

## Discussion Questions for Chapter 3: Individual differences in second language learning

### Research on learner characteristics

- 1 Why is it difficult to assess the influence that personal characteristics have on the development of L2 proficiency?
- 2 How would it help you to know the relationship between the personal characteristics discussed in this chapter and their influence on L2 development?

### Intelligence

- 3 Language learners' performance on IQ tests is related to certain aspects of L2 ability but not to others. Why do you think the language abilities mentioned on pages 80–83 are related or unrelated to performance on IQ tests?

### Aptitude

- 4 'Abilities targeted by language aptitude tests are irrelevant for the process of language acquisition in communicative language teaching.' Discuss whether the research presented in this chapter on aptitude supports or refutes that statement.
- 5 What lessons can language teachers learn from the research on language aptitude and L2 instruction by Wesche (1981) and Erlam (2005)?

### Learning styles

- 6 Based on what you read in this chapter, do you think that there is an ideal way to teach/learn a language?
- 7 Do you think differences in learning styles should affect the way L2 teachers teach? If so, how?

### Personality

- 8 What can we learn from research about the relationship between L2 learning and
  - extroversion
  - inhibition
  - anxiety/tension
  - willingness to communicate

- 9 Why is it difficult to get a clear picture about the impact personal characteristics have on the L2 learning process?

### Attitudes and motivation

- 10 Define instrumental and integrative motivation in your own words and give an example to illustrate each. Comment on how these types of motivation might be manifested differently in different learning environments.
- 11 Explain Dörnyei's process-oriented model of motivation and define each of the three stages in your own words.
- 12 What are the particular challenges in motivating students in schools where you teach (or plan to teach) and how can they be addressed?

### Identity and ethnic group affiliation

- 13 It is suggested that members of a majority group learning a minority language might have different attitudes towards learning language than those in a minority group learning a majority language. What differences do you think there might be? Try to illustrate your answer with concrete examples.
- 14 Norton Peirce (1995) found that immigrants were reluctant to speak English in situations characterized by a power imbalance. Why might that be the case? Think of an example of such a situation to help you answer this question.
- 15 What relationship did Gatbonton et al. (2005) find between mastery of pronunciation and identity? Toohey suggests that identities can change over time. Do you think this is true of adults as well as children? How do you think such changes affect L2 development?
- 16 Some studies have shown that Japanese students were reluctant to speak English to the best of their ability during classroom activities. Do those findings surprise you? Think of a classroom setting that you are familiar with. Do you think you might see a similar pattern? Why/why not?

### Learner beliefs

- 17 How important is it for teachers to consider the beliefs their students hold about language instruction? How might this change their approach to teaching a particular group of students?
- 18 Some studies have found that teachers and students have different beliefs about the role and importance of explicit language-focused instruction and corrective feedback. Where do you think these different ideas come from? What is your experience as a teacher and as a language learner? How do you feel about the amount of such instruction that you have given and received? Have your beliefs

changed over time? If you have had the experience of learning another language in a classroom, do you think that the beliefs you have as a teacher and those you had as a language learner are the same?

### Age and second language learning

- 19 Why is it difficult to compare L2 learning success in children and adults? You should be able to suggest several reasons.
- 20 Which language features were studied in Patkowski's (1980) study to examine L2 development of immigrants? Does his study support the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)? How?
- 21 How did Johnson and Newport (1989) assess the language ability of individuals who had started learning English at different ages? Do their findings provide support to the CPH? How?
- 22 What does DeKeyser's (2000) study add to the previous findings on the role of age in second language acquisition? Do these findings surprise you?
- 23 Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle carried out a comprehensive study in which they assessed language development of L2 speakers on a variety of measures. Describe the development of the child, adolescent, and adult L2 learners in relation to each other. In your own words, explain why the results may not be relevant for assessing the CPH.
- 24 What do the studies discussed in this section indicate about the best age for beginning L2 instruction? What are the benefits of an early start? What are the benefits of starting later? How would you answer someone who says that it's always best to start learning an L2 as early as possible? Look back at the discussion of early bilingualism in Chapter 1 as you think about your response.
- 25 One of the difficulties in determining the importance of starting age in L2 instruction is that those who start early will usually accumulate more total hours of instruction. How did the Barcelona Age Factor (BAF) study get around the problem of distinguishing between the role of beginning age and total time? What was the importance of the fact that the BAF study extended over a period of several years?
- 26 One of the most frequently repeated facts about research is that even though two variables are correlated, it is not possible to know whether one causes the other. Explain in your own words why this is so and give an example from an educational context you are familiar with.