

THE EFFECTS OF KURDISH LEARNERS' CHARACTERISTICS ON THEIR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper is conducted at the University of Zakho, department of English language studies in (2013-2014). It investigates Kurdish learners' characteristics and their effects on the process of their second language learning. The data of the current study was collected throughout a methodological triangulation utilizing a questionnaire which consisted of 13 questions and it was given to a 100 students from different level in English department. Also a number of students were interviewed (2 students from each level) in order to obtain as reliable and authentic data as possible; the interview questions were 10. This research paper has been conducted to provide a detailed presentation of the learners' characteristics and investigates their effects on the process of second language learning. It is revealed that the majority of the students are affected by some main characteristics such as anxiety, personality and motivation. And also the results and findings revealed that the majority of the students have some characteristics that affect their level in the process of second language learning in both ways negative and positive.

Keywords: Learner characteristics, age, attitude, Kurdish learners, personality, aptitude

Introduction

According to Costantino (1999.p.20) "successful second language learning depends on a complicated interaction of individual and group learners' characteristics and motivations". It also depends on the individual strategies used by the language learner and the conditions in which the learning takes place. The identification and study of learners' characteristics that influence second language learning will be the main focus of this study.

It is believed that Kurdish students learn only by being spoon fed. Some studies have been conducted to investigate the effect that learners'

characteristics have on the process of Second Language Learning. However, there has not been any work done to investigate these factors with Kurdish learners of English language. Thus, this work is mainly done to investigate how Kurdish learners' characteristics affect the process of their second language learning (English). This problem is concerned with the environment of the learners that they live in, their personality and their age.

General aim of the study

The present study aims at providing a detailed presentation of the learners' characteristics and investigates their effects on the process of second language learning.

Research questions

1. What are the main Kurdish learners' characteristics that affect learners in the process of second language learning?
2. Do Kurdish learners' characteristics affect the process of their second language learning?
3. Why some L2 learners are more successful than others from a personal perspective?
4. What are the most characteristics that Kurdish learners are affected by in both ways negative and positive?

Literature review

Second language learning and acquisition.

According to linguists, there is an important distinction between language acquisition and language learning. The term 'acquisition' when it is used in the field of language refers to the ability that is acquired gradually in a language and using it naturally in communicative circumstances (Gass, and Selinker, 2001). That is why second language acquisition is acquired not learned. The activities which are related to the acquisition are experienced by the young child or acquired, or by those who spend along period in a different communicative environment and be acquired another language and their situations make them to acquire another language. Therefore, it should be known that second language acquisition is not learned but it is the result of interaction in other communicative situations or the experiences acquired by the young child (Yule, 1996). Learning, on the other hand, is an accurate process that has been made to accumulate the knowledge in the field of language which is included vocabulary and grammar of a language. That is why second language learning is learned not acquired because this process cannot be acquired without learning. (Mathematics. For example, is learned, not acquired). Activities which are related to the learning are the result of the attempts that has been done in the different levels of studying language

because sometimes successful learning is associated with the learning background learned in previous levels (Harmer, 2007). Therefore, it should be mentioned that the second language learning is the result of a good studying about the language in the previous levels and present (Yule, 1996).

Learners' Characteristics

Age

Many researchers believed that children are more proficient at second language acquisition than older individuals, but some of them mention that, this assumption is not supported very well. And children are natural acquirers before the period of puberty, and this does not mean that they are more skillful in second language in all ways than adults are. Also it is revealed that children are not better than older individuals in all aspects of second language acquisition (Collier(1987), Krashen (1982), Krashen, Long and Scaecella (1979), Krashen and Terrell (1983) and Scarcella and Higa (1982) cited in (Costantino, 1999).

