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"CONTEXTUAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CHILDREN`S LEARNING

OF A SECOND LANGUAGE"

UNDERGRADUATE WORK PRESENTED TO OBTAIN THE DEGREE OF

LICENCIATURA EN IDIOMA INGLES OPCIÓN ENSEÑANZA

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I. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

II. INTRODUCTION

Learning to talk is one of the most visible and important achievements of early childhood. In a matter of months, and without explicit teaching, children move from hesitant single words to fluent sentences and from a small vocabulary to one that is growing by six new words a day. New language tools mean new opportunities for social understanding, for learning about the world, and for sharing experiences, pleasures and needs.

Some students learn a new language more quickly and easily than others. This simple fact is known by all who have themselves learned a second language or taught those who are using their second language in school. Clearly, some language learners are successful by virtue of their sheer determination, hard work and persistence. However there are other crucial factors influencing success that are largely beyond the control of the learner. These factors can be broadly categorized as internal and external. It is their complex interplay that determines the speed and facility with which the new language is learned.

Internal factors are those that the individual language learner brings with him or her to the particular learning situation, such as age, personality, motivation, experience, native language, and others. External factors are those that influence students from the outside like the learning styles that influence students when they are in classes.

Along these lines, this report has to do with all those contextual factors that influence children`s learning of a foreign language. Many theories, opinions, models, and proposals on how to teach English to children have been considered of great help for our bibliographical work.

This paper contains the following elements: the objectives of the work which guided us throughout the paper, then there is a justification that presents the importance of the work and the reasons for choosing this topic. Besides that, there is the theoretical framework which has been the basis of our work and the one that explains the research done; also there is the methodology which contains the different steps followed to

conduct our work. At the end, there are some conclusions and recommendations that have come out after having done this important work.

III. OBJECTIVES

General Objective

- To carry out a bibliographical research about the factors that influence children`s learning of a foreign language

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze the factors that help children to learn a foreign language accurately

2. To point out the aspects that motivate children extrinsically and intrinsically to learn a second language.

IV. JUSTIFICATION

Considering the necessity to learn English as a foreign language in most countries, and the increasing number of bilingual institutes, we, as a group, find the lack of knowledge regarding certain skills that may help or motivate children to learn a foreign language at an early age concerning. The purpose of this work is to clarify and emphasize important issues   among internal and external factors, learning styles, different types of methodologies, and other elements that must be taken into account when the instruction of a new language is being applied to young learners.

Moreover, by doing this bibliographical research, the group intends to help teachers by providing them some tools, such an increased knowledge about the contextual factors in education that may have some influence on children when learning a foreign language.   It is important to point out that the majority of programs that universities offer to teach English just focus on adults and teenagers, not on children. Therefore, it is significant for English teachers to gain knowledge about those factors that may help them to understand the way children acquire a second language.

It is worth mentioning that institutions would also benefit if they knew that there are factors that it is important to point out that the majority of teachers are trained just to teach adults or teenagers as opposed to children, for instance all the students who are getting prepared to be teachers in the country's universities are not having enough information in the area of teaching children.   That is why the necessity to let educational institutions know the importance of teaching children and the way to do it, which is what it is stated in this paper.

V. CONTEXTUAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CHILDREN´S LEARNING OF A SECOND LANGUAGE

Learning to talk is one of the most visible and important achievements of early childhood. In a matter of months, and without explicit teaching, toddlers move from hesitant single words to fluent sentences and from a small vocabulary to one that is growing by six new words a day. "New language tools mean new opportunities for social understanding, for learning about the world, and for sharing experiences, pleasures and needs". *Brandt, R. (1995).*

While most of the time learning a second language focuses on teaching methodologies, little emphasis is given to the contextual factors that affect students' learning, especially that of young learners. These contextual factors include age, learning styles, personality, motivation, native language, and others.

The way children learn language follows a specific pattern and is inherently systematic in nature. It is clear that children must be exposed to language and be able to interact with others, but how that exposure and interaction occur is extremely variable. Even though young children are not formally taught, language acquisition is part of the overall development of children physically, socially, and cognitively. Children between the ages of 2 and 6 acquire language so rapidly that by 6 years of age they are competent language users. By the time children are of school-age, they have an amazing language ability; it is a seemingly effortless acquisition (Cole & Cole, 1993; Curtiss, 1977; Goldin-Meadow, 1982; Lindfors, 1991; McLaughlin, 1984; Newport,1991).

