create utterances for which they have no models, casts doubt on the theory of language as imitation
and behavioral conditioning, and suggests instead that humans possess some innate capacity for acquiring the language systems. Noam Chomsky led the way in proposing the cognitive theory of language that, toward the end of the 1960’s, came into vogue. Language, says cognitive theory, is far too complex to be understood simply as a collection of habits; rather, it represents the complex functioning, in each human being, of a *language acquisition device* (LAD). This LAD contains within itself a universal grammar by means of which limited resources (phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, etc.) are combined to form an infinite variety of utterances.

An important development of Chomsky’s cognitive theory was Stephen Krashen’s “comprehensible input” hypothesis, which holds that language acquisition occurs when subjects receive L2 input that is slightly beyond their linguistic knowledge yet still comprehensible. The result is *unconscious* language acquisition. To Krashen, *conscious* learning results in little more than mental representations of formal rules. These representations make up the so-called *monitor*, whose function is limited to that of correcting formal mistakes.

Krashen’s model of second language acquisition has been widely discussed and almost universally criticized, most especially for its insistence that conscious language learning cannot contribute significantly to language acquisition. Theorists like Ellen Bialystok (1978) and Barry McLaughlin (1983) have proposed alternate models of second language acquisition that assign a more active role to learner’s conscious efforts and strategies. An interesting model proposed by Jiazhen Hu (1995) describes L1 metacognitive knowledge (i.e. knowledge about the native language) as a starting point for L2 learning, with dependence on L1 progressively giving way to reliance on L2. The notion that L1 can serve as a valuable base from which the learner gradually appropriates L2 will be encountered again in this discussion.

**Formal language teaching/learning**

Historically, most second language acquisition has occurred as the natural result of the jostling together of nations, ethnic groups, and languages within confined geographical spaces. The modern monolingual nation-state has never been the typical form of human community, nor has bilingualism or even multilingualism ever been the exclusive prerogative of an economic or intellectual elite. A great
deal of language learning has always taken place through natural exposure to target languages. Indeed, the formal teaching/study of such “vulgar” modern tongues as French, German or English would have seemed an absurd and unworthy academic pursuit a few centuries ago. Krashen and Terrell point out that the first language teaching textbooks, which appeared about 1600, avoided use of students’ native language and promoted learning of L2 in the same way that they had learned L1. According to Titone, even Latin, which by this time was no longer a common medium for oral communication, was taught using oral methods. However, as Latin and Greek ceased to be living languages they acquired more and more the character of traditional academic disciplines, so that learning them by means of grammatical analysis and memorization of lexicon came to be regarded as an intellectual and moral discipline. Only when modern living languages acquired equal status as academic disciplines were the same pedagogical methods applied to them. By the early nineteenth century the so-called “grammar translation” or “Prussian” method of foreign language learning was firmly established. E. G. Browne, like many other perceptive minds of his time, regarded it with contempt: “... to know by rote a quantity of grammatical rules is in itself not much more useful than to know how often each letter of the alphabet occurs in Paradise Lost, or how many separate stones went into the building of the Great Pyramid”.

The grammar translation continued to dominate public school foreign language teaching well into the twentieth century, and has not yet fallen completely into disuse. However, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries growing popular interest in foreign language acquisition fueled a demand for alternative methodologies. Among the varied methods developed around that time were Francois Gouin’s series method, the direct method, and the Berliz method. Yet neither the grammar translation method nor its rivals could claim to be based on clearly articulated theories or serious research.

The first half of the twentieth century saw a great deal of theoretical discussion and methodological experimentation relating to language teaching/learning. Inspired by the success of U.S. Army language training programs in World War II and building on structural linguistics and behavioral psychology, the audio-lingual method concentrated on the formation of L2 speech habits through imitation and drill. This was thought to represent the application of modern scientific principles to language teaching. How, in the late 1960’s the cognitive theories of Noam Chomsky discredited the structuralist/
behaviorist view of language and with it audio-lingualism, has already been mentioned. The loss of faith in a scientific procedure for language learning led to a proliferation of innovative methods such as Krashen and Terrell’s “Natural Method”, Asher’s “Total Physical Response”, Gattegno’s “Silent Way” and Lozanov’s “Suggestopedia”. Whereas no foreign language teaching methodology has replaced the audio-lingual method in general acceptance, most language teaching today subscribes to a general set of principles collectively known as the communicative approach, which views language as communication of meaning rather than reproduction of linguistic forms, and emphasizes the active role of the learner in the pedagogical process.

