

Individual Learner Differences in SLA

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Individual Learner Differences in SLA

Edited by

Janusz Arabski and Adam Wojtaszek

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Bristol • Buffalo • Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Individual Learner Differences in SLA / Edited by Janusz Arabski and Adam Wojtaszek.

Includes bibliographical references.

I. Arabski, Janusz. II. Wojtaszek, Adam.

P118.2.I53 2011

418.0071–dc23 2011028012

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978-1-84769-434-8 (hbk)

Multilingual Matters

UK: St Nicholas House, 31–34 High Street, Bristol, BS1 2AW, UK.

USA: UTP, 2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150, USA.

Canada: UTP, 5201 Dufferin Street, North York, Ontario, M3H 5T8, Canada.

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Typeset by Techset Composition Ltd, Salisbury, UK.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group.

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Introduction

J. ARABSKI and A. WOJTASZEK

The significance of individual differences in language learning has been recognised as an important area of research for quite some time now. Additionally, the early years of the 21st century have witnessed a perceptible shift towards individualisation in educational settings, especially in the area of language instruction. No wonder publications in the area flourish, supplying teachers and researchers alike with an abundant resource basis of enlightening ideas and practicable solutions. However, in spite of this affluence, the thirst for more remains unquenched.

The present volume responds to this requirement, offering a broad selection of contributions, touching upon a wide array of issues subsumed under the heading of individual learner differences (ILD) in language acquisition and performance. Traditionally, the area comprises three major sub-fields: learning styles, learning strategies and affective variables, but other issues, such as learning aptitude, gender, culture, age and other demographic variables frequently reappear in many publications (Ehrman *et al.*, 2003). Dörnyei (2005) provides a comprehensive overview of those issues in his influential and widely quoted textbook, divided into chapters on personality, aptitude, motivation, learning and cognitive styles, learning strategies and such other issues as anxiety or self-esteem. Similar themes are also discussed and reviewed in Robinson (2002). All of them are represented in the chapters of the present volume.

The organisation of the book follows a grouping principle based on a division into several topic areas, related to a number of sub-fields under the ILD umbrella. It is definitely not exhaustive in its scope, but undeniably very rich in variability of content. The first part, more theoretically oriented in comparison with the others, consists of two contributions. Dieter Wolff takes up the theme of the apparently insoluble conflict between the necessity of acknowledging individual learner needs and the organisational principles of institutionalised language instruction. These two seemingly irreconcilable principles are discussed in the light of recent publications in the field. Mirosław Pawlak's contribution, on the other

hand, concentrates on the sub-field of language learning strategies, providing the reader with a comprehensive overview of research articles related to the subject, followed by suggestions pertaining to new developments.

An important aspect of catering for individual learner needs is teachers' involvement in developing learner autonomy. This issue is the main theme of the second part, where Hasan Bedir, Anna Studenska and Maria Stec present results of their research on the potential role of teachers and parents in shaping learners' independence and initiative, also including selected psychological variables in the investigation. They stress that proper diagnosis of ILD is a necessary prerequisite on the road to development of learner autonomy, which was earlier also advocated by Ehrman *et al.* (2003: 324–325).

The third part of the book takes a closer look at successful strategy application by learners of English as a foreign language in institutionalised settings. Anna Mystkowska-Wiertelak applies an experimental scheme to compare the effectiveness of reception-based and production-oriented grammar instruction, on the basis of the analysis of the participants' explicit and implicit knowledge, while Agnieszka Otwinowska-Kasztelaniec focuses on the acquisition of lexis, demonstrating how advanced learners of English employ such strategies as the exploitation of cognates or their knowledge of other languages.

The fourth part continues the theme of strategy application, this time not only in instructional settings, but also in situations where the acquired L2 knowledge has to be put to practice. It also widens the scope by making references not only to strategies themselves, but also to such issues as anxiety management, self-efficacy perception and needs diagnosis. A longitudinal diagnostic perspective is represented by Ewa Piechurska-Kuciel's and Zbigniew Możejko's contributions, who investigate learners' feedback on secondary and tertiary levels, respectively. Joanna Bielska, on the other hand, concentrates on the perception of self-efficacy in young teacher-trainees who are diagnosed in the situations where their L2 expertise has to be employed in the role of a language instructor, while Andrzej Łyda, Krystyna Warchał and Alina Jackiewicz investigate strategic behaviour of advanced learners performing as interpreters. Two of the chapters (Piechurska-Kuciel and Łyda, Warchał & Jackiewicz) additionally relate the findings to the variable of subjects' gender.

The fifth part, probably the most uniform and homogeneous in its scope, deals with individual variation in L2 phonological attainment. It focuses more on the manifestations of learner variability in production, rather than in the use of strategies or in style profiles. The exemplification comes from Polish (Andrzej Porzuczek, Arkadiusz Rojczyk) and Greek learners (Eleni Tsiartsioni) of English. The first of these chapters concentrates on suprasegmentals (mainly intonation), the second one combines