



Individual Differences in Language Learning: A Complex Systems Theory Perspective

1st Edition (2020)

Carol Griffiths & Adem Soruç

Palgrave, Macmillan

Pages : 220

ISBN: 978-3-030-52900-0 (Ebook)

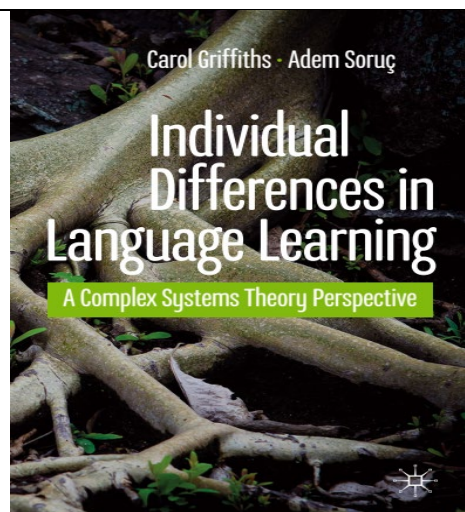
ISBN 978-3-030-52899-7

Cost: 64, 99 Euro (Hard copy)

53.49 Euro (Soft copy)

Reviewed by Dr. Deniz Elçin

University of Siirt, Turkey, delcin@siirt.edu.tr



Individual Differences in Language Learning: A Complex Systems Theory Perspective is composed of 13 chapters, a glossary and index with a total of 220 pages. It was largely dedicated to explain individual differences in language learning through lenses of Complexity Theory by Larsen Freeman. The authors explain individual differences with a dynamic system perspective to express the constant and ever-changing interplay between differing variables by giving theoretical background of specific individual differences as well as providing valuable information about recent approaches and studies for such differences. The authors provide some critical questions before providing information about each individual variable to get the students thinking plus background information by including related studies, referring to pioneer scholars of that variable and the underlying theories about the variable. They finish each chapter by further questions and suggested readings about the subject.

Chapter I is dedicated to providing a general overview of what complexity theory is, why individual differences are to be dealt with, the dynamic interplay between the individual variables as well as socioecological properties of those variables. After expressing the theoretical basis of individual differences, main subcomponents of individual variables are given as age, sex/gender, race/nationality/ethnicity/culture, aptitude, personality, style, strategies, autonomy, beliefs, affect/emotion, motivation and holistic view. The authors provide a general definition of each term and giving reference to each term by the chapter name the concepts are included. This section is like an introduction part to individual differences explaining what the other chapters will include one by one. The chapter seems to be divided into two parts, the first one giving the theoretical basis of individual differences which could be regarded as of great significance for the readers however the second part for the definition of the individual variables one by one seems to be an unnecessary repetition of the same concepts.

Chapter II is dedicated to explaining the generally accepted conceptions of young learners and adult learners. The authors provide very brief definitions for young learners, adolescent learners and adult learners. Age phenomenon is explained by Critical Period Hypothesis and authors provide very important examples of related studies, some of which stand on the side of young learners and others, adult learners. Although there is a general agreement among scholars that younger is better, the authors propose an additional counterargument that adults also could be successful when some interconnected variables are

at play in harmony like attitude, autonomy, necessity of social interaction, exposure to language and experience. They divide the age related individual variables into three subcategories namely neurological, psycho-affective and contextual ones with successfully referring to related studies. They conclude that most researchers express the importance to exposure at a young age; however, adults could also acquire language if necessary conditions come together.

Chapter III is devoted to explain the interplay between sex/gender issue and other variables such as culture, aptitude, personality, style, strategies, autonomy, beliefs, affect and motivation. The authors provide valuable studies of each variable mentioned above and some generally accepted criteria about language acquisition success for both males and females. Most studies mentioned in the chapter conclude that culturally there is little difference between males and females as well as the claim that females learn better than males issue should be dealt with care as there is not any concrete proof for this. However, in some studies females are found to have more style flexibility, use more strategies, be more autonomous, more excellence oriented, have more control on anxiety and motivation on the other hand males are seen to be more extroverted. The authors at the end of the chapter re-express the importance of the interpretation of above results in terms of complexity theory, which sees every student as a totally different individual from the others and highlights the interplay of a lot of other factors in language acquisition adventure in a dynamic ecology.

Chapter IV focuses on the socioecological context for the newcomers to a foreign country. The authors start the chapter by giving brief definitions of race, ethnicity, culture and acculturation while highlighting the softening of the terms in order to avoid misunderstanding or discrimination issue. Because sometimes they claim race issue is taken too discriminative by some people, which is why it is called as ethnicity at times. After providing the conceptual shifts among those terms, they define the acculturation term by referring one specific study. In the study the participants from different countries studying at various universities in Turkey witnessed some level of culture shock and homesickness while a couple studying in Australia witnessed almost the problems plus some kind of discrimination on the side of the female as she was covered. The authors expressed very briefly in the conclusion part of the chapter that in order to avoid or overcome culture shock or acculturation-“the gradual adaptation to the target culture without necessarily forsaking one’s native language identity-“ problems in another country, proficiency level of language and getting to know what to expect in that country are of vital importance. From the results of that study, they finalize the chapter by highlighting the socio-ecological significance of language to adapt to a new environment. They retold the endless connection or bound among differing variables and united the language issue with its sociological duty.

