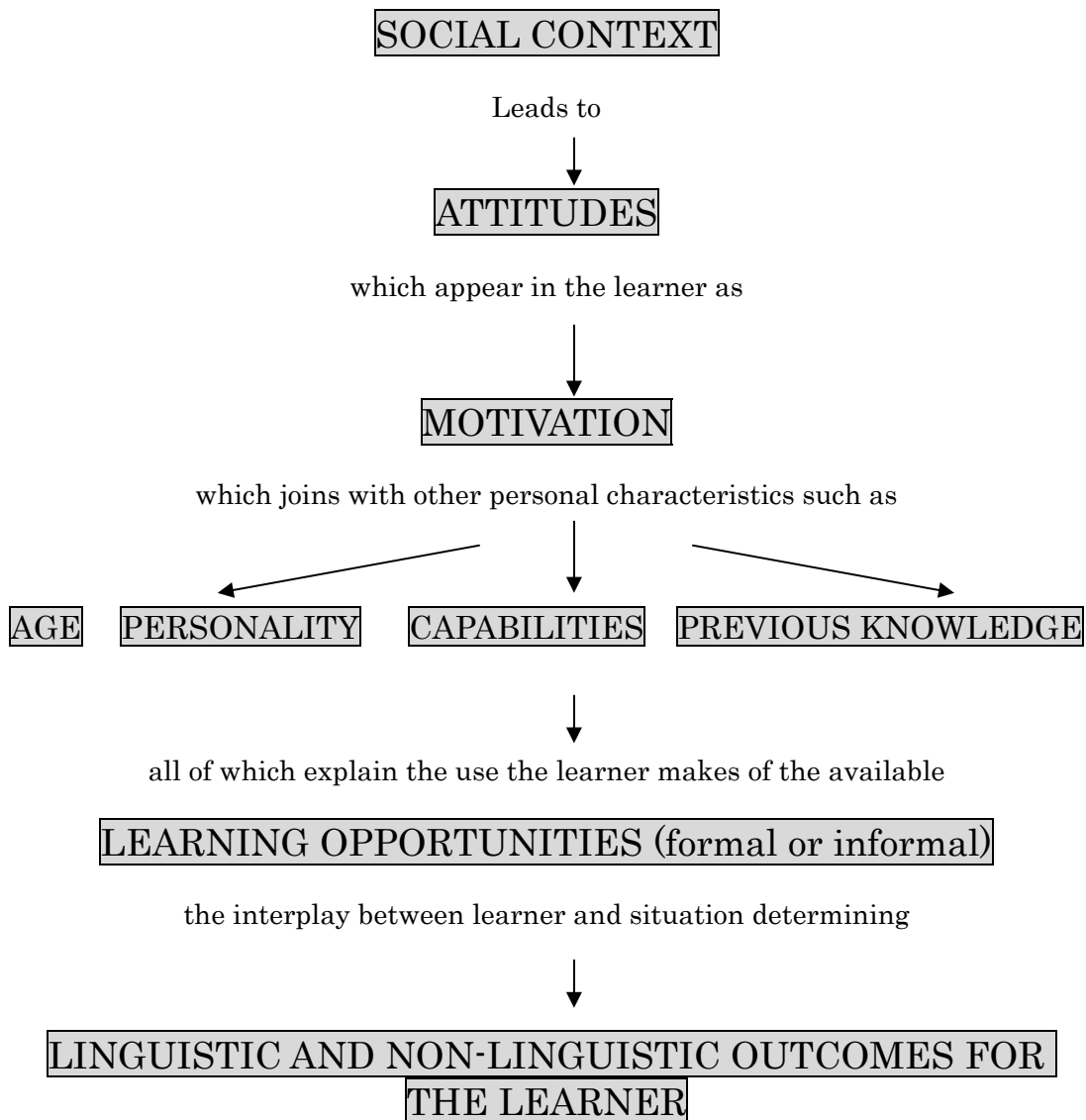


B. THE ROLE OF PERSONAL FACTORS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING.

Figure 1 is one suggestion of how we can view the contribution of a variety of factors to the process of foreign language learning.

