

Individual differences in language learning and teaching: Essential theory and practice

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Overview and purpose of the book

This comprehensive volume deals with a multidimensional topic, namely individual variation in the field of language learning and teaching. The current publication is part of a series aiming to provide the reader with thorough theoretical information involving diverse research paradigms as well as practical pedagogic suggestions with regard to various aspects of language learning in instructed and non-instructed settings. Summarising recent studies and the latest findings, and overviewing the literature in this complex and highly inconclusive field undoubtedly challenged the editor of the book. His declared aim was to attract a wide readership including researchers, methodologists, materials designers, teachers, and undergraduate and graduate students as well. Therefore, numerous outstanding authors contributed to the volume by presenting their field of research briefly in each part of the different sections, which makes the book an up-to-date collection of diverse studies filling a niche on the market.

Content and analysis

As was mentioned above, the present volume comprises several studies, which are organised into different sections on the basis of their themes, enabling readers to find their interest easily. Although the book does not cover some important areas of individual differences, such as ambiguity tolerance and gender, its scope of interest is broad enough to involve some less investigated topics. For instance, the relationship between individual variation and classroom practices, grammar learning strategies, individual differences (ID) in teachers, and the needs of learners with a learning difference are among the topics discussed in the papers collected.

Concerning the structure of the book: it is divided into five sections in order to highlight different aspects of ID, ranging from theoretical considerations of the changing second language acquisition (SLA) perspective to cognitive factors, affective and social factors, ID in learning and teaching practices, and learners with special needs in foreign language education. Each section starts with a solid overview of previous literature in the field in order to provide the reader with sufficient background knowledge to the subsequent studies.

In the first section of the volume, Nizegorodcew examines the changing perspective of SLA theory through her own and her students' previous research, drawing the conclusion that ID belongs rather to the sociolinguistic domain of SLA

theory than to the traditional interpretation of ID as stable traits, though the study discusses both the cognitive and the sociolinguistic approaches. In the second study, Aronin and Bawardi also deal with ID from the sociolinguistic point of view. They argue that global shifts influence second language learning and use, which leads to diversity in the process and results of language learning, and consequently the re-evaluation of teaching methodology. In the last paper in this section Ottó and Nikolov provide a possible solution to the Adult Language Learning Paradox (Sokolik, 1990) on the basis of grounded theory relying on a connectionist model supported by the results of a set of simulations. The novelty in this approach is that previous research is refuted by more recent theoretical considerations and practical simulations as well.

The second section of the book introduces the reader to cognitive factors, starting with Robinson's study on the complexity of language aptitude. He proposes a framework in which the focus is on the relationship between language aptitude and the conditions of L2 classroom language exposure. The aim of the analysis is to aid informed pedagogic decision-making and pedagogic intervention as opposed to selection exclusively. On the basis of a proposed new framework he suggests that the Modern Language Aptitude Test be revised in order to make it more applicable for classroom purposes. In another study, Biedron investigates short-term and working memory abilities in gifted foreign language learners as there can be a strong link between memory capacity and learning outcomes. It is also worth reading this study to obtain definitions of that abstract notion: the 'gifted language learner'. Later on in the section, Singleton and Lesniewska raise questions regarding a widely discussed topic in SLA: the Critical Age Hypothesis. Besides summarising all the controversial approaches towards the topic, they raise the issue of giving an answer to the crucial question of language teaching education policy: when to begin L2 language teaching. The subsequent two papers focus on the relationship between intelligence and language learning. Wrobel investigates the issue of whether language learning requires a mental organ or general intelligence in children's language learning processes. Michonska-Stadnik reveals the link between different types of intelligences and teaching style. In the last article in this section, Alwan's aim is to point out the beneficial pedagogic implications of the so-called 'meta programs', discussing personality types in order to pay more attention to ID while teaching in class.

Each of the six studies in the third section of the book focuses on affective and social factors from a different angle. Keblowska argues in the first paper that affective learner features can be extremely important in the language learning process, as many research projects have proved that emotional states affect L2 learning. This is followed by Piechurska-Kuciel's work on language anxiety, in which she examines language anxiety levels in Polish secondary school students from different areas (from urban to rural) over the whole period of their secondary education. Moving on to the teachers' perspective, Gabrys-Barker presents the results of an on-going research project investigating pre-service teachers' reflective reports with regard to their beliefs, their own perception of the teaching profession, and their crucial experiences as language learners, in the form of a diary study. A similar topic is discussed by Mercer regarding the EFL self-concept of a tertiary-level, advanced learner, investigating to what extent it is dynamic; as self-esteem and self-efficacy are also considered crucial factors in successful language learning processes. Subsequently, Crisfield and White give the results of a highly practical study dealing with the relationship between student-perceived usefulness and their motivation level in

mandatory general and specific-purpose English second language courses. Findings confirm that perceived usefulness of content increases motivation and vice versa. In the last study in the section, Csizér introduces the reader into the field of L2 motivation in the Hungarian setting. She presents the results of research conducted during the past 20 years involving different target groups from young learners to adult learners. Reflecting on the achievements and limitations of previous investigations, she suggests direction for further research aimed at obtaining more information on the complex paradigm of motivation.

The fourth section consists of five studies in the area of individual differences in learning and teaching practices. The section begins with Cohen discussing the interesting area of pragmatics with regard to negotiating meaning, comprehension, and production of pragmatic material through language, gestures, and silence. Then, Pawlak explores the use of grammar learning strategies by advanced learners of English, relying on the descriptive paradigm developed by Oxford et al. (2007). He comes to the conclusion that there is a need to develop a reliable and valid instrument in order to gain valid data in the field. Baran-Lucarz presents the results of her research into the impact of certain cognitive and affective factors on pronunciation and learning. She concludes that field independence, auditory preference, and musical talent can be predictors of success, though students lacking these factors can also succeed.

This is followed by Chunhong and Griffiths' paper examining error correction preferences correlated with success in language learning through a quantitative questionnaire study containing qualitative remarks, as well. Finally, Pedrazzi and Nava discuss the complex issue of dictionary strategy use by presenting the results of a qualitative case study involving think-aloud protocol and video recordings and concluding that strategy use correlates with English language proficiency.

Although the closing section of the book contains only two articles, it has to be emphasized that the needs of learners with learning differences are dealt with in detail in the volume. First, Jedynak describes the issues of giftedness in visually impaired learners; besides giving a thorough discussion of their difficulties, and offering practical pedagogic suggestions for teachers. The last article, by Nijakowska, deals with developmental dyslexia and gives a detailed overview of how it is manifested in learners and what kind of difficulties it causes for them.

Considering the entire volume, it can undoubtedly be stated that each segment of the initially intended target audience can find what they need. From the point of view of both undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as that of researchers, one of the strengths of the book is its comprehensive content and structure, which enable the reader to gain a complex picture of the theory on individual differences. The volume also offers references to further sources in the field. Besides referring to the most significant milestones in the literature, it also provides an overview of recent trends and changes in the topic. Another noteworthy benefit for the novice researcher is the opportunity to read several studies following different methodologies, which can serve as guidelines or samples for their own work; the volume also fosters critical reading and thinking skills. Therefore, not only researchers and students, but materials designers and teachers can also benefit from the collection of studies in the volume.

References:

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