Chapter V is devoted to define the complexity of the term, aptitude. The authors start with the definition of the term by different scholars and they refer to a list of famous good and talented language learners in the past. Moreover, famous aptitude tests and scales are listed with their contents one by one. They provide two recent talented learners in language and express a comparison list according to their own reports about their language learning adventures. The authors conclude from the sayings of those talented learners that aptitude is not a very easy trait to measure by simple terms but a very complex phenomenon influenced by various other factors like motivation, discipline, systematic hard work, investment, sustained interest, autonomy, personality traits, gender, beliefs, affective factors, social context and so on. This shows that although there have been numerous studies to analyze aptitude and intelligence plus working memory of learners, there seem to be other important factors at play together with language learning abilities. Moreover the recent examples Andrew and Gökhan given in the chapter show that language learning capacity may be manipulated on the benefit of the learner by the learner himself, which means aptitude issue seems to be an individual and dynamic trait rather than being an innate capacity in general.

Chapter VI provides brief definition of the term personality and gives information about famous personality scales, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator by Myers (1962), and Big five model by McCrae & John (1992). The authors refer to the studies which used these scales and they conclude that some personality traits play important roles in differing language skills. For example, extroverts are seen to be good speakers and social while introverts are good writing and reading. Although personality traits seem to be fixed abilities, their roles in language learning are a bit complex to define. A recent study by Soruç was given as an example to show that they may be no correlation between personality traits measured by a famous model and language proficiency, which might highlight the importance of other variables are again at play for language acquisition apart from personality. The authors conclude from the results of various studies that the connection is a mixed phenomenon in which “a complex, dynamic and socioecological system of components interact in particular ways to result in overall state or form at a particular context” (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2007, p. 26). The quotation above emphasizes the complex interplay among differing individual variables such as willingness to communicate, ego boundaries, motivation, anxiety, language learning strategies and styles in connection with personality traits, which is the main focus of the whole book trying to explain individual differences through the lenses of complexity theory.

Chapter VII is dedicated to explain learning styles and its connection with language learning. The authors start the chapter by providing the definition of the term and its importance for both learners and teachers. There seems to be some overlapping among the definitions of personality, learning styles and cognitive style according to different scholars. There is a list of famous learning style inventories but the first language learning based scale was according to the authors, Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire by Reid (1987). Other scales connected with language learning were also developed after that one. Although learning styles or preferences of learners are seen to be stable traits, the authors emphasize the complex relation between them and language proficiency by referring to some other radical assumptions which focus on style stretching or flexibility or manipulation of styles according to emerging needs of learners. This style stretching may also be connected with other terms like tolerance of ambiguity, risk taking, field dependence/independence all of which are generally seen as good language learner traits. Along with manipulation of learning preferences in terms of emerging needs, the authors highlight the necessity of teacher style stretching by giving a specific example in which the learner felt more secure and motivated when his teacher allowed more freedom of choice and respected his preferred learning style. The chapter is finalized with the emphasis of interplay between several factors in connection with learning preferences and styles.

Chapter VIII focuses on the historical journey from language learning strategies to self-regulation. The authors start with the definition of strategies and provide valuable information about some overlapping issues in terms of definition, classification of them. Strategy term is generally attributed to Rubin (1975) who observed proficient learner behaviors and wondered whether those tactics or behaviors could be taught to less proficient ones. Although there seems to be overlapping and confusing conditions for strategy scales and studies, the authors emphasize that consciousness is of utmost importance for strategy use. In order to show effective and successful use of strategies, they provide an example of a case study in which two learners are compared. One of them, the more successful seems to be using various strategies more successfully, being able to change or modify when needed with a big diversity of repertoire for the strategies whereas the other one was only using the strategies on the surface level with a small repertoire. This means as the authors suggested strategy choice or use is not itself enough to acquire a language. Effective use and modification according to emerging needs are more important than the use. They finalize the chapter by giving information about famous strategy instruction programs like CALLA, learning to learn, strategy based instruction and so

on. The chapter concluded that language learning strategies dynamically interact with other complexities of their socioecological conditions, the task, goals and individual characteristics.

