

Capitalizing on Language Learners' Individuality

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Capitalizing on Language Learners' Individuality

From Premise to Practice

Tammy Gregersen and Peter D. MacIntyre

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To Mi Vida, Mario:

Gracias a la vida...

*Gracias a la Vida que me ha dado tanto
me ha dado el sonido y el abecedario
Con el las palabras que pienso y declaro
madre amigo hermano y luz alumbrando,
La ruta del alma del que estoy amando.*

*Gracias a la Vida que me ha dado tanto
me ha dado la marcha de mis pies cansados
con ellos anduve ciudades y charcos,
playas y desiertos montañas y llanos
y la casa tuya, tu calle y tu patio.*

And to my children, Reycito, Margie and the Abinator:

*Gracias a la Vida que me ha dado tanto
me ha dado la risa y me ha dado el llanto,
así yo distingo dicha de quebranto
los dos materiales que forman mi canto
y el canto de ustedes que es el mismo canto
y el canto de todos que es mi propio canto.*

I'd like to dedicate this work to my wife Anne,

*Woman I can hardly express
My mixed emotions at my thoughtlessness
After all I'm forever in your debt
And woman I will try to express
My inner feelings and thankfulness
For showing me the meaning of success*

– John Lennon, Woman

Also to my children Valerie and Robert

*When the waves roll on over the waters
And the ocean cries
We look to our sons and daughters
To explain our lives
As if a child could tell us why

That as sure as the sunrise
As sure as the sea
As sure as the wind in the trees
We rise again in the faces
of our children
We rise again in the voices of our song
We rise again in the waves out on the ocean
And then we rise again*

– Leon Dubinsky, Rise Again

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Foreword

This volume offers a double-barrelled approach to understanding individuality in language learning by focusing on both the ‘premise’ and the ‘practice’ of individual differences as related to language learners. The premise section of each chapter offers theory and research about a given individual difference variable, such as learning strategies or motivation, and explains that area’s importance or utility for language learning and teaching. In contrast, the practice section of each chapter provides hands-on activities related to that particular individual difference. We might think of these two sections of each chapter as the parts of a tree. The premise section comprises the roots and the trunk of the tree. The practice section constitutes the tree’s crown, which, in turn, is made up of leaves and branches that reach out into the surrounding environment. Figure 1 shows the parts of a tree and indicates how the premise and the practice sections relate to those parts.

If one part is missing, the tree is not complete. A full-grown tree or even a tree on its way to full maturity cannot live and thrive without all of its parts. Similarly, any discussion of an individual difference variable is likely to have insufficient health and liveliness if the premise (i.e. the theory and research combined with comments about importance) is considered by itself, without any *practical* aspects, implications or outreach into the classroom.

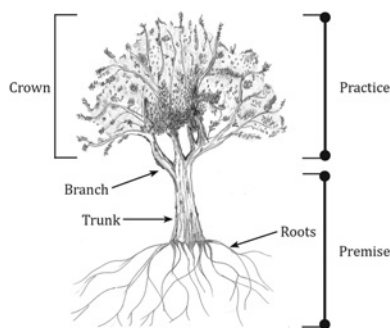


Figure 1 Premise to practice tree metaphor

Moreover, the practical aspects cannot stand on their own without a sufficient base of theory and research. These statements are reminiscent of the old saying, 'Theory without practice is futile, and practice without theory is fatal.' But as the title of this volume suggests, we must also consider the tree as a whole. Language learners are individuals and their 'differences' or characteristics permeate their experience and approaches in learning a second language. Individual difference research originated from the interest of researchers and teachers to explain why some learners were more successful than others. Contemporary research in individual differences, as this volume maintains, seeks to understand the individual experience of each language learner.

This book systematically looks at the premise and the practice within seven individual difference areas – anxiety, beliefs, cognitive abilities, motivation, learning strategies, learning styles, and willingness to communicate – that are of tremendous importance to language learning and teaching. In this way, the tree of individuality not only survives but thrives.

