

New perspectives on the individual learner: Implications for research and teaching

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Abstract

Since the late 1960s, the individual learner has been the focus of research on the learning and, above all, on the teaching of languages. Given the importance of this topic to the field of language learning and teaching, two American Association of University Supervisors, Coordinators, and Directors of Language Programs (AAUSC) volumes, one in 1994 and another in 2013, have addressed issues related to the individual learner. This chapter explores the main trends in research on individual differences since the 2013 AAUSC volume. Given the proliferation of learner variables, we have chosen to focus on several key issues, specifically, the age of onset of acquisition, language aptitudes, motivation, emotion, and the willingness to communicate. After examining recent studies in each of these areas, we will turn our attention to current challenges related to research on individual differences and discuss the implications of a person-centered approach for language research and teaching.

Keywords: individual differences, person-centeredness, language learning, language teaching

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Introduction

Since the late 1960s, the individual learner has been the focus of research on the learning and, above all, on the teaching of languages. This was especially true of the period between the late 1960s and the early 2000s, an era of cognitive-based accounts of second language acquisition, which Benson (2019) designated an era of “learner-centeredness.” This period was followed by the social turn in second language acquisition (SLA) (Firth & Wagner, 1997), which ushered in the era of “person-centeredness,” where language learning is viewed as “a social process in its social contexts” (Benson, 2019, p. 66) and which has brought new insights into the language development of individual learners.¹ Given the importance of the individual learner to the field of language learning and teaching, two AAUSC volumes have addressed this topic: in 1994, *Faces in a Crowd: The Individual Learner in Multisection Courses* and, nineteen years later in the 2013 volume, *Individual Differences, L2 Development, and Language Program Administration: From Theory to Application*.

Following on the 1989 publication of Skehan’s seminal book, *Individual Differences in Second-Language Learning*, the 1994 AAUSC volume reflected the growing research interest in individual learners and the increasing awareness that the needs of individual learners should be addressed both in curriculum development and instructional practice (see Nunan, 1988; Tarone & Yule, 1989). As noted in the 1994 volume, the focus on individual learners presented new challenges to language program directors who oversee multisection courses and who struggle to balance the need for consistency and coherence across sections with the differing needs and interests of language learners. The volume included chapters on a variety of traditional learner variables, such as anxiety, aptitude, learning strategies, as well as studies that focused on gender differences in language learning, heritage speakers, and students labeled learning disabled. A number of the contributions to the volume, such as Dekeyser’s (1994) study of error correction, suggested ways that instructors could better meet the needs of different types of learners in the context of

large language programs.

In the twenty years between the first and second AAUSC volume on this topic, research on individual differences in language learning proliferated. During that period, hundreds of research articles and multiple books were published on the topic of the individual learner, as researchers sought to answer the question: “Why do individuals differ so much in second language attainment success?” (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p. xii). In addition to the individual factors that were analyzed in Skehan’s 1989 volume—language aptitude, motivation, language learning strategies, and other cognitive and affective influences on language learning, such as extroversion-introversion, risk-taking, intelligence, field independence, and anxiety—the field had expanded to include additional factors, such as working memory, previous language experience, and learning styles, among many others. Thus, the 2013 volume comprised a section on “individual differences as moderators of L2 development under different pedagogical conditions” (p. iii), which included studies of aptitude and its role in processing instruction, as well as on the role of aptitude in mediating the effects of feedback. In addition to studies of aptitude, the chapters addressed the role of explicitness and working memory in L2 development in the context of computer-delivered feedback, the attitudes and motivation of Hispanic heritage language learners, older adults and SLA, and the intersection of learner characteristics and study abroad program features. Other chapters were dedicated to individual differences and teacher education, and two chapters focused on students with learning disabilities and special needs.

Since the publication of the 2013 volume, a number of scholars have advocated for a *multilingual turn* in the fields of second language acquisition (SLA) and language education (Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2014; Ortega, 2019), in which learners are conceptualized as “multilingual social practitioners and agents with dynamic and complex biographies and identities who exist in a multilingual ecosystem” (Meier, 2017, p. 153). Researchers now eschew the concept of the native speaker or monolingual as the baseline for language development and attainment, thus rejecting “a deficit view of L2 learning as a less successful enterprise than L1 learning” (Ushioda, 2017, p. 470). In addition, researchers stress the need to study all language learners, including circumstantial bilinguals, in order to address the overrepresentation of elite bilinguals in SLA studies (Ortega, 2019).² This broadened perspective has begun to influence the study of individual differences, expanding its focus beyond the individual-psychological dimension to a consideration of the macro-sociological context in which learning occurs.

