A wave of psychological forces in second language learning: An Arabic experience at IIUM[*]

Muhamadul Bakir Hj. Yaakub

(Department of Arabic Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur 53100, Malaysia)

Abstract: Psychological bases of success deal with relatively inner-self factors. The paper presents basic understandings of learning process as well as a model of identifying factors of second language learning success. There are a number of reasons why some students learn Arabic much quicker than the others. Learner's psychological situation is one of the most expected determination factor. Therefore, its nature has to be described, its function needs to be identified and analyzed, especially in term of motivating students to have better performance in learning Arabic as a second language in the context of International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

Key words: psychological factors; motivation; attitude; second language learning

1. Introduction

There is considerable interest today in the notion of educational psychology to postulate a theoretical model subsuming the psychological faultless variable to explain and predict learner's performance within a learning process. The same appears for the case of second language learning (SLL) or foreign language learning (FLL) where the process becomes more complicated and complex together with the interplay of internal and external factors. In principle, learning (whatever subject it is) does not take place easily with the antipathy between learners and teacher or the other learners. Another influential factor on the speed of SLL learners is self esteem, and courage in taking risks or making mistakes and being wrong in learning process that lead to the formation of self-confident personality. In other words, learner's personality is an advantage to become a motivated and hard-working person in confronting fearful situation and pressured environment. Generally, psychological bases of success are the fundamental force in doing better than someone with opposite characteristics.

Indeed, there has been a lot of research and opinions in explaining what makes SLL succeed or fail. Positive thinking toward target language for instance, is one of the finding that describes learner's willingness of exploring new experiences independently, realistic attitude in learning strategies, activeness and creativity in organizing learning information and so on. Although these qualities have been found in most efficient language learners, there are still many other influential factors that involve in making SLL success. Some researchers have chosen a psychological orientation as the determination toward success. A leading psychological theorist, Robert Gardner, introduced the concepts of integrative and instrumental motivation in relation to SLL. His conceptualization was

that students would have higher performance in the SLL process if they exhibit the desire to learn SL in order to integrate themselves with the target culture than when they exhibit the desire to learn SL in order to get a better job or meet a particular requirement. Gardner's socio-educational model (1979) included attitudinal variables, such as attitudes toward the target language group, language teachers, language course and language learning process, together with motivational variables such as the desire to learn and motivational intensity; and anxiety variables such as anxiety pertinent to the language class, language use and so on. According to Gardner (1979), Lambert (1963) was the first researcher to propose a social psychological theory of SL acquisition. The Lambert's theory argued that an individual who successfully acquired a second language would gradually adopt various aspects of behavior characteristic in the second-language community.

Obviously, psychological factors have a very important impact on human development and achievement, especially in SL learning process. However, measuring the impacts and its degrees is not an easy procedure or even might be assumed impossibly for some reason. For example, how statistical numbers can be utilized as mechanism to represent something abstract, deep in sight human psyche, invisible and infinity? What is more, the task of representing numerical addition pertinent to psychological invisible and infinity? For that reason, an attempt also should be done for future development and success.

2. Understanding learning process

Learning is a unique process that leads toward an output. It refers to obtaining or acquiring knowledge. It may also refer to systematic approaches of obtaining knowledge and procedures in which a learner becomes insatiably curious to absorb, to know and to discover knowledge. Obviously, the term "learning" doesn't stand by itself, but interrelates with other elements of its process as shown in Figure 1.
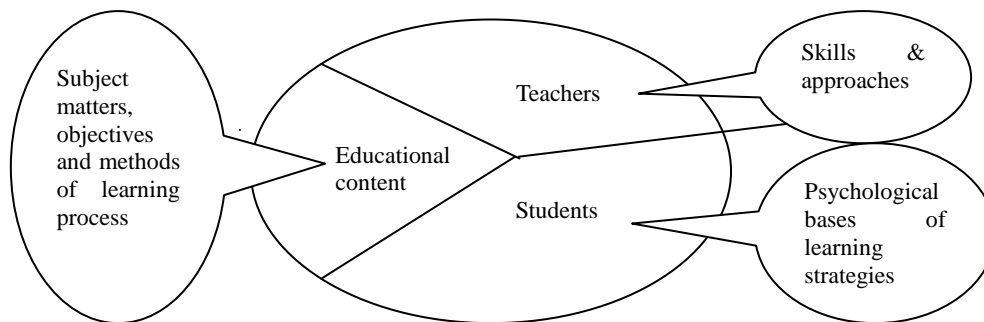

Figure 1. Educational elements and components of learning process

Figure 1 is the description of how the ideas of this study are drawn up. It begins with the realization of the nature of educational process. As we know that educational elements consist of three pillars: Firstly, the educational content, syllabus and structure; secondly, the students' attention, preparation and motivation; and lastly, the teachers' presentation and performance. The question here is why some students (especially within the same learning setting) can master the subject matter faster and better compared to the others?

