Second language aptitude: stable or dynamic?

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Research and theory has traditionally assumed that second language (L2) aptitude is stable. However, evidence that experience in language learning leads to higher L2 aptitude test scores and the reconceptualisation of L2 aptitude in terms of aptitude-treatment interactions (ATIs) challenge this assumption. This study further investigates this assumption by looking for changes in L2 aptitude in a longitudinal study.

Participants were 85 university students taking a beginner-level Spanish course. A pretest of language aptitude was taken at the beginning of the course and a posttest eight weeks later. The LLAMA language aptitude test (Meara, 2005) was used for its validity, reliability, and digital format. Participants also completed a questionnaire regarding first language background and previous L2 learning experience. Instruments were administered via the university learning management system.

Data collected included LLAMA pre- and post-test scores for each sub-test: LLAMA B (vocabulary learning), LLAMA D (sound recognition), LLAMA E (sound-symbol association), and LLAMA F (grammatical inferencing). Linear regression was used to investigate any relationship between prior L2 learning experience and pre-test scores. Paired-Sample t-tests were used to investigate any changes in L2 aptitude test scores.

Preliminary results suggest that L2 aptitude is sensitive to experience. Participants who had extensive prior L2 learning experience scored significantly higher in the LLAMA F (grammatical inferencing) sub-test. Significant gains were made between pre- and post-tests for all LLAMA sub-tests except for LLAMA E (sound-symbol association). Effect sizes were greater for those sub-tests measuring abilities more implicated at the beginning stages of L2 learning (i.e. vocabulary learning and sound recognition), supporting the ATI conceptualisation of L2 aptitude. These results add to the evidence challenging the assumption of stability in L2 aptitude.

References:

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