Building on the previous volumes, this article examines recent studies of the individual learner. We begin by exploring the main trends in research on individual differences, since the 2013 AAUSC volume, focusing primarily on adult language learners in classroom contexts as these are the contexts most relevant to language program directors. Wherever possible, we include information relevant to the social turn and person-centeredness, although we note that many studies continue to approach individual differences from a cognitive, rather than a social, perspective. Given the proliferation of learner variables,³ we have chosen to focus on several key issues: the age of onset of acquisition, language aptitudes, motivation, emotion, and the willingness to communicate. After examining recent studies in each of these areas, we turn our attention to current challenges to the study of individual differences and elaborate on the implications of a person-centered approach for language research and teaching.

Age of Onset of Acquisition

Age of onset of acquisition (AOA) is recognized as having an important role in second language acquisition attainment and rate of acquisition. Recent scholarship on AOA largely avoids discussions of a cognitive or sensitive period. Instead, research strongly supports the trend towards a person-centered frame of reference by taking a nuanced look at how various factors, such as context, input, and timing, may interact with age to affect the rate of acquisition and the overall success that language learners experience. Similar to Cox’s chapter in Sanz and Lado (2015), scholars of AOA encourage language programs to create an environment that motivates the individual and is tailored to the specific needs and tendencies of the age at which a learner begins. Whereas many scholars have suggested that younger may be better when it comes to speech perception and pronunciation (e.g., Huang, 2016; Moyer, 2018), others have demonstrated an advantage (at

least initially) for older learners when it comes to rate of acquisition (e.g., Rothman et al., 2016). For many, however, context has the potential to offset AOA effects. For example, Pfenninger and Singleton (2016) contradicted studies (Huang, 2016; Moyer, 2018) that suggested that early AOA was associated with positive attitudes toward the target language and increased motivation. In their study, positive attitudes did not correlate with age, motivation increased with time, and success in the L2 was significantly predicted by a strong future vision of L2 use and usefulness. This was supported by Pfenninger (2017), who found that age interacts with and is strongly influenced by the broader social environment of the classroom and school. Pfenninger and Singleton (2019) demonstrated that, although some linguistic skills, such as oral accuracy and grammaticality judgments, may initially be highly sensitive to AOA, in the long-term, AOA was a relatively weak predictor of second language learning outcomes compared to contextual factors and bilingualism effects. Other studies of AOA turned their attention to the amount and type of input students were receiving. Regarding quality of input, DeKeyser et al. (2017) and DeKeyser (2018) reminded us that younger learners tend to benefit from implicit learning, although the relative importance of explicit instruction increases with age. Paradis and Jia (2017) noted that whereas older learners can reach high levels of proficiency in the target language, timeframes for attainment vary by student and depend on task difficulty, linguistic sub-domain, language environment factors, cognitive factors, and input quantity and quality.

Across these and similar studies, the major implication for language programs is adaptation. No matter the age at which instruction begins, instruction should be adapted accordingly. Moyer (2018), along with Pfenninger (2017) and Pfenninger and Singleton (2016, 2019), encouraged instructors to create a class—and, ideally, an institution-wide environment that fosters positive attitudes toward the L2, motivation, and a strong L2 self-concept. Paradis and Jia (2017) advised having realistic expectations for L2 learners in an environment with limited L2 input (both in quantity and richness). The above studies demonstrated a conviction that the key to successful language learning was age-appropriate learning, rather than simply starting early, and that adapting the learning environment to the individual learner might compensate for any negative effects of age of onset of acquisition.