The findings of the above researchers suggest that children are superior to adults in second language acquisition only with regard to the level of second language proficiency they are ultimately able to attain, and Students who begin their second language as children will attain higher levels of second language proficiency than those who begin as adults. However, adults are faster than young children in attaining second language proficiency over the short run. In the beginning stages of second language development, adults make more progress in acquiring morphological, syntactic and lexical aspect of the second language. One reason adults are at an advantage in the early stages of second language acquisition is that their experiences have a positive impact on language comprehension (Costantino, 1999). A second reason according to Krashen (1982), is that adults generally receive more comprehensible input (the amount of new language either written or heard, that the learner is exposed to and understands) than young children. Krashen (1982) argues that, this is because adolescents and adults are more skillful in dictating both the quantity and quality of their input. A third reason is that adults are able to largely bypass the initial silent period that is so obvious in young learners.

Tabors and Snow (1997) cited in (Costantino, 1999) in their study of the language development of preschool age second language learners, note that when young children are in a social setting and are unable to speak the language of the group, they initially respond to dilemma in one of two ways: they continue to speak their native language or they stop speaking. Many children when faced with a social situation which their home language is not useful for communication will abandon attempts to communicate in that language and enter a period when they do not talk at all. This period has been

observed by a number of previous researchers who have termed it the “silent or mute period” (p.107). Older learners according to Krashen (1982), are able to largely circumvent this silent period due to their ability to produce the second language rules. This allows the learners to more actively participate in conversation and receive a greater amount of specific comprehensible input for very specific purpose than that received by children.

Learning Strategies

According to Celce-Murcia (2001) second language learning strategies are specific behaviors or thought processes which student use to attain their own second language learning, and these strategies help them to learn the second language easily and learn it in organized way. A given strategy is neither good nor bad; it is neutral until the context of its use is thoroughly considered. And it should be known, what does make a strategy positive and helpful for the learners? A strategy is useful if the following conditions are present: “^(a) the strategy relates well to the second language task at hand; ^(b) the strategy fits the particular student’s learning style preferences to one degree or another; and ^(c) the student employs the strategy effectively and links it with other relevant strategies”. Strategies that fulfill these conditions “make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990,p.8,cited in Celce- Murcia, 2001). Learning strategies can also enable students to become more independent, autonomous and lifelong learners. Yet students are not always aware of the power of consciously using second language learning strategies to make learning faster and more effective. That is why this affects the process of second language learning to be attained easily.

Motivation and Attitude

“Attitude is defined as an individual’s reaction about or toward something based on their beliefs or opinions, while motivation refers to the degree of an individual strives to do something because they desire to and because of the pleasure and fulfillment derived from the activity” (Costantino,1999,p.25). According to many researchers attitude and motivation act as an important thing in the field of second language learning. For example, Gardner (1985) notes that attitude and motivation are so important because the ways of learning second language are different from the other ways for students. In contrast to other ways, students procedure second language study is involved with material outside their cultural context and some other things that maybe new for them and they are not just asked to learn about the language but they are need to learn the language and make it a part of their behavior. That’s why attitude and motivation are important

especially in the process of second language learning because they help students and make their task easily attainable.

In his study on attitude and motivation, Gardner (1985) also note that attitude and motivation are two important factors that affect the development of second language proficiency. Successful language learners must be psychologically prepared to adopt various aspects of behavior which characterize members of another linguistic-cultural group (Selinker, 2004).

Language Aptitude

It has been revealed that people differ in the field to which they have a natural ability for learning a second language. This ability, known as language aptitude which is believed as a part related to general intelligence but also to be in part different (Ellis. 1997). These are the components of language aptitude; phonemic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, inductive language learning and rote learning ability (Carrol 1965 cited in Ellis, 1997). And also according to Ellis (1997) to what extent language aptitude is revealed to success in second language learning, and gives a strong evidence that it is learners who have a great language aptitude learn fast and attain great levels of second language proficiency than learners who do not have a great language aptitude. And that's why language aptitude affects the process of second language learning because it makes the learning process so easier and makes a difference between the learners.

