



Cultural and Linguistic Sensitivity in Second Language Development: A Case of Korean L1 Prepubescent Learners of English*

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ABSTRACT

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This case study has observed three Korean-speaking prepubescent learners of English as a second language (L2) in the United States over a year, with the goal of investigating the relationship between their ability to notice and accommodate cultural differences and their development in L2 proficiency. Using a mixed method combining quantitative scales, interviews, and observation notes, the study seeks to identify the role that age of immersion plays in the learners' adaptation to a second culture and the extent to which individual differences in cultural and linguistic sensitivity impact their L2 learning. Results from the measurement scales support that individual differences in cultural and linguistic sensitivity predict L2 development to a significant degree. In particular, those who have a higher transcultural sensitivity in affective and behavioral dimensions are likely to achieve more in L2 proficiency. Also, those who show a preference for the productive-creative and interpersonal-practical functions of language develop faster in oral communication skills than those who are oriented toward ideational-intellectual functions. Qualitative observations suggest that the characteristic differences in the young learners' second culture and language learning can be described, albeit rather impressionistically, in terms of a gradual change from immersive to observational learning and from skill learning through nonreflective rehearsing to knowledge building through meaning-based representing.

KEYWORDS

cultural sensitivity, linguistic sensitivity, second language acquisition, individual difference factor, age of onset

1. Introduction

The field of second language acquisition has shown limited interest in exploring cultural differences and individuals' abilities to understand and acquire them. This may, in part, be attributed to its initial impetus from modern theoretical linguistics, which placed emphasis on the universal aspects of language faculty and acquisition apart from cultural settings. Thus, "culture was not a concept that resonated with scholars in second language acquisition/applied linguistics, who were more psycho- and sociolinguistically oriented" (Kramsch 2014, p. 31). In the area of language teaching, how individuals learn a second culture along with the language spoken in it has been discussed for the most part within the framework of social constructivism. The sociocultural perspectives have focused on understanding the dynamics that underlie the formation and consequence of second language (L2) learners' perceptions of the host society and culture. The age of onset, cultural distance, length of sojourn, acculturation stages, and attitudinal-motivational orientations have been the most studied topics in relation to L2 achievement, and these factors were believed to cause the variations observed in individual learners' L2 development (Barjesteh and Vaseghi 2012, Brown 1980, Lantolf 2000, Lantolf and Beckett 2009, Schumann 1978, 1990, Robinson-Stuart and Nocon 1996).

While the ability to acquire another culture is not typically regarded as a learner internal variable in L2 research, the past three decades have witnessed a growing interest in cultural competence as a predictor of successful adaptation to a non-native community, especially in the areas of anthropology, communication, social psychology, business, counseling, and nursing. These disciplines have explored the concept of cultural competence with the assumption that individuals differ substantially in their capacity to recognize and adapt to new cultural patterns. This conceptualization of non-native culture acquisition as a distinct competence has been articulated and supported by empirical studies in a range of domains (Ang et al. 2015, Bennett 1993, Bhawuk and Brislin 1992, Byram 2020, Hammer et al. 2003, Ott and Michailova 2018, Suinn et al. 1995). In L2 research, however, the questions of "what it is that is acquired in the name of culture learning, how culture is acquired and modified, and by what processes" remain relatively underexplored (Robinson 1991, p. 115).

With this background, the present study aims to bridge the gap by investigating individual differences in L2 learners' ability to understand and accommodate the target culture in relation to their development in L2 proficiency. As a first step towards this goal, three Korean prepubescent learners of English in the United States have been observed over a year, with a focus on whether they differ considerably by age of onset in their ability to acquire a second culture, how their reactions to cultural differences mediate their L2 development, and to what extent individual differences in linguistic sensitivity interact with second culture and language learning. The relationship between cultural competence and language development has been discussed mainly on the basis of the contrast between child and adult learners and for the purpose of developing instructional materials targeting postpubescent learners. In analogy to language acquisition, it is often taken for granted that prepubescent learners, who are more resilient cognitively and socioculturally, have fewer affective and perceptive barriers and so go through stages of acculturation with little difficulty. This may be sufficiently true insofar as ultimate attainment is concerned, which is one of the reasons why children's ability to acquire another culture and individual differences therein have not received much attention. As is well-known, the critical period accounts of language acquisition draw on two parallel predictions: One posits that native-like proficiency is impossible after the period, and the other, which plays a more productive role in the current debate, is that it is the relation of the age of onset to ultimate attainment that is essentially different prior to and after the period (DeKeyser et al. 2010). This study is an attempt to investigate the relation with second culture learners before puberty. Additionally, it is expected to provide some insights into the challenges and issues that future research concerning second culture and language acquisition may have to address.

2. Background of the Study

2.1 Cultural Sensitivity and Second Culture Acquisition

To integrate into a non-native culture, individuals must possess certain attributes, such as a genuine interest in that culture, the ability to recognize cultural differences, and a willingness to adjust their thoughts and behaviors according to the norms of the community, both explicit and implicit. These qualities are referred to as (inter-)cultural sensitivity, a theoretical construct assumed to understand and predict an individual's successful integration into a new culture. This conception raises a number of questions such as those formulated early in Schumann's (1978) acculturation-pidginization model — to what extent L2 learners vary in their perceptions of cultural distance and how their attitudes towards that distance affect their L2 development. A less explored question is whether individuals exhibit considerable differences in their sensitivity to new cultural patterns. This further gives rise to a series of more specific questions: Do different types of cultural experience necessitate varying degrees of sensitivity? Does an individual's cultural sensitivity increase as a function of living experience in the target culture or remain largely unchanged? Would individuals living in a monolithic society tend to display less sensitivity and more ethnocentrism compared to those living in environments where necessary and frequent interactions with culturally diverse individuals occur? Questions such as these and efforts to investigate them will collectively shed light on our understanding of second culture and language acquisition.

Assessing individual differences in cultural sensitivity poses one of the most critical challenges in this realm of inquiry. Several tools have been proposed to measure individuals' ability to recognize cultural differences, empathize with people from the target culture, adjust themselves in transcultural situations, and enhance their sensitivity through awareness and experience (Bennett 1993, Deardorff 2011, Hammer et al. 2003, Suinn et al. 1995). These tools share the assumption that cultural sensitivity consists of multiple facets, such as recognizing new cultural elements and practices, demonstrating interest in intercultural communication, and displaying a willingness to apply newly acquired cultural patterns. Unfortunately, their direct relevance to L2 research is limited as they do not delineate the acquisition of language from the acquisition of culture.