Language Aptitudes

The definition and measurement of language aptitude are controversial topics within SLA. As Li (2015) noted, there are two divergent definitions of language aptitude, one that treats language aptitude as static and predictive of ultimate attainment (Carroll & Sapon, 2002), and one that takes a dynamic view of language aptitude (Robinson, 2005). Carroll and Sapon (2002) defined language aptitude as a set of cognitive abilities that can predict how well an individual can learn a foreign language under certain conditions and within a certain amount of time. Conversely, Robinson (2005) defined language aptitude as the “cognitive abilities information processing draws on during L2 learning and performance in various contexts and at different stages” (p. 46). Traditionally, researchers relied on Carroll and Sapon’s definition of aptitude, as well as their Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT), which measured four components of aptitude: inductive language learning ability, grammatical sensitivity, rote learning ability, and phonetic coding ability (Grigorenko, 2002). Today, SLA researchers tend to favor Robinson’s (2005) view, and several new tests (e.g. LLAMA, VORD, PLAB) exist that attempt to integrate other constructs such as working memory, linguistic analytic ability, etc. As Gregerson and MacIntyre (2014) observed, “the term *language aptitude* needs pluralization as it is made up of a variety of cognitive features forming a composite measure” (p. 65). This section reviews some of the recent research involving several components of language aptitudes, including explicit language aptitude and working memory. In addition, the research touches on several other issues, such as whether language aptitudes can be developed through language experience and/or training, and the pedagogical implications of differences in language aptitudes.

Explicit language aptitude (ELA), defined as “a dimension of aptitude characterized by explicit cognitive processes, involved in explicit inductive learning, explicit associative learning, and rote learning ability” (Yilmaz & Granena, 2016, p. 151), was examined by Yilmaz and Ganena in relation to L2 learning

outcomes under different corrective feedback conditions. Specifically, they analyzed the mediation of ELA during explicit and implicit feedback among 48 English L1 undergraduate students.⁴ The authors found that ELA was only able to predict learning outcomes for those learners who received explicit corrective feedback.⁵ Although their results suggested that explicit negative feedback delivered in a direct manner may be of immediate benefit to learners with a high aptitude for explicit learning, they also stressed that explicit correction is not preferable for all learners, as low ELA learners benefited to a similar extent from both explicit correction and recasts. Thus, they concluded that “cognitive factors may moderate the extent to which L2 learners benefit from various instructional interventions, such as corrective feedback” (p. 158).

Working memory (WM), originally proposed as a component of language aptitude by Miyake and Friedman (1998), has increasingly received attention in recent SLA research (e.g., Gregerson & MacIntyre, 2014; Singleton, 2017; Wen, 2016; Wen et al., 2017). There are many models of WM, but common to all models is the conception of WM as the “mechanisms and processes that are involved in the control, regulation, and active maintenance of task-relevant information in the service of complex cognition” (Miyake & Shah, 1999, p. 450). Recent scholarship advocates considering students’ various strengths in WM when designing activities. For instance, students with high WM can easily participate in interactive activities, tasks with no planning time, and online tasks, but students with low WM have much more difficulty with these tasks (Tare et al., 2014). Tare et al. proposed providing planning time, scaffolding tasks, incorporating repetition, and offering some less cognitively demanding tasks to help students with low WM. Similarly, Abdi Tabari (2019) supported giving students planning time for writing tasks in order to lower the cognitive load. Individualized instruction through task-based learning in groups may also be effective in helping students with low WM.

Though there is still much debate as to the extent to which cognitive aptitudes can be improved (Suzuki et al., 2019), several studies evidenced the possibility of at least small improvements in WM (e.g., Au et al., 2015; Soveri et al., 2017), perhaps through computer training. Specific to SLA, Hayashi (2019) reported on the findings of two studies on working memory training (WMT) among Japanese undergraduate learners of English. She noted that larger improvements in a verbal working memory task were associated with higher oral proficiency scores. Because the training effects were strongest in the group that received both WMT and language training, Hayashi suggested that instructors incorporate explicit and systematic strategy training in the language classroom, focusing on cognitive (e.g., scanning for details, chunking) and metacognitive (e.g., setting a goal, evaluating learning) strategies, which may help students improve performance on tasks that require high levels of verbal memory.

