



Individual Differences among Second Language Learners: Implications in Language Teaching

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Abstract

Everybody is unique. Everybody does a given job differently and it is no different in case of language learning. That is the way the world is. Therefore, instead of being surprised with the way people are different from each other and with the way they perform differently from each other, we, as language practitioners can make use of the differences as teaching strategies and techniques in teaching. Letting better learners help poorer learners in learning is the best example of such techniques. A teacher needs to know and regard the differences his/her learners have in order to be able to use those differences productively. The paper discusses individual differences and its use in language classroom.

Individual Differences

The science of psychology studies people at three levels of focus and this study is well captured by the following well known quote:

“Every man is in certain respects (a) like all other men, (b) like some other men, (c) like no other man” (H. A. Murray, 1953).

However, the individual differences psychologists focus on two general concepts which are different and somewhat contradictory to each other. They are trying to understand the *general principle* of human mind on one hand and *uniqueness* of human mind on the other.

The concept like uniqueness of each human mind paved the way for many researches in this field. Traditionally it was termed as *differential psychology* but now it is referred to as Individual Differences (IDs).

IDs can be defined as “*anything that marks a person as a distinct and unique human being.*”

Here, we do not consider the physical features as IDs. Character and psychological behaviours make people different from each other.

IDs studies show that individual behaviour, even that of identical twins may vary significantly. It is proven that a person’s behaviour is mainly shaped by the culture in which s/he is brought up. Still, all the people brought up in the same environment or culture never think and act in the same way. All these take place because of the uniqueness of the human brain and these phenomena of human brain lead to the studies of individual differences.

The issues of the IDs draw our attention when it occurs in language studies. It has been disclosed that IDs play a great role in language acquisition, may it be first language or second language. Differences in ways of and success in learning languages are seen in different levels in different learners. It has been long observed that there is a particularly wide variation among language learners in



terms of their success in mastering an L2. Thus, psychologists felt the necessity of studies of IDs.

According to psychologists, the variables like *personality, aptitude, motivation, learning style, learning strategies and other learner characteristics* are responsible for these differences in learning. These ID variables are noteworthy concepts in second language acquisition as the outcome of the acquisition of an L2 is significantly more diverse than that of an L1. So, it is very important for us, teachers of English, to know about the variables. When we come to the question of the implications of IDs, it seems to be practically beneficial to know about the variables as the IDs have been found to be consistent predictors of L2 learning success.

Sir Frances Galton was the first psychologist to investigate and speak about the variables and their influences in language learning way back in the later part of the nineteenth century.

Let us discuss the major ID variables and their implications for language teaching briefly.

Personality

Personality psychology is a branch of psychology that studies personality and individual differences.

Personality can be defined as an organized set of characteristics possessed by a person that uniquely influences his or her cognitions, motivations, and behaviors in various situations and affects the learning of the individual. The word “personality” is derived from the Latin word *persona*, meaning mask.

Pervin and John (2001) say, “Personality represents those characteristics of the person that account for consistent patterns of feeling, thinking and behaving”. Indeed, every

language contains a wide array of adjectives to describe these patterns ranging from aggressive to kind or from lazy to sociable, and there seems to be a fair deal of agreement among people about such categorizations. This suggests that these adjectives represent underlying personality traits. Then, the personality theories take an attempt to identify these traits and organize them into broad personality dimension.

While talking about personality, concepts like ‘*temperament*’ and ‘*mood*’ must be distinguished. Temperament is highly heritable and mood is highly volatile. Personality and temperament are seen as broadly overlapping domains, with temperament providing the primarily biological basis for the developing personality. Two thousand years ago, Hippocrates and Galen divided human beings into four major personality types as follows:

- *Phlegmatic*- those who are unflappable and slow to take action
- *Sanguine* - those who get excited easily but not strongly and they have short-lived interests
- *Choleric* - these kind of people are impetuous, impulsive and often ambitious and perfectionist.
- *Melancholic* – they are inclined to reflection.

In contrast to temperament, mood refers to a highly volatile, changing state. According to Mathews, Davies, and Westerman (2000) there exist three separate dimensions of mood states. Those are *energy-fatigue, tension-relaxation, and pleasure-displeasure*. A little is known about the change of the mood as per the situations but Mathews et al. state that there is a definite relationship between mood and performance. It can interfere task processing and influence the performance and it can also energize and mobilize processing.



After many researches, psychologists have invented many constructs to know about personality. Among those, *Eysenck's Three Component construct* and *Big Five model* of Lewis Goldbrg, Robert Mc Crae, and Paul Costa have dominated the field of research in personality psychology. These two models overlap considerably.