Children develop a conditioned reflex to turn from one language to the other without confusion, translation or a mother-tongue accent. A critical period was originally postulated by *Lenneberg in 1967 for first Language Acquisition*, he said that "The Critical Period Hypothesis is a biologically determined period from birth to puberty, during which language acquisition is easier". Based on our own experiences as beginning teachers, we consider what the expert said to be true. Children learn from the womb until death, but the most important period is when they are from 0 to 12 years of age because this is when puberty hits. Teenagers will never learn a language like a native speaker, but children may do it. In other words, if the child is not exposed to a

foreign language, he or she will not acquire the language as a native speaker, no matter how the cognitive system may be predisposed to learn It.

According to *Piaget (1920s),* the effects of age on second language acquisition appear at puberty, between the ages of eleven to sixteen. At this stage, a person becomes capable of abstraction, which is formal thinking of concrete experiences in life. In this period, people can identify the effects of their previous learning from the age of zero to twelve because of the acquisition of some important brain structures, basic vocabulary, the main commands and the simple grammar structures.

Second language researchers like *Skehan, P. (1989)* assume that second language acquisition has a critical time before puberty, and children who want to succeed in learning a second language should start before this critical period of time. Every child is born with an ear to learn the language that the child is most exposed to at birth. Although, by the age of 3, the child already has a repertoire of words, modulations and intonations, there are many things the child still has to learn. The child has to master the art of speaking, enrich his vocabulary, develop precision in the pronunciation of words and learn to use the right word to convey what he means, know how sentences are structured using words, and master orthographic complications in writing. In both first- and second-language acquisition, a stimulating and rich linguistic environment will support language development.

Another important element is that children are not usually equally proficient in both languages. They may use one language with parents and another at school. While children are acquiring new vocabulary and understanding of the use of language, it may appear that they are falling behind in language acquisition.
Everything acquired in the first language (academic skills, literacy development, concept formation, subject knowledge, and learning strategies) will transfer to the second language. As children are learning the second language, they are drawing on the background and experience they have available to them from their first language.

Skehan, P. (1989) believes that the skills children develop in their first language form the foundation they must have to be academically successful in their second language. Literacy not only transfers across languages, it facilitates learning to read in another

language, even when the language and writing system appear to be very different. Reading in all languages is done in the same way and is acquired in the same way. The common linguistic universals in all languages mean that children who learn to read well in their first language will probably read well in their second language. Reading in the primary language is a powerful strategy for continuing to develop literacy in that language, and to do so, children must have access to a print-rich environment.

Some factors that should be taken into account by teachers in teaching a foreign language to children are the learner's social skills and styles. Children who are naturally social and communicative seek out opportunities to engage others. If these children are given lots of opportunity to interact positively with others who speak the target language, their language learning is promoted. Personality, social competence, motivation, attitudes, learning style, and social style of both learners and speakers influence the way a child learns the second language. With the variety of programs available to children, these elements become variables that are difficult to factor in and whose effect is difficult to predict (Lindfors, 1991; Wong Fillmore, 1991a; Wong Fillmore, 1991b).

Research has shown that individuals vary greatly in the ways they learn a second language (Skehan, 1989). Some learners are more analytically oriented and thrive on picking apart words and sentences. Others are more globally oriented, needing to experience overall patterns of language in meaningful contexts before making sense of the linguistic parts and forms. Some learners are more visually oriented, others more geared to sounds.

These three main learning styles must be taken in to account when teaching a new language; if not, even a determined group of students will become bored.
Learning styles can be defined by "characteristic cognitive, affective, and psychological behavior that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment" (Ronald R. Sims, Serbrenia J. Sims). Most experts, like Riding R and Rayner S (1998), agree that there are three basic learning styles as mentioned above. For instance, upon hearing the word dog, some people see a picture of the animal or hear a bark, while others visualize the animal. Those who see the letters spelled out or a picture of a dog in their minds' eye are

probably visual. Those who hear the barks are probably auditory learners. Those who feel the soft fur of a dog are probably kinesthetic. Using this example we can determine which learning style a person has.

According to statistics, it is estimated that 80 percent of what we learn is through our vision. From an early age, a child acquires valuable information about his surroundings through his or her eyes. Because of this fact, the majority of schools make use of methods that favor visual learners. Children who are primarily visual learners tend to get information through pictures, charts, and visual materials. If children organize their thoughts in such a way, then they might be visual learners. They have a wonderful sense of imagination, and they tend to be very creative. Visual learners usually have great instinctive direction, and they can easily visualize objects. If teachers represent information with real objects and images, students will be able to focus on meaning, reorganize and group similar ideas easily, and make better use of their visual memory.

