

Measuring language aptitude – issues and problems

Jacek Rysiewicz
School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

L2 acquisition/learning research inevitably faces the problem of adequate and precise description of the variables it sets out to investigate. In individual learner differences (ID) research descriptive and theoretical accuracy of the constructs of anxiety, beliefs, motivation or aptitude becomes a necessity if any valid generalizations about the role of the IDs in L2 learning are to be made. Because the IDs are not directly available for observation researchers must rely on indirect ways of gauging the dimensions studied. Hence, the need for reliable and valid tests of aptitude or motivational questionnaires becomes a 'sine qua non' of any serious, primary data generating research.

In the first part of my talk I will discuss the concept of FL aptitude and briefly outline the history of research done in the field. Then the principles and procedures in mental test development will be presented and illustrated with reference to the design and development of, what by now has become a classical measure of language aptitude, i.e., Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) by Carroll and Sapon. In the second part, a project to adapt MLAT to the Polish grounds will be described. Specifically, in the light of the MLAT's weaknesses as a valid test of language aptitude, arguments will be presented in favor of the adaptation of MLAT rather than the development of a new FL aptitude test.

Carroll, J. B., Sapon, S. M. 1959 (2000.) *Modern Language Aptitude Test. Manual*.
N. Bethesda, Maryland: Second Language Testing, Inc.

Stansfield, C. W., Reed, D. J. 2003. *Adaptation of the Modern Language Aptitude Test and the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery for examinees whose first language is not English*. Paper read at the Second Annual Conference of the East Coast Organization of Language Testers, Washington, D. C. 20-21 March, 2003.

Awareness of L1 grammar and foreign language learning

Jacek Rysiewicz
School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

A study is reported in which a relationship between implicit awareness of L1 grammar and L2 English proficiency is investigated. The main aim of the study was to see if there are any differences in the relationship among the two variables across two groups of learners (N=245; 18 years and N=120; 20 years old) chosen for the study. The following tools were used to acquire the data for the study: a battery of tests to measure FL aptitude (including a grammatical sensitivity measure) and a year-final L2 proficiency test including both the assessment of written and oral language.

Several research questions were pursued in the study. Firstly, it was hypothesized that, irrespective of the instructional experience, there is a relationship between the extent of L1 meta-linguistic knowledge as measured by a grammatical sensitivity task and the learners' L2 English proficiency as measured by course-final grades. Secondly, it was to be seen if this performance was significantly different for the two learner samples studied. Thirdly, the relationship between meta-linguistic ability and the components of L2 English proficiency were investigated to discover finer-grained patterns of correspondence between L2 learning success and learners' aptitudinal profiles. The results of the study are interpreted against the concept of the explicit/implicit learning dimension and some pedagogical and methodological implications are suggested.

Steel, D., Alderson, J. C. 1994. "Metalinguistic knowledge, language aptitude and language proficiency". Paper presented at the Annual Language Testing Research Colloquium. Washington, DC, March 5, 1994.

Robinson, P. 1997. Individual differences and the fundamental similarity of implicit and explicit adult second language learning. *Language Learning*, 47:1. p. 45-99.

Ellis, R. 2005. Measuring implicit and explicit knowledge of a second language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 27. p. 141-172.

Learner profiles and how to find out about them

Jacek Rysiewicz
School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

The talk will begin with a comparison of two general types of quantitative research and an illustration of what kind of research questions each type enables researchers to ask. It will be shown that the first, and more commonly used in language studies, type of research aims at reducing the number of descriptive categories attributable to a learner, whereas the other, less frequently used type informs us how a multiplicity of descriptive categories ‘converge’ into a reduced ‘number of learners’. In other words, the first type is interested in describing learners with a most efficient and predictably valid set of reduced numbers of variables, whereas the latter asks questions about how different, unreduced numbers of attributes ‘combine’ into a reduced number of learner types.

In the second part of the talk a study will be reported in which ability/aptitude profiles of 13 year old second language (L2) learners are identified (Rysiewicz, 2008). A multivariate statistical procedure of cluster analysis proved to be particularly useful in this respect. The aim of cluster analysis is to identify, within a sample studied, certain subgroups (clusters) of participants who share similar combinations of characteristics and who are different from other groups of subjects. So, unlike factor analysis which aims at a reduced number of variables characterizing subjects' behaviour, cluster analysis aims at a reduced number of subjects, or subject types, given a set number of variables (Skehan, 1986).

Rysiewicz, J. 2008. Cognitive profiles of (un)successful EFL learners: A cluster analytical study. *Modern Language Journal* 92/1. pp. 87-99.

Skehan, P. 1986. Cluster analysis and the identification of learner types. In Cook, V. J. (ed.). *Experimental approaches to second language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon. 47-75.