Eysenck's model identifies three principal personality dimensions by contrasting:

1. Extraversion with introversion
2. Neuroticism and emotionality with emotional stability and
3. Psychoticism and tough-mindedness with tender-mindedness

On the other hand the big five model retains the initial two dimensions but replaces the third one i.e. Psychoticism and tough-mindedness with tender-mindedness with three additional dimensions like *conscientiousness*, *agreeableness* and *openness to experiences*.

The inventory is given to learner to respond. The nature and personality of the respondent is decided according to the score s/he obtains. In the *Big Five* model, top scorers are considered to be imaginative, curious, creative, systematic, hard-working, sociable, friendly, good-natured, moody and emotional.

Apart from these inventories, there is another good inventory called *Myers-Briggs Types Indicator* (MBTI) which helps us to know about the personalities.

These constructs are extremely helpful to know about different persons and their personality. Thus, it can be very helpful for the second language teacher.

Implication for language teaching

Knowing about the differences in personalities can always be beneficial for a language teacher. Application of Big five model lands with the results that personality and language learning are somehow related, even if there is no direct link between personality traits and learning outcomes. But, if we shift to process-oriented manner of teaching, then personality variables will have a great impact on the process of learning.

Personality factors shape the way people respond to their learning environment. It is likely that people of different personality types pursue differential behavioural patterns and this has an impact on their participation in learning tasks, may it be class room activities or real life practices. Thus, it is now quite apparent that personality is a modifying variable. So, knowing this will be immensely helpful for a teacher. We can predict and know many things about the learners like whether s/he is willing to participate in the activities, what is the situation that is liked by the learners, in what way they get interested to get involved in the activities.

Psychologists say that personality factors interact with various variables inherent to the social context of the learning situations, which prevents generalized linear associations from reaching overall significance. Skehan (1989) reported on a study by Wankowski that related extroversion-introversion to age and found that this affected achievement differently before and after puberty. Below puberty extroverts had an advantage over introverts and after puberty it was the other way round.

This knowledge about the learners in heterogeneous classroom is certainly very helpful for a language teacher.

Language aptitude

By language aptitude, we refer to the ability that a person has for learning languages. The concept of language aptitude is related to the broader concept of human abilities with a variety of learner differences. When we discuss aptitude, issues or concepts like ability and intelligence come to the screen. These are very closely associated with aptitude. Some psychologists differentiate between ability and aptitude but in typical practice these two terms are used synonymously. In educational contexts such as second language learning, ability is often considered similar to 'learning ability' that is the potential of an individual for acquiring new knowledge or skill. Thus, the terms 'language aptitude' and 'language ability' denote the meaning 'language learning ability'. The term **language learning aptitude** refers to the "prediction of how well, relative to other individuals, an individual can learn a foreign language in a given amount of time and under given conditions."

'Intelligence' is yet another synonym for 'ability' when it is used on its own but it usually has a broader meaning referring to a general sort of aptitude that is not limited to specific performance area but is transferable to many sorts of performance. Intelligence has been closely associated with learning success. This ability has been referred to variety of names like 'language aptitude', 'propensity', or 'talent' for learning an L2.

This language aptitude is one of those psychological concepts those are readily recognizable as ID variable. It is accepted fact that the innate ability to learn another language varies significantly individual to individual.

This potential or ability can be evaluated using formal aptitude tests. Aptitude tests

vary but many include evaluation of ability to manage sounds, grammatical structures, infer rules, and memory.

Eherman and Oxford (1995) found that aptitude measures were the ID variables most strongly correlated with L2 proficiency. Interestingly, Sternberg's report found the same thing. Thus, aptitude is strong predictor of academic success. Intelligence is often used to denote the 'ability to learn' and in fact, the first ever intelligence test the 1905 Binet Simon Intelligence scale, was originally developed to identify pupils who could not benefit from regular instruction in school class rooms because of their limited mental ability.

Much research has been conducted on language aptitude but two prominent researches among them are MLAT (Modern Language Aptitude Test) by Carroll and Sapon (1959), and the PLAB (Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery) by Pimsleur (1966). The modern Language Aptitude Test is the outcome of a five-year research conducted during the year 1953-1958 at Harvard University. They highlighted the great number of intuitively appealing task types that were expected to tell good and bad language learners and then selected the tasks that worked best in this respect. The MLAT construct consists of five constituents as follows:

- Number learning
- Phonetic script
- Spelling clues
- Words in sentences
- Paired associates

The PLAB is a paper-and-pencil test battery comprising six following parts:

- Grade point average
- Interest in foreign language learning
- Vocabulary



- Language analysis
- Sound discrimination
- Sound-symbol association

The tests are done with a time limit. The candidate has to perform several activities like auditory practice, memorizing etc. The final score obtained by the candidate indicates his/her ability of or progress in language learning. It predicts the *rate of progress* a learner is likely to make in learning under optimal condition of motivation, opportunity, and quality of instruction.

