

LANGUAGE APTITUDE AS A VERITABLE VARIABLE THAT INFLUENCES THE LEARNERS' ACHIEVEMENT IN FRENCH LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper looked critically at the concept of language aptitude as a veritable variable that influence the learners' achievement in a foreign language with particular emphasis on French language. The facts for this study are drawn from the review of related literature, personal observations and interactions. The study revealed among others that foreign language should not be made compulsory for all learners and if it is mandatory that all learners should learn a foreign language, the objectives of learning such a foreign language should be well spelt out and the level of proficiency expected of the learners should be adequately stated so that the learner will identify with these objectives and work towards attaining the level of proficiency within the confine of his or her language aptitude. Conclusively, it was stated that curriculum developers and educational policy makers should put into consideration the aptitude of the learners for learning a foreign language while designing programmes of foreign language learning and learners should be allowed to take charge of their learning and be involved in the learning process.

Keywords: *Language, aptitude, influences, learners, French*

INTRODUCTION

High rate of drop out and mass failure in foreign language programme remains the source of frustration for the stakeholders in foreign language fields as observed by (Emenanjo, 1996). Many stakeholders in the field of foreign language teaching and learning blame the failure on variables such as the methodology of language learning, motivation, non-chalant attitude of the government in focusing attention on developing the study of foreign language and some other factors either found inside or outside the classroom context or environment. Little or nothing has been done to consider the influence of language learning aptitude on the performance of learners in foreign language learning situation. The success or failure of the learners in a foreign language depends on their ability or inability in the language which could be ascertained through the administration of aptitude test at an appropriate time during the foreign language learning programme.

Carroll and Sapon (1981) conceptualize language aptitude simply as an ability or knack for learning a foreign language. The language aptitude could be described as the length of time required by each individual learner to gain mastery of a foreign language or acquire communicative competence in

it. In other words, the length of time required to learn a language varies from one individual learner to the other going by the assumption given above. It is generally affirmed that every individual learner has the propensity to learn a foreign language within a stipulated time if given the opportunity to do so but due to the variation in the characteristics of the learners and their natural endowment or gift to learn a new language, the length of time to master a foreign language may be differential.

Carroll (2002) identifies the four variable clusters on the one hand, that cumulate to form the concept of foreign language aptitude separate from verbal intelligence and motivation. These four distinction variables are as follow: phonetic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, rote learning and inductive learning ability. On the other hand, Pimsleur (2002) itemizes four other variables that combined to form the concept of foreign language learning aptitude. These factors according to Pimsleur include the following: Grade point average as indication of general academic achievement, motivation, verbal ability factor, and auditory factor.

Aptitude is a general phenomenon as it cuts across all fields of human endeavours. We can talk of language learning ability as we can talk of musical ability, aptitude for sporting activities and aptitude for technical competence. Some learners have technical competence which gives them the ability to function effectively in the fields that involve the display of manual dexterity such as carpentry, mechanical engineering and construction and so on while some other learners are endowed with academic prowess that gives them the ability to excel in tasks that involve the use of the brain. In the same vein, in the field of foreign language learning, the learners either have low or high aptitude for learning a foreign language and it is a natural phenomenon but subject to certain modifications as observed by some researchers in the field of second language learning which would be slightly considered subsequently in this paper.

APTITUDE AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

As rightly pointed out by Carroll and Sapon (2001), aptitude for foreign language determines in no small extent the success of the learners in the foreign language learning. Each individual learner has the propensity and the intellectual wherewithal to weather the storms of learning a foreign language if given the opportunity to do so. Invariably, there is no learner who can be considered 'a never-do-well'. Foreign language experts lay emphasis on the amount of time or the rate at which each individual learner acquires the required linguistic competence in the language.

However, it could be reiterated that the amount of time required by each learner to complete a programme of foreign language learning is already pre-empted or pre-determined and the standards expected of each individual learner already set by the institution without any consideration for the difference

in the foreign language aptitude of the individual learner. On the long run learners who fail to meet the standards or measure up to expectation in the foreign language programme are either deprived of the opportunity to proceed on the programme or advised to go to other disciplines. In most cases government assumes that the same number of years would be appropriate for learners to learn a foreign language in a school system. The high rate of failure or drop-out experienced in the French class across schools may be the direct consequences of lack of foreign language aptitude on the parts of the learners and insensitivity of the stakeholders in the field of foreign language learning to aptitude of the learners for foreign language learning.

One can say categorically that if learners are allowed to go on their pace in the process of learning a foreign language, appreciable level of achievement would be recorded in the learning endeavor. The development of programmed instruction or computerized instructional packages which will give room for the difference in learners' aptitude for foreign language will be a welcome development if it could be adequately adopted by foreign language teachers. Foreign language instructions will be given to the learners and they would progress at their own pace after undergoing a set of evaluations. In this regard, the learners would be free from psychological and emotional imbalance that characterize normal classroom setting and conduct of examination and their level of productivity and outcomes on the foreign language learning will be optimally enhanced.

Aptitude is not an isolated factor in terms of what constitute foreign language aptitude. Carroll (2001) is of the view that motivation and verbal intelligence form an integral part of language aptitude. As part of the components of language aptitude, he made mention of four clusters that combine to form the language aptitude of the learners. These factors include phonetic coding, grammatical sensitivity, rote learning ability and inductive learning ability. Carroll's description of language aptitude cut across major skills in language learning that learners are expected to imbibe. The learners are expected to be knowledgeable not only in the sound systems of the language but also they must be able to identify the rules that govern the lexis and structure of the target language. In other words, the learners must be grammatically competent to be able to identify the functions of each lexical item in the sentence and he or she should be able to induce rules that govern the structure of a language.