Most studies of language aptitudes have focused on classroom learners. In contrast, a recent study on Spanish-English heritage speakers (Cox et al., 2019) focused on circumstantial bilinguals to explore the connection between heritage language experience and language aptitude. The authors attempted to shed light on the issue of whether language aptitude is a stable trait or one that is developed through experience. In this study, the authors assessed potential relationships between individual differences in bilingual language experience (e.g., language exposure, proficiency, and age of onset of acquisition), language aptitude, and nonverbal IQ of 80 Spanish-English uninstructed bilinguals. Results indicated that for sound-symbol matching (LLAMA-E) and for grammatical inferencing (LLAMA-F) bilingual experience predicted language aptitude.⁶ Additionally, participants who scored higher on these tests showed higher balanced proficiency in their two languages. Sound-symbol matching was also related to greater exposure to the more dominant language of the individual, whether Spanish or English. Age of onset was not a predictor for language aptitude, but nonverbal IQ accounted for significant variation in sound-symbol matching and grammatical inferencing. The authors concluded that some aspects of aptitude may develop in response to bilingual experience and that uninstructed bilinguals enjoy a bilingual advantage.

Motivation

Motivation is a complex construct that has been defined in different ways depending on the researcher's theoretical framework. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) provided a historical overview of research on motivation, outlining three phases that reflect different theoretical approaches: the social psychological period (1959–1990), the cognitive-situated period (the 1990s), and the process-oriented period that began at the turn of the millennium. In the first phase, social psychologists, such as Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1972), focused on integrative and instrumental orientations to motivation to explain why language learners are motivated to study an L2.⁷ During the cognitive-situated period, researchers turned their attention to the ways in which learners' mental processes influence their motivation, realigning their approach with mainstream educational psychology and shifting their attention from macro- to micro-contexts. Research during the third phase, which Dörnyei and Ryan described as “a shift to socio-dynamic perspectives,” focuses on motivation as a dynamic process, which changes over time, and is “especially concerned with how motivation emerges from interaction between individuals and contexts” (p. 91). Ushioda (2009), for example, argued for a person-in-context relational view, which is characterized by:

a focus on the agency of the individual as a thinking, feeling human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background, a person with goals, motives and intention; a focus on the interactions between this self-reflective intentional agenda, and the fluid and complex system of social relations, activities, experiences and multiple micro-and macro-contexts in which the person is embedded, moves, and is inherently part of. (p. 220)

This approach clearly aligns with the social turn in research and a focus on person-centeredness. MacIntyre et al. (2017) used Ushioda's framework to analyze the community-level motivational processes of heritage learners of Gaelic on Cape Breton Island (Canada). They identified processes specific to heritage language learners—e.g., heritage passions and heritage convictions—that contributed to the development of a rooted L2 self, which was “defined by strong feelings of connection to speakers of the language” (p. 512), but which went beyond the immediate context to include connections to ancestors as well as to future generations of speakers of the language.

Another perspective on motivation, which aligns with both the social turn and person-centeredness, is the construct of *investment*, developed by Norton (1997) and defined as “the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (p. 411). Within a macro-sociological framework, students' life histories, especially as related to the target language, and their changing identities, together with their agency, shape their desire and commitment as language learners. The concept of investment has been used effectively in research in a variety of contexts, such as in dual immersion programs (Potowski, 2004; Ballinger, 2017) as well as in university classrooms (Haneda, 2005).

Much of the recent work on learner motivation centers around identity, autonomy, and emotion, reflecting Sanz and Lado's (2015) observation that motivation has been characterized by fluidity. The studies we review below reveal implications for classroom learning. Findings indicate that a learner's tendency to be motivated by an ideal L2 self (promotion-focused) or an ought-to L2 self (prevention-focused) correlates with either negative or positive emotions (e.g., Papi & Teimouri, 2014; Teimouri, 2017). Building on this connection, Saito et al.'s (2018) study of Japanese high school students learning English investigated L2 motivation, emotion, and experiences as key variables in L2 oral proficiency. They found that although experience is a crucial part of language development, L2 learners' individual differences in motivation and emotion might be the keys to turning that experience into acquisition. They encouraged language teachers to facilitate positive emotion and motivation in the L2 classroom through a pleasant and amusing atmosphere; consistently encouraging students to use the target language; not being unduly focused on errors; and designing a variety of interesting challenges that involve risk taking, autonomy, and unpredictability.

