FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR ADULTS - NO WRONG TIME FOR THE BEST DECISION

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Abstract: After offering a theoretical background on decision making, the paper analyses the perceived benefit of learning a foreign language in todays' Romanian society. The research method used is an online questionnaire. The hypothesis of the study is that adults generally decide to embark upon language learning projects without having clear objectives and realistic expectations. The paper also suggests some solutions to prevent loss of resources and to encourage higher success rates when it comes to language learning projects.

Keywords: language learning, adults, decisions, motivation.

Introduction

In today's evolving business environment, an increasing number of adults are faced with the decision of starting to study a foreign language. Although it only comes in third after Chinese and Spanish in terms of number of speakers, English is still the most popular choice when it comes to choosing a foreign language in Romania, due to its being the lingua franca of business, travel and international relations.

Adults decide to start new projects like studying a foreign language all the time, more often than not under the pressure of external circumstances like improved career opportunities. In most cases, adults do not evaluate themselves as absolute beginners when embarking on such projects, but they usually want to get fast results.

Foreign language learning is a complex activity that depends on a lot of variables like: age, talent, motivation, anxiety, culture, to name just a few. Age is one of the critical variables in this equation as it defines the learners we have in mind for this study. Drawing on neurological evidence, Lenneberg (1967) formulated the critical age hypothesis and showed that adults find it more difficult to learn a foreign language than children. Although the theory has been highly debated and researchers even argued that adults and teenagers have an advantage because of their ability to learn about language, adults still come out last in the race for language proficiency in at least one aspect: the time they can invest in foreign language study.

So do adults stand a chance when it comes to foreign langauge learning or are they likely to give up after a few months of uncertain progress because they still "can't find their words" when they try to socialize at a conference or business event?

In order to answer this question and to attempt some solutions, we will first analyse some theoretical viewpoints on decision theory. We'll apply this theoretical perspective to language

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learning by looking at the way in which adults tend to make decisions when they start studying a foreign language. The research consists of a questionnaire which attempts to shed some light on how adults make decisions and their expectations related to language learning. At the end, we will make some recommendations to help adults make better decisions before they start such projects and thus be better equiped to navigate the waters of language learning.

Insights from Decision Theory

Decision making seems like a rational territory that is more related to the prefrontal cortex rather than intuition and feelings. Nevertheless, a historical perspective on this subject reveals a long and winding road of integrating external and internal constraints which leads to the acceptance of what Simon (1991) referred to as "bounded rationality". This concept explains the way in which people take decisions while being constrained by their own cognitive limitations, the information they have access to and the time in which they have to take a certain decision. Although Simon shows that people cannot be seen as exclusively rational when they take decisions, the idea is that, if given the necessary psychological and contextual conditions, they could take purely rational decisions (Buchanan, O'Connell, 2006).

Antonio Damasio (1996) offers quite a different perspective on decision making. The Portuguese-American neuro-scientist formulated the somatic marker hypothesis after studying patients with brain damage. According to this theory, somatic markers are feelings in one's body which are associated with emotions and strongly influence decision-making. When we make a decision, we evaluate the benefit resulting from the options we have while using cognitive and emotional processes. When we have to make complex decisions, we are not able to use only cognitive resources, which quickly become insufficient. This is when somatic markers come in and help us. Somatic markers are associations between stimuli that induce a physiological affective state. Damasio maintained that somatic markers help us focus on the options presenting the most benefits, thus simplifying the decision-making process. Li et al. also confirm that emotional processes are extremely important when taking decisions, by using MRI during decision making tasks to prove that the amygdala and the prefrontal ventromedial cortex are key in the decision-making process (Li et al., 2010).

Kahneman's research (Kahneman, 2003) follows the same line of limited rationality. He analysed the repeated, systematic mistakes people make when taking decisions and shows that there are two separate modes of thought called System I and System II. System I is intuitive, fast and based on emotions. Impressions arise automatically, effortlessly and implicitly. There is no need for introspection. On the other hand, System II is controlled, slow, judgments require effort, can be monitored and are rule-based. The simultaneity criterion can be used to determine whether a process belongs to system I or system II. Since the capacity of system II is limited, one cannot easily fulfill two tasks within this system at the same time. System I processes do not require any effort, so they can happen in parallel with other processes.

