Perspectives on Individual Characteristics and Foreign Language Education
Studies in Second and Foreign Language Education 6

Editors
Anna Uhl Chamot
Wai Meng Chan

De Gruyter Mouton
Perspectives on Individual Characteristics and Foreign Language Education

*edited by*

Wai Meng Chan
Kwee Nyet Chin
Sunil Kumar Bhatt
Izumi Walker

De Gruyter Mouton
This book brings together fifteen papers selected from CLaSIC 2010, the Fourth Centre for Language Studies International Conference, held at the Orchard Hotel in Singapore on December 2–4, 2010. Since its inception in 2004, the CLaSIC series of biennial conferences, organised by the Centre for Language Studies (CLS) of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS), has gained the unwavering support of scholars, researchers and practitioners in foreign language education and related disciplines from around the world. CLaSIC 2010 was devoted to the theme “Individual Characteristics and Subjective Variables in Language Learning,” thus acknowledging the undoubted importance of learners’ – and teachers’ – individual characteristics in foreign language education. Altogether, over 240 proposals were received, from which 100 papers and posters were eventually selected for presentation at CLaSIC 2010.

The Asia-Pacific Symposