

Book Review

Individual differences in language learning: A complex systems theory perspective

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Second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have been exploring individual differences (IDs) to identify how variation in second or foreign language (L2) learners' attainment can be explained by factors such as personality, language aptitude, learning styles, and motivation, to name but a few (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Pawlak, 2012). Therefore, it is important for teachers to develop a solid understanding of ID factors and their impact on L2 learning. However, except for a handful of notable publications that have attempted to close the gap between research and practice (e.g., Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Pawlak, 2012), most extant ID studies have been conducted with the aim of achieving theoretical development and rigorous methodological validation (Ushioda, 2020). Consequently, their findings are typically detached from pedagogical realities and cannot easily be translated into practical insights that can inform L2 teaching. For this reason, we believe that Griffiths and Soruç's book is an important resource for practitioners as it offers a comprehensive and accessible review of ID research that can guide teachers' engagement with individual variation in L2 education.

The book contains a total of 13 chapters, with the introductory chapter framing 11 ID factors within a variety of theoretical perspectives including “complex/dynamic systems theory,” “sociological context,” and “holism” (pp. 3-5). The book has an explicit message encouraging L2 teachers to adopt a holistic view of IDs “in the interests of practicality” (p. 5). Following Benson and Gao’s (2008) classification, we group the 11 ID factors into two categories. The first group includes age, sex/gender, race/ethnicity/nationality/culture, aptitude, personality, and learning style. These ID factors are relatively stable. The second group includes language learning strategies, autonomy, beliefs, affect, and motivation. These factors are dynamic and susceptible to change due to interactions between individual learners and contextual conditions as well as pedagogical interventions.

In Chapter 2, Griffiths and Soruç highlight the fact that age-related differences in L2 learning are closely linked to other variables, such as neurological maturation, psycho-affective factors (e.g., aptitude and motivation) and contextual conditions. Chapter 3 demonstrates how individual L2 learners’ biological sex and culturally constructed gender interact with a variety of ID factors, including beliefs, learning styles, race/ethnicity/nationality/culture, language learning strategies and contextual conditions in mediating their L2 learning. In Chapter 4, Griffiths and Soruç engage with complex constructs such as race/ethnicity/nationality/culture. They not only focus on key issues such as culture shock and intercultural communication gaps but also emphasize that these constructs interact with other ID factors such as affect (e.g., loneliness caused by cultural alienation of an international student in a study-abroad context) and cognition (e.g., learning beliefs) in impacting individual learners’ L2 learning.

Chapter 5 focuses on the construct of aptitude, which was once considered to be fixed and thus of limited relevance for language educators. Griffiths and Soruç make the point that examining exceptional learners’ accounts more closely has the potential of generating crucial insights into the mechanisms underlying successful L2 learning, such as working memory, aptitude, beliefs, multiple intelligences and motivation. By highlighting the interconnectedness of aptitude with other ID factors, Griffiths and Soruç make a compelling argument that critical engagement with this variable can assist L2 teachers in developing relevant strategies that can aid their learners to enhance the mastery of additional languages.

Similar arguments are presented in Chapter 6, which focuses on personality as an ID factor. Griffiths and Soruç suggest that a deeper understanding of how personality mediates the process of language learning will help L2 teachers to adopt appropriate strategies that promote other desirable attributes such as willingness to communicate (WTC; see also MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2021). In a similar vein, in Chapter 7, Griffiths and Soruç direct readers’ attention to the

dynamism of learning styles, encouraging L2 teachers to use pedagogical strategies that help L2 learners to become “aware of the benefits of . . . [moving] beyond rigid ideas of their own stylistic preferences . . . to try new ways of doing things” (p. 107; see also Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014).

Chapter 8 engages with key issues in L2 learning strategy research. For instance, Griffiths and Soruç offer an extended discussion of strategy-integrated L2 education models such as the cognitive academic language learning approach (Chamot, 2009) and strategies-based instruction (Cohen, 2011). Chapter 9 focuses on an issue closely related to language learning strategies, that is, learner autonomy, and it discusses its links with self-regulation, agency, and metacognition. The chapter concludes with a list of important principles that can guide L2 teachers’ efforts to promote learner autonomy, such as “choice” and “clear guidelines” (p. 143).

Chapter 10 discusses the dynamism and complexity of learners’ beliefs, stressing their situated nature. Griffiths and Soruç argue that it is important for L2 teachers to “recognize and respect learners’ belief systems” before creating conditions to enable learners to change their beliefs “as and when they feel the need to do so” (p. 161). Subsequently, Chapter 11 examines affect as a multi-faceted construct associated with a variety of factors such as anxiety, attitude, empathy, and self-related concepts (e.g., self-efficacy). The last ID factor examined in the book, that is, motivation, is probably the most extensively researched ID variable. Chapter 12 emphasizes that L2 learners’ motivation, like their beliefs, is situated, complex, and dynamic. In line with the complex dynamic systems theory perspective, this chapter also illustrates the interconnectedness of motivation and other ID factors such as volition and investment (e.g., Tanaka, 2021).

Despite the complexity of the ID factors mentioned above, Griffiths and Soruç present a highly accessible narrative about these ID factors intended for L2 teachers. In fact, they have excelled at translating research into practical suggestions for L2 instruction. The book also includes multiple reader-friendly features that facilitate teachers’ engagement with ID factors through research and critical reflection. Each chapter contains summaries of key relevant findings related to each ID factor that is examined. For instance, Chapter 9, dedicated to learner autonomy, first summarizes the relevant research findings and then includes two studies for further illustration: Gürergene’s study “of the relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency” in Turkey (p. 134) and Zhang’s (2018) inquiry regarding “Chinese students who study abroad in the UK” (p. 136). Each chapter ends with a list of directions or questions for additional research. For example, Chapter 10 focuses on beliefs and encourages readers to explore more deeply questions such as “How do learners’ beliefs change according to situation and/or other factors which impact on their lives and/or their ability/willingness to learn (longitudinal research designs are especially lacking and would be particularly useful here)?” (p. 161).

Additionally, each chapter contains a list of questions for readers to consider if they wish to apply relevant findings on ID factors in practice. For example, in Chapter 4, the authors invite readers to critically reflect on questions such as, “Do you think that Hofstede’s metaphor of culture as the, software of the mind’ is useful? Why/not?” (p. 59). In Chapter 3, dealing with sex/gender, the readers are encouraged to interview “some male/female classmates, workmates, or others that [they] know, about their attitudes towards/experiences of language learning” and explore whether there are “any noticeable differences according to gender” (p. 43). Griffiths and Soruç also suggest additional key readings related to each ID factor. All these features help L2 teachers to enhance their understanding of ID factors and make informed pedagogical decisions.

It must be noted that ID research is a vibrant field of inquiry in SLA. Therefore, it is difficult for the book to capture all key, up-to-date research findings within the concise, reader-friendly narrative the authors have produced. However, it might be desirable for Griffiths and Soruç to include ID constructs that have been conceptualized and examined in recent studies, such as linguistic giftedness (e.g., Biedroń & Pawlak, 2016) or emotions (e.g., Pawlak et al., 2020). They could also consider expanding the discussion of affect by including recent studies on positive psychology (e.g., Dewaele et al., 2019). That said, however, we believe that this book is a must-read for language teachers who seek empirical insights into ID factors to develop effective pedagogical strategies. While individual readers can use this work as a guide for learning about ID factors at their own pace, the book is also an ideal resource for L2 teacher educators who wish to develop ID-related pedagogical activities in their courses. The book will help language teachers to become more flexible and responsive in supporting L2 learners with appropriate strategies.

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