Personality

A number of personality characteristics have been mentioned that affect the second language learning, but it is not easy to reveal their effect in empirical studies. And also it has been revealed with the other research investigating, the effects of individual characteristics on second language learning, that different studies measuring a similar personality trait produce different results. For example, it is most of the time has been discussed that an extroverted person is well suited to language learning. However, this is not always been supported by the research. Although some other studies have noted that success in language learning is related to learners' scores on questionnaires measuring characteristics related with extroversion such as assertiveness and adventurousness, other have mentioned that many successful language learners do not obtain high scores on measures of extroversion (Lightbown & Spada 2006). According to the psychological studies the extrovert person is enjoyable and sociable that is why he gains his greatest energy from the external world and he always wants to interact with the other people and have many types of friendship, some deep and some not. Therefore his/her styles (sociable and interaction with other people)

make him/her to be more successful in learning and acquiring language (Celce-Murcia, 2001).

Anxiety

Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system (Spielberger, 1983 cited in Zheng, 2008,p.2). Anxiety is also another characteristic of personality that has a great effect on the process of second language learning. It has gained the attention of a big number of linguists in second language acquisition research and also it is revealed that the lack of anxiety is considered as an important component of self-confidence (Horwitz 2001 cited in Saville-Troke, 2006). Anxiety is negatively relates to the level of second language proficiency which is included grades awarded in foreign language classes. Therefore, it is revealed that higher anxiety affects the language learning negatively, and make its level to be low and make the learners to not be confident but lower anxiety makes the learners to get a high self-confidence that is a good way in attaining second language learning (Saville-Troike,2006).

Methodology

Data Collection

"The information gathered by researchers during a research study, is referred to technically as data. The data gathering process, also known as instrumentation, is a crucial element of research, as the conclusions of the study are based on what is revealed by the data" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990 cited in Gomes, 2008).

Method of Data Collection

Through this study the data have been gathered by two ways such as quantitative or questionnaire which consist the number of Yes/No questions and it is given to the students to answer them. And the other way is the qualitative or interview which is made between two persons the interviewer and the interviewee and this way needs more detailed discussion because the questions open-ended in order to give more chance to the interviewee.

A *quantitative* approach is one in which the investigator primarily uses post positivist claims for developing knowledge (i.e., cause and effect thinking, reduction to specific variables and hypotheses and questions, use of measurement and observation, and the test of theories), employs strategies of inquiry such as experiments and surveys, and collects data on predetermined instruments that yield statistical data (Creswell, 2003). And also according to Gilbert (2001) quantitative methods are special tools used in collecting data that is in the form of numbers.

This type of approach is one in which the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives (i.e., the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed. with an intent of developing a theory or pattern) or advocacy/participatory perspectives (i.e., political, issue-oriented, collaborative. or change oriented) or both. It also uses strategies of inquiry such as narratives, ethnographies, grounded theory studies, or case studies. The researcher collects open-ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from the data (Dawson, 2009). Another researcher states about it, a qualitative research methods are special type of tools that are used in collecting data that is not in the form of numbers (Punch, 2009).

Questionnaire

According to Mellenberg (2008), the questionnaire is a structured technique for gathering primary data about a specific study, it is a series of written oral questions for which the respondent gives answers. A well-designed questionnaire encourages the respondent to provide complete and accurate information about the subject that they are faced in this case. A distinction can be made between questionnaires with questions that measure separate variables, and questionnaires with questions that are combined into either a scale or index.

"A questionnaire is simply a 'tool' for collecting and recording information about a particular issue of interest. It is mainly made up of a list of questions, but should also include clear instructions and space for answers or administrative details. Questionnaires should always have a definite purpose that is related to the objectives of the research, and it needs to be clear from the outset how the findings will be used. Respondents also need to be made aware of the purpose of the research wherever possible, and should be told how and when they will receive feedback on the findings" (Oppenheim,1992. p.1).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Questionnaire

These are some advantages of questionnaire according to (Institute of lifelong learning, 2009)

- It is practical between the researcher and the respondent.
- A lot of data could be gathered from a large number of people in a brief period of time and in a relatively cost effective way.
- It could be performed by the researcher or by any number of people with limited affect to its validity and reliability.
- The sequences of the questionnaire can usually be rapidly and effortlessly quantified by either a researcher or through the use of a software package.