Let us pursue the tree metaphor still further. In the psychology of language learning, individual differences are typically understood as contrasts between or among people with respect to phenomena such as motivation, anxiety and learning styles. However, to understand how people differ in terms of psychological variables, it is essential to understand the 'inner workings' of these variables *within* a given person. In other words, we need to grasp not only interpersonal differences (differences among a group of people) but also intrapersonal dynamics (how the phenomena actually operate inside someone). Looking only at the differences between or among people is like observing just the outer aspects of the tree. Examining the inner workings or intrapersonal dynamics of a given phenomenon within a person goes further, like moving beneath the bark of the tree trunk or peering inside the leaves. Both of these views are important. Please keep the tree metaphor in the back of your mind as you read and cherish this valuable book.

Rather than reiterating the information in the books' introduction, we would like to share some of the most notable aspects of the book. One of these is the creative, story-based way that the premise sections open themselves to the reader. For instance, the premise of the anxiety chapter opens with a short paragraph about debilitating anxiety but then immediately moves to a story – a parable – about a water bearer and his load. The premise of the beliefs chapter contains a story about a wealthy father taking his son on a trip to see how the poor live, but the son interprets the findings entirely differently from the father because of differences in their beliefs. In the cognitive abilities chapter, the opening of the premise sparkles with the stories of Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein and August Rodin, all of whom were considered cognitively deficient by those around them. The premise of the motivation chapter touches on the story of Sir Edmund Hillary, the first person to reach the summit of Mount Everest; consider how strong his

motivation must have been. The parable of the donkey falling into a well introduces the premise section of the learning strategies chapter. A boy and a butterfly populate a story that highlights the premise of the learning styles chapter. Two paradoxes, one about Taeko and the other about John, both students, open the premise of the chapter on willingness to communicate. These stories, while very different in content, have some general characteristics in common. First, they are intriguing. Second, they are accessible and relevant, bringing us face to face with the phenomenon being discussed. Third, they offer a painless way to enter a particular area of individual differences. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they demonstrate that individual differences and learning are not isolated phenomena but aspects of a total human being and his or her life history.

Another notable aspect of the book is the richness of the activities in the practice section of any given chapter. Let us take, for example, the chapter on willingness to communicate (Chapter 7). The practice activities in Chapter 7 include the focused essay technique. A modification mentioned by the authors is to put the essay into a Wiki document to which learners can contribute. A second activity concerns exploring driving and restraining forces that influence willingness to communicate (WTC). This is done through a beautiful sequence of events for students: keeping a daily list in language diaries, analyzing the data in a table, summarizing main driving and restraining forces in sentences, randomly receiving summary sentences of others and giving feedback, receiving one's own sentences with feedback from others, and then having a debriefing. Modifications are given for emergent learners and for the uses of different technologies, such as mobile hand-held electronic recording devices for oral practice, electronic journals for written practice, and discussion boards. A third WTC activity focuses on past experiences to increase perceived competence. That activity contains seven steps from purposing to debriefing, with two technology-related modifications. The fourth WTC activity concerns 'if-then' scenarios that can convert intentions into actions. Not only are there seven useful steps, but there are also modifications for emergent learners, large groups, and different types of technology. These are just four of the ten activities for this chapter. Imagine the richness and plentitude of activities such as these, which are found not only in this chapter but are spread across all seven individual-difference chapters in the volume. In our experience, language teachers value the concept of meeting the needs of all learners, but the realities of modern classrooms make that objective truly challenging. This volume offers teachers concrete and realistic ideas to help them embrace their students' individuality.

A remarkable feature of this book has already been intimated: the intentional way that the book caters to a wide range of learners and their teachers. The activities can be used by emergent learners (pre-beginners), as well as by beginning, intermediate, and advanced learners. They can also be employed by those who have access to high-level technology and those who do not.

Moreover, the chapters can be approached in any order, meaning that teachers can 'redesign' the book in any way they wish. All of these features make the book extraordinarily accessible.

An additionally useful characteristic is that the book does not become muddled or muddled by theoretical arguments by experts in the field of individual differences. For instance, the area of learning strategies has been marked by great differences of opinion about how to define, categorize, and explain these strategies. The chapter on learning strategies in the present book refuses to sink itself (literally) into these weighty arguments but instead finds value in multiple theoretical perspectives on learning strategies. Similar things can be said about the chapter on motivation. In other words, the authors are open to the best ideas in a given area, without feeling the need to adjudicate differences among theorists.