Figure 1 A Model of Language learning (Spolsky 1989 *1)



Let's consider some of these factors briefly in turn.
Social context, attitudes and motivation

In his model Spolsky sees the social context (living in Japanese society) as the factor creating attitudes which appear in the learner as motivation. Social context is also linked to 'learning opportunities' lower down the model. Attitudes to language learning will obviously be affected by rate of progress or lack of it, and are not immutably fixed factors. We may throw ourselves enthusiastically into Japanese study at the outset and be thoroughly discouraged a year later. Our opinions about our Japanese may vary from day to day as our ability to communicate fluctuates along with physical and mental well-being or its converse, fatigue. However, the attitude we are concerned with here is more of a basic underlying kind, less accessible to change. We need to consider our attitudes

1. to Japanese culture and
2. to Japanese language.

We will consider these closely intertwined areas separately for the sake of convenience. Thus we can talk of both **culture shock** and the less familiar phenomenon of **language shock** as factors in hindering learning.

Language shock refers to the fear of appearing comic, infantile or ridiculous, and the loss of accuracy of expression and 'narcissistic gratification' available with the new language. **Culture shock** is the anxiety resulting from the disorientation encountered upon entering a new culture and discourages the effort necessary to become bilingual'. (*2)

Culture shock

Whether we experience culture shock to a greater or lesser degree, there is no doubt that acceptance of the culture is essential in language study, possibly more so at advanced levels. 'It is no use simply regarding the language as some kind of algebra; it is a human mode of living and experiencing reality. Learning the language means that one is being invited to experience reality in a particular way. (*3) The fact that Japanese perceptions of reality differ at times from our own, will cause us to feel bewildered (why should traffic lights and apples be 'aoi' (blue) when they are so obviously green!), baffled and frustrated, (you've learnt the counters for cars, books and pencils, but what on earth is the counter for 2 pairs of scissors?), or even irritated (perhaps with Japanese perceptions of social status as expressed in the use of 'keigo', honorific language, or in idiosyncratic readings of simple kanji such as 'nakoodo' for IT A.) 'Why can't the Japanese have one reading for Chinese characters and be done with it like we do in English' (or whatever your mother tongue is) we cry. The unconscious implication being that your mother tongue is more logical, or even superior to Japanese. I remember in my first days and months in Japan wondering why on earth Japanese still used Kanji when they could perfectly well write entirely in the much simpler system of hiragana. This is just one example of how difficulties encountered in our language learning can engender critical or even arrogant attitudes in us towards the language and culture.

Motivation

In Spolsky's model of language learning attitudes appear in the learner as motivation. Motivation thus 'refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language.' (*4) Motivation is generally divided into 2 types, instrumental and integrative. Instrumental (utilitarian) motivation is when you are motivated to learn a language in order to achieve a certain objective or to get a job done. The instrumental

motivation of the missionary is to acquire Japanese, firstly, in order to survive in the country and secondly, as a tool with which to communicate the gospel to Japanese people. Integrative motivation, on the other hand is the desire to be accepted into the community of Japanese people, to identify and empathise with them. By definition, with integrative motivation there has to be a positive attitude towards the society. (By a positive attitude I don't want to infer an unthinking acceptance of all aspects of Japanese culture - there are obviously things as Christians which we cannot accept and would wish to change.) Theoretically, it would be possible to have a strong instrumental motivation and yet harbour negative feelings towards Japanese people and culture. In reality, both types of motivation are probably at work in most of us and a mixture would seem to provide the most favourable climate for language learning.

Language shock - a way of growing personally?

While culture shock may be something we experience mainly in the early days of life in Japan, (it's amazing how quickly some of us become 'ofuro' and 'onsen' lovers or 'sushi' connoisseurs), language shock could remain with us to a greater or lesser extent throughout our missionary career, unless we are able to come to terms with it. It is no doubt easier to find aspects of Japanese culture that we can immediately enjoy and positively embrace than it is to experience enjoyment in language learning which, by its very nature, entails a great deal of hard work. (Unless, that is, one is the type of character who is fascinated by language for its own sake.)

It is sometimes easier to come to terms with external differences in language and culture than it is with the effect that learning a language can have on us as individuals in, for example, undermining our confidence or adding to our stress and anxiety levels, accentuating our sense of inferiority etc. It is humiliating to make mistakes, to be misunderstood, laughed at or unfavourably compared to others whose Japanese may be better than ours, especially when those others are missionaries we are working closely with

How do we learn to cope with the negative emotions which our struggle with our adopted tongue may evoke in us? In a book entitled 'The Foreign Language Learning Process' I came across the following comment by one contributor which set me thinking. **'I have found learning foreign languages is a way of growing personally, and this casts the whole task in a very positive light'** (*4) I don't suppose the writer was thinking of growth in a Christian sense but, if we as Christians believe that any circumstance in which we find ourselves is an opportunity under God to become more like Him, then our experiences of studying Japanese, negative though they may be will be a springboard to maturity. Feelings of inferiority, of inadequacy, or discouragement at slow progress truly faced up to, may mean that we are still trying to meet our drives for self worth and significance by achieving, rather than seeking to have these needs met in the Lord. Perseverance is most certainly a spiritual quality that language study gives us plenty of opportunity to develop! (It has been said that to learn an Asian language requires 'the patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon and the years of Methuselah!') (*5) Recalling my early experiences with language in Japan in the light of how it helped me to grow, I can now see that being constantly thrown into situations where I was forced to communicate with a minimum of language because there was simply no one else to depend on, enabled a rather shy and introverted 22 year old to overcome some of her inhibitions and begin to learn to reach out to others. In a very real sense there is a dying to self in speaking a foreign language, a willingness to take risks or appear a fool. These are areas

where there is scope for a lifetime of learning but I shall ever be grateful to the Lord for calling me to Japan and giving me unique opportunities for growth I might not have had in my home country.

We shall be looking in more detail at the characteristics of the good language learner later in this series of articles, but it is interesting to note that one characteristic listed by many writers is the learner's ability to come to terms with the affective (emotional) demands of language learning. Naiman, for example, (*6) lists some of the ways learners he surveyed coped with these affective demands.

1. *Realise negative feelings are not continuous, but intermittent.*
2. *Accept these feelings (frustration etc.) as inevitable, occasionally even helpful in that they provide motivation to learn more in order to overcome them.*
3. *Persistence appeared as a key word on coping with affective demands.*
4. *Positive action was recommended to overcome inhibition e.g. by consciously seeking out situations where there was no choice but to talk in the foreign language (although that was the last thing they wanted to do.)*
5. *Maintaining a sense of humour.*
6. *Realizing others are not going to be so concerned about your mistakes as you are.*

We could perhaps add another:

7. *Looking at things in the light of eternity.*

Age, personality and aptitude

Age

How often do we bemoan the fact that increasing age has a detrimental effect on our mental powers especially when it comes to remembering Japanese vocabulary? I shall be considering how we can train our memories better in the section on learner strategies, but it is as well to point out that increasing maturity, sensible study habits and a specific purpose for learning Japanese can more than compensate for a decline in the sensitivity of one's ear and the snappiness of one's memory.

Personality

Likewise, it is tempting for the quieter, more introspective types to look with a degree of envy on the more boisterous and outgoing fellow missionary or learner who with his 'gift of the gab' appears to have 'the ideal personality' for effective language learning. It is an appealing hypothesis that extroverted learners learn more rapidly than introverted ones. They get more practice because they find it easier to make contact with native speakers. The research results, however, lend only partial support to this hypothesis. Naiman(1978) found no significant relationship between extraversion/introversion and proficiency.

Aptitude (capabilities)

'I think the improvement of language is due to some inheritance. The most important is our personal ability to learn English. In my case, I have no personal

ability so I think it will take a long time ... there is no good way to speed up my learning---.' (*7)

This quote reflects another belief about language learning, that innate linguistic ability is the main factor determining success or failure. Modern language aptitude tests aim to assess 3 important language learning abilities.