- It can be examined more experimentally and objectively than other forms of research.
- The point when the information has been quantified, it could be utilized to look in, out and all around other research and may be utilized to measure change.
- Positivists believe that quantitative information can be used to make a new speculation and/or test existing hypotheses.

These are some disadvantages of the questionnaire according to (Institute of lifelong learning, 2009).

- Is argued to be deficient to understand some forms of information – i.e. Changes of emotions, behavior, feelings etc.
- Phenomenologists state that quantitative research is basically an artificial creation by the researcher, because it is asking a limited amount of information without any illustration or explanation that received from the respondent.
- Lacks of validity and reliability.
- There is no way to judge how truthful a respondent is being when he/she provides his/her answers.
- There is no way of telling how much thoughts a respondent has put in or how they care about it.
- The respondent may be forgetful or not thinking within the full context of the circumstance.
- People may read distinctively into each question and therefore, answer based on their own interpretation of the question for example, what is 'good' for someone may be 'bad' for someone else, that is why there is a level of subjectivity that is not acknowledged.
- There is a level of researcher imposition, because when the researcher develops the questionnaire, it means the researchers make their own decisions and assumptions as to what is and is not important that is why they may miss something that is of importance.

Interview

The interview is a system intended to evoke a vivid picture of the participant's viewpoint on the research point. Throughout the interview, the individual being questioned is acknowledged the master and the questioner is viewed as the understudy. The researcher's questioning methods are encouraged by the desire to take in everything the participants' can impart about the exploration subject. The researchers share with the participants by giving questions in a neutral way, listening mindfully to participants' reactions, and asking catch up inquiries and tests dependent upon those reactions. They don't lead participants as per any preconceived ideas, nor do

they motivate participants to give specific replies by communicating regard or objection to what they say (Mack, et. al., 2005).

According to Seidman (1998) the "interview is a conversation between two or more people where questions are asked by the interviewer to elicit facts or statements from the interviewee. Interviews are a standard part of journalism and media reporting, but are also employed in many other situations, including a qualitative research".

Procedure

The methods that have been used for data collection through this piece of work are two methods such as questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire which consists of several Yes/No questions that have been divided a great number of students for getting their answers as samples of this study, the number of the students who are shared within this method is about one hundred students from different levels of the study and these students are from the university of Zakho, Faculty of Humanities, department of English, and also they are from both gender male and female. And the majority of the participants in both methods are between the age of eighteen to twenty four except some of them are over the age of twenty four. But the interview also contains of several questions which are open-ended in order to give more chance to participants to provide their own opinions and to be more free to say what they want, also the participants are students from the English department, University of Zakho, they are eight students from different levels of the study, from each level two students are taken to participate in this method one of them is a female and the other are male. These are the two methods which are used in this study, and they are between the students and the researcher.

Results and Discussion

According to Hopkins (2002) the analysis of the data collected involves breaking the data into manageable themes, patterns, trends, and relationships. According to the investigation that has been made in the University of Zakho/English department, which is included the majority of the students from the above department, it is revealed how the students in this department are dealt with the process of second language learning.

The responses of the questionnaire suggest the different answers. These are discussed and shown in the charts provided in this chapter. From a total of 100 students, 64% have some characteristics that negatively affect their English language learning process. These are, as stated by the majority of the students, anxiety and personality. Anxiety negatively affects their level of English hence not being able to speak comfortably. This was further

investigated by interviewing some of the students and the majority of them agreed on both aspects. When interviewed, one of the students said that:
"I feel anxious when I speak in English in front of the students especially if the students are not familiar to me and when I think they are better than me or they are above my knowledge that is why this hinders my way in the process of second language learning".

Another student stated that:

"My personality affects me in a way that I cannot interact with the other students especially those who have a great level of English language learning and I cannot make friends easily to speak with them in English because sometimes I am not confident about what in my mind to say in English because I am afraid about my English to not be correct".