Auditory Learners learn through listening, they learn best through verbal lectures, discussions, talking things through and listening to what others have to say. Auditory learners interpret the underlying meanings of speech through listening to tone of voice, pitch, speed and other nuances. Written information may have little meaning until it is heard. These learners often benefit from reading text aloud and using a tape recorder. And some of them Tactile/Kinesthetic Learners: learn through, moving, doing and touching.

Tactile/Kinesthetic persons learn best through a hands-on approach, actively exploring the physical world around them. They may find it hard to sit still for long periods and may become distracted by their need for activity and exploration.
To help the teacher to cope with your children learning disabilities and ADD, it is important to identify your learning style. Once you have figured out the way you learn, you will need to use specific strategies to fit into your way of learning. For example, if you are a visual learner, you could use a highlighter when reading a text book. The bright color would appeal to your artistic sense and help you concentrate on the reading.

Here are some more practical suggestions pertaining to each learning style: Visual Learners use visual materials such as pictures, charts, maps, graphs, etc. Have a clear

view of your teachers when they are speaking so you can see their body language and facial expression use color to highlight important points in text take notes or ask your teacher to provide handouts Illustrate your ideas as a picture or brainstorming bubble before writing them down write a story and illustrate it use multi-media (e.g. computers, videos, and filmstrips)

study in a quiet place away from verbal disturbances read illustrated books visualize information as a picture to aid memorization.

Auditory Learners participate in class discussions/debates make speeches and presentations use a tape recorder during lectures instead of taking notes read text out aloud create musical jingles to aid memorization create mnemonics to aid memorization discuss your ideas verbally dictate to someone while they write down your thoughts use verbal analogies, and storytelling to demonstrate your point.

Kinesthetic Learners take frequent study breaks move around to learn new things (e.g. read while on an exercise bike, mold a piece of clay to learn a new concept) work at a standing position chew gum while studying use bright colors to highlight reading material dress up your work space with posters if you wish, listen to music while you study skim through reading material to get a rough idea what it is about before settling down to read it in detail.

Therefore, regarding to children we can say that they learn by three main leaning styles which are: visual, auditory and kinesthetic, these three main learning styles must be taken in to account when teaching a new language; if not the class will become bored for a determined group of students.

Motivation is one of the contextual factors that most influence children in learning a foreign language. According to Deci & Ryan (1985) intrinsic motivation is related to basic human needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Intrinsically motivated activities are those that the learner engages in for their own sake because of their value, interest, and challenge. Such activities present the best possible opportunities for learning. Extrinsic motivation is when we are motivated mainly from the outside to do something because someone else wants us to do it. The outside influence makes it worthwhile, by promising us a reward if we do it, or by threatening us with a

punishment if we do not. Thus a person might be motivated by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or an external influence of a reward or punishment.

Although intrinsic motivation is clearly an important type of motivation, most of the activities people do are not intrinsically motivated. *Extrinsic motivation* is a construct that make reference whenever an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome. Extrinsic motivation thus contrasts with intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing an activity simply for the enjoyment of the activity itself, rather than its instrumental value.

Extrinsically motivated children will work on a task, even when they have little interest in it, because of the anticipated satisfaction they will get from some reward. The rewards can be something as minor as a smiley face or something as important as fame or fortune. For example, an extrinsically motivated student who dislikes math may work hard on a math problem because he or she wants the reward for completing it. In this case, the reward could be a good grade on an assignment or in the class. Children also respond to rewards like paper medals, candies, toys, or the honor of wining.

Cory Schop (2009), in her article *Extrinsic Motivation is it Effective,* points to a few points on the matter that we should consider when talking about extrinsic motivation:

• Extrinsic motivation induces an individual to perform a certain task even if there is no interest in it, but it does not mean that the person does not get pleasure from working or completing the task. The external reward simply lengthens the duration of the anticipated reward once the intrinsic interest is long gone.

• It paves the way for the individual to set goals. By setting their eyes on the prize, the child will consort to playing by the rules and even develop a huge amount of persistence towards getting that reward.

• Extrinsic motivators can release stress. Extrinsic motivation can distract a person from the pressure that he gets from his job.

