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Language Learning Aptitude and Autonomous EFL Acquisition: The Context of the Arabic Speaking Adult EFL Learners

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Abstract

This framework approach paper analyzes the case of the adult Arabic speaking autonomous EFL learners in an attempt to develop a tool that enables them to assess their English learning aptitude and discover whether they enjoy it for effective learning. Devising the framework involved comprising three theories: Feng's, 2015 learner autonomous vocabulary acquisition; along with Carroll & Sapon's, 1959 Implicit language aptitude as well as Schmitt's, 1997, vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). The paper targets the wide population of adults who are keen on learning English language out of school premises and college campuses. The participants are the adults above 25 years old and they include employees of different professions as well as jobless. The paper finally produces a framework of a self-assessment forms as a convenient tool for gauging language aptitude.

I. INTRODUCTION

Background

Language learning aptitude in Arabic is referred to by the transliterated term “the language faculty” –transcribed as ‘malaka lagaweyah’, indicating an inborn rather than acquired language skill. The field of educational psychology field on the other hand, takes language to be among the 9 types of intelligences; namely, the “Linguistic Intelligence”. Meaning, the gap is not that wide between the simplistic and the scientific characterization of this exceptional language learning gift that some learners enjoy rather than others. Also, the ‘individual differences’ phrase is a common

concept that is frequently used in language learning as well as in learning any skill at all. In the language acquisition discipline though, the ‘individual differences’ is conceptualized in what is termed as language aptitude. So, the question that poses itself is, how many EFL learners out there who enjoy this language learning aptitude without knowing it or aren’t making use of it? In fact many EFL learners everywhere say they are frustrated because they believe they are not making progress in learning English. This is especially true with a great deal of the EFL learners in the Arab world who constitute a substantial portion of the enrollees in language schools (Alsabatin, Nureldeen & et al, 2023). This

is because the Arab world's EFL environment in particular is known to be less supportive to English language learning for several reasons. A key reason is due to the Arab societies' superficial interaction with English language at the day-to-day life level, which means less exposure for the EFL learners. The second reason which is relevant to the first one, neither is English the workplace language in the Arab EFL environment.

Age is evidently a recognized factor in second language acquisition (SLA). Therefore, maturity and autonomous EFL learning, can be a perfect combination compared to the formal classroom learning of the young learners. There is a percentage of persons with exceptional language learning aptitude in every EFL environment including the Arabic speaking one (Ghazal, 2007). Thus, for the adult Arabic speaking EFL learners to make the best of their exceptional talent, they have to first detect it, and then or self-studying English language is a complementary effort on the learners' side in both the formal classroom and informal EFL learning environments. This self-study effort though, is likely to be more fruitful with the EFL learners who are gifted with exceptional language learning aptitude. It is even more viable with the adult EFL learners than it is for the schoolers or college students who are receiving formal classroom instruction.

Problem of the study

Whether or not all EFL autonomous learners equally make progress in learning English language, is a question whose answer involves several variables. Comes on top of these variable, the learner's language aptitude. Another variable is the age of the learner, in addition to other factors such as the degree of exposure to the language, effectiveness of the learning process, time length and the learning strategy. Therefore, to address these variables in the context of the Arabic speaking adult EFL autonomous learners, it requires accounting for these variables besides identifying their very L1 aptitude along with their L2 aptitude. This is because, besides the two are found to be correlated, their informal learning setting necessitates their engagement in self-

assessment in order to address the effectiveness of their autonomous efforts.

Study questions

- How can EFL learners detect and make use of their language aptitude?
- How are the L1 implicit and L2 explicit language learning aptitudes correlated?
- Which L2 language areas are the autonomous EFL learners are likely to progress in and therefore prioritize?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language learning aptitude is defined by Bokander (2022) to be, "an individual's initial state of readiness and capacity for learning a foreign language" which refers to learning languages in general including mother tongues. The definition though, doesn't differentiate between L1 and L2 acquisition based on Carroll's (1981), who puts it, "the potential that a person has for learning languages. Not to mention other linguists who associate language learning aptitude to language development such as the early studies by Skehan 1986, and studies that built on it such as that by Sparks, 2012. Singleton (2017) poses it a question in his study, "Language aptitude: Desirable trait or acquirable attribute?" Singleton's answer language aptitude has often been associated with the popular notion of a "gift for languages. According to these early studies there is a correlation between language learning aptitude and children's early L1 development. In fact, this assumption of the early researchers holds a consensus view that language aptitude is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Furthermore, other researchers consider language learning aptitude to be to be the distinguishing factor that sets highly professional persons such as linguists, poets and literary figures apart from ordinary language learners according to Khaja (2021). Meaning the language learners who excel at the theory and applied linguistics are likely to have enjoyed a degree of language learning aptitude.

As of L1-L2 correlation with language-learning aptitude several studies including that by Oldin (1989) confirm the fact that both known to facilitate successful L2 learning. Such view is expressed by Odlin (1989) as the "cross-linguistic influence (CLI) as a "the different ways

in which one language can affect another within an individual speaker.” As of the case of Arabic and English languages the study by Sultana (2017) confirms the presence of covert CLI effects, demonstrating that English influences tend to inhibit traditional Arabic writing preferences. According to the paper this Arabic-English CLI results in a generally reduced the use of connectives in translated Arabic texts. There are also plenty of studies that attribute many of common grammar errors to the CLI effect and Arabic-English interaction in the minds of the learners. A major study on this regard is that by Lghzeel & Radzuan (2020) whose view is that, the huge differences rather

than similarities between Arabic and English and the minimal contact of these two languages results students committing errors whenever they write in English, especially when they change a statement from active to passive. In relation to these findings from L1-L2 correlation with language-learning aptitude literature, Williams (2012) took it further as implications for the organization of L2 instruction in linguistically diverse contexts, since high aptitude is not likely to compensate speakers of typologically highly dissimilar languages. This statement sounds concordant with the case of Arabic and English languages as this statistical data in Table (1) below shows:

Table 1: The Relationship between Abilities in English & Arabic

Research Groups	Number of Participants	Mean Scores in Reading in Arabic	Mean Scores in Reading in English	Sum of Ranks in Reading in Arabic	Sum of Ranks in Reading in English	Significance at 0.05
Intermediate	Male (3)	56.60	63.50	663.00	674.50	0.09 (Not sig)
	Female (15)	79.24	80.24	1894.50	1923.00	0.39 (Not sig)
Advanced	Male (4)	84.58	88.22	1942	1954	0.05 (Sig)
	Female (14)	93.26	94.90	1964	1982	0.04 (Sig)

*P < 0.05; **P < 0.01; ***P < 0.001

Vocabulary learning strategies, adults' autonomous English learning and language-learning aptitude are components that are co-addressed in several studies by early linguists such as by Dai & Renzulli, 2008; Feldhusen & Moon, 1992. Thereafter, many recent studies have been conducted such as that by Alexiou (2005) who differentiate between young and adult learners' aptitude. Alexiou pinpointed the difference to be in the EFL learners' cognitive development, as school-aged gifted and gifted adult learners. This difference is narrowed down by Ma & Yodkamlue (2019) that unlike the young learners who have short attention spans, class controlled and require a lot of creativity, adults are autonomous from these factors. In line with this age-aptitude correlation, the topic of age-vocabulary correlation is discussed in many studies such as that by Ghalebi, Sadighi & Bagheri (2020) whose study emphasizes that vocabulary learning strategies are applicable to adults more than it is to the younger learners.

