

***The Psychology of the Language Learner:
Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition***

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This book follows the structure of the seminal book by Peter Skehan (1989), *Individual Differences in Second Language Learning*. The objective of Dörnyei's book is to provide a single-authored monograph on language individual differences (ID) research. Based on this objective, the author provides a consistent and comprehensive review of the most up-to-date studies in this field. In doing so, he extends the traditional boundary of ID research and includes some important learner variables from other fields, such as psychology and sociology.

What I especially like about this book is that the author not only focuses on the field of second language acquisition (SLA), but he starts by discussing relevant ID concepts from their origins in psychology or sociology, and then zooms in on the SLA area. By doing so, the author successfully provides the reader with a clear understanding of the foundations of those conceptual frameworks and their development, and what the connections are between SLA and psychology or sociology, and between SLA and ID research.

The book is organized into eight chapters. The opening chapter is an introduction to the essential definition and taxonomy of individual differences. The author traces the beginning of ID research to the end of 19th century when individual differences were first investigated scientifically by Sir Francis Galton. The concept of ID is regarded as a loose notion, containing certain core variables and many optional ones. The core variables in ID research comprise personality, language aptitude, motivation,

learning/cognitive styles, and learning strategies.

Following the thread of the core variables, the author elaborates on each of them individually in the next five chapters. Chapter 2 distinguishes personality from temperament and mood. Different instruments in the study of personality are discussed, including the "Big Five" model and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). From the relationship between personality and learning in general, Dörnyei moves on to discuss personality and language learning in particular. By dividing the studies into early studies, extraversion and introversion studies, studies that use MBTI, and other studies, the author shows connections within the progression that could shed light on the relationship between personality and language learning. Though at this stage in the research we can't say that personality directly determines an individual's academic success, it certainly is a potent mediating factor that should be examined more in ID research.

Language aptitude is the focus of Chapter 3. The author notes that, as a strong predictor of academic success, language aptitude has been widely studied from the beginning of the 1990s. The author elaborates on two widely used aptitude batteries: the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) and the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (PLAB). He then considers ongoing issues in language aptitude research: L1 aptitude, age, intelligence, teaching methods, and learning situations. Further, the author outlines some new research directions in language aptitude, namely, new aptitude instruments and new hypotheses. Examining the relationship between working memory (based on Baddeley's 2003 study) and language aptitude is introduced as one of the most promising directions in language aptitude studies. Lastly, Dörnyei points out that combining aptitude measures with other ID variables as pioneered by Peter Robinson (1997) is another promising avenue in aptitude research.

Chapter 4 is about motivation. Three important phases of L2 motivation research are identified: the social psychological period, led by the work of Gardner and his associates in Canada; the cognitive-situated period, characterized by work drawing on cognitive theories in educational psychology; and the process-oriented period, initiated by Dörnyei and his colleagues in Europe over the past five years and focusing on motivational change. Subsequently, newer concepts such as group dynamics, demotivation, motivational self-regulation, and the neurobiology of motivation are described to indicate that external forces (e.g., group norms) or internal forces (e.g., self-regulatory strategies), may result in either motivating or demotivating effects. "Self-motivation" is analyzed and the "L2 Motivational Self System", a new paradigm, is presented as an integration of the concepts of *possible* and *ideal selves*, terms borrowed from personality psychology.

Learning styles are discussed in company with cognitive styles in Chapter 5. Drawing on the work of Riding (2000), the author states that confusing labels, ineffective measurement instruments, lack of distinction between style and other constructs (e.g.,

personality) make the research on learning style and cognitive style a "quagmire" (p. 120). Dornyei tries to at least clarify the difference between learning style and cognitive style using colors as an analogy. He states that "cognitive styles can be seen as equivalents of the colors proper, whereas learning styles are the manifestations of the colors in the real world" (p. 160). Regardless of its complexity, learning style/cognitive style, as the research review in this chapter demonstrates, is a variable too important to be ignored in ID studies. Dornyei illustrates such importance by presenting the basic tenets of two learning style models, Riding's and Kolb's (1999), and in L2 studies, field dependence/independence (FD/I). I found this chapter's section on practical implications most appealing. The author's descriptions of six possible style conflicts and six possible ways of using learner style in the classroom demonstrate very well the practical side of this theoretically blurry concept.

As in the motivation chapter, learning strategies are highlighted in Chapter 6, along with a relevant new concept, student self-regulation. Different from previous chapters, the introduction from general psychology is understated; more attention is paid to learning strategies used in L2 studies. Readers interested in L2 learning strategies will find this chapter handy for accessing a series of strategy inventories from previous research. Self-regulation is elaborated as a concept more robust than the "surface manifestations" (p. 195) of strategies in previous research, more robust because dynamic and process-oriented. The brief introduction to self-regulation in educational psychology provides some foundation for researchers inclined to examine students proactively applying learning tactics or skills.

Chapter 7 is a discussion of less-researched learner characteristics also regarded as important in the ID research picture: anxiety, self-esteem, creativity, willingness to communicate (WTC), and learner beliefs. I especially welcomed the inclusion of this chapter, as it opens a big window onto future research into these less prominent variables that may also significantly impact second language acquisition. The last chapter is a brief summary of three themes of future ID research in the L2 field: (1) a better understanding of the situated nature of L2 learning, (2) possible optimal combinations of the complex theoretical models that contain different ID variables, and (3) the connection of ID variables with specific SLA processes.

This book is a substantial resource because, in thoroughly reviewing the literature, Dornyei provides succinct summaries of many prominent instruments used to measure different ID variables. *The Psychology of the Language Learner* also helps to furnish teachers and researchers with tools required for investigating ID variables further and suggestions for how they might be contextualized. Not until the the last chapter did I encounter anything needing to be strengthened. Compared with the extensive reviews offered in the previous chapters, a stronger conclusion, one making clearer links among individual-difference variables, would provide a more systematic and conclusive overview of the psychology of language learners. Also, as in Skehan's (1989) book, a section that delineates the interactions of different ID variables would give readers a

better understanding of the complicated phenomenon of ID variables in L2 acquisition.

The breadth of perspectives in this book is wide enough to offer not only an updated ID paradigm for SLA, but also a critical review of the recent development and expansion of the core variables within individual-learner differences. I believe this book would appeal to graduate students and professionals in the fields of linguistics, psychology, and education. It should also serve as a comprehensive reference book for second/foreign language teachers who aim to understand the psychology behind students' acquiring a second language.

Reference

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