As mentioned, early research on L2 acquisition focused on learners' internal competence and natural development, particularly concerning their interim language. Structural features and forms that vary across languages were considered essential for linguistic competence and not fully attainable after a biologically determined period. While the field has continued to expand across disciplines, the interplay between learners' first culture and language and individual differences in L2 attainment remains one of the most contentious issues. In parallel to the cognitive-behavioral orientation, the acculturation-pidginization model of Schumann (1978, 1990) argues that it is L2 learners' perceptions of distance between their first and second cultures that determine the quality and amount of input they receive. Greater perceived distance leads to less conformity to and limited interaction with people in the culture, resulting in inadequate input for language learning. Schumann (1990) further posits a neurocognitive component that mediates individuals' affective-cognitive reactions to new cultural patterns. This perspective seems to align later with Lantolf's (1999) argument for conceptual thinking that interfaces with cultural forces and Talmy's (2000) cognitive culture system.

Other things being equal, familiarity with the target culture and the desire to identify oneself within it would promote communication with people in the community, thereby facilitating language development. Similarly, the closer the learner's first language is to the second language, the easier communication becomes, increasing the likelihood of successful learning. However, the influence of the first culture cannot be separated from that of the first language in most natural settings. Therefore, the field has mainly focused on crosslinguistic distance, as it can

be defined and measured more objectively. The contrastive analysis hypothesis, for example, which was an earliest theoretical account of L2 acquisition, attributed the difficulty experienced by learners entirely to the similarities and differences between their first and second language.

In his foundational work for cognitive semantics, Talmy (2000) adds an intriguing cognitivist perspective on the intimate relationship between culture and language acquisition, suggesting that the process of acculturation constitutes a cognitive module with distinct developmental, impairing, and attainment features. This innate view of culture acquisition resembles that of language acquisition in the sense that development is not driven by behavioral learning but unfolds in incremental stages characterized by evolving coherent systems. For example, Kordes (1991) and Minoura (1992) support the existence of a critical period for culture acquisition. The hypothetical module further increases its significance when it is linked with the developmental aspects of L2 acquisition. If culture acquisition occurs on a gradient scale, it follows that encountering new cultural patterns later in life, one may be able to apprehend them intellectually while not reforming their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors by appropriating them (Kramsch 2014). This perspective of culture as part of intelligence diverges from the sociocultural view of acculturation based on individuals' varying perceptions. It instead argues that acculturation, both in process and outcome, depends more on individuals' capability to notice and reproduce cultural patterns. The idea that some delicate aspects of culture can only be fully acquired within a sensitive period aligns with the contrast between L1 and L2 acquisition. Language learners who have internalized the concepts and codes of their first language would not likely grasp culture-laden meanings in a non-native language through exposure (Lantolf 1999, Talmy 2000). While certain aspects of development are universal and controlled by an innate faculty, the precise nature of second culture acquisition remains an open question.

2.2 Linguistic Sensitivity and Second Language Acquisition

The term, linguistic sensitivity, is rarely used to denote language-related abilities in contemporary L2 research, though the concept it imports is familiar to most people. Fluency, accuracy, proficiency, and ultimate attainment have been the predominant terms to describe language learners' development. These terms implicitly relate to the ideologies of native-likeness and language as an overall competence rather than a collection of abilities and experiences that vary within learners. Nonetheless, it is evident that one's ability to understand and use a language can vary considerably in each domain of knowledge and skill; that is, an individual may excel in certain areas of language competence while remaining relatively less developed in others.

L2 research has devoted its principal attention to global factors such as age, aptitude, motivation, memory, and naturalistic/instructed settings, which are presumably the most robust predictors of ultimate success in the achievement of (near) native-like proficiency. These factors are thought to cause or mediate the variation observed in L2 development among learners. A consequence of this emphasis on *inter*-individual factors is that apart from estimating how deviant a learner's current achievement is from native-like proficiency, only limited attention has been assigned to *intra*-individual differences (Choe 2022b). Thus, why learners demonstrate inconsistent abilities in different knowledge-skill domains of the language they are learning remains underexplored. This concern resembles the lasting problem in critical sociology that "any appeal to a collective identity is oppressive because it imposes a shared identity on the members of a group and suppresses the inherent differences of the group" (Medina 2003, p. 655). The concept of linguistic sensitivity finds its current place only in the debate on the existence and nature of sensitive periods for language development. In this context, however, it does not refer to an individual's divergent abilities in the components of language but rather serves as a synonym for non-defective input processing of sound and structural features.

One may argue that the notion of language aptitude readily incorporates that of linguistic sensitivity. The investigation of language aptitude in scientific research began with the development of the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) (Carroll and Sapon 1959). It has been regarded as an inter-individual factor that predicts highly successful learners. The MLAT consists of four main constructs: phonetic coding, grammatical sensitivity, inductive learning (recognizing and applying patterns/structures), and associative memory. A meta-analysis conducted by Li (2016) has affirmed that the MLAT remains the most predictive test of language aptitude. Over the past two decades, there has been a renewed interest in language aptitude, giving rise to various alternative theories and tools (Doughty 2014, Granena and Long 2013, Meara 2005, Robison 2013, 2019, Skehan 2012, 2016). These recent models invariably put emphasis on the cognitive dimensions of language ability such as working memory and implicit learning. For example, Meara's (2005) LLAMA test is comprised of four tests: phonetic recognition, word pairing, implicit learning, and grammatical inference. Bokander and Bylund (2020) examined the construct validity of these subtests and found that only one of them (LLAMA B) fit well with the Rasch model, advising researchers to interpret their results cautiously when using the entire battery. The most recent contribution to the theory and measurement of language aptitude is Doughty's (2014, 2019) Hi-LAB. As implied by its name, this test battery was designed to differentiate extraordinary achievers from above-average ones. In this model, language aptitude is viewed as a deterministic ceiling on ultimate achievement; all other conditions being equal, aptitude determines the level of success a learner can eventually achieve. Linck et al. (2013) reported that the Hi-LAB test had particularly strong discriminative power in three subtests: paired associates (measuring associative learning), serial reaction time (measuring implicit learning), and letter span (measuring phonological memory).