One of the main functions of System II is to monitor mental operations and explicit behaviour (Gilbert, 2002, Stanovich, 2002). Self-monitoring is subject to interference with other tasks. If someone needs to take a complex decision and at the same time they have to do another cognitive task, they are likely to respond superficially to the second task. Self-monitoring during decision-making is negatively affected by time pressure, by simultaneous engagement with another cognitive task and by emotional state. An efficient System II is positively correlated with high intelligence and the need to get involved in cognitive tasks.

Frederick (2003) uses cognitive tasks to study cognitive self-monitoring like in this example: "A bat and a ball cost $1.10 in total. The bat costs $1.00 more than the ball. How much

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does the ball cost?" Almost everybody answers "10 cents". Frederick found that many intelligent people give in to impulse: half of the students in Princeton and 56% of the students in University of Michigan gave the wrong answer. Clearly, they answered without self-monitoring first. This proves how lax is the monitoring of System I by System II. People tend to trust their first impulse and have a low tolerance to waiting until they find the right answer.
Unfortunately, wrong decisions are not exclusively pathological. There is a high number of cognitive biases – repetitive ad systematic deviations from rationality which lead to illogical decisions. People create their own subjective reality based on how they perceive the information leading to their decisions. Some cognitive biases can be considered adaptive, in that they help us make faster decisions when time is more important than the precision of the result.

The cognitive biases (Lee, Lebowitz, 2015) that are most relevant for our research are: anchoring, the bandwagon effect, the blind spot bias, choice supportive bias and overconfidence.
Anchoring: people can be over-reliant on the first piece of information they get access to. For example, if someone hears that a friend learned Spanish in a year, they decide to start studying English and expect to master the language in a year, without paying attention to the fact the Spanish and English are very different languages or that the friend learning Spanish studied every day.

The bandwagon effect: people are more likely to take a decision if they come in contact with a great number of people who also took that decision. More specifically, if more than half of the people in your company take up German, you may feel under pressure to comply.

The blind-spot bias: people tend to fail to recognize cognitive biases in themselves, but they notice them in others.

The choice-supportive bias: when making a choice – for example to take English evening classes – people tend to be positive about the choice, even if the choice has flaws. You barely have time to do homework, can't make any progress, but you keep attending the English classes because you have already paid for them.

Overconfidence: some people are excessively confident about their abilities and this causes them to take greater risks or embark on projects they cannot finish, like learning a foreign language.

The study

Objective:

The objective was to check whether language learners manage to take good decisions related to their objectives.

Hypothesis:

People with internal motivation have more realistic expectations when it comes to progress in the foreign language, regardless of their level. They are also the ones who tend not to regret their decisions.

Method:

We distributed a questionnaire to be filled in online. The language of the questionnaire was Romanian, because some subjects are beginners. The subjects were students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, from Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca and the

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Lingua Centre. 43 subjects filled in the questionnaire (see Annex), which consisted of 6 multiple choice questions and took about 5 minutes to complete.

Results:

Overall motivation

Out of the total 43 answers received, 13 (30.2%) said they studied a certain foreign language mainly because they liked it, 2 (8.6%) said they studied the language because they wanted to be able to communicate better with friends and colleagues, 19 (44.18%) said they studied mainly because it was part of the curriculum in university and 7 (16.2%) said their main reason was that they wanted a better paid job.

Expectation of time investment - level

There was no clear correlation between the time subjects wanted to invest in getting to the next level and their current self-assessed level. Out of the 12 subjects (27.9 % of the total) who said they needed maximum 100 hours, 3 were A1 (25%), 3 were A2-B1 (25%), 5 were B2 (41%) and 1 was C1 (8.3%). Out of the 9 subjects (20.9%) who said they needed 100-300 hours, 1 was A1 (11.1%), 1 was A2-B1 (11.1%), 4 were B2 (44.4%) and 3 were C1 (33.3%). Out of the 7 subjects (16.2%) who expected to invest 300-500 hours, 3 (42.8%) were A1, 2 (28.5%) were B2 and 2 (28.5%) were C1. Out of the 6 (13.9%) subjects who said they would need more than 500 hours to get to the next level, 1 (16.6%) was A2-B1, 3 (50%) were B2 and 2 (33.3%) were C1.