To return to the initial metaphor, this book captures the vibrancy of the tree's roots and trunk (the premise), with its crowning branches and leaves (the practice) that reach outward into language classrooms and into the hearts of learners and their teachers. The premises and the practice activities embodied in this volume constitute a great resource to language instructors and students alike.

Rebecca Oxford and Elaine K. Horwitz

Introduction

Teachers who effectively capitalize on their learners' individuality view their language classrooms as a kaleidoscope. When they pan across the room moving from learner to learner, savvy teachers see unique and colorful designs. The patterns are in constant motion even when looking at one particular learner. Not only are language learners different one from another, but learners change – and sometimes it's because teachers change them. The way that a learner feels, thinks and acts in one moment is different from the feelings, thoughts and actions that he or she experienced a moment ago or from what will be experienced in the next.

A learner's behavior, thoughts and emotions are interwoven into a dynamic system. We can and do discuss individual differences among learners as if they are relatively stable traits: Johnny is extroverted, Santana is conscientious, Reiko is a nice person. But even as we see the stability in learners' actions and reactions, they are changing – sometimes in subtle ways and sometimes in substantial ways. The various attributes of a learner are interconnected – like a fishing net. If we tug on one end of the net, the shape of the entire net changes. Teachers are continuously tugging on the learner's net by their activity choices, their instruction, their feedback, and their mentorship.

Even as teachers create lesson plans with learning goals and objectives, they are continuously (maybe unconsciously) engaging learners' individuality in powerful and personal ways. At times, language learning can be a difficult chore but language is the most powerful tool humans have to connect with one another. In every case, languages are learned by a person who has thoughts and feelings. Both positive and negative emotions figure prominently in the learning process. On the one hand, studies of the psychology of negative emotions reveal that they have a specific role to play in our experience. Negative emotions tend to focus attention on specific events and predispose people to certain types of actions. For example, anger tends to be associated with an obstacle or obstruction, disposing us to act to eliminate or destroy the obstacle. This is not a bad thing at all – successful learners overcome obstacles. But the negative emotion has additional effects that can be less facilitating. On the other hand, recent theory in positive emotion

points to its power to broaden our field of attention and build resources for the future. For example, when we are happy, we are more likely to notice pleasant things that might have escaped our attention otherwise. Positive emotions help us to build relationships, personal strength, and tolerances for the moments when things become difficult.

Our book seeks to close the gap between theory and classroom application concerning individual differences in second or foreign language (FL) learning. Through an exploration of the existing literature and theoretical underpinnings of each of the most prominent learner characteristics – anxiety, beliefs, cognitive abilities, motivation, learning strategies, learning styles, and willingness to communicate – teachers expand their knowledge and become better equipped to meet the challenges created by negative-narrowing affect and capitalize on the positive-broadening power of facilitative emotions as they guide their learners through the research-based activities specifically created to inspire learners' self-discovery in an affectively nurturing environment while learning a target language (TL). Until now, teachers' access to books on the psychology of the language learner and what makes each one unique has been limited to those which take a predominantly theoretical perspective with few practical classroom activities offered. Although innovative language learning activity books also have been available, few provide the research contexts that would inform the intellectually curious reader about reasons why certain techniques are more effective than others. This book is our attempt to wed pioneering research premises with innovative practices.

From Premise . . .

Readers can pick and choose from among the chapters in any order. Each chapter concentrates on a psychological/cognitive variable or a combination of closely related ones and begins with answers to the questions: 'What is it?' 'Where does it come from?' and 'Why is this important?' Once definitions, origins and significance for the given variable are established, readers explore pedagogical implications that include research applications that directly impact classroom practices. Although individual differences (ID) researchers in the past have rarely outlined specific step-by-step classroom activities, many have often proposed valuable guiding principles meant to steer teachers in the direction of more effective and affective classroom techniques. These principles directly inspired the activities in each chapter and provide the order for their sequence.

Language anxiety, as characterized in the Premise Section of our chapter, concerns the negative-narrowing worry experienced by learners as they use their TL, arising in part from a learner's cognizance that the authenticity of

self and its expression cannot be communicated as readily in his or her second language as in the first. Debilitating anxiety engenders undesirable consequences in a variety of domains, including the physical, emotional/affective, cognitive/linguistic and interactional/social. The activities in the Practice Section target actions that teachers and learners can take to create positive-broadening comfort zones characterized by mutual encouragement and community building. For teachers, we offer opportunities to review instructional choices, classroom procedures and assessment practices. For learners, we provide tasks that focus attention on previous achievement and progress rather than past failure and expectations of perfection. For teachers and learners working together, we present activities that promote the community-building and social networks necessary for positive interaction.