Language aptitude and its implication

Having knowledge about the learners' level of ability, intelligence and their working memory can be extremely fruitful for a language teacher. It may help us to infer the level of effort and motivation he must expend to learn second language successfully. It may be helpful for us to recognize the learners who need extra bit of attention to do well.

Motivation

Motivation is the activation of goal-oriented behavior. It is activation of interest in learning. Motivation is one of the major ID variables that has been found to significantly affect language learning success as it provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later driving force to sustain the long learning process. It is observed that even individuals with the most remarkable abilities can not accomplish long term goals without sufficient motivation. For them, highly suitable syllabus, curriculum and good teaching also become useless to ensure achievement. Before thirty years, Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert argued that motivational factors can over ride the aptitude effect although language aptitude accounts for a considerable proportion of

individual variability in language learning achievement,

Wallace Lambert, Robert Gardner and their associates were the pioneer social psychologists working on L2 motivation. Gardner and Lambert (1972) viewed second languages as mediatory factors between different ethno linguistic communities and thus regarded the motivation to learn the language of the other community as a primary force responsible for enhancing or hindering intercultural communication affiliation.

Gardner had designed Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) in 1985 which gives us ideas about the learners' interest, motivation, and motivated behaviour.

Motivation is said to be intrinsic or extrinsic. **Intrinsic motivation** refers to motivation that is driven by an interest or enjoyment in the task itself. It exists within the individual rather than relying on any kind of external pressure. People having this intrinsic motivation can be called **self-motivated**. Social and educational psychologists have studied Intrinsic motivation Research has found that it is usually associated with high educational achievement and enjoyment by students.

Extrinsic motivation can described to be an external force to arouse interest in the individual. Common extrinsic motivations are rewards or incentives like money, grades, chocolates and threat of punishment etc. Competition is also considered as an extrinsic motivation as it encourages the performer to win and beat others, not to enjoy the intrinsic rewards of the activity. A crowd cheering on the individual and trophies are also extrinsic incentives.

Motivation is dynamic and ever changing process. Therefore, by and by, the process of research has been undergoing many changes.



Motivation is concerned with the fundamental question like *why people think and behave as they do*, and we can never assume and expect that we know the perfect and full answer to this question.

Demotivation:

Dornyei (2001) defined 'demotivation' as "specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action". There are both positive and negative forces leaving their impact on ongoing behaviors of the student. Positive motivation research seems to have over looked the negative motives and it has conceptualized motivation as a kind of inducement that is a force whose strength ranges on a continuum from zero to strong. But, it is observed that there exists negative motivation demotivating the learners from learning.

Motivation and its implications in language teaching:

Motivation is the key of learning an L2. Being language teachers, we should be aware of the classroom specific aspects of motivation. We have generally different kinds of learners in the classroom and each learner is different from others in the concept of motivation. Some are highly motivated intrinsically, some need to be motivated by some activities like stories, jokes etc. and some learners always need special attention. In this situation, if we are aware of different *motivational strategies, formulation of self-motivating strategies*, we can apply it to generate and maintain motivation in the learners and we can train them to take personal control of the effective conditions and experiences that enforces their involvement in the learning. This concept of motivation makes us aware of very small but

affective things in the classroom like making the teaching materials relevant to the learners, setting specific learner goals, increasing learner satisfaction. It tells us that we should aim at becoming good motivators by choosing few motivational techniques that suit both teacher and learners.

Learning styles and cognitive styles

Learning style is one of the prominent ID variables. Not everyone learns in the same way. 'Learning styles' vary individual to individual. Learning styles are various approaches or ways of learning. They involve learning methods, particular to an individual that are presumed to allow that individual to learn best. The idea of individualized "learning styles" originated in the 1970s, and gained 'enormous popularity'.

Learning styles occupy a crucial place in second language acquisition as a strong and problematic ID variable. According to Reid (1995), learning styles refers to "*an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred ways of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills*". Thus, as Ehrman says, they must be considered as a 'broad preferences for going about the business of learning'.