Robinson (2013, 2019), one of the leading cognitivists, views language learning aptitude as a combination of abilities that characterize the observed phenomena in L2 acquisition such as incidental learning, fossilization, and metalinguistic awareness. His aptitude complexes-differential abilities model comprises four layers: cognitive resources, aptitude complexes, task-specific aptitudes, and pragmatic-interactional traits. The innermost layer encompasses cognitive abilities such as processing automatization, phonological working memory, and semantic priming. These abilities combine to form complex abilities, such as noticing the gap and contingent learning from input. The third layer represents the interaction between aptitude complexes and the conditions of specific language tasks, such as planning time and topic familiarity. The outermost layer connects the learner's task-specific aptitudes with their affective dispositions and personality traits, regulating their language performance in communicative settings. Skehan (2012), in his account of language aptitude based on information processing theory, points out that previous research neglected the sequential processes involved in L2 acquisition. The phonemic coding ability of L2 learners directly influences their input processing stage, and then their analytical ability enables them to identify and internalize the structural patterns of the language. Skehan (2016) proposed 10 developmental stages, such as noticing, segmenting, pattern recognition, and error avoidance, which are grouped into four macro-stages: sound discrimination, grammatical pattern recognition, proceduralizing, and automatizing. These studies have shown that language aptitude is not a single trait but a complex amalgamation of multiple abilities. The models and assessment tools of aptitude have shed light on the constructs of language acquisition. However, they primarily emphasize cognitive abilities and give little attention to learners' unique potential for developing other skills and forms of knowledge needed for language use. This underscores the importance of taking a profiling approach to the diagnosis of learner characteristics.

Among other constructs that exhibit strong associations with the notion of linguistic sensitivity are learning styles and strategies. Previous research on L2 learning styles focused on several specific aspects such as field dependency, tolerance of ambiguity, and metacognitive awareness. Other style aspects that are closely relevant to L2 acquisition such as sensory modality, willingness to rehearse models, need for immediate closure, and

conceptualization/categorization preference have rarely been studied (Castro and Peck 2005, Ehrman et al. 2003, Hatami 2013, Oxford, 1990). Importantly, individuals are not rigid in their learning styles. For example, field-independent individuals can shift to a field-dependent approach more easily than the other way around (Willing 1988). Moreover, although academic settings tend to emphasize analytic reasoning, there is no consistent advantage of field-independence over field-dependence in terms of language development (Andreou et al. 2008). One of the most extensive lists of L2 learning strategies was compiled by Oxford (1990). She classified them into six categories: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. The first three are referred to as direct strategies and the latter three as indirect strategies. Research shows that cognitive strategies are used more frequently than the other types, and metalinguistic awareness plays a decisive role in strategy selection (Wong and Nunan 2011). This implies that learners' conscious understanding of their learning process allows them to employ the strategies that are more effective for them.

The approach that embraces intra-learner differences in linguistic sensitivity should aim to identify each learner's preferred ways of language processing and learning, rather than predict their eventual success or failure in multilingual development. Also, profiling their language-related dispositions, styles, and strategies is essential for personalized pedagogic interventions. L2 research has increasingly focused on learners' self-perceptions of the progress and plateau that they experience in the course of L2 learning (see Paulhus and Vazire 2007 for a discussion of self-report methods). This also highlights the need for a practical tool that practitioners can use to evaluate learners' unique strengths and underdeveloped capacities (Choe 2022b, 2023). Language background questionnaires could serve similar purposes. However, their conventional function is to classify learners into homogeneous groups based on biographical variables or to screen out those who do not meet certain threshold levels of proficiency. These considerations led the present study to assess individual differences in linguistic sensitivity using a self-report scale designed to profile learners' preferences and strengths in language learning.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

This case study has observed three Korean prepubescent learners' development in L2 English for a year. They recently immigrated to the United States and had not resided in any foreign country before. When the first orientation interview was conducted, they had been in a large US city for 3 to 5 months. The learners will be referred to henceforth as Seon, Jean, and Hana (pseudonyms), respectively.

At the outset of data collection, Seon was 4.7 years old. She came from an upper-middle class urban background. She was fluent in Korean and was able to communicate effectively with adults. In Korea, her exposure to English was limited to basic vocabulary and expressions through extracurricular English classes at her kindergarten.

Jean (8.10) and Hana (12.5) were sisters. Their parents decided to move to the United States for better educational opportunities. They attended a public school in Korea. They had an excellent academic record and demonstrated a strong aptitude for music, drawing, and mathematics. Their parents emphasized the importance of education and had high expectations for their academic success. Initially, they could hardly communicate in English although they had been exposed to English since around five. TV cartoons, story books, and media contents were the main sources. The amount of written input gradually surpassed spoken input as they grew older.

The mainstream approach to teaching English as a foreign language in Korea has been reformed by the government through periodic curricular revisions. Since the early 1990s, communicative language teaching has

been the prevailing method employed in elementary and middle schools. Despite its emphasis on negotiation for meaning and interaction in authentic contexts, English is still considered a major subject where students' intellectual abilities are evaluated. Thus, the learning environment revolves around teacher-centered input and instruction. Prior to reaching third grade in elementary school, Jean and Hana had not received any formal instruction in English. Nor did they attend any private English language institute. Thus, they would likely face considerable difficulties in cultural adaptation because of the differences in educational methods and social customs.

The three learners exhibited a substantial degree of homogeneity concerning their school settings and the L2 input and interaction they encountered during the observation period. The educational institutions that they attended were in the same district, where they were exposed to similar curricular materials, teaching methodologies, and language learning environments. The learners also shared comparable backgrounds in terms of their socioeconomic status, cultural experiences, and linguistic exposure outside of the classroom. This homogeneity suggests that any observed differences in their L2 development are less likely to be attributed to external factors such as educational disparities or varying levels of language exposure. Therefore, it allows for a more focused examination of individual learner characteristics and internal processes contributing to L2 development.