III. METHOD OF THE STUDY

This study adopts a framework approach in order to draw findings and out of which to develop a learner's language aptitude

self-assessment tool. To draw the findings, an extensive literature review is conducted around three premises: Implicit L1 (Arabic) aptitude, explicit L2 (English) aptitude and the autonomous English vocabulary learning in an attempt to interconnect and devise the framework. The theoretical inputs of the framework mainly involves autonomously EFL learning and language aptitude by Singleton, 2017 and Fengm, 2015 respectively. Elaborately, it is devised by associating Feng's, 2015; EFL learner autonomous vocabulary acquisition; along with Carroll & Sapon's, 1959; Implicit language aptitude as "intentional cognitive abilities that facilitate implicit learning and processing of an L2"; Gu & Johnson, 1996 metacognitive self-initiation strategies of EFL learning; and finally Schmitt's, 1997, Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) that suggests, "the learners are faced with discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's experience".

Defining Language Learning Aptitude

Bokander (2022) defines language learning aptitude as "an individual's initial state of readiness and capacity for learning a foreign language," a broad conceptualization that

applies to both first (L1) and second (L2) language acquisition. This definition aligns with Carroll's (1981) foundational perspective, which describes aptitude as *"the potential that a person has for learning languages."* However, Carroll's model does not explicitly distinguish between L1 and L2 learning, treating aptitude as a general cognitive predisposition rather than a skill tied to a specific linguistic context.

Historical Perspectives on Aptitude

Early research by Skehan (1986) and later studies by Sparks (2012) expanded on Carroll's work, proposing that language aptitude is closely linked to **language development in children**. Skehan's research suggested that individuals with high aptitude demonstrate:

- **Strong phonological memory** (ability to retain sound patterns).
- **Grammatical sensitivity** (recognizing syntactic structures).
- **Inductive learning ability** (figuring out rules from input).

These traits were observed in both L1 acquisition and early L2 learning, reinforcing the idea that aptitude is a **cross-linguistic cognitive trait**.

Aptitude as an Innate Gift vs. Acquired Skill

Singleton (2017) critically examined whether language aptitude is a **fixed, innate trait** (a "gift for languages") or an **acquirable attribute** shaped by experience. His study synthesized findings from cognitive psychology and neurolinguistics, concluding that while some aspects of aptitude (e.g., working memory capacity) are biologically influenced, others (e.g., metalinguistic awareness) can be developed through training. This duality suggests that while some learners may have a natural advantage, structured practice and strategy use can enhance aptitude over time.

Aptitude as a Multi-Dimensional Construct

Research consensus supports the idea that language aptitude is **multi-dimensional**, encompassing:

1. **Cognitive Abilities** (e.g., pattern recognition, memory).
2. **Affective Factors** (e.g., motivation, anxiety levels).

3. **Metalinguistic Awareness** (e.g., understanding language rules).

For example, Khaja's (2021) study on **highly proficient language users** (e.g., linguists, poets, translators) found that these individuals often exhibit:

- **Exceptional phonological coding ability** (crucial for pronunciation).
- **Advanced lexical inferencing skills** (guessing word meanings from context).
- **Superior grammatical intuition** (sensing correct syntax without explicit rules).

This supports the argument that **aptitude is not just for general learners but a distinguishing factor in professional language mastery**.

L1 and L2 Aptitude: Overlaps and Distinctions

While early studies (e.g., Skehan, 1986) emphasized **L1-L2 correlations**, later research (e.g., Sparks, 2012) highlighted key differences:

- **L1 Aptitude:** Naturally acquired through immersion; tied to **implicit learning mechanisms**.
- **L2 Aptitude:** Often requires **explicit instruction** and strategy use, especially in low-exposure environments (e.g., Arabic-speaking EFL learners).

For Arabic speakers, the **diglossic nature of Arabic** (Modern Standard Arabic vs. dialects) adds complexity, as learners must navigate multiple linguistic systems when acquiring English (Sultana, 2017).