In simple words, *learning style is the way an individual learns the best*. And this 'way' varies person to person. The concept of learning style represents a profile of the individual's approach to learning, a blue print of the habitual or preferred way both individual perceives, interacts with, and responds to the learning environment. It is observed that even the same way of learning is approached by different learners in quite different ways and it is also a logical assumption that this variation in approach is not infinite but is characterized by systematic patterns, which can be called 'learning styles'.



Cognitive style or ‘thinking style’ is a term used in cognitive psychology to describe the way individuals think, perceive and remember information. It also refers to their preferred approach to using such information to solve problems. We get into controversy while trying to get the exact meaning of the term cognitive style and while trying to know whether it is a single or multiple dimension of human personality. However, it remains a key concept in the areas of education and especially in the field of second language acquisition.

We usually define Cognitive styles as an individual’s preferred and habitual modes of perceiving, remembering, organizing, processing, and representing information. Thus, cognitive styles are typically identified as being in a “conceptual gray area” between personality and intelligence. The terms Learning styles and cognitive styles are too often used in an interchangeable manner but they are not the same. Here, Raymer helps us to make a distinction between these two. He says, if learning style is considered as a profile of approach to learning by the individual, this profile can be seen to comprise two fundamental levels of functioning. The first is cognitive, referring to a stable and internalized dimension related to the way a person thinks or processes information, the second is the level of the learning activity which is more external and embraces less stable functions that relate to the learner’s continuing adaptation to the environment.

Kolb designed a theory and inventory to assess learning styles. His model is based on the Experiential Learning Theory, as explained in his book *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (1984). According to Kolb’s model, the ideal learning process engages all four modes in response to situational demands. In order to make learning effective,

all four of these approaches must be incorporated. The resulting learning styles are combinations of the individual’s preferred approaches. These learning styles are as follows:

- **Divergers (concrete and reflective)**
Divergers prefer concrete experience and reflective observation. They are imaginative and innovative
- **Convergers (abstract and active)**
Convergers are characterized by abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. They are good at practical implications of ideas.
- **Assimilators (abstract and reflective)**
Assimilators are characterized by abstract conceptualization and reflective observation. They are capable of creating theoretical models by means of inductive reasoning.
- **Accommodators (concrete and active)**
Accommodators use concrete experience and active experimentation. They are good at actively engaging with the world and actually doing things instead of merely reading about and studying them.

This model escorted to his Learning Style Inventory, an assessment method used to determine somebody’s learning style. An individual may exhibit a preference for one of the four styles depending on his approach to learning. Respondents are given several tasks and questions to respond to and their performance is observed to decide the style of the particular learner.

Related to this learning style, we have two more major concepts that need to be discussed. Those are ‘Field Dependence-Independence’ (FD/I). FD/I were initiated by Herman Witkin originally associated with



visual perception. Johnson summarized that FIs are good at out side performance whereas the FDs are good at cognitive task.

Apart from the style, the senses used by learners are different from each other and they can be categorized based on that as follows:

Sensory preferences

Sensory Preferences is concerned with finding out which senses do the learners use to perceive the information among all the senses like 'visual', 'auditory', 'kinesthetic', and some times 'tactile' types. According to this theory the learners are categorized as visual learners, auditory learners and kinesthetic and tactile learners.

Visual learners

Donrnyi (2005) quotes the study of Oxford (1995) saying as many as 50% to 80% of people in any classroom are predominantly visual. As the term suggests, these learners perceive information most effectively through the visual channel. Thus, they tend to prefer reading tasks and often use colorful highlighting schemes to make certain information visually more salient.

Auditory learners

Auditory learners can make effective use of the auditory input such as talks, lectures or audiotapes. They also like to 'talk the material through' by engaging in discussions and group work. They benefit from written passages to be read out and. They find loud reading and reciting extremely helpful for them to learn and remember.

Kinesthetic and tactile learners

Kinesthetic and tactile learners are often grouped together under the 'haptic' style category. The *kinesthetic style* refers to

learning most effectively through complete body experience. The key issue is movement. Kinesthetic learners thus require frequent breaks. They often find that actions or movements like walking around, shaking legs or hands while trying to memorize some thing helps.

Tactile learners like a hands-on, touching-learning approach. Manipulation of objects is the key issue here. They enjoy making posters, collages, and other types of visuals, building models, and they also happily engage in artistic works. For them conducting a lab experiment may be a real treat.

Psychologists like Joy Reid, Oxford, Cohen, and Ehrman and Leaver have designed inventories to know about the learning styles and cognitive styles of the learners.