3.2 Instruments

In order to assess the learners' differences in cultural sensitivity, the scale proposed by Choe (2022a, 2023) was employed (Appendix I). This scale is composed of four sections: affective, cognitive, behavioral, and developmental. Affective sensitivity refers to learners' emotional reactions, attitudes, and interpersonal affects towards the target culture and its people. Cognitive sensitivity is operationalized as an individual's intellectual capacity to understand cultural differences, encompassing the ability to notice cultural norms and (un-)acceptable deviations. Behavioral sensitivity refers to learners' intention and ability to adjust their ways of acting to fit the cultural context they encounter. This facet includes basic assimilative-imitative skills, where learners try to behave like typical members of the culture. At more advanced levels, learners possess the ability to control and employ modificatory-integrative strategies to function flexibly according to the given cultural setting. Finally, developmental potential indicates one's meta-level ability to reflect on and further develop the aforementioned three facets of cultural sensitivity. Individuals who possess developmental sensitivity are capable of recognizing and adjusting their inherent dispositions in order to optimize their competence required for the process of acculturation. They can identify shortcomings in their sensitivity and make conscious efforts to address them.

The learners' linguistic sensitivity was assessed by the profiling questionnaire developed by Choe (2022b) (Appendix II). It includes mode/sensory preferences in language processing, sensitivity in each component domain of linguistic competence, inclinations in language use, and metalinguistic consciousness and strategic control for development. The first section of the questionnaire assesses individuals' preferences and inclinations in language processing and use, diagnosing individuals' natural inclinations in language function. The second section is concerned with individuals' differential capabilities in the constructs of linguistic competence. It includes six domains of language-related ability: auditory, articulatory, lexical, grammatical, discursal, and pragmatic, as well as memory aspects such as phonological working memory and associations of linguistic units in long-term memory. The third section examines individuals' conscious and strategic handling of their inclinations. This dimension focuses on learners' self-awareness and strategic approaches to their inherent preferences and abilities. Thus, metalinguistically sensitive individuals manifest the ability to modify their dispositions and behavioral

preferences to enhance their strengths or compensate for areas of limited competence.

The learners' development in L2 English was assessed by a standardized proficiency test and the researcher's observations through periodic interviews. In order to measure their development in English proficiency, the ACCESS for ELLs 2.0, a composite test to diagnose ESOL students in the United States, was used. This test aims to classify elementary and secondary students who need support from ESOL classes. It measures four skills, oral communication, and literacy proficiency. The oral communication section probes the learners' ability to understand spoken English and convey their thoughts clearly in English. The literacy test assesses their ability to understand different types of text, infer meaning, and make connections within the text, together with their ability to produce coherent and well-structured texts.

Finally, interviews were conducted biweekly with each learner, using Korean and English alternately. Their progress in acculturation and English proficiency were closely examined. The researchers' observation notes were also analyzed with a focus on the learners' characteristic patterns of culture and language learning. Several themes emerged from the two sources, the most notable of which were acceptability judgment, (dis-)identification, ought-to and less-than-ideal self.

4. Results

This section mainly discusses the results from measurement scales. Findings from interviews and observation notes will be presented in the next section. Seon was too young to understand the statements of the scales, so her acculturation and language development were assessed through direct observation. Data from the scales of cultural and linguistic sensitivity were used for the comparison between Jean and Hana. Assessments were conducted with a 3-month interval. Table 1 shows the differences in cultural sensitivity between Jean and Hana.

Table 1. Difference and Change in Cultural Sensitivity/Awareness

Period	Affective sensitivity		Cognitive sensitivity		Behavioral sensitivity	
	Jean	Hana	Jean	Hana	Jean	Hana
1	44.56	28.92	35.87	42.19	57.48	36.45
2	51.23	47.36	55.51	58.43	65.29	41.83
3	67.78	52.67	64.34	61.71	72.65	53.57
4	83.41	56.14	72.62	69.89	78.97	51.12
Mean	61.75	46.27	57.09	58.06	68.60	43.24
Gain	38.81	27.22	36.75	27.70	21.49	14.67

There was no substantial difference in cognitive sensitivity between Jean and Hana. Both learners increased their cultural sensitivity as a function of time spent in the host culture. With regards to affective and behavioral sensitivity, however, Jean's scores were consistently higher than Hana's. Hana's behavioral sensitivity, i.e., her behavioral acculturation, seemed to plateau after period 3. It is also noteworthy that Jean's increase in affective sensitivity over time was greater than Hana's. All in all, Jean and Hana showed a considerable difference in the affective and behavioral aspects of cultural sensitivity and in their developmental patterns regarding behavioral acculturation. Table 2 shows the differences in linguistic sensitivity between Jean and Hana.

Table 2. Difference and Change in Linguistic Sensitivity Measures

Learner	Period	Preference				Competence				Development
		Per Cog	pro cre	id intl	intp prt	l/p	v/g	d/p	mem	meta- dev
Jean	1	32.19	28.98	42.36	36.53	48.18	39.67	27.24	46.66	59.26
	2	46.47	32.11	60.54	42.96	72.46	45.93	48.52	44.90	71.59
	3	48.33	50.39	66.92	54.16	78.74	48.23	69.75	60.22	68.91
	4	64.62	54.64	66.13	60.44	93.29	66.51	72.31	66.45	77.17
	Mean	47.90	41.53	58.99	48.52	73.17	50.09	54.46	54.56	69.23
	Gain	32.43	25.66	23.77	23.91	45.11	26.84	45.07	19.79	17.91
Hana	1	44.85	34.70	60.42	30.81	66.61	57.78	36.69	50.83	49.49
	2	52.72	36.21	66.68	24.32	84.89	66.35	45.95	64.34	63.73
	3	68.25	42.48	72.88	36.63	84.15	75.57	48.12	68.58	66.30
	4	72.56	46.77	71.27	33.94	90.41	77.86	51.37	74.87	65.97
	Mean	59.60	40.04	67.81	31.43	81.52	69.39	45.53	64.66	61.37
	Gain	27.71	12.07	10.85	3.13	23.80	20.08	14.68	24.04	16.48

* per-cog: perceptive-cognitive; pro-cre: productive-creative; id-intl: ideational-intellectual; intp-prt: interpersonal-practical; l/p: listening-pronunciation; v/g: vocabulary-grammar; d/p: discourse-pragmatics; mem: memory; meta-dev: metalinguistic-developmental

With respect to preferences in language processing and use, both Jean and Hana showed a tendency to be perceptive-cognitive rather than productive-creative. They also showed a similar tendency in the preference of ideational-intellectual functions of language over interpersonal-practical ones. However, Hana's inclinations were stronger and more consistent than Jean's. There was relatively little change in her preferences over time. Jean gradually became more productive-creative and interpersonal-practical, resulting in the gaps between the modes and functions getting smaller than when they were at the beginning.