3. Definition of the second language learning (SLL)

Second language learning (SLL) is the process in which people consciously learn a new language. According to the linguist Stephen Krashen (1982), there is a difference in language learning and language acquisition.

Generally, two processes happen when we "learn" a second language or acquire a new language. Acquisition is the subconscious process that children already undergo when they acquire their first language. By contrast, second language learning is the conscious process of learning, such as grammar rules. It leads to a conscious knowledge of the learned system.

4. Objectives of the second language learning

The term "objectives of SLL" refers to the specific expectation output of theoretical modeling of the language learning process, such as to develop language skills that will enable learners to become language users in various functions and situations. As the outputs are varied, the types of learning impacts also differ from person to person. Some are with the goal of self-competency development, while other only for self satisfaction and knowledge-based exposures. Consequently, the one who is learning SLL due to the needs of self development, or maintaining social relationships, or communicating ideas for their survival leaving as minority and among other people will be more motivated compared to the others.

5. Methodologies of the second language learning

The method of learning a language means an overall plan of learning process based on a specific theoretical approach selected objectively, such as second language learning and communicative language learning or even situational language learning. It involves the design of the syllabus for a course, which in turn consists of learning objectives and also techniques to achieve its objectives. The terms "approach, method and technique" are usually used inter-changeably. To design a method, a practical plan for learning a language is considered, together with its details (technique) by which the actual learning activity takes place. Some language learning courses basically use only one technique. More commonly, these days a variety of techniques are combined, so the term method is not used in the same sense. In other words, an objective of learning a second language is one of the determination factors of choosing a specific method of learning. On the other hand, the chosen method might cause a positive motivational force to certain group of learners, and vice versa.

6. Psychological factors of success in second language learning

Human being is a world by itself. It has its own physical form and psychological structure where the mental images and social sense of belonging exist. The term "psychological factors" here refers to the determination forces in putting a learner in the right frame of mind to perform well or otherwise. These factors are reciprocally attached with each other in structuring the identity of a learner and in need of a comprehensive interpretation of its interaction and correlation as shown in Figure 2. The hypothesis here is addressing the question that whether the various aspects of this psychological model are constituted independently or they are causally related in improving learning success?

In the case of language learning, it seems as a complex set of variables including all aspects of generating force in SLL process, such as motivational orientations, interest and attraction to become positive toward language learning activities, in overcoming difficulties and challenges. As Lambert's theory finds out that learner's motivation is determined by his/her attitudes and orientations toward SLL. Gardner's theory (1993) clearly differentiated attitudes (as affective dispositions), orientations (as reasons for learning) and motivation (as directed effort). Both attitudes and orientations are the predetermination of motivation, and thus have only a distal

influence on outcomes. Motivation, on the other hand, presupposes the interaction with learning opportunity, and involves the realization of directed effort on learning. Thus, motivation is central to success, and is held separated from attitudes and reasons for learning.

For the case of psycho-educational model of SLL adopted in this study which is named as "self-reactivating cycle theory" (SRCT), six self-psychological variables will be focused on, they are: Self-physical fitness (SPF), self-mind setting (SMS), self-motivational force (SMF), self-esteem and anxiety (SEA), self-satisfaction determination (SSD) and finally self-socialization reaction (SSR), which have been added correspondingly to psycho-dynamic learning factors as shown in Figure 2. Actually, traditional psychological theory has a distinction between affect, cognition and readiness for action. Socio-psychological models of SLL, on the other hand, seek to stress the unique interrelation of attitudes, objectives and motivation for other language learning process (Gardner, 1979).
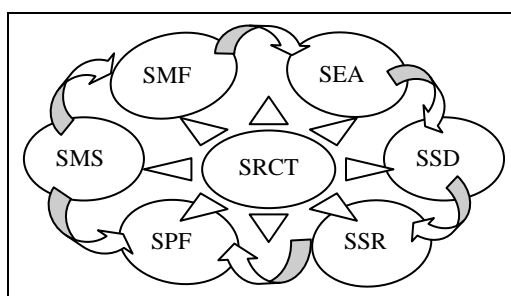