• Extrinsic motivation is not sustainable. Eliminate the reward and you eliminate the action. If we withdraw the punishment or reward students will lose motivation.

• It gives diminishing returns. Motivation slowly vanishes when the punishment or reward stay at equivalent levels. More motivation means bigger rewards.

• Extrinsic motivation highlights over justification and hurts intrinsic motivation. When one punishes or rewards people for doing something, their desire to do it on their own evaporates. If at first a person loves doing a task, but then his love is punished or rewarded, then the original love will vanish, and the person will be doing it for sheer reward or to avoid punishment (over justification). If the reason for engaging in a certain activity is a reward or accolade, then the activity will become less enjoyable without such accompaniment.

Mark Lepper (1988) says that student who is intrinsically motivated undertakes an activity for the enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feelings of accomplishment it evokes." Self motivation is important for children who wish to have better results when they are learning a language. a student who enjoys learning by any activity will be successful when acquiring a language.

Intrinsic motivation occurs when the learning activity and the learning environment elicit motivation in the student. We do not motivate students but rather create, through our teaching, opportunities that can evoke motivation in students. In addition, Brandt (1995) presents the following points that help to create intrinsic motivation:

- When the goals and rewards of the learning are meaningful to the learner
- When the learning is important to the student
- When the learning assists the learner in obtaining valued accomplishments
- When the learning assists the learners in integrating themselves with the world, with others, and promotes self-awareness

By taking into consideration these tips to create motivation in children, one can help them when they lack the motivation to learn a second language, which is very important for success in their learning.

Young children are often enthusiastic, almost too enthusiastic. The problem arises when they are eager to do things other than what you are trying to teach them. Shelley

Vernon (2009), in her article *Motivating Young Children to Learn English,* has six tips to keep them interested in class, motivated to do what you want them to do, and have effectiveness in the learning process.

1. Keep Yourself Motivated

Think back to when you were a child. If your teacher was not enthusiastic about what he or she had scheduled for class that day, how did you feel about it? It is the same with young children today. the teacher is the role model for younger children, think this is a neat activity, then they will too!

2. Encourage

Young kids succeed on praise and positive attention from the adults in their lives. If you want to get them motivated in your class, you often just need to give them a lot of positive attention.

3. Games

Children learn through play. Sometimes they do not even realize they are learning if they are enjoying the game. Just think children could sit there and fill out worksheet after worksheet or they could play an English game and learn the same concepts. Which would you rather do? When we say English games, we are talking about games that are specifically designed to teach language and vocabulary. For example, if you might normally give them a worksheet to write the correct verb next to the picture illustrating the action, have them instead practice their verbs by doing the action for the word you say or the word on a card that you hold up. Likewise, you could do the action and have them write down the word.

When you play games, you can use points and competition as a motivator, but not for kids under six who may find the competition too stressful. For them, just playing the game is motivating enough. You can also sometimes award extra credit, but use it sparingly so that it remains "extra" and a special reward. Also if you use it too much, children can have so much extra credit that it sways the actual grades too much.

4. Get Their Hands Dirty Literally and Figuratively

Children like to work with their hands and whatever you can do to get the items they are learning about in their hands is useful and fun for them. This can be anything from

having a sensory table filled with sand and beach items when you want to teach them summer words to having them each bring in a piece of fruit when you are teaching fruit words. Anytime you can get young children up and doing instead of listening (often passively) you are getting their hands dirty in the learning process.

5. Get Them Moving

Movement is a vital component to motivating children. The best way to prevent children from zoning out is to get them up out of their seats at least once each class period. Even if you just require them to come up to you instead of you going to them for help, the movement can help get them out of the trance that they sometimes get from sitting in one spot too long. Grouping the children for study projects and activities helps as well. If you can, let them move the desks around or sit on the floor to change things up as well. Many games involve movement without the children needing to leave their seats, such as miming, moving certain body parts and passing things around as part of a game or race. Therefore even teachers with large classes and no space to move can use this technique, although to a more limited degree.

6. Vary the Pace

Alternate calm games with lively ones to keep the children alert and motivated, but without letting the class get out of hand. Good discipline is essential to effective learning.

Finally, after considering all the points above, extrinsic motivation is effective when it is kept in check. If we lean too much on rewards then we end up doing mediocre work just enough to meet our needs. On the other hand, if we are denied the external side of things like money, awards and prizes, then we will live the life of a drifter, stressed and constantly changing work.