The effectiveness of formal language learning

How effective then, is formal language teaching/learning? Is there a “best” method?

Proponents of diverse methods and approaches have been anxious to cite scientific evidence for the superiority of one over another. However, only the claims of James Asher’s “Total Physical Response” (which is more a set of techniques than a full-fledged method) have held up to rigorous investigation. Many studies have found no appreciable differences in overall proficiency between subjects taught using the grammar translation method and subjects taught according to more fashionable “communicative” methodologies.

Yet to prove experimentally the superiority of any one method may be impossible. To begin with, genuine language classes are rarely planned – much less executed – in strict fidelity to methodological models. Rod Ellis cites J. Clark’s illuminating comment made as long ago as 1969: “If ostensibly different teaching methods tend . . . to resemble one another in terms of what actually goes on in the classroom, the likelihood of finding significant differences in student performance is accordingly reduced.” Furthermore, it is difficult to construct experiments that take into account such individual variables as motivation, aptitude and learner strategies. E. G. Browne, for example, learned several oriental languages through his own efforts, or by means of sporadic assistance from teachers whose methods were not only pedagogically questionable but highly eccentric.

How are foreign languages acquired? “By replacing native language elements with target language elements”, says the grammar translation
method. “By forming linguistic habits”, says audio-lingualism. “By receiving and comprehending messages”, says Krashen. “By communicating in the target language”, says the communicative approach. In his famous allegory of the elephant placed in a dark room, the Persian poet, Rumi tells of one visitor feeling its trunk and declaring the object to be like a water pipe, another feeling its leg and declaring it to be like a pillar, another feeling its ear and declaring it to be a fan and so on, each giving valid yet contradictory interpretations of the same phenomenon. One attempt to reconcile divergent concepts of the language acquisition “elephant” would be to say that languages are mastered by using them. Amid changes of pedagogical fashion and methodological nomenclature, language teachers have insistently urged students to think (i.e. conceptualize) and express themselves directly in the target language. This is the essence of the self-teaching technique that E. G. Browne recommends:

When any intelligent being who is a free agent wishes to obtain an efficient knowledge of a foreign language as quickly as possible, how does he proceed? He begins with an easy text, and first obtains the general sense of each sentence and the meaning of each particular word from his teacher. In default of a teacher, he falls back on the best available substitute, namely, a good translation and a dictionary. Looking out words in a dictionary is, however, mere waste of time, if their meaning can be ascertained in any other way; so that he will use this means only when compelled to do so. Having ascertained the meaning of each word, he will note it down either in the margin of the book or elsewhere, so that he may not have to ask it or look it out again. Then he will read the passage which he has thus studied over and over again, if possible aloud, so that tongue, ear, and mind may be simultaneously familiarized with the new instrument of thought and communication of which he desires to possess himself, until he perfectly understands the meaning without mentally translating it into English, and until the foreign words, no longer strange, evoke in his mind, not their English equivalents but the ideas which they connote. This is the proper way to learn a language, and it is opposed at almost every point to the public-school method, which regards the use of “cribs” as a deadly sin, and substitutes parsing and construing for reading and understanding.

In like manner Burton describes his own self-learning experience:

I got a simple grammar and vocabulary, marked out the forms and words which I knew were absolutely necessary, and learnt them by heart... I never worked more than a quarter of an hour at a time, for after that the brain lost its freshness. After learning some three hundred words, easily done in a week, I stumbled through some
easy bookwork and underlined every word that I wished to recollect … having finished my volume, I then carefully worked up the grammar minutiae, and I then chose some other book whose subject most interested me. The neck of the language was now broken, and progress was rapid. If I came across a new sound, like the Arabic Ghayn, I trained my tongue to it by repeating so many thousand times a day. When I read, I invariably read out loud, so that the ear might aid memory.30

The self-teaching techniques described here, both involving the use of foreign language texts and a bilingual dictionary, are essentially similar. This “method” (if such it can be called) was also employed by Mezzofanti and several other great polylinguals.31 By reading aloud, learners provide their own “comprehensible input”, or to use Krashen’s term, auto-input.32 In this respect, it resembles Krashen/Terrell’s “Natural Method”, but it also calls to mind other tendencies, as for example in its use of translation (grammar-translation method), its formation of speech habits by reading aloud (audio-lingual method), and its emphasis on direct comprehension in the target language (direct method). It features the “loop” of conscious and unconscious linguistic input/output described in Bialystok’s second language acquisition model, the attention processing aspect of McLaughlin’s model, and Jiazhen Hu’s concept of a continuum whereby L1 concepts are gradually replaced by those of L2.