Moyer (2017) also argued that autonomy is central to motivation; he encouraged activities that periodically

increase in difficulty in order to foster motivation. Similarly, Papi et al. (2019) advocated creating a variety of activities that match students' inner drive (promotion- or prevention-focused), noting that a one-size-fits-all approach to motivation is ineffective. This theme was also evident in Godwin-Jones's (2019) article on the use of technology in language learning. He maintained that motivation in language learning occurs when learning connects in some way to one or more of a person's identities. He suggested that this can be facilitated by online learning; teachers can foster motivation in students by encouraging them to explore their various "transferrable" identities in different ways online.

Another innovative approach to motivation research in which identity construction is central is Directed Motivational Current (DMC). DMC refers to experiencing a surge of motivation that supports long-term learning and has three distinguishing characteristics: being goal-directed, having a salient facilitative structure,⁸ and experiencing positive emotionality (see Dörnyei, Henry, & Muir, 2015; Dörnyei, Ibrahim & Muir, 2015). Dörnyei, Henry, and Muir (2015) encouraged fostering DMCs by incorporating into the language classroom activities that were relevant to students and encouraged student agency. They also addressed ways teachers can help students who experience a loss of DMC, including working with them to set goals. The final chapter of their book provided project frameworks for focused interventions that facilitate DMC. Relying on interview data from highly motivated learners of Swedish, Henry et al. (2015) discussed the potential for positive emotionality to spread to a group. They encouraged developing DMCs in group work through focusing on positive emotionality and other core characteristics of DMC.

Emotion

In SLA, cognition has typically been prioritized over emotion, at least in part because emotion is difficult to define and is also difficult to measure in a reliable way, as noted by Swain (2013). The one exception is the impact of anxiety on language learning, which has an abundant literature (Horwitz, et al., 1986; Young, 1985, 1991; also see Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014 for an overview). Much recent research on foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) has compared its presence and influence with that of foreign language enjoyment (FLE). Several studies suggest that FLCA and FLE, although they do share a modest amount of correlation, are separate emotions and may be (and often are) experienced simultaneously by a learner (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, 2016a, 2016b; Dewaele, et al., 2016; Dewaele, et al., 2017). The major findings of these studies were that female learners tended to experience more of both FLCA and FLE and that FLE is largely influenced by teacher-related variables, whereas FLCA is primarily a product of personality traits. Additionally, Dewaele and Alfawzan (2018) found that the effect of FLE outweighs the effect of FLCA in foreign language performance. This finding was supported by Khajavy et al. (2018) as well, who argued that more FLE led to more willingness to communicate, both at the individual and the classroom level. The studies above encouraged teachers to actively promote FLE through activities that are unpredictable, challenging, and interesting; to avoid activities that purposely increase anxiety without also increasing enjoyment; to create a positive classroom atmosphere; and to help students savor small successes. Likewise, Gregersen et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of knowing students and their emotional triggers.⁹ They encouraged teachers to know their students well enough that they can jump in to boost student confidence and minimize anxiety in moments when they see it building. They suggested teaching students strategies to help students manage their own anxiety (e.g., stalling strategies for public speaking) and to lessen anxiety by giving students plenty of opportunities to interact with other students.

Swain (2013) emphasized the importance of emotion in language teaching and learning and recommended that rather than viewing emotion as a personal trait, we should consider its interpersonal and social nature. She noted that emotional meaning is socially and culturally based and is internalized through interactions with others within the broader socio-historical context. This is important in any type of learning context, but especially so for minoritized populations whose experiences in the classroom are deeply affected by their social conditions (e.g., race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic condition).¹⁰ Because students' thoughts and emotions are expressed through languaging activities in the classroom, she urged teachers to listen closely to their students to determine their emotional landscape and be equipped to help

them achieve their goals. She observed that students should be given opportunities to process negative emotions—which can occur due to frustrations during the learning process or in response to broader sociocultural issues—by writing or talking about them. Affective expression can be included as a goal when instructors design collaborative learning tasks. She also encouraged teachers to teach emotional expression, both linguistically and socioculturally, so that students can use the L2 as a tool for thinking and emoting.