However, only 36% of the students in the English department/Zakho University do not have any characteristic that negatively affect their English language learning.

As for whether being extroverted, the questionnaire shows that a total of 74 (74%) students are extroverted learners as it is clear in chart 1. And it is more revealed during the interview the majority of the interviewed students said that they are extroverted person as if out of the eight students five of them said, they are extroverted and this affects them to get more about English language learning when one of the interviewed students said:

"I am an extroverted learner and it affects my level of English learning and encouraged me to do more efforts in order to get more because I can interact with the students easily as friends and also talk to the teacher easily without hesitating or being afraid of communication".

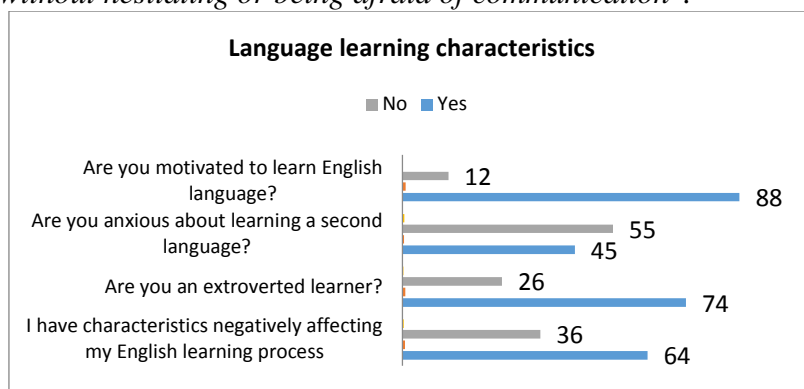


Chart 1 (Language learning characteristics)

According to Celce-Muricia (2001) how he explains these two kinds of personality and how they affect, by definition, extroverts obtain their energy from the outside world. They desire to interact with the people and have many kinds of friendships, some deep and some not. In contrast,

introverts get their energy from the inside world, seeking loneliness and want to have just a few friendships, that are often very deep.

The above chart also shows that 45% of the students are anxious about second language learning which means that anxiety hinders their way in the process of second language learning. However, more than half of the students (55%) are not anxious about learning English as their second language. Anxiety, as stated by most of the interviewees, does not affect their process and progress of second language learning. One of the interviewed students said:

"I do not feel anxious when I speak in English with the other students even if they are not known for me or they are above my knowledge and it is normal to speak English in front of the students in the class or outside or even with the teachers and which means anxiety does not hinder my way in the process of second language learning".

According to Saville-Troike (2006,p.90), "the higher anxiety tends to go with lower levels of success in L2 learning in addition to self-confidence, lower anxiety may be manifested by more risk-taking or more adventuresome behaviors".

Out of 100 students, 88 of them stated that they are motivated to learn English language, while only 12 students said no they are not motivated (see chart no 1). From this result, it is revealed that the majority of the students in Zakho university English department are motivated to learn English language. This was further investigated by asking the interviewees about this question and all of them stated that they are motivated to learn English because of many reasons: their families always motivated them to learn English because it is a global language.

According to Ur (1996,p.274) "the motivated learner is the one who is willing or even eager to invest effort in learning activities and to progress". And also it has been revealed in various studies that motivation strongly facilitates language learning (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1982 cited in Ur, 1996).

Results from the questionnaire show that 55% of the students feel that their Kurdish language affects their English language learning while 45% of the students disagreed to the point, and also 46% students depend on their first language during the process of English language learning while 54% students do not.

Age is considered by many researchers as an important factor in learning anything. Results from the questionnaire reveal that 67% of the students think that their age is not a problem for them and does not affect the process of their second language learning according to the results of the questionnaire about this point because the majority said it does not affect. And also during the interview the majority of the interviewed students stated

that their age does not affect them through the process of second language learning, and one of the interviewed student said;

"I don't think that my age affects me in the process of second language learning because it does not hinder my way to learn English language and I do never feel that my age become an obstacle for me which I cannot overcome it in the process of second language learning".

