

Section 2. Psychology

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING APTITUDE CONSTRUCT: THE CLASSICAL VIEW

Abstract. With the number of both voluntary and involuntary language learners rising daily, there has been an increase in the importance of second/foreign language instruction and learning worldwide. However, there are overt disparities among the actual results attained by those learning a second or foreign language, which are typically explained by pointing to a particular skill that some people possess but not others. This talent, generally termed “foreign language aptitude” is a psychological construct that is thought to be measurable and quantifiable with the results of such measurement thought to be reliable indicators of success in intensive foreign language training programs. The present paper will deal with what we term the “Classical View” of the foreign language aptitude construct (its origins and basic tenets) that still remains an influential if often overlooked individual difference in foreign language learning and acquisition.

Keywords: foreign language aptitude, intensive foreign language instruction, foreign language learners, foreign language aptitude conceptualization, foreign language aptitude operationalization.

Both laypeople and professional language instructors and learners attest to the disparity in language learning skills observable in a language learning environment. The latter are frequently no wiser than the former being baffled by the contrast between those who learn a foreign language rather effortlessly and those who struggle to do so despite having the same opportunities available¹.

¹ Sparks R. L. and Ganschow L. Foreign language learning difficulties: affective or native language aptitude differences?, *Mod. Lang. J.*, vol. 75, no. 1, P. 3. 1991

The “aptitude for languages” or “foreign language aptitude” is one of the main individual variations invoked to explain why some people are successful at learning foreign languages while others are not.

Foreign language aptitude (FLA) is a psychological construct that underlies certain observed differences in a person’s behavior in response to an external stimulus¹. It is a “postulated attribute of people”² that comprises a number of distinct yet interconnected cognitive abilities³.

Any construct that is utilized to describe a behavioral performance must be conceptualized, or given a clear description in terms of that behavioral performance.

However, there is a significant heterogeneity of conceptualization construction processes when it comes to FLA⁴. This has a direct impact on the operationalization of the construct, i.e. on the conditions and processes necessary for eliciting behavior that allows an observer to make inferences about the construct⁵. The existence of the proposed construct can be established by a sufficient number of comparable performances (behavioral samples), but it must also be shown that it differs from other constructs that have already been established as legitimately existing by the research community.

Numerous extant instruments that claim to elicit specific performance and ultimately provide some sort of measurement of the construct show the heterogeneity in construct conceptualization techniques, which is true in relation to FLA as well⁶.

The FLA has traditionally been considered from the perspective of its potential use in two related fields: student placement and student screening⁷. Therefore, the two FLA test types that were most frequently used in the 1920s and 1930s (the dawn of

¹ Wesche M., Edwards H., and Wells W. Foreign language aptitude and intelligence, *Appl. Psycholinguist.*, vol. 3, no. 2. P. 128, 1982, doi: 10.1017/S0142716400006664.

² Cronbach J. and Meehl P. E. Construct Validity in Psychological Tests, *Psychol. Bull.*, vol. 52. P. 178, 1955.

³ Wen Z., Biedroń A., and Skehan P. Foreign language aptitude theory: Yesterday, today and tomorrow, *Lang. Teach.*, vol. 50, no. 1. P. 2, 2017, doi: 10.1017/S0261444816000276.

⁴ Dörnyei Z., *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*, vol. 29, no. 01. 2005. P. 33; Li S. The Construct Validity of Language Aptitude, *Stud. Second Lang. Acquis.*, vol. 38, no. 4. P. 843, 2016, doi: 10.1017/S027226311500042X

⁵ Bachman L. F., *Statistical Analysis for Language Assessment*. Cambridge University Press, 2004. P. 15.

⁶ Dörnyei Z., *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*, vol. 29, no. 01. 2005. P. 33; Li S. The Construct Validity of Language Aptitude, *Stud. Second Lang. Acquis.*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 802, 2016, doi: 10.1017/S027226311500042X; Winke P. M. Aptitude Testing, in *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*, First Edit., M. DelliCarpini, Ed. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2018. P. 2.