Both learners exhibited a considerable increase in all components of linguistic sensitivity. In particular, they had a keen sense of the sound features of English and improved quickly in listening and pronunciation. This seemed to be associated with their interest and training in music. Hana was strong in vocabulary-grammar and memory, but her discourse-pragmatic sensitivity did not change much after period 2. Jean's discourse-pragmatic sensitivity progressively heightened over time, leading to the largest difference from Hana's at the end. Her levels and changes in vocabulary-grammar and memory were comparable to those of Hana. Overall, they were different only in the developmental patterns of discourse-pragmatic sensitivity.

Finally, with respect to metacognitive-developmental sensitivity, Jean showed a higher level than Hana across all four periods, but the difference was not large. Both learners tried to improve their English skills and were strongly motivated for personal growth. While Jean's metacognitive-developmental potential increased throughout, Hana showed a sharp increase during the first period but changed little afterwards.

Table 3 shows the three learners' development in English proficiency over time.

Table 3. Change in L2 English Development Measures

Period	Seon		Jean				Hana			
	MLU	T-Unit	L	S	Oral	Lit.	L	S	Oral	Lit.
1	1.61	1.2	3	2	2.5	3.0	5	2	3.5	2.5
2	3.27	2.1								
3	4.03	2.8								
4	6.33	4.4	6	4	5.3	4.4	6	3	4.4	3.9

* L: listening; S: speaking; Oral: oral communication skills; Lit.: literacy skills

Seon's fluency in English developed fast as evidenced in the MLU (Mean Length of Utterance) and T-units over the periods. MLU refers to the average number of morphemes or words in the learner's spoken utterance. It serves as a crucial metric in assessing linguistic development, reflecting the fluency and syntactic maturity of the learner's language production over time. T-unit stands for minimal terminable unit and represents an independent clause including its accompanying subordinate phrases and clauses. T-unit analysis provides insights into the organization and coherence of the learner's speech, providing direct information about their grammatical and communicative abilities.

Her progress was particularly salient between periods 1 and 2 and between 3 and 4. Although she sporadically made grammatical errors, mostly redundant or omitted *be*'s and misinflections, her English was remarkably accurate from the beginning onward. Both Jean and Hana achieved the highest level 6 in listening proficiency after a year. This again appeared to reflect their acute aural sensitivity. As compared to their initial levels, Jean's improvement (from 3 to 6) was greater than Hana's (from 5 to 6). Their development in speaking ability did not proceed with their listening ability. Jean improved her speaking ability from 2 to 4 and Hana from 3 to 4. Interestingly, however, there was a significant difference in their development in oral communication skills; Jean improved from 2.5 to 5.3 and Hana from 3.5 to 4.4. This can be seen to correlate with the differences in their cultural and linguistic sensitivity. When it comes to literacy skills, they showed a similar degree of development, lending further support to the inference that their difference in L2 oral communication skills is attributable to their cultural and linguistic dispositions to a large extent.

5. Discussion

Integrating into a new culture is indeed the most challenging task for many L2 learners. The foregoing findings indicate that differences in cultural sensitivity predict L2 development to a significant degree. Jean, who possessed a higher level of affective and behavioral sensitivity than Hana, had an advantage in L2 acquisition. She appeared to be more cognizant of subtle cultural nuances, social cues, and usages of language, which allowed her to explore the new cultural context actively and develop a personalized awareness of cultural differences. That she is sensitive to cultural differences does not mean that her attitude towards the differences is always positive. In fact, she mentioned her dissatisfactions and negative feelings as frequently during the interviews. While both Jean and Hana were introvert and preferred to be observational when dealing with new cultural experiences, Jean's willingness to participate in and contribute to her community was stronger than Hana's. This is well illustrated in the following reflection made by Jean during the first period of observation.

“I saw something bad happen in the school bathroom. There’s a student in our class who bullies other students. One day, I was there when she was playing with a twig and tapping other students’ legs in the bathroom. It really bothered me to see this. She warned me not to tell Ms. Salgado. But when I went back to the classroom, I couldn’t just ignore it and forget what happened. Even though I was nervous and not confident in my English, I decided to talk to Ms. Salgado about what I witnessed in the bathroom. Luckily, it didn’t go badly when I spoke up. She seemed embarrassed, realizing that not everyone just stands by and does nothing.” (Jean, Period 1; Translated from Korean)

It seems that it is not the learner’s positive attitude toward the target community *per se* but rather her willingness to play a socially desired role in it that promotes development in cultural and linguistic identification. Culture learning is then not so much a matter of simply knowing about another set of values and beliefs as a matter of adopting a new set of values and beliefs to guide and motivate one’s ways of living (Castells 2009). This conception of culture goes along with the late modernist view, in which culture is conceived as co-constructed membership in a community that shares a system of standards for perceiving, evaluating, and acting (Kramsch 2014). Jean’s identifying herself and acting as a functional member in the host community showed a sharp contrast to Hana’s non-participatory stance throughout the whole observation period. She tried to construct her membership and the behavioral standards of the community where she sought a membership. This contrast in perceived and prospected membership, rather than positive-versus-negative perceptions toward the community, plays a more important role in culture and language learning.