One does not learn to think in a foreign language by translating, yet students do translate, at least initially. Successful students, however, go beyond translation by mentally striving to associate foreign words and phrases directly with concepts. Thinking in the target language is not the result of complete mastery; rather it is a process that begins with the first L2 words encountered by the learner. The student who confronts “Die Sonne scheint warm.” by mentally conjuring up sensations of the sun’s warmth and brilliance (instead of mentally translating) has already begun to think in German. Training the mind to conceptualize like this is not merely the “best way” to learn a foreign language – it is the only way.

Thinking in a foreign language requires an effort of will that can only come from the learner. It requires risk-taking, acceptance of ambiguity, openness to alternative cultural paradigms, and above all, motivation. These qualities are manifest to an unusual degree in the polylinguals who have been discussed here, just as they are conspicuously lacking in most language learners today.
Some pedagogical considerations

This discussion has concerned itself with extraordinary individuals. Pedagogy, by contrast, is mainly concerned with the ordinary. Yet even if the accomplishments of Mezzofanti, Burton, and the others suggest little that can be generalized as applying to the mass of language learners, they demonstrate that the learning of one or even several languages is a goal to which ordinary learners can aspire if they are sufficiently motivated. The case of Browne, who confidently set himself to learn Turkish for the short-term goal of participating in a war, contrasts with that of today’s student who enrolls in an expensive state-of-the-art foreign language program with only vague hopes for success.

Browne possessed, besides confidence in his ability to learn foreign languages, strong motivation. Browne’s identification with Iran and his desire to master its language were expressions of an Englishman’s cultural self-esteem and consequent openness to foreign cultures. Far different is the situation of many third world students, who are taught in school to regard English speakers as powerful, cunning oppressors and themselves as pathetic victims. Pedagogical efforts to reinforce, on the one hand, concepts of genuine cultural pride, and on the other, sentiments of world citizenship would surely do much to improve foreign language education in third world countries like Colombia.

While foreign language teachers make a taboo of translation, students continue, as they have always and everywhere, to use bilingual dictionaries and to translate in and out of the native tongue. This is understandable given the fact (ignored in most methodologies) that languages consist of countless lexemes that must be learned by rote. The self-teaching techniques used with such success by Burton and Browne take account of this reality, as does the second language acquisition model proposed by Jiazhen Hu. A concept that has assumed increasing importance in recent years is J. Cummins’ theory of CULP (Common Underlying Language Proficiency) which insists on the importance of students’ native language in facilitating assimilation of target language concepts. Rather than vainly try to exclude L1 from the L2 learning process, teachers might well consider how to build bridges between the native and target languages.

The successful language learners treated in this paper were their own teachers save, in some cases, for limited amounts of improvised, semiformal instruction. Browne’s Turkish instructor was a British
missionary. His Persian tutors were eccentrics who made him listen to their amateur fiddle playing or set him the task of memorizing their bizarre poems. Examples like these support the current emphasis of the language teaching profession on “learner centeredness” and “learner autonomy” and reaffirm the truth that foreign language acquisition is not so much a question of the teacher who teaches but rather of the learner who learns.

Conclusion

Cases of extraordinary language learners do not easily lend themselves to generalizations, but they do inspire with examples of what is possible. They do not exonerate teachers of responsibility as facilitators of language acquisition, but they place in perspective the essential responsibility of learners for their own success. Such a perspective is especially important in countries where the quality of foreign language teaching suffers from limited educational budgets. This poses a challenge for educators to formulate pedagogical approaches that take full advantage of learners’ abilities and individual strategies rather than try vainly to override them.

Notes


10. Ibid, p. 50.


Bibliography