Implications for Autonomous EFL Learners

The literature suggests that **autonomous adult learners** can leverage their aptitude by:

- **Self-assessing strengths** (e.g., strong memory vs. grammatical sensitivity).
- **Adopting targeted strategies** (e.g., spaced repetition for vocabulary).
- **Monitoring progress** in key areas (e.g., reading comprehension, spoken fluency).

Gaps in Current Research

Despite extensive studies, key questions remain:

- **Can aptitude be reliably measured in informal learning settings?**
- **How do sociocultural factors (e.g., limited English exposure in Arab countries) interact with aptitude?**

Future research could explore **adaptive aptitude tests** for self-directed learners.

Revised Paragraph with Added Depth

*"Language learning aptitude, as defined by Bokander (2022), refers to an individual's inherent readiness and capacity for acquiring languages, encompassing both L1 and L2 learning. This broad definition aligns with Carroll's (1981) view of aptitude as a general potential for language acquisition, though it does not differentiate between native and foreign language learning processes. Early studies by Skehan (1986) and subsequent work by Sparks (2012) established that aptitude is a multi-faceted construct involving phonological memory, grammatical sensitivity, and inductive learning ability—traits observable in both child L1 development and adult L2 acquisition. Singleton (2017) further interrogated whether aptitude is an innate 'gift' or a trainable skill, concluding that while certain cognitive advantages are biologically influenced (e.g., working memory), strategic practice can enhance aptitude over time. Notably, Khaja's (2021) research on exceptional language users (e.g., poets, linguists) revealed that high aptitude manifests in advanced metalinguistic awareness and lexical inferencing, suggesting that aptitude is not merely about general proficiency but also about mastering language at an expert level. However, key distinctions exist between L1 and L2 aptitude: the former relies heavily on implicit acquisition, while the latter often demands explicit strategy use, particularly in low-exposure environments like the Arab EFL context. This raises critical questions about how autonomous learners can self-assess and cultivate their aptitude effectively, a gap the current study seeks to address.

IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

From the reviewed literature above, a few key findings can be drawn and formulated into

the target framework. First, L1 and L2 are found to overlap in the language aptitude's element of metacognitive self-initiation yielding in both intentional and unintentional learning process. Secondly, the privilege that adult EFL learners enjoy lies in their ability to detect, manage and develop the self-learning process particularly vocabulary -size and diversity. is evidently a pivotal indicator of progress in English learning. Therefore, in the absence of formal English progress assessment, the onus lies on the autonomous EFL learners to use their linguistic exceptional potentials and manage the whole process as elaborated in the study by Tabanlıoglu & Sherwani (2018).

A 2-from self-assessment framework of language aptitude thereby yields out of the findings drawn from the reviewed literature above. The framework combines L1 (Arabic) implicit aptitude and L2 (English) explicit aptitude correlation to provide a self-assessment tool represented in Arabic Form 1 and English Form 2 below:

From 1. L1 (Arabic) Language Aptitude Indicator

1. Early zeal for learning L1 language	<input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High
2. Outstanding level of L1 formal learning	<input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High
3. Conscious of own L1 language ability	<input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High
4. Zeal for L1 morphology and semantics	<input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High
5. Interest in foreign languages in general	<input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High

From 2. L2 (English) Language Aptitude Indicator

Practice	Self-assessment
1. Zeal for L2 vocabulary learning	<input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High
2. Writing habit in L2	<input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High
3. Reading habit in L2	<input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High
4. Attached to learning resource	<input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High

5. Track learning progress in L2	□ Low □ Medium □ High
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In conclusion, the 2-from self-assessment tool is a convenient manual for the adult Arabic speaking EFL learners to gauge their potentials of making the best of the autonomous English learning. The tool therefore avails this category of informal EFL learners that some of whom may not even know about their inherent and exceptional potentials of learning English. The assessment tool would as well serve as a guide for these adult learners to pay attention to the L2 areas which they might be disregarding so as to intensify their efforts on.

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