The finding is also reminiscent of Brown’s (1980) early observation that language development, and perhaps most aspects of human development as well, is facilitated when there is an optimal level of cognitive and affective pressure. With regards to culture learning, he proposed that feelings of anomie, a typical symptom of the third stage of acculturation, provide the sociocultural distance that produces the optimal pressure to acquire the target language. This implies that anomie (or disequilibrium in Piagetian terms) may be a critical factor that synchronizes cultural and linguistic development. Unsuccessful L2 learning is therefore attributable to less than optimal tension that the learner feels against the second culture, not essentially to the age of the learner. He further added that young children, who are culturally more resilient, have fewer perceptive filters to adjust and so move through acculturation and language development stages more quickly. As evidenced by the present study, this is not the case for all prepubescent learners. Jean, who displayed affective-behavioral openness to cultural differences, had a more engaged disposition when encountering novel cultural experiences. It is also worth noting that in general, those who possess culturally flexible communication skills are better able to establish social connections with speakers of the target language and participate in dialogic interactions (Byram 2020, Deardorff 2011), and those who possess social resilience can better cope with the challenges in the process of transculturation and L2 learning. These facilitate language learning by increasing opportunities for practice and exposure in personally meaningful contexts, as indicated by Schumann (1978).

When it comes to individual differences in linguistic sensitivity, the results show that individuals differ in their preferred modes of language use and their attentiveness to various linguistic features. These differences have a significant impact on L2 development as well. Both Jean and Hana had high phonological sensitivity. In a relatively short period, they were able to detect the segmental and prosodic distinctions in the target language and produce sounds that lack in their L1 (see Moyer 1999 for a detailed discussion). Seon and Jean had a high sensitivity to words and conventional expressions, while Hana showed stronger analytical-structural sensitivity. Hana was adept at recognizing the encoding patterns and constraints of English, but this sensitivity did not apparently help her produce more accurate sentences in communicative situations. What seemed to be more related to their L2

performance (or performativity) was discourse-pragmatic sensitivity in social contexts. Jean, who had a comparatively higher discourse-pragmatic sensitivity, was better able to grasp social cues and implied meanings than Hana.

The examination of qualitative data from interviews and observation notes led to some significant discoveries. When it comes to culture learning, the most notable difference between Seon on one hand and Jean and Hana on the other was seen in their attitudinal-behavioral reactions to new cultural practices. For Seon, all new cultural experiences were nothing but different sources of enjoyment. For Jean and Hana, however, new cultural experiences were often evaluated and judged. Seon was attentive to the novelty of cultural elements and practices, whereas Jean and Hana were more attentive to how they are different from their first culture. During the interviews, Hana frequently expressed her judgmental attitude towards cultural differences. Specifically, there were two recurring themes of her dissatisfaction: hygienic practices and peers' undisciplined behavior. Her remarks on these were consistent through the whole observation period. For example:

“I have been quite taken aback by the hygienic practices I’ve observed among American students. I found it disconcerting to witness such lax attitudes towards basic cleanliness.” (Hana, Period 3; Translated from Korean)

“I have been quite disappointed by the level of undisciplined behavior I have witnessed among American students. [...] It is so disheartening to see students being disruptive, showing a lack of focus, and not adhering to rules.” (Hana, Period 4; Translated from Korean)

Hana's feelings of discomfort and reactions to the new community were not of the same nature as what Jean was feeling about her classmates. Hana firmly disidentified herself from the new group of peers in hygienic and behavioral norms. Her emotion was judgmental in essence, rationalized, and was close to abhorrence, whereas Jean's was close to tension from a conflict between social ideals and reality. Hana's persistent intolerance of different hygienic norms did not merely reflect her own standards of hygienics shaped by her first culture. It was seen as more of a manifestation of her psychological repulsion against heterogeneity. Although it is beyond the scope and purpose of this study to draw any sound psychoanalytic account of her behavior, an important implication is that the exploration of cultural competence and acculturation will ultimately require psychoanalytic contributions. Tummala-Narra (2015), for example, points out the neglect of sociocultural context in psychoanalytic theory and calls for inclusion of cultural competence as a core area of psychoanalysis.

The attitudinal-behavioral differences led to differences in ways of acquiring second culture and language. The differences can be partly accounted for in terms of the contrast between immersive and observational learning (see Makransky and Petersen 2021 for a conceptual groundwork for immersive learning). When learning new cultural norms, Seon fully engaged herself in immersive learning, while Jean held a spectator stance initially but became more participatory later. Hana maintained her spectator stance throughout. Seon was surrounded by peers and situations where she had to demonstrate socioculturally desired behaviors, with no intervention of acceptability judgment. Immersive learning provides immediate feedback through interactions with other children or adults, and this feedback reinforces their development in cultural and linguistic skills. On the other hand, Jean and Hana preferred to interpret the behaviors of other students, adults, and media representations in the second culture while limiting their own participation. They rarely received feedback or guidance and hence relied on their own understanding of the observed behavior.

There were also differences in the learners' motives for and ways of L2 learning. Seon was far more imitative

and expressive than Jean and Hana. Among the three learners, Hana was most receptive in processing and reconstructive in production, paying less attention to pronunciation than did Seon and Jean. Seon was very sensitive to pronunciation accuracy from the beginning with a firm basis for (dis-)identification. She often pointed out and tried to remedy the researcher's non-native pronunciation during the interviews, as illustrated in the following example.

Seon: George pushed me on the playground. He always makes trouble.

Interviewer: Did you play with [dʒodʒ] today? Why did he do that?

Seon: No, say [dʒordʒ], not [dʒodʒ]. Listen [dʒɔ:r:dʒ].

Interviewer: Okay, [dʒo.odʒ].

Seon: No, [dʒɔ:r:dʒ] (repeated twice with emphatic tone and lengthened vowels).

You can't say it! Only girls can do it. (Seon, Period 2)

One of the most characteristic differences in their learning strategies seemed to be accounted for in terms of rehearsing versus representing. Rehearsing involves repeated and nonreflective practice of social speech, mostly in form of role plays and narrative schemes. The learner focuses on appropriating the words and organizational patterns of adults and other children, acquiring a *habitus* of language use, borrowing the term from Bourdieu (1991). It is an active, non-thoughtful, behavioral disposition that often involves mimicking the dialogues that occur in cultural contexts salient to the learner. It gives priority to language use that is fluent and automatized enough for the immediate application of language. In contrast, representing indicates the cognitive process of building and organizing internal representations of knowledge. It involves organizing linguistic data in memory, creating models of form-meaning pairs, structures, networks, and other language-related experiences. Learners can create mental representations without necessarily engaging in active rehearsing at that moment. Unlike rehearsing, representing requires the learner's reflective maneuvering of linguistic information for long-term elaboration and storage of knowledge. The representations derived from this process serve as a permanent foundation for there-and-then language use and future learning.