1. The ability to discriminate the sounds of a new language (having an 'ear' for language)
2. The ability to break the stream of speech into constituents and to generalise about its structure (ie. organize language into some sort of system).
3. The ability to remember its words

'The more each capacity is developed in a learner, the faster control will be attained, and the higher the potential level of success achieved.' (*8) There is no need, however, to feel pessimistic regarding a particular learner's likelihood of success on the grounds of low aptitude, since as we have seen, it is only one of a series of factors contributing to language learning. Motivation and exposure to the target language are equally critical factors. Studies **'demonstrate that contrary to popular belief language success is not so much attributable to an innate gift as to conscious effort and constant involvement.'** (*9)

Personal application

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- You can't learn Japanese very well if you
- feel frustrated
- feel bored
- don't have an ability for language learning
- don't understand the culture
- have a teacher who doesn't understand your way of learning
- don't have the right personality
- are not ambitious
- are not interested in the culture
- have no confidence in yourself
- are not a full time student
- have other responsibilities (e. g. church, family etc.) (*10)

2. Are you aware of any negative factors in your attitude to Japanese society which could hinder your acquisition of the language?

3. Is your motivation instrumental, integrative or both?

4. Do you experience/have you experienced 'language shock'?

1. Do you look upon your experience of learning and using Japanese in Japanese society as a means to personal and spiritual growth? If so, in what way?
2. How well do you cope with the affective demands of learning Japanese? What is your realistic assessment of your language aptitude? How does this affect your thinking about your language learning?

Needs analysis

Before concluding this section on the role of personal factors in language learning, you may find it helpful to try to analyse and prioritize your needs in relation to Japanese. The aim of this to clarify where you need to concentrate your time and effort in language study so as to maximize its effectiveness. It may simply be a means of making explicit what you are already well aware of.

Analysing your needs

1. Make a list of the specific situations where you need to use Japanese now and in the future.

e. g. leading a church service, church meeting or Bible study, praying aloud in a prayer meeting, shopping, interacting socially with Japanese etc. If your list is likely to be impossibly long, concentrate on the areas which are problematic for you.

List the situations on the chart on page 2.

2. Tick the skills you need for each particular situation in the relevant column.

If you find that most ticks end up in one or two columns such as vocabulary and speaking, then these are the skills you need to work on.

Prioritizing your needs

1. Assess yourself in each of the 6 skills (Vocabulary, grammar, reading, etc) on a scale from 1-5 in the chart below.

- Circle the number that you feel represents your position for each skill in the left-hand column 'self-assessment'.
- Remember that in OMF we use the 5 level proficiency scale in which 1 = Survival Proficiency, 2 = Limited Working Proficiency, 3 = Professional Working Proficiency, 4 = Distinguished Proficiency and 5 = Native Speaker Proficiency.

2. Now give each skill priority rating from A-F

A indicates highest priority and F rates lowest in the right hand column. Thus, if you find that many situations require you to use a wider vocabulary than you have got, increasing vocabulary would get a high priority rating. If you never need to write in Japanese then this would rate as priority F even though your proficiency in this skill might be only Survival proficiency.

Self assessment	Skill	Priority rating
1 2 3 4 5	Vocabulary	
1 2 3 4 5	Grammar	
1 2 3 4 5	Listening	
1 2 3 4 5	Speaking	
1 2 3 4 5	Reading	
1 2 3 4 5	Writing	

Needs Analysis Page 2

Write down specifically where and when you need/will need to use Japanese. Then tick the columns on the right which show what language skills you need to operate in Japanese in these situations.

Situations in which I need Japanese	Vocab.	Grammar	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing

Notes (for section B)

1. Spolsky, B. Conditions for Second language learning 1989 OUP p. 28.
2. Spolsky op c i t. p. 144
3. Gardner, quoted in Spolsky p.148
4. The Foreign Language Learning Process The British Council English Teaching Information Centre publication. 1978. p. 21.
5. Dinkins, Larry Help! my halo's slipping OMF 1990 p. 35
6. Naiman et al. The Good Language Learner Research in Education Series 7, Ontario Institute for studies in Education. 1978.
7. Student quoted in Wenden, A. 'Helping language learners think about learning' in Currents of change in English Language Teaching ed. by Rossner and Bolitho 1990 OUP p.162.
8. Spolsky op c i t p. 106
9. Naiman 1978 op cit
10. Wenden op c i t p. 166
11. For the ideas in this section and figures 2 and 3, I am indebted to Ellis, G. and Sinclair. B. Learning to learn English (Learner's book) pp 10-11, 109-110.