Willingness to Communicate

Willingness to communicate (WTC) has been defined as “the probability of initiating communication given choice and opportunity” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 567) and has been conceptualized as stable traits interacting with situational factors (MacIntyre et al, 1998). Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) stated that there have not been major theoretical innovations with respect to this concept since the early part of the 21st century and noted that research in this area focuses on “situated classroom-based specifications of L2 WTC” (p. 223). General findings regarding student WTC in the target language have led scholars to recommend that teachers pay close attention to the classroom environment they are creating and to the activities they use. In their study of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class in Iran, Khajavy et al. (2016) found that classroom environment was the strongest predictor of students’ WTC, as well as a predictor of motivation (which also indirectly affected WTC). They identified the classroom environment as being composed of teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation. All three factors either directly or indirectly affected WTC. This finding is supported by Joe et al. (2017), who found that the social environment of the classroom directly impacted students’ satisfaction of basic psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, competence, and relatedness), which in turn predicted both self-motivation and WTC. They stated that the classroom is a complex system of interdependence between the classroom environment and the individuals within the classroom; each shapes and is shaped by each other. Suggestions for creating a positive classroom environment included increasing wait time after a question is asked, encouraging students in their responses by smiling and nodding, using delayed feedback whenever possible (as opposed to on-the-spot feedback), conveying a friendly disposition, setting reasonable goals for students, and removing unnecessary distance between teachers and students (e.g., avoiding an authoritarian approach) (Zarrinabadi, 2014; Khajavy et al., 2016).

Scholars also encourage teachers to employ tasks that facilitate student cooperation and lessen student anxiety. Zarrinabadi’s (2014) study of the effect of teachers on student WTC found that higher WTC occurred during activities that included negotiated topics, student choice of topic, a focus on student knowledge, awareness and adaptation of error correction, and time to reflect prior to answering questions. Introducing tasks as learning opportunities also stimulated intrinsic motivation and helped learners internalize extrinsic motivation, which led to increased WTC (Khajavy et al., 2016). In their study of Japanese EFL students who were preparing for university study, Yashima et al. (2018) found that decreased initiation-response-feedback (IRF) interactions, where turns are typically assigned by the teacher, led to more WTC. Like other scholars, they recommended increased student autonomy in discussions and giving students a chance to practice before they have to speak in front of the class. Instead of using IRF techniques, they suggested opening discussion up to the class and allowing students to direct the conversation. As part of the approach, teachers should provide skills training on initiating turns by asking questions or commenting on what an interlocutor says. Finally, teachers should facilitate positive relationships among students.

Although most recent research on WTC focused on classroom-based specifications, MacIntyre et al.’s (1998) definition also included macrolevel social factors, such as *intergroup climate* and *intergroup attitudes*, which are related to differential power relations between groups and to the use of the target language outside the classroom. More research is needed on WTC of L2 learners outside the classroom context as well as on heritage learners. Ideologies of linguistic correctness (Rosa, 2016; Leeman, 2018) together with monolingual bias (Leeman & King, 2015) were shown to stigmatize heritage speakers’ language and ultimately affected their WTC in the heritage language both inside and outside the classroom

(Tseng, 2020).

Challenges to the Study of Individual Differences and New Directions

Although much research has been carried out on individual differences over the past fifty years, there remain significant gaps in the field. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) described the study of individual differences as being “in a theoretical turmoil with powerful arguments suggesting that IDs [Individual Differences] do not exist as such and also that they do” (p. viii). They pointed out that the classic individual difference paradigm rested on the following four assumptions:

- (a) IDs exist as *distinctly definable* psychological constructs; (b) IDs are relative *stable* attributes;
- (c) different IDs form relatively *monolithic* components that concern different aspects of human functioning and that are therefore only moderately related to each other; and (d) IDs are learner internal, and thus relatively independent from the external factors of the environment. (p. 6)

These assumptions have all been challenged and, as is clear in many of the studies cited above, individual learner characters are seen as not distinct and monolithic, but rather as involving “complex constellations made up of different parts that interact with each other and the environment synchronically and diachronically” (p. 6). In addition, individual differences are not stable, but rather reveal temporal and situational variation. This change in perspective has brought increased recognition of the context dependence of individual differences, as well as their mutual interaction, and the fact that they change over time. Thus, individual differences are no longer seen as stable learner traits, but rather as evolving constructs. An additional issue is that many previous studies of individual differences have focused on inter-individual variability among large numbers of participants, and their findings cannot be extrapolated to any specific individual within the group, thus limiting their explanatory power, as well as their usefulness to instructors. As Benson (2019) pointed out, there has been a certain degree of ambiguity in the term “individual differences,” which in large-scale studies “submerged the individuality of actual learners under a variety of psychological and social contextual factors” (p. 165).