Implications for language teaching:

All of us know that every learner learn in a different way. But, as language teacher, if we are able to know the way a particular learner learns, it would be extremely helpful for us and the learners. If a language teacher with this knowledge categorizes his learners into groups of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners and tries to cater to their need in the classroom, it would be beneficial for the learners. By doing this, we may be able to familiarize the learners with other learning styles. The learners may score higher in tests, have better attitudes, and turn out to be more involved and efficient if they are taught in ways to which they can more easily relate. Therefore, it is to the educator's advantage to teach and test students in learners' preferred styles.

Language Learning Strategies

We can define **Learning Strategy** as "behaviours of a learner that are intended to influence how the learner processes information."



However, in case of **Language Learning Strategies**, the definitions and the concepts differ significantly.

In the context of second language learning, we have a number of definitions of LLS given by many prominent figures in the field of psychology. Rubin (1987) says that LS “*are strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly.*” O’Malley and Chamot (1990) defined LS as “*the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to comprehend, learn, or retain new information.*” Finally, Oxford (1992/1993) provides specific examples of LLS and this helpful definition:

“Language learning strategies are specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative ability.”

To Andrew, “Language learning strategies include strategies for identifying the material that needs to be learned, distinguishing it from other material if need be, grouping it for easier learning (e.g., grouping vocabulary by category into nouns, verbs etc.), having repeated contact with the material, and formally committing the material to memory when it does not seem to be acquired naturally.”

The learning strategies are more often mistaken as a synonym to learning activities. But, Riding and Rayner (1998) provide a good distinction by saying that *an activity becomes strategic when it is particularly appropriate for the individual learner, in contrast to the general activity that may be less helpful for him.*

Taxonomies of language learning strategies:

We have two well-known taxonomies of language learning strategies by Oxford, and O’Malley and Chamot (1990).

Oxford’s taxonomy has six strategy classes as *cognitive, memory, metacognitive, compensation, affective, and social strategies.*

The taxonomy of O’Malley and Chamot is quite similar to the Oxford’s taxonomy. They categorize strategies into *cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, social strategies and affective strategies.*

The resulting typology comprises the following four main components:

1. Cognitive strategies, involving the manipulation or transformation of the learning materials/input (e.g., repetition, summarizing, using images).
2. Metacognitive strategies, involving higher-order strategies aimed at analyzing one’s own learning process.
3. Social strategies, involving inter personal behaviors aimed at increasing the amount of L2 communication and practice the learner undertakes (e.g., initiating interaction with native speakers, cooperating with peers).
4. Affective strategies, involving taking control of the emotional conditions and experiences that shape one’s subjective; involvement in learning.

There are individual differences in the use of learning strategies. Even, we can not recognize any particular strategy to be the best strategy to learn second language as different learners have been observed to have achieved success in tasks using significantly different strategies. There are many ID

variables like gender variation, sex variation and discipline based variation in learning strategy use.

Recently, some psychologists have linked the learning strategies with other ID variables. It is said that strategy use is very much related to motivation and learning style primarily. If it is so, we need to encourage the learners for strategy use. Normally, they use their own strategy unconsciously, but we can make them use some strategy consciously. Conscious strategy use is linked to learner beliefs; since the learner will select the most appropriate strategy for himself on the basis of what he believes to be best strategy. To make the learners aware of the strategy use we can do something like **strategy training**. By this, we can produce learners who will have more skill and will. With the help of different strategy training framework, feed back, and sharing session, we can train the learners for strategy use. We can know about their own strategy and supply them with additional strategies. By inventories like Oxford's SILL, MSLQ, we can know about their strategy use.

Implications for language teaching:

Learners vary from each other in case of use of strategies. They use various learning strategies in the process of acquiring the language. So, if we are, as teachers of English language, aware of the learning strategies, we can make the learners benefit from new strategies by strategy training and we can make them benefit from each other's strategy by sharing sessions. This can be immensely helpful for the learners to develop the use of multiple strategies. Then, teaching and learning process will be highly effective. As Hsiao and Oxford (2002) opine, learning strategies constitute a useful tool kit for active and conscious learning of second language.

Conclusion

We often mask the important variation between individuals by *averaging* in many of our research works and even in our teaching and while giving comments on the performance of our learners. Thus, Study of individual differences is very essential in this case. We can never neglect the ID variables like *personality, aptitude, motivation, learning styles and the learning strategies* and their impacts on second language learning. Each variable is equally important for a language teacher. Careful treatment of all these ID variables can pave the way for better learning and teaching of second language.

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