Figure 2   Self-reactivating cycle theory (SRCT)

This study tries to investigate the adequacy of this theoretical assumption of self-psychological model toward Arabic learning process, which is used as an attitudinal construction to determine learner's motivation and performance. A basic assumption here is that SLL success is based, at least in part, on individual's abilities to regulate learning impact factors. The purpose of this conception of psychological aspects is to demonstrate the precursors and the nature of its status in learner's inner-self factors. The process of self-reactivating cycle factor can be observed in learner's reaction toward SLL. In this way, the terminology derives largely from the methodology of factor analysis of the responses to the self-reactivating cycle theory introduced in this study. It seems necessary to appeal to more diverse theoretical disciplines in order to be properly applied and adopted with Gardner's theory, where certain everyday terms such as "attitudes" or "motivation" are defined rigorously. In fact, this is an important step towards appraising Gardner's findings. The following section therefore is an attempt to apply the general conceptual ideas found in mainstream psychology to SRCT's theory to develop an objective evaluation of emphasis upon the importance of positive attitudes towards other language identity and entity. The essence of the psychological approach is to stress that second language learning represents a unique context in which attitudes and motivation are better studied in tandem (Dornyei, 1994).

Taking linguistics theory for example, recognizing motivation as a major prerequisite for success is considered as a key area or intervention by teachers. For that reason, a comprehensive description of learner's personal orientations towards SLL needs to be drawn clearly, so that teachers may develop the characteristics of good learners based on existing enthusiasms. However, as Gardner (1988, p. 112) claimed that the role of attitudes and motivation should be consistent in many different contexts, thus a universal method in language learning is just too simplistic to be ignored.

(1) Self-physical fitness (SPF)

The term "self-physical fitness" theory in this study refers to a physical source of impact upon learner's learning success. It is about physical condition influencing on learner's achievement and performance, especially in term of readiness in performing duty and providing mental support to become an energetic, motivated, effective and efficient person that leads to perfection in making success. Three types of indicators were observed to describe learner's comprehensive readiness in attending learning process starting with "comfortless", "tiring" and "inactivity".

(2) Self-mind setting (SMS)

The term used in this context is related to personal type of psychological thinking and perception toward the target language itself. The theory examines three aspects of personal mind setting that influences the success of Arabic learning process and explains the response of failure, starting with the degree of needs, personal willingness and thinking objectivity toward mastering Arabic language (Sayyid, 1979, p. 21).

(3) Self-motivational force (SMF)

The term here means the stage of individual's orientation in making effort, the desire of achieving goals, and positive attitude toward any challenges and difficulties, especially in term of personal enthusiasm to perform or improve current stage through self determination force to do or not by observing three aspects of forces toward Arabic language describing learner's motivational behaviors, brightness of learning goals and attitudinal positivity toward learning beneficiaries.

(4) Self-esteem and anxiety (SEA)

The term used here is to reflect learner's overall evaluation or appraisal ability, identity and dignity that cause an "anxiety", "wound up", stress and tension, especially in the context of SLL. The nature of self-esteem and anxiety refers to their self-reflective accounts of emotional difficulties encountered in learning process and how it's taking place in sustaining the progress and success. As a human, learner will always expose to emotion and stress that cause a challenge and reaction (Mamduh, 2005, p. 169).

(5) Self-satisfaction and determination (SSD)

The term here is to describe the indication of learner's learning attitudes as an inner self reflection of full recognition toward the success of learning process, especially in term of satisfaction, strategies determination that leads to environmental suitability and concentration ability in making success.

(6) Self-socialization and reaction (SSR)

The term here is to describe learner's personal behaviors or the way of conduction within the context of learning socialization process. Whether it has a substantial effect and impact on the process of SLL competency, or social conditioning context leads SLL learner to an emotion reaction of learning success, especially in term of the participation, engagement and optimistic reaction toward classmate socialization.