Chapter IX tells about autonomy and its connection with success. The authors provide valuable information about its historical background and refer to related studies about the concept. Autonomy is generally attributed to success in most of the studies. To show the universal qualities of the term, two studies conducted in totally different cultures were compared. In the studies autonomous learners have some strong characteristics like being self-disciplined, having strong executive powers while enjoying learning, skills for searching, having clear goals and so on. These features require teachers to formulate their teaching style according to strengths and weaknesses of learners. The authors further suggest that the term autonomy has connection with self-regulation, strategies, metacognitive skills and agency. Moreover they highlight that the improvements in technology have created more advantages for autonomous learners. They reemphasize the individual and socio-ecological differences contribution to autonomy which also has a dynamic structure modified by emerging needs and contexts of the learning environment.

Chapter X starts with the definition of belief by related scholars and provides information about the historical background of the term. The authors refer to a very famous scale by Horwitz (1987) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) and explain the content of the questionnaire by referring to the studies in which it was used. In most of the studies, it was concluded that belief system, in spite of being some kind of stable characteristics for some learners, is shaped and modified by differing contexts and individual differences such as anxiety, self-efficacy, strategy use, age, personality, motivation, aptitude, cultural traits, autonomy, style, gender and so on. To show the cultural differences, they compare one study in China and another in Iran. They conclude from all the studies mentioned in the chapter that belief system of language learners is influenced by sociocultural or geographical contexts and has got a dynamic nature, which may change according to emerging needs or situations. That is why the authors suggest to the teachers that it is very important to know the complex interplay between various factors and dynamicity seems to outperform most among all of the other terms.

Chapter XI deals with the connection between several affective factors and success for especially good language learners. The authors provide a valuable list of affective factors like attitudes, attribution, empathy, inhibition, self-efficacy beliefs, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-image and so on. They conclude from the studies conducted on the issue that human beings are sentimental creatures and their language learning adventure cannot be affective factors free. Emotional responses of learners are a part of human beings and they seem to influence our performance in language acquisition process. The authors provide valuable guidelines for teachers commenting that teachers need to create a non-threatening environment, promote positive attitudes, empathize, minimize inhibitions, and facilitate positive self-efficacy beliefs, all of which could contribute to pleasant and harmonious classroom atmosphere. Teachers especially in this chapter are required to reconsider their main role in language acquisition environment in which classical teacher is out and eclectic teacher who is aware of differing individual concerns and complexity and interplay among various variables is in.

Chapter XII is dedicated to explain the connections between student motivation and success. The authors provide several differing definitions of motivation created by scholars. The main focus on motivation in the chapter is not the importance of the concept but its dynamic nature with emerging needs and contexts. There are again interconnectedness, socioecological terms and dynamicity for the concept as student motivation can change either positively or negatively according to emergent conditions on the way. Therefore, it is highly recommended to explore the complex interaction of factors, how and why motivation can change at times, and what kind of context influences it, its relation to goal setting or orientation, what teacher can do to sustain it and what learners can do to maintain and enhance it. Autonomy is emphasized

along with motivation as self-directed or oriented learners seem to be more process oriented ones who are ready to overcome or encounter new challenges on the way. Moreover volitional control is also referred in the chapter to highlight the importance of balancing positive and negative feelings in order to sustain motivation and finally success. Although high motivation appears to be an effective predictor of success, it should be analyzed in a holistic and meaningful manner because of the interplay of various dynamic factors.

The last chapter, XIII provides a simple summary of all the discussed individual variables above. The authors try to summarize the main concepts by referring to a study conducted to see the differing perception of teachers about individual differences. They conclude from the results that learner individuality is very important, a learner is influenced by his/her contextual learning environment, goal orientation and agency as well as learner identity play a dynamic role in the process. The complex dynamic view is again highlighted in this chapter providing very valuable source of information from different studies in literature. Teachers difficult as it seems, need to be aware of a lot of factors which are interconnected among each other and it is not a very easy task for them. Getting to know students or learners with those individual variables at play may help teachers manipulate the teaching styles while creating a meaningful and pleasant learning environment for the sake of the learners.

Griffiths & Soruç in this book provided a very valuable source of information about individual learner differences with their dynamic nature changing through time and interconnection with various emergent factors according to situations or ecological contexts. I would definitely suggest the book for teacher training institutions or programs as it provides almost every detail about learner variables with important questions both at the beginning and at the end. This book can be dealt with very interactively in such programs to show the teacher candidate the dynamic interplay among differing variables. This book is a like a historical chronology of learner variables and they are very successfully bound together with related references and studies in every chapter.

REFERENCES

- Cameron, L., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (2007). Complex systems and applied linguistics. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 17(2), 226–239.
- Horwitz, E. (1987). Surveying student beliefs about language learning. In A. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning* (pp. 119–132). London: Prentice Hall
- McCrae, R., & John, O. (1992). An introduction to the five-factor model and its applications. *Journal of Personality*, 60(2), 175–215.
- Myers, E. (1962). *The Myers-Briggs type indicator*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Reid, J. (1987). The learning style preferences of ESL students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(1), 87–111
- Rubin, J. (1975). What the ‘good language learner’ can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly*, 9(1), 41–51.