The Premise Section of our chapter on ‘Beliefs’ recognizes that students and teachers hold countless notions about language learning that influence their behavior and impact the choices they make. Formed through a variety of sources – such as previous experience, observation and imitation, or through listening to others – teachers’ and learners’ beliefs cover an assortment of issues ranging from the nature and difficulty of language learning to individually defined expectations and motivations. These preconceived ideas fall on a wide array of continuums that range from harmful to helpful; from erroneous to accurate; and from destructive to productive. Through the activities in the Practice Section, we hope to shift learners’ negative-narrowing beliefs to positive-broadening ones through processes that clarify teachers’ and learners’ beliefs, increase self-awareness, address any mismatches between what learners and teachers believe, and directly confront specific ill-advised and counter-productive beliefs.

Our chapter on cognitive abilities brings together premises and practices for capitalizing on aptitude, working memory and multiple intelligences. We characterize them as interrelated dynamic variables as well as notions deserving of consideration as separate domains as learners process information and obtain new knowledge. In the Practice Section, our aptitude activities provide opportunities for learners to increase their skills with the four macro-components of noticing, patterning, controlling and lexicalizing language forms; our working memory activities encourage learners to maximize their storage and processing capacities through repetition and rehearsal of input, visualization, invoking schema, and experimenting with working memory strategies; and our activities that target multiple intelligences offer thematically organized interdisciplinary tasks that promote cooperative learning and provide learners with choices to awaken and amplify a variety of intelligences.

Rather than highlighting differences among motivational theories, our chapter on motivation emphasizes the congruencies among several, including those grounded in social and cognitive psychology. We introduce the importance of a process orientation to account for dynamic moment-to-moment

changes that occur in the classroom with particular consideration to the role of tasks. Looking at motivation in this way draws out the social and emotional nature of learning, where identity, self, and the imagination figure prominently. The motivational qualities of integrativeness and imagination are interwoven among many of our activities as learners: explore their social identity by understanding their own investment and imagined communities; develop their international posture and bi-cultural identity; and create, strengthen, substantiate, activate, operationalize, and balance their possible selves.

While acknowledging the complicated task of finding a consensual definition for language learning strategies, we propose in our Premise Section that they are consciously or semi-consciously chosen by learners. Strategies operate on a continuum between being intentionally deliberate and fully automatic, are purposeful and goal-directed and can be enhanced through instruction. We contend that the self-regulatory function of strategies is optimized when learners make choices that consider the specific learning context, including the individual learner, the task, and the environment and that the effectiveness of strategies is not measured by the frequency of their use, but rather their appropriate exploitation within a given context. To meet the primary goal of increasing learners' self-regulation, our Practice Section contains activities that take learners through a series of sequential tasks that raise and deepen learners' strategy awareness and provide opportunities for presenting, modeling, practicing, transferring and evaluating strategies.

We cast a broad net in our Premise Section on Learning Styles by characterizing them as 'comfort zones' – those 'go-to places' where both teachers and learners can approach learning by drawing upon their preferences and habits – which can include personality and/or sensory preferences as well as cognitive styles. As value-neutral preferences, there are no 'end-all' learning styles to which all learners must cater to find success. With this in mind, throughout our Practice Section we capitalize on the diversity of learning styles found in language classrooms by advocating a 'mixed and many' approach that provides balance and choice. Presented in pairs that allow teachers and learners to experiment with matching AND stretching their comfort zones, our activities promote teachers' discovery of their own instructional preferences, encourage learners' exploration and definition of their favored learning approaches, foster teacher-learner teamwork in the pursuit of balance, juxtapose tasks that expose learners to both style matching and stretching, and provide opportunities for learners to reflect and gain insight into their strategies, linguistic progress and affective responses under matching and stretching conditions.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) is described in our Premise Section as a conglomeration of dynamic antecedents – both enduring and situational – to TL communication that potentially facilitates or inhibits language learners' in-the-moment decisions to speak. Our activities in the Practice