One can easily conclude that the language aptitude proposed by Carroll is an all encompassing and comprehensive skill that could brand and rebrand the learners of a foreign language to a state that one can easily say he or she has acquired the linguistic competence in the foreign language. Pimsleur (2001) adopted a new dimension to the study of the concept of language aptitude as it affects the success of the learner in the foreign language. Pimsleur suggested that verbal ability and auditory ability constitute the major components in the

foreign language aptitude. Pimsleur showed particular interest in the learners that failed foreign language or related courses but perform excellently well in other subjects. He is of the opinion that the so called students lack auditory ability. The conclusion of Pimsleur on language aptitude is a pointer to the fact that no learner is completely handicapped in all fields of human endeavours. A learner that fails to do well in language related courses might experience failure not due to fault of his or her laziness but due to auditory ability which is one of the components of foreign language aptitude.

To further elucidate the significance of language aptitude in second language learning, the findings of the research conducted by American Educational Research Association in 2006 on the topic 'foreign language instruction; implementing the best methods' adjudged the fact that the combination of aptitude and motivation could either make or mar the success of foreign language learners in second language learning situation. In other words, aptitude and motivation are two powerful forces to be reckoned with in second language learning situation. The findings of this group of researchers also place aptitude above contextual factors which include teaching method, text book used or the quality of teacher.

However, stakeholders in foreign language learning dissipate their efforts chasing shadow and believing that the high rate of failure or drop out in foreign language class resides in the qualifications or experience of the foreign language teacher, the methodology of foreign language teaching and the availability of current textbooks. However, one can easily affirm that with the absence of language aptitude in the learners, any efforts geared towards improving on the methodology or the quality of teachers may prove abortive. Ajibade (1994) has a totally different view on the issue. She is of the view that short term training in the foreign language learning may have a considerable influence on the aptitude of the foreign language learner. Therefore, this assertion contradicts the widely held view that aptitude is constant and immutable in individual learner's life span.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE APTITUDE TEST

The earlier tests developed to measure the aptitude of the learners in foreign language are the ones developed by Carroll (1981) and Pimsleur in the early 60s. These tests were named Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) and Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (PLAB) respectively. The tests had been admonished to be efficient and effective in measuring the language aptitude of learners. Foreign language aptitude test could be used for diverse purposes depending on the intention of the developers and the administrators. In the foreign language learning situation, it could be used to place learners in intensive language learning programmes and in some cases it could be used to build the history of language learning disability in the learners. A learner that scored above average in general intelligence test and performs woefully in the

language aptitude test is said to have language learning disabilities and the so called learner could be encouraged to embark on other programmes that are not language related. Some schools use aptitude test to build history of foreign language learning difficulty, identify gifted children as far as language learning is concerned and link learning style with instructional style. Foreign language teachers should avail themselves of the viability of aptitude test scores to diagnose the disabilities, strength and weaknesses of learner of a foreign language. This would equally help him or her to package his or her instructional strategies to match the characteristics of the learners.

Furthermore, the government agencies use the test to place employees on jobs that require language learning. In other words, it is used for selection, placement, and exclusion of employees who may not likely do well in language related professions in the educational sector. However, much has not been done to explore the benefits of the language aptitude test as a veritable instrument used in measuring the aptitude of the learners in foreign language programmes. Government and policy makers in our education sectors have taken vital decisions at one point or the other on the study of foreign language in school not mindful of the ability or disability of the learners in learning such a foreign language. Learners are said to differ not only in their learning characteristics but also in the language learning aptitude. Aptitude determines the length of time required by each learner to attain communicative competence or proficiency in the foreign language programme.

What appears outrageous and absurd is that the foreign language programme developers predetermine or pre-empt the length of time each learner would be required to complete a course of study. The variation in the aptitude of each learner is not put into consideration while designing such a program. Paradoxically, the curriculum developers only assume that all learners irrespective of their verbal intelligence, linguistic background and aptitude should be able to complete a programme of study within a stipulated time and competently display required skills in such a language of study.

The argument in this paper is that programme of language proficiency should not only be certificate based because certificate of language proficiency may not necessarily determine whether a learner is competent in the use of the foreign language or not. The overall language skills which cut across all the four major skills of speaking, writing, listening and reading must be evident in the learner before one can conclude that the learner is well grounded in the knowledge of the foreign language. We make bold to say therefore that language aptitude tests should not be undermined in a foreign language programme most especially at the preliminary level of the programme. Foreign language should not be made compulsory for all learners and if it is mandatory that all learners should learn a foreign language, the objectives of learning such a foreign language should be well spelt out and the level of proficiency expected of the learners should be adequately stated so that the learner will identify

with these objectives and work towards attaining the level of proficiency within the confine of his or her language aptitude. The length of time proposed for learning any foreign language should also be at variance with the aptitude of each learner. This could easily be determined by administering a foreign language aptitude test on the learners at the inception of their programme of language learning. This could be done to select, place and categorize learners into different groups of language learning based on their performance in aptitude tests so as to help them achieve the set goal of language proficiency. Also, learners with language learning disabilities could be easily identified and excluded from the language learning program.

CONCLUSION

This study has dealt critically with the concept of aptitude as a determinant of success or failure in foreign language. We are of the view that aptitude of a learner should be pre-determined prior to the learning of a foreign language. Curriculum developers and educational policy makers should put into consideration the aptitude of the learners for learning a foreign language while designing programmes of foreign language learning and learners should be allowed to take charge of their learning and be involved in the learning process. This could be done through the use of computer assisted instructional packages that would involve the learner in learning the foreign language at their own pace.

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