⁷ Lutz M. *The Development of Foreign Language Aptitude Test: A review of the literature*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1967. P. 3.

the aptitude testing) were¹: tests gauging a person's ability in their native language and covering vocabulary, grammar, and spelling tasks; tests simulating tasks that students of a foreign language might encounter while studying that language (also known as “work-sample” tests).

Early FLA tests had a strong correlation with intelligence assessment tools and required that the subject have some prior linguistic knowledge (including that of grammar-related terminology and comprehension of basic word-formation processes in their native language). The assessments were consistent with the goals of foreign language instruction at the time, which focused primarily on teaching students how to read and translate in the target language and paid little attention to communication.

Early FLA testing and intelligence tests had a strong association, raising the question of why specific FLA measuring and assessment tools were even necessary. What use is it to have two tests that produce highly correlated findings when one test would do just as well?

With the outbreak of World War II and the United States Government's understanding of a precarious situation in the domain of foreign language training of its personnel serving in missions abroad, the FLA-as-IQ era came to an end. “The Army Method”, which focuses on intense language teaching, was created at that time. The approach is still commonly utilized in educational institutions around the world, using the American Language Course (ALC) materials, and requires enrolled students to devote at least six (often nine) months of their lives to studying a foreign language (up to 8 hours daily).

One may argue that the first scientific study of FLA and the creation of trustworthy FLA evaluation test batteries arose directly in reaction to the demands of intense foreign language instruction programs (and the Army Method). Where such programs are in place (for example, at the Ministry of Defense of Uzbekistan), it is necessary to use valid instruments to choose candidates for rigorous language training.

John Bissell Carroll, an American educational psychologist and the field's pioneer, advocated the Classical View of FLA while working at Harvard University in the early 1950s. What follows is the underlying assumptions of this perspective².

In terms of the different resources (both physical and temporal) necessary for its successful implementation, rigorous foreign language training is a difficult task. There

¹ Carroll J. B. The Prediction of Success in Intensive Foreign Language Training., *Train. Res. Educ.*, vol. 64, P. 91, 1962.

² Wen Z., Biedroń A., and Skehan P. Foreign language aptitude theory: Yesterday, today and tomorrow, *Lang. Teach.*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 1–31, 2017, doi: 10.1017/S0261444816000276; Carroll J. B., Implications of Aptitude Test Research and Psycholinguistic Theory for Foreign Language Teaching. Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey, p. 14, 1971; Li S., The Associations between Language Aptitude and Second Language Grammar Acquisition: A Meta-Analytic Review of Five Decades of Research, *Appl. Linguist.*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 385–408, 2015, doi: 10.1093/applin/amu054

hasn't been discovered a means to shorten training programs past a certain threshold while still ensuring the achievement of satisfactory results¹.

While everyone is capable of learning a foreign language, but not everyone can succeed in doing so within the parameters of "rigorous, intensive, expensive training programs in foreign languages operated by military and governmental organizations," where the environment in the language classroom may be more suited to those with high than to those with low aptitude scores².

According to Carroll³, some persons have "a fairly specialized talent (or group of talents)" enabling them to effectively complete rigorous foreign language training, yet their population proportion appears to be small. The fairly specialized talent, or FLA, is a psychological characteristic that influences the process of learning a foreign language without being influenced by other variables in the affective or cognitive domains⁴. Since they essentially serve as a general cut-off point but are unable to account for the wide variations in aptitude levels in those who cross it, intelligence tests in particular have been shown to be rather weak and unreliable for selecting candidates for intensive language training.

FLA is a construct that is regarded to be relatively stable, unchangeable, and resistant to any attempts at mechanical progress; it is believed to be impossible to train someone to be better at their FLA. The rate at which language learners eventually reach the necessary mastery level within specific time restrictions, with other variables (motivation, instructor quality, learning chances, etc.) being ideal, is the most obvious manifestation of FLA.