Benson (2019) argued that the social turn in SLA ironically brought with it more attention to the individual and ushered in the era of person-centeredness. His perspective coincided with that of Larsen-Freeman, who in 2001 stated: “those calling for a more *social* perspective on SLA may actually contribute to foregrounding the uniqueness of *individual* learners engaged in SLA in different contexts” (p. 24). Larsen-Freeman (2018) also took note of the bifurcation that has occurred between research on individual differences and research on the process of SLA. She foresees a future in which researchers recognize that each individual has a unique developmental trajectory and in which the focus of SLA research is on language learners in context. Corresponding to this, there is increasing recognition of the importance of the situated nature of language learning (Kramsch, 2002), and the role the social environment plays in fostering and impeding language learning success.¹¹

What do these new perspectives on individual differences mean for instructors and for directors of language programs? How can they best capitalize on individuality in language learning given its complexity and the fact that IDs “affect both learners and teachers, often in quite complex, intricate and unpredictable ways” (Pawlak, 2012, xxxiv)? As DeKeyser (2019) pointed out, “constant adaptation to an individual student seems to require an amount of information processing that only a computer [and not an instructor] can do” (p. 325). The particular tension between the need for uniformity in relation to both horizontal and vertical articulation in multisection language programs and a focus on the individual will unfortunately not be resolved through newer approaches focusing on person-centeredness. In the introduction to the AAUSC 2013 volume, Sanz and Lado (2015) noted that:

effective teachers are aware of the potential differences among their learners, are capable of identifying those differences, and are willing and capable of adapting their approach, their syllabus, and their techniques to accommodate them best. LPDs’ [Language Program Directors] work with novice and experienced language instructors to develop their awareness and to give them ideas on

how to adapt their teaching to a diverse classroom. LPDs are also responsible for designing syllabi that are flexible, and for the development of guidelines for grading, participation, and attendance that are mindful of special needs while at the same time committed to providing coherence and cohesiveness and, yes, fairness, to the program. (p. 4)

In short, given the diverse characteristics and learning trajectories of language learners, language program directors must continue to provide language instructors with guidance on how to adapt their teaching so that individual students in their classrooms can become successful language learners even within the constraints of the multisection program. Instructors need to be aware of the complexity of individual differences, accept that the trajectory of learning for each individual in their classroom will vary, and embrace what Levine (2020) has recently described as “a pedagogy that assumes and allows for variability rather than sameness” (p. 25).

Notes

1. Benson pointed out that later eras are layered on earlier ones, i.e., they have not replaced them.
2. Ortega (2019) defined elite L2 learning as ensuing “when people learn new languages by choice, without any material or symbolic threat to their home languages—and often aided by ample support and in the midst of great praise” (p. 27).
3. Larsen-Freeman (2018) stated that there exist “more than 100 dimensions in which learners have been identified” (p. 59).
4. They measured explicit language aptitude by using three LLAMA subtests: vocabulary learning (LLAMA-B), sound-symbol associations (LLAMA-E), and grammatical inferencing (LLAMA-F).
5. The authors described the explicit corrective feedback given in this study as “a direct rejection of the learner’s error (‘X is wrong’) followed by a correction of the error, which was also directly presented (‘you should say Y’)” (p. 156).
6. Sound-symbol matching refers to the ability to match the pronunciation of a word with its spelling and grammatical inferencing refers to identifying a grammatically correct sentence; both tests are performed in a language that is unknown to the learner.
7. Integrative motivation has been defined as wanting to learn a language to communicate with people who speak it. Instrumental motivation has been defined as wanting to learn a language for pragmatic reasons, such as to get a job or good grades.
8. A salient facilitative structure is a clear pathway for achieving a goal that includes opportunities to check progress; these checks facilitate continued momentum towards achieving the end goal.
9. Positive emotionality is the feeling one experiences when working towards a goal and when maintaining motivation; this feeling in turn leads to more self-esteem and self-satisfaction. The authors used heart rate monitors and students’ self-reports to help students and teachers identify students’ emotional triggers.
10. We’re grateful to an external reviewer for pointing this out.
11. See Gurzynski-Weiss (2020) for research on the role of the interlocuter in second language development.

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