

‘ELT for a Global World’



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Individual differences

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Language Learning Aptitude

Definitions

Aptitude is the 'capacity that enhances the rate and ease of learning' (Carroll, 1981 as cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 495)

Under the same conditions, learners with **high** language learning aptitude tend to learn languages **faster** (Ottó, 1996).

Taxonomies (1)

Taxonomies of aptitude based on empirical evidence:

Carrol

Aptitude is

- separate from achievement;
- separate from motivation;
- distinct from general intelligence. (Carroll, 1981)

Taxonomies (2)

Pimsleur

Aptitude is

- strongly related to auditory factors;
- related to motivation;
- related to general academic achievement (GPA).

(Pimsleur, 1966)

- 'Aptitude is what aptitude tests measure'
(Dörnyei, 2005, p. 35)

Instruments (1)

Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) (Carroll & Sapon, 1959)

Phonetic coding ability

Being able to identify particular sounds and linking them to written symbols.

Grammatical sensitivity

Being able to identify the grammatical functions of words within sentences.

Rote learning ability

Being able to learn and remember words in a foreign language and their meanings .

(Inductive language learning ability)

Being able to figure out the rules from language samples.

(Carroll, 1965; 1981, p. 105)

1. number learning,
2. phonetic script,
3. spelling clues,
4. words in sentences,
5. paired associates

Instruments (2)

- Pimsleur's Language Aptitude Battery (PLAB) (Pimsleur, 1966)
 - For adolescents
 - Emphasis on auditory factors
- VORD (Parry & Child, 1990)
 - Using an artificial language
- CANAL-F (Grigorenko, Sternberg, & Ehrman, 2000)
 - Reconceptualisation of aptitude – importance of processing skills

Instruments (3)

Magyar Egyetemi Nyelvértékmérő Teszt

(MENYÉT) – based on Carroll's conceptualisation

1. hidden sounds
2. language analysis
3. words in sentences
4. vocabulary learning

(can be used for streaming or matching see Ottó, 1996)

Issues in measurement

- Integrating theory and measurement;
- Viewing aptitude as a dynamic construct;
- Accounting for the notion that “learning a language involves different abilities at different stages of development” (Robinson, 2013, p.2);
- Accounting for the notion that “learning a language takes place in many different situations and classroom contexts” (Robinson, 2013, p. 2).

(Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015)

New directions in theorising aptitude

- Linking language learning aptitude to L1 literacy levels (Sparks & Ganschow, 1993);
- Implicit vs. explicit aptitude and the link to cognitive and learning styles;
- The importance of working memory with regard to aptitude;
- Aptitude complexes (linking learner abilities and task characteristics (see Robinson, 2012));
- Linking abilities (aptitude) to L2 processing stages (Skehan, 2002).

Research findings (1)

Specifying aptitude in terms of intelligence

Sternberg (2002): intelligence has

analytical aspect (information processing),

creative aspect (coping with relative novelty in language learning as opposed to creativity in other domains)

practical aspect (adaptation)

BUT

Analytical skills can be taught! (e.g. decontextualising meanings of unknown words presented in context)

Creative thinking skills can be taught!

Practical intelligence can be taught!

Analytic ability: dependent on age of onset of L2 learning (DeKeyser, 2000)

Research findings (2)

- Aptitude comprises interacting components.
- Different components gain emphasis in different ages.
- The more languages learnt, the higher the level of aptitude (Thompson, 2013).
- Particular aspects of aptitude match particular learning contexts better, BUT the effect of aptitude has been shown to be independent of instruction (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p. 45).

Future directions in aptitude research

- Investigating aptitude complexes and interaction among constituents (including not just cognitive variables);
- Linking aptitude research with language pedagogy;
- Account for the dynamic nature of aptitude.

(Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015)

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