According to Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1979) cited in Krashen (1982, p.43). Mentioned the observational research on the impact of age and second language acquisition and inferred all published studies were consistent with these three generalizations.

1. *Mature people proceed through the early stages of second language advancement speeder than younger children.*

2. *Older children acquire faster than younger children, time and exposure held constant.*

3. *Acquirers who start nature exposure to second language through childhood generally obtain higher second language capability than those starting as adults.*

As for being introverted, alarmingly the percentage for students being introverted was only 26 which highly corresponds with the question of "Are you an introverted learner?" shown in the above chart (1), as shown in the below chart (2). This validates the responses and also further proves that the majority of English language learners at the University of Zakho are extroverted learners. Moreover, to make sure about the result of the questionnaire, this question was asked to the interviewed students as well. Astonishingly, all but one student stated that they are not introverted students and like to be open to the world and express themselves in the target language.

The introverted student said that:

"I am an introverted learner and that is hinder my way in the process of second language learning because that affects me to not interact with the students easily or making friends to communicate with them in English because my personality does not allow me to do that, that is why my personality becomes an obstacle in front of me which I cannot overcome it or protect myself from it to speak in English more or enough that I need to do".

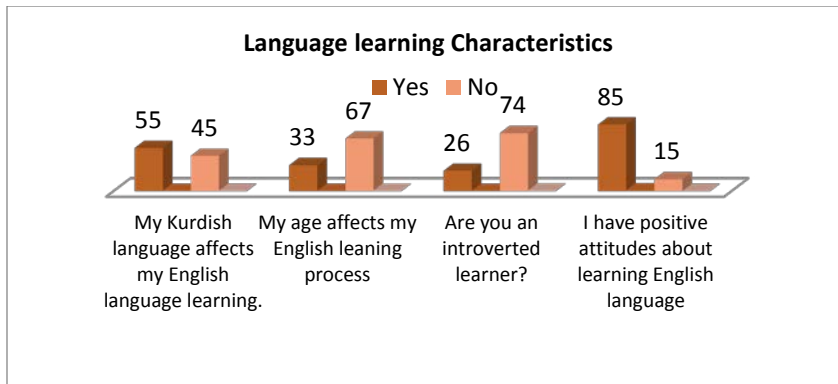


Chart 2 (Language Learning Characteristics)

Throughout this study, and as it is shown in Chart (2), it is revealed that a total of 85 (85%) students have a positive attitude about learning English language while only 15% students do not have a positive attitude and it is showed that most of the students of Zakho university English department are interested in learning English language. Almost all of the interviewed students stated that they have a positive attitude about learning English because it is revealed from the responses of the interviewed students while out of eight students all of them said that, they are so interested in English language learning and most of them said it was one of our dreams when we were in high school, and one of the interviewed students said:

"I have a positive attitude about learning English language and I am so interested with it because it was one of my dreams when I was at high school and I hoped to be accepted at English department and always I hope to be one of those who speak as a native ".

Regarding the presence of a big number of the students, result from the questionnaire revealed that the majority of the students (71%) think that the presence of a big number of students in the class influences their language abilities and learning process. From this result it is revealed that most of the students in Zakho University English department are affected because the presence of a big number of students in the class affects their level of English and cannot speak easily. Chart (3) below clarifies this.

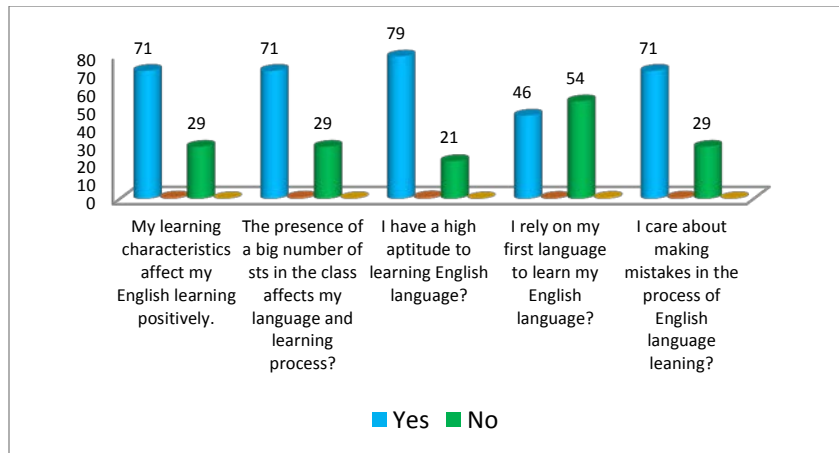


Chart 3 (Language Learning Characteristics)

According to the responses of the participants during the questionnaire it has been revealed that 79% students think that they have a high aptitude to learning English language and only 21% of the students do not have a high aptitude. According to the results of the interview that is interviewed with eight students the majority of them said that, they have an aptitude that affects their level of English language learning because it helps them to understand the subject easily and get the idea of the subject matter and memorize vocabulary. And about this point one of the interviewed students said:

"I have an aptitude and that affects my level of English learning positively because it helps me to understand things easily and memorize vocabulary with a little effort without do more efforts such as other students who don't have an aptitude".

Another interviewed student said:

"I do not have an aptitude to learn English language because I cannot distinguish between the grammatical forms and memorize things easily that is why I think I am not affected by this characteristic and it does not help me in the process of second language learning".

Moreover, 71% of the students stated that they care about making mistakes in English language which might be a huge problem for them to progress in their language learning.

Major Findings

Throughout the investigation that has been done in Zakho university English department out of the discussion and analysis above, it has been revealed that the majority of the students have some characteristics that affect them in the process of second language learning. These are anxiety, personality and motivation. In addition, learners' characteristics affect their

process of second language learning in both ways positively and negatively, and the level of English language learning is affected in both ways as well. For example, the students who are anxious, their level of English language learning is lower than those who are not anxious. Also, some students are more successful than others because they have characteristics that affect them positively to be more encouraged to learn English language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, throughout the attempts that have been done in this study in order to investigate the Kurdish learners' characteristics and their effects on the process of their second language learning and the results that have been reached, it is revealed that Kurdish student in Zakho University/English department have some characteristics that negatively and positively affect their English language learning process. However, the degree of this effect is different from one learner to another because each learner is affected according to the characteristics that he/she has. Therefore, it is concluded that the learners' characteristics that negatively and positively affect Kurdish learners in the process of their second language learning are anxiety. This affects the learners negatively because it hinders their way in the process of English language learning in a way that they cannot speak in front of the students comfortably because their anxiety makes them to fear in that moments when they stand to speak with other learners especially those who are not familiar for them. Personality is also considered one of the factors contributing in the learning process of English learners at Zakho university. It has two types which are extrovert and introvert. However, each type affects students' learning process in a different way and they are opposite to each other. For example, extroverted personalities have been affected positively by this factor, because it helps learners more and gives them more chances to interact and communicate with the other learners or even teachers to improve their language and do more practice. Whereas, the introverted personalities have been negatively affected by this trait.

Results revealed that motivation is one of the characteristics that positively affects the process of Kurdish students' second language learning, because it helps and encourages them to be more successful in the learning process. Age was also concluded to affect the process of Kurdish students' second language learning in a positive way. This could be because they are all young learners and are trying very hard to learn English language. Attitude towards learning English language was revealed to have a positive effect towards the process of their second language learning, because students are very interested to learn English language. Aptitude affects Kurdish learners' positively and it makes the process of their second language learning easier, because it enables them to understand the language

easily. Moreover, their learning strategies affects their process of second language learning positively because they help them to do their tasks in professional way and According to Celce-Muricia (2001) second language learning strategies are specific behaviors or thought processes which student use to attain their own second language learning, and these strategies help them to learn the second language easily and learn it in organized way. These characteristics are mentioned because they are the most affective learners characteristics that affect the majority of the Kurdish learners in Zakho University/English department.

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