Finally, another noteworthy difference among the learners, which appeared to be attributable mainly to the effect of age and its concomitant maturation factors, was their self-perceptions. To put it rather bluntly, Seon and Jean prioritized and sought here-and-now well-being in their new environment, but Hana was more attentive to less-than-ideal aspects of self and less-than-ideal conditions for her well-being. Hana's case suggests that a concrete ideal-self may not always promote personal development (cf. Dörnyei 2010, Dörnyei and Ushioda 2009). At times, it can be detrimental to the learner's self-esteem and motivation for acquiring new identities, especially when their idealized identity formed in the first culture is not in accord with the desired identities in the second culture. Though speculative, it might also be the main cause of denial and avoidance. Hana showed a fear of falling short of reaching her goals and expectations. She focused on her perceived defects, which led to a preoccupation with less-than-ideal facets of self and less-than-ideal surroundings. Negative attitudes and experiences in a new cultural setting shape individuals' mindset and perception of themselves. If they have faced setbacks or challenges in their adaptation, they may develop a belief that they are not capable enough to overcome them. This in turn aggravates their tendency to focus on, or even deny, less-than-ideal self.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated whether prepubescent L2 learners differ in their attitudinal-behavioral reactions to the target culture and how such differences impact their L2 development. The findings support that there exist considerable individual differences in cultural sensitivity and these differences influence the way they approach and engage in language learning. In particular, affective and behavioral resilience play an important role in L2 acquisition by modulating learners' readiness to acquire the cultural aspects of the target language. The study has also revealed that individual differences in linguistic sensitivity, especially phonological sensitivity, inclination for productive-creative modes of language, and discourse-pragmatic sensitivity, play a foundational role in initial L2 development.

A longitudinal observation of three learners has verified that the age of onset (along with its related maturation factors) impacts the manner of learning second culture and language to a large extent. Preschool children were fully immersive and engaged in their encountering and experiencing new cultural practices, while older children tended to become more observational and representational. Immersive learning involved active participation, real-life contexts, and co-construction of cultural skills, whereas observational learning rested primarily on non-participatory observation, second-hand modeling, and less interactive practice. When it comes to language learning, the most prominent age-related difference in external behavior was the utilization of rehearsing. Rehearsing is characterized as non-thoughtful, often immediate, and frequent repetition of extended language including narrative and conversational schemes. On the other hand, representing involves creating personalized representations and organizing discrete knowledge units for long-term retention and further elaboration. Rehearsing is essentially a process of skill-building while representing operates for knowledge elicitation and organization. Overall, the characteristic differences in the learners' culture and language learning could be described in terms of gradual change from immersive to observational learning and from skill learning through rehearsing to knowledge building through representing, most closely akin to an integrated model that combines the Vygotskian notion of internalization of external speech and the acquisition-based aptitude model of Skehan (2016).

Of course, the limitations of this study can be attributed to various factors, one of which is the insufficient validity of the instruments used. The self-report questionnaires used to measure the learners' cultural and linguistic sensitivity might pose a significant limitation to this study. Although they were developed based on established theories and efforts were made previously to validate them with a group of adult L2 learners (Choe 2023), their validity was not rigorously assessed using objective measures for the specific context of this study. Another major limitation lies in its restricted sample size, as data were solely collected from three learners. Such a small sample diminishes the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of L2 learners. To ensure the robustness of the conclusions drawn, further research with a more extensive participant pool is imperative. By addressing these shortcomings, future studies can offer more comprehensive insights into the phenomena in question.

The concluding remark of this study rests solely on the researchers' speculation after the year-long observation, and thus requires ensuing efforts to make it suitable for scientific research. As mentioned in the discussion section, Seon's judgmental and remedial behavior regarding non-native-like pronunciation appeared soon after the onset of immersion. The well-known innate account of this rapid discrimination and internal representation is based on universal grammar; phonemic features and their combinatorial patterns have been set promptly with limited primary input because the learner knows what are possible or impossible realizations of language. One source of evidence for this thesis is the child's ability to judge the acceptability of linguistic well-formedness, which has been given minimal attention from sociocultural perspectives. This bears on what Lantolf (1999, p. 28) asked two

decades ago: “How are we to interpret acquisition when it comes to culture? Does it have the same meaning with respect to culture as it does in the case of linguistic development, or does it mean something different?”

Given that acceptability judgment is an important aspect of linguistic knowledge, whether innate or acquired, exploring the nature of cultural competence and individual differences therein can also be enhanced by recognizing individuals’ judgment about cultural acceptability as another source and method of research. It is evident that children become able, or qualified, to judge whether a certain cultural form is within the range of nativelikeness or not at some point of development. If language acquisition is part of culture acquisition and is driven by domain-general cognitive abilities, then the nature of acceptability judgment with respect to cultural form will not essentially be different from the nature of acceptability judgment with respect to linguistic form. This and other relevant hypotheses have not been addressed so far and thus await further elaboration. One possibility is that the ability to judge whether certain cultural or linguistic forms are acceptable can possibly be a developmental/acquisitional process that is fundamentally rooted in the interplay of identifications and differentiations. This view assumes that individuals acquire a sense of judgment over what are acceptable or non-acceptable forms of culture and language through a continuously evolving system of identifying or disidentifying novel forms with existing ones. This developmental process of identification and disidentification, which is shaped by experiences and social interactions, instead of a biologically endowed set of principles and parameters, may form the basis for their ability to judge the *acceptability* of particular cultural or linguistic forms.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Primary, Secondary