Motivation – expectation of time investment

Out of the 19 (44.18%) who said they studied the language mainly because it's part of the curriculum in university, 6 (31.5%) said they expected to spend maximum 100 hours to get to the next level. 2 (10.5%) wanted to invest 100-300 hours. 4 (21%) expected to invest 300-500 hours and 3 (15.7%) more than 500 hours.

Out of the 15 (34.8%) who said they studied the language mainly to communicate better with friends or because they liked it (internal motivation), 1 (6.66%) would invest maximum 50 hours, 3 (20%) would invest 50-100 hours, 4 (26.6%) chose 100-300 hours, 1 (6.66%) chose 300-500 hours and 3 (20%) said more than 500 hours.

Motivation – expectation of future level

Out of the 19 (44.18%) who said they studied the language mainly because it's part of the curriculum in university, 1 (5.26%) subject thought that in 10 year's time, they would speak the language worse than at present. This same person expected to invest 300-500 hours to get to the next level, but, if they could turn back time, they would choose to study another language. 4 (21.05%) subjects said they expected to speak the language at the same level as now. Out of these 4, 3 said it was not their decision to study the language, but they don't regret it and 1 said they would choose to study something else, not a foreign language. 9 (47.3%) said they would expect to have reached the next level. Out of these 9 subjects, 5 said they did not regret the decision to study another language and 4 would choose to study something else or another language. 3 (15.7%) subjects believe they would improve by two levels and 4 (21.05%) thought they would improve by more than two levels.

Decision - Motivation

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Out of the 16 subjects (37.20%) who said they made the decision to study the language and they do not regret it, 10 (62.5%) had internal motivation (i.e. they said they studied the language because they liked it).

Out of the 10 (23.2%) subjects who regretted having started to study the language, 9 (90%) had external motivation (i.e. they studied the language because it was part of the curriculum or to get a better paid job).

Discussion and conclusion

The only correlation that can be made between the variables analysed is the one between decision and motivation. The results reveal that most students who think they had made the right decision to start studying a foreign language also have internal motivation – they study the foreign language to communicate better with friends or because they like it. Moreover, the vast majority of those who regret having started to study the language, have external motivation - they studied English because it was part of the curriculum or to get a better paid job.

Starting from the premise that all students should get the maximum results depending on the investment made, it appears to be crucial to establish one's motivation before deciding to start studying a foreign language. Internal motivation is strongly correlated with good decisions regarding foreign language study. The present study has limitations in that it has been conducted on a small sample. Further research should extend the sample so as to be able to make more relevant correlations between the other variables.

Annex:

Decision-making in language learning questionnaire

Please think about a foreign language that you started studying and answer all of the following questions referring only to this foreign language.

1. How long have you been studying this foreign language?

a. Less than a year

b. 1-2 years

c. 3-5 years

d. 5-10 years

e. More than 10 years

2. Why are you studying this foreign language?

a. Mainly because it's part of the curriculum in university.

b. Mainly because I want to be able to communicate better with friends and colleagues.

c. Mainly because I want a better paid job.

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d. Mainly because I like it.

3. How do you evaluate your own level in this language?

a. Beginner A1

b. Pre-intermediate A2-B1

c. Upper- intermediate B2

d. Advanced C1

e. Proficient C2

4. How long do you expect you'll have to study to get to the next level?

a. Maximum 100 hours

b. 100-200 hours

c. 300-500 hours

d. More than 500 hours

5. How well do you think you'll speak this language in 10 years from now?

a. Worse than now

b. As well as now

c. I'll get to the next level

d. I'll improve by two levels

e. I'll improve by more than two levels

6. Choose the option that fits you best:

a. If I could turn back time, I would choose to study another foreign language.

b. If I could turn back time, I would choose to study something else – not a foreign language.

c. It was my decision to study this foreign language and I do not regret it.

d. It was not my decision to study this foreign language, but I do not regret it.

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