The more motivated children are to learn a foreign language the faster they will acquire it. They will have a more positive attitude and they will therefore invest time and effort to learn and speak the foreign language. , If ones children are lacking motivation, due to anger about the move, anxiety, embarrassment, etc., then the acquisition of the second language can be much slower. That is why it is important to motivate children to have better results when learning a second language.

As a conclusion, it can be said that this bibliographical research has focused on the factors that influence a child to learn a foreign language like age, learning styles and motivation that have a tremendous impact on second language learning, especially for young students. Also those factors are fundamental to have successful learning in general education programs. Once teachers realized of this important factors and take into account the age, the way student learn if they are visual, auditory or kinesthetic, and if students are highly motivated and show interest in certain knowledge, they will produce great performance in the learning process. Also if teachers realized of this factors and they apply this in terms of having effectiveness in the classroom interactive language teaching, the teaching goal is to stimulate students' enthusiasm, initiative and originality and improve their language expressing abilities to make students learn English well.

VI.METHODOLOGY

This part of the work summarizes and describes the working process developed for the design, execution and integration of the research, as well as the tools used to undertake this research. Also it highlights those aspects that have special relevance and have been dealt with in depth in this work.

The research was designed according to the steps given in "The Literature Review" in order to provide the necessary guidelines to researchers and the accomplishment of the expected objectives. That book guided us in building a case from credible evidence based on previous research and data. It also helped us to create a topic and a logical case to defend the position taken during the research.

 The first step was to select a topic. We selected the topic *"The contextual factors that influence children's learning of a second language"*. After deciding on the topic, we looked for some literature which would help us to support the topic with strong evidence.

After collecting all the research data, we started to develop the argument, by arranging the relevant data into a body of evidence that would explain what is known about the topic. We took into account our experience both as students and as beginning teachers of a foreign language. After reading several books and articles about the topic, we started to write the essay, through which we synthesized and analyze the data. Afterwards, we stated our conclusions and the corresponding recommendations from the work done.

VII.   CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, it is important to point out that there are certain factors that always influence in the second language acquisition process, and have a tremendous impact on second language learning, especially in children. One of the most important factors is age because of the plasticity of the brain which goes in favor when learning a second language; let us remember there is a specific period of time in which children can incorporate the language as a native speaker.

It is necessary to remember when teaching a new language to children, all the activities carried out should be fun. This is where the importance of knowing the different learning styles, how children are motivated, their personality traits, etc comes into play. Knowing all these factors about students can help the teacher to teach in a more comfortable way without experiencing stress.

In a classroom where the student's learning style is never taken into account by the teacher, the learning process may fail because there is no way of knowing what strategies or techniques or activities may be practiced to promote students motivation in learning a second language.

 Teachers frequently bore the children by preparing the class for just one type of student, such as in the case with a listening activity targeted towards those students who learn faster by listening. Teachers should never forget that every student has his/her own learning style and that; they tend to use this personal learning strategy to learn a language. Therefore, if we, as teachers, are aware of this, our classes will be more fun and dynamic and our students especially children will more fully enjoy the classes while at the same time learning the language faster and without getting stressed of frustrated.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Knowing the main factors that influence young learners in the process of acquiring a new language, we point out the following recommendations:

1. It is important for the Foreign Language Department to make some changes in the curriculum by adding some topics concerning factors that influence children's learning of a second language in the didactic courses.

2. Teachers should update the methodology, activities and material used in the classrooms.

3. Teachers should also include some topics about the importance of knowing how to teach children in the didactic courses.

4. Teachers should help shape students' beliefs about success and failure in L2learning (second language learning)   .

5. Teachers should help students improve motivation by showing that L2 learning should be an exciting mental challenge, a career enhancer, a vehicle to cultural awareness and friendship and a key to world peace.

6. Teachers should make the L2 classroom a welcoming, positive place, where psychological needs are met and language anxiety is kept to a minimum.

7. Teachers should urge students to develop their own intrinsic rewards through positive self-talk, guided self-evaluation, and mastery of specific goals, rather than comparison with other students. Teachers can thus promote a sense of greater self-efficacy, increasing motivation to continue learning the L2.

Educators and policy-makers have often ignored pre-schoolers whose language seems to be lagging behind development in other areas, arguing that such children are "just a bit late" in talking. The research evidence suggests instead that language acquisition should be taken seriously and includes topics such as

conceptual factors to get to know the learner's preferences in learning a second

language.

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