Appendix I

The Cultural Sensitivity/Awareness Scale

Facet	Cognitive Sensitivity
Knowledge Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I know what Americans like and are happy about. - I know what Americans don't like and have scruples about. - I know what Americans value and appreciate. - I know what Americans consider unimportant and don't think much of. - I know the etiquette and customs of American life. - I know the foods and ingredients that Americans enjoy eating. - I know the leisure activities that Americans enjoy. - I can notice problems and their causes among American people. - I can see American people's facial expressions and gestures and understand their inner thoughts.
Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I think there are few differences between American culture and ours. - I think Americans are narrow-minded and secular. - I think our culture is made up of more complex traditions and worldviews than American culture. - While living in the United States, I gradually became able to better understand the way Americans think. - I think Americans live and see the world from a different perspective than we do. - I think the values and lifestyles of American people are very diverse.
	Affective Sensitivity
Motivational Affect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I tend to observe the behavior of Americans closely. - I am uncomfortable and sometimes afraid to communicate with Americans. - I am curious when the minds and actions of the American people are different from mine. - Spending time with Americans for no particular reason is useless to me. - I try to avoid embarrassing situations in front of Americans.
Interpersonal Affect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I care about how Americans will see or judge me. - I get intimidated and timid when I am among Americans. - I want to build deep friendships with friends I made in America. - I do not try to deal directly with Americans unless it is unavoidable. - Other things being equal, I would rather be with Koreans than Americans. - I can feel the emotions that Americans feel. - I can read the unintentional emotions and attitudes of Americans toward me.
Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am an outsider to American society, and I feel I will never be an insider. - I think our culture is better than American culture when it comes to emotions and personal relationships. - You can get along with Americans, but it's hard to be true friends. - While living in the United States, I gained more confidence and certainty about American people. - While living in the United States, I gradually began to feel like an American.
	Behavioral Sensitivity
Assimilative Imitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I can imitate the expressions and gestures of American people. - I change my tone and behavior when communicating with Americans. - I change my clothes and appearance to impress Americans. - I want to live in a small town in America where there are no foreigners. - I avoid situations where I have to face American people alone.
Modificatory Integrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I do not reveal my true face to Americans. - When I get caught up in a conflict with Americans, I have the confidence to resolve it. - While living in the US, I hang out with Americans more often than I do with Koreans. - I can live as a Korean in Korea and as an American in the US. - I can live in the US permanently as long as I can get Korean language support when I need it.

Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I still don't know how to relate to and get along with Americans. - While living in the United States, I have met more and more diverse Americans. - Living in the United States, I have come to get the information I need mainly from Americans. - I became more and more open-minded about American people. - Living in the US, I have come to feel less stressed out by Americans.
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Appendix II

The Linguistic Sensitivity Scale

Facet	Mode-Sensory & Functional Preferences
Perceptive Cognitive (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am more comfortable listening/reading English than speaking/writing. - I feel more anxious when I speak English than when I listen or read it. - I am more comfortable listening to English than reading. - When I listen to English, I concentrate better than when I read. - I am more confident in listening than reading in English.
Productive Creative (11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I find speaking and writing English less boring than listening and reading. - I concentrate better when I write than when I listen to English. - I am more comfortable speaking than writing about the same content. - When I speak English, I concentrate better than when I write. - I am more confident in writing than speaking English. - I try to memorize as many useful English expressions as possible. - I like to find and invent new English expressions. - I think the most important thing is to practice speaking and writing English. - There are times when I admire novel and meaningful English expressions. - I don't think the difference in expression is important unless there is a big problem in conveying the meaning. - I believe that there is always an expression that can best convey the meaning I have in mind. - I think that accurate conveying of meaning is more important than analogy or metaphor.
Ideational Intellectual / Interpersonal Practical (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I enjoy practicing pronunciation and conversation more than studying English vocabulary and grammar. - When I talk with someone in English, I concentrate better than when I read and write alone. - I can learn English better in real life than in the classroom. - When I see a sentence with a rare and complex structure, I pay special attention to it. - There are times when I want to know the etymology and history of words that are not often used in everyday life. - I have thought about how the expression principles of Korean and English differ from each other.
Linguistic Components	
Listening Pronunciation (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I can remember and pronounce the first and last names of native English speakers correctly. - I have felt differences in speech sounds that other people cannot distinguish well. - I pay more attention to weak and fast sounds rather than louder words. - I tend to distinguish English /s/ and /th/ based on context rather than sound. - I can distinguish the unique accent and tone of native English speakers. - I can imitate the tone of native English speakers similarly. - There are often cases where native English speakers cannot understand my pronunciation.
Vocabulary Grammar (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I feel that there are too many words with similar meanings. - When I use an English word, the opposites and synonyms of the word also come to mind. - I have been hesitant for a long time to choose the words I like the most when writing. - I don't think it's a big problem if the meaning is good, even if there's a little bit of inaccuracy in grammar.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I pay a lot of attention so that there are no mistakes in my words and writings, no matter who the interlocuter is. - I think whether the grammar is right or wrong is a problem that has little to do with communication.
Discourse Pragmatics (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When I have a conversation in English, I tend to plan in advance how to get the words out and continue. - When I read English, there are times when I feel that the writing is a bit sloppy and the seams are not smooth. - When I read English, there are times when I feel the flow of the author's mind and thoughts vividly. - In similar situations, I usually use one English expression that I am most confident in. - I think direct expressions are more effective than circumlocutions when speaking in English. - I have been offended by the other person's expression when conversing in English.
Working Memory Memory Retrieval (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I tend to remember what I hear better than what I read in English. - When I hear English words for the first time, I tend to check the spelling right away. - I memorize the part that I did not hear well in English listening and review it later. - When I hear an English word and think of its meaning, I also think of the spelling of the word. - I have the confidence to listen to English sentences made up of about 10 words and repeat them exactly. - When I read English aloud, I can interpret the meaning at the same time. - Among the English expressions I remember right now, there are things made up of more than 10 words. - I can say at least 3 synonyms or antonyms of any English word I know. - When I speak English, it's hard for me to control that Korean words keep coming to my mind.
	Metalinguistic & Developmental Potential
Metalinguistic Awareness (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I think that if you know a lot of words, your English skills will automatically improve. - I know exactly which parts of my English pronunciation differ from native speakers. - I notice my grammar mistakes right away when I speak English. - I feel embarrassed when I look at my English writings in the past. - I often find mistakes in the speech and writing of native English speakers. - I often see English sentences that can be interpreted in different ways.
Developmental Potential (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I know what I am lacking in learning English and focus on that part. - I have ever used my own English learning strategy, not the method I heard from others. - I know quite a few learning methods used by people who speak English well. - The only way to learn English listening and speaking skills is to listen and speak a lot. - I don't want to use a learning strategy that doesn't suit me. - I prefer fun, albeit less effective, learning methods to boring ones.