Learning takes place anywhere and everywhere. Under formal conditions, it takes place inside classrooms. These can be teacher-led lecture style, small group activity, reading rooms with more individualized arrangements, and technology assisted self-learning through interactive or participatory learning classrooms. Learners create ‘classroom’ environments whenever they feel a need to ‘learn’. Under informal conditions in social gatherings, conferences, television interviews, by being presenters, participants, listeners, critiques and observers, people learn.

While there is a universe of learning situations, actual learning is restricted, controlled, managed, guided, dominated and exploited by each individual. This community of factors that affect individual learning is identified in educational psychology as learner factors. These learner factors reside in the learner and are hard to categorise and quantify. These factors develop dominant learning styles in individuals and an awareness of them will help widen a person’s approach to learning. This article will profile learner factors and learning styles in a background of English language education.

Broadly, educationists recognize three vital areas that influence learners. The first is the age question. It has been observed anecdotally, that early exposure to a second language helps learning. Experience in teaching second languages commencing in the secondary school in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, did not lead to much success. In the prestigious English ‘preparatory’ and ‘public’ schools, where multi-lingual children from the British Commonwealth schooled, it was customary to give an early start to second language exposure. These policies had great success. In spite of this, in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a world-wide demand for early education in the mother tongue. Sri Lanka also fell into that precipice and let the possible benefit of early exposure to second language go by. That not withstanding, English continued to be visible in schools, in the media, in industry, and in governance and much more here.
The debate on the ideal age for second language acquisition continued to gain momentum through the development of the study of linguistics and the engagement of front runners in this field such as Chomsky, Krashen and others. Opinion on an optimum age for exposure to a second language has remained divided. Against claims that early childhood has special advantages for second language learning, others have argued that greater cognitive maturity and greater learning experiences on the part of adults are assets. Much research has been carried out on both these views and there is no single, best recommendation here. The data made it possible to compare the effect of different patterns of language instruction including different starting ages.

The discussion on the role of age in second language learning has seen much fruitless debate and a good deal of indecision in educational systems. What has been established clearly is interesting. Language learning may occur at different maturity levels from early to adult life. In some aspects, all age levels face second language learning in similar ways. Some strategies cross age boundaries and have much in common with first language acquisition.

The second factor believed to influence language learning is language aptitude along with other cognitive factors. The concept of an aptitude derives from everyday experience: some language learners seem to have a 'gift for languages' which others lack. Psychologists have used tests to assess language abilities. But the isolation of a language aptitude has been difficult and is not entirely resolved.

Second language learning, which is only one among several learning activities involving aptitude, has much in common with other learning activities. Those psychological qualities which surface in formal schooling generally, particularly in the learning of verbal materials are likely to influence second language learning. Aptitude is seen, not as a single entity, but a composite of different characteristics which come into play in second language learning. Learners possess these constituents in varying degrees. Through analysis of language aptitude tests, it is found to be possible to focus on four characteristics, common to language learning. These are the:

- Auditory capacity which is the ability to pay attention to and discriminate speech sounds of languages,
- Sound-symbol relations which is the ability to relate speech sounds to some form of graphic representation, (sound-symbol relationship),
- Grammatical abilities which is the ability to pay attention to the formal characteristics of a language
Learner factors and learning styles

- Verbal memory which is the capacity to memorise and recall new verbal material

The third group of learner factors that affect language acquisition are affective and personality factors. Language learning involves strong positive or negative emotions. These areas received only marginal attention for a long time. But any language teacher and learners too testify that language learning often involves emotions. This side of the learner has been studied through instruments which contain attitude tests. Such test queries were worded as:

I like learning English.
Learning English is a waste of time.
I think French is the best language.

Those responding stated their agreement or disagreement.

In addition, other techniques sought responses to, on scales which were the opposite of each other. Among others, the items such as the following were included:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Interesting</th>
<th>Boring</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prejudiced</td>
<td>Unprejudiced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brave</td>
<td>Cowardly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Handsome</td>
<td>Ugly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>Unfriendly</td>
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</tbody>
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The attitudes investigated were the learners’ attitudes towards the community that used that language.

All these studies recognized there is a positive association between measured learning outcomes and attitudes towards the target group and the language. The social status of the second language in relation to the first language influence learners and motivate them. Acquisition of the target language is likely to be a pre-requisite for economic advancement. This is very visible in Sri Lanka, particularly at present. The important point is that, individual learner factors are influenced in subtle ways by these factors.
Personality characteristics are sometimes helpful or detrimental to language learning. Extroverted, outgoing students tend to be more successful language learners than more inhibited or introverted students. Good language learners are not necessarily those to whom a language comes very easily. But they have persevered, have overcome frustrations and after many trials and errors, have achieved a certain level of self-satisfaction. Successful learners set goals, engage their ego, aspire high and persevere. Another set of personality characteristics relates to the social and communicative nature of language. As a learner moves into a new linguistic, cultural and social environment, some demands are made on the learner to cope with all that. This can either help or hinder learning.

Research on the influence of individual personality on language learning has investigated attitude, motivation and personality. Studies conclude that this is a composite of factors. It is something more than simply wanting to learn a language. It involves a variety of components which make up an attitudinal orientation in a broad sense.

These learner factors impose themselves on learning styles. There is no single best way to learn. People have preferences in the ways they take in and process information. Once a person is aware of one’s own learning style, it is possible to use that knowledge to adjust individual learning and study habits. The important thing is not to restrict one’s self to the preferred learning style but use that information to balance individual preference with the various methods one can take in information, to individual advantage.

**LEARNER TYPES**

**ACTIVE AND REFLECTIVE LEARNERS**

- Active learners tend to retain and understand information best by doing something active with it--discussing or applying it or explaining it to others. Reflective learners prefer to think about it quietly first. "Let's try it out and see how it works" is an active learner's phrase; "Let's think it through first" is the reflective learner's response.
- Active learners tend to like group work more than reflective learners, who prefer working alone.

**SENSING AND INTUITIVE LEARNERS**

- Sensing learners tend to like learning facts, intuitive learners often prefer discovering possibilities and relationships.
- Sensors often like solving problems by well-established methods and dislike complications and surprises; intuitors like innovation and dislike repetition.
- Sensors tend to be patient with details and good at memorizing facts and doing hands-on (laboratory) work; intuitors may be better at grasping new concepts and are often more comfortable than sensors with abstractions and mathematical formulations.
VISUAL AND VERBAL LEARNERS

Visual learners remember best what they see--pictures, diagrams, flow charts, time lines, films, and demonstrations. Verbal learners get more out of words--written and spoken explanations. Everyone learns more when information is presented both visually and verbally.

SEQUENTIAL AND GLOBAL LEARNERS

- Sequential learners tend to gain understanding in linear steps, with each step following logically from the previous one. Global learners tend to learn in large jumps, absorbing material almost randomly without seeing connections, and then suddenly "getting it."
- Sequential learners tend to follow logical stepwise paths in finding solutions; global learners may be able to solve complex problems quickly or put things together in novel ways once they have grasped the big picture, but they may have difficulty explaining how they did it.

In conclusion, average-to-fast learners are known to traverse this vast area. Faced with a situation, learners have the ability to cross their emotional and attitudinal frontiers and achieve their target. This is the best information to learners and their learning styles. Consciously or unconsciously, learners know there is no single best way to learn. The barriers are self imposed and very rightly, clever learners have found a multitude of ways to get a breakthrough in their own narrow paths.