7. Psychological variable of Arabic learners in IIUM

A brief survey of psychological bases of Arabic language learning success was done, which aimed to help IIUM students choose their own approach, method and techniques for language learning by informing them better about the choices and criteria they had and able to analyze with the purpose of identifying its nature and function for their improvement of learning success in the future. The most important question here is what are the most determination factors contributing for successful learning process?

The sample of this study was originated from a simple survey and interview format conducted in 2008-2009

academic year in IIUM, where questionnaires were distributed to 120 participants randomly, who had already past Arabic Placement Test (ARAB LQ 4000), consisting of 6 items which were drawn from the six psychological aspects of "self-reactivating cycle theory" constructed specifically for this study. Each aspect was examined from three different value levels in order to identify potential sources of success and measure its percentage degree in describing its status impacts on Arabic learning process. Students were also asked to complete a simple Arabic test at the same time to assess their proficiency in Arabic.

When learning any new knowledge, it helps to have feedback about how one is doing. With that spirit, Table 1 listed the output level and degrees of SRCT elements which were explored through questionnaire to index students' perceptions of Arabic learning success in identifying the most supportive factors and to discover a potential source of evidence in considering psychological factors as an important force to become a successful Arabic learner. They were as follows:

Table 1   Arabic learner's levels and degrees of psychological factors of success

Level & degree / Factor	1st (91-100)		2nd (81-90)		3rd (61-80)		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
SPF	13	23	26	42	10	6	49	71
SMS	9	21	28	46	12	4	49	71
SMF	18	12	28	32	3	27	49	71
SEA	11	28	33	30	5	13	49	71
SSD	10	9	24	37	15	25	49	71
SSR	9	10	31	41	9	20	49	71
Total	70	103	170	228	54	95	120/720	
Percentage	24%	24%	58%	54%	18%	22%	100%	
Total percentage	24%		55%		21%		100%	

Table 1 showed that physical fitness had impact upon the degree of Arabic learner's achievement and performance. However, it seemed that despite their largely positive mind setting toward Arabic, some had failed to develop either effective methods or strategies in making learning easier or clear direction that led to strong motivational forces. The data also indicated that self-esteem and anxiety was an important factor in helping learners to become patient and positive in facing challenges and obstacles, especially for female compared to male. Similar observation was also observed in the case of socialization reaction.

The above finding indicated that the degree of psychological cycle wave among the factors was relevant to subsequent Arabic language achievement. As indicated by the higher percentage above, the degree of individual difference variables that were hypothesized to contribute to second language learning success had an indirect effect on the performance. The variables of SRCT concept reflected genuine evidence in improving the success of learning Arabic as a second language.

8. Limitation and recommendation

The analysis based on psychological factors which was highlighted in this brief survey provided support for various theoretical tenets advanced within SRCT concept, scope of applications and interventions such as self-determination theory (SDT) and socio-educational model (SEM). Indeed, SRCT as a concept needs more

evaluations and profound inspection. For example, external motivation surrounded by complexity and subjectivities should be considered. In fact, there is a belief that one can distinguish motivation and motivating, and it is not clear that it has been demonstrated with respect to language learning (cf., Dörnyei, 1994, 2001, p. 119).

It is observable that this study provides some important indicators to both Arabic learners and teachers (especially those who are currently in the stage of learning), where they should try to identify ways to increase the degree levels of impact factors in maintaining learner's psychological stability to ensure achieving learning success. Consequently, with this information learners know how to get ready for SLL learning process, aware of the main tasks involved, and capable of structuring the ideal psychological bases of SLL's success.

A wave of psychological force conducted in SRCT point out the following two practical recommendations in enhancing Arabic learning success:

(1) Learning style has been shown to be malleable. It seems prudent to educate Arabic learner about the importance of applying SRCT in their learning habit and method;

(2) When a learner is not inherently interested in Arabic learning activities, the Arabic teacher might use the wave of SRCT supportive forces, starting with: (a) Providing a meaningful physical exercises; (b) expressing a rationale thought and setting; (c) identifying the aspects of future brightness; (d) acknowledging the ability and possibility; (e) describing the most satisfied strategies; (f) utilizing socializational environment and engagement.

Finally, SRCT application suggests that in the long run, learners may not only succeed in learning, but also become beneficial for less learning pressure, stress and hassle.

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