FLA is engaged in contexts of formal instruction when linguistic input is directly manipulated, but it is not a key component of natural language learning environments where strong time constraints are not present⁵. The FLA gives the student a "first level of preparedness"⁶ for learning a foreign language.

¹ Carroll J. B. The Prediction of Success in Intensive Foreign Language Training, *Train. Res. Educ.*, vol. 64. P. 87, 1962.

² Winke P. M. Aptitude Testing, in *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*, First Edit., M. DelliCarpini, Ed. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2018. P. 6; Carroll J. B. The Prediction of Success in Intensive Foreign Language Training, *Train. Res. Educ.*, vol. 64. P. 89, 1962; Sparks R., Ganschow L., and Patton J. Prediction of performance in first year foreign language courses: Connections between native and foreign language learning, *J. Educ. Psychol.*, vol. 87, no. 4. P. 640, 1995.

³ Carroll J. B. The Prediction of Success in Intensive Foreign Language Training, *Train. Res. Educ.*, vol. 64. P. 89. 1962.

⁴ Ibid 90.

⁵ Winke P. M. Aptitude Testing, in *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*, First Edit., M. DelliCarpini, Ed. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2018. P. 1.

⁶ Carroll J. B. Twenty-five years of research on foreign language aptitude, in *Individual differences and universals in language learning aptitude*, K. Diller, Ed. Rowley, MA: Newbury House., 1981. P. 81.

According to the Classical FLA model, there are four fundamental components (abilities) comprising it: Phonetic Coding Ability, Grammatical Sensitivity, Inductive Language Learning Ability, Rote memory for Foreign Language Materials.

Phonetic Coding Ability can be defined as the capacity to encode novel auditory information (sounds or sound stings) in a fashion that allows for a delayed retrieval of it, meaning the information may be “recognized, identified and remembered over time”¹. A person who can immediately reproduce what they hear would not be similarly successful in this job if there were any form of interruption in between the two instances, which is the important component of the definition known as “delayed retrieval.” Since language learners must not only acquire “the identities of the new phonemes..., but must also recognize and recall the phonetic sequences represented by the morphemes, words, and intonation contours,” Carroll argues that this skill is crucial for language learners². **Grammatical Sensitivity**, in its turn, is defined as the capacity to recognize the distinct roles that various lexical items play within the confines of an utterance without explicit teaching. The ability to infer grammatical rules and forms, as well as the meanings of lexical items, from unknowable linguistic material without the aid of a teacher is known as **Inductive Language Learning Ability**. Despite Carroll’s denial³ that language learning ability is unrelated to general intelligence, this component is, as Carroll himself acknowledged, “most strongly correlated with general intelligence”⁴. Inductive Language Learning Ability it is the capacity to “notice and identify patterns of correspondence and relationships involving either meaning or grammatical form”⁵. **Rote Memory for Foreign Language Materials** is the capacity to memorize sufficiently many new words or grammatical structures in a foreign language.

The Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT), which was created by Carroll and his colleague Stanley Sapon in 1959 and has five subsections (“Learning numbers”, “Phonetic script”, “Spelling clues”, “Words in sentences” and “Paired associates”), is based on the FLA’s four components. All of the MLAT subtests, however, are “a hybrid blend of the different underlying components” rather than “a pure manifestation of the four components” that Carroll himself identified⁶.

¹ Sparks R. L. and Ganschow L. Foreign language learning difficulties: affective or native language aptitude differences?, *Mod. Lang. J.*, vol. 75, no. 1. P. 6. 1991.

² Sparks R. L. and Ganschow L. Foreign language learning difficulties: affective or native language aptitude differences?, *Mod. Lang. J.*, vol. 75, no. 1. P. 4, 1991; Carroll J. B. The Prediction of Success in Intensive Foreign Language Training, *Train. Res. Educ.*, vol. 64. P. 90, 1962.

³ Carroll J. B., Implications of Aptitude Test Research and Psycholinguistic Theory for Foreign Language Teaching. Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey. P. 6, 1971.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Dörnyei Z. and Skehan P., Individual Differences in Second Language Learning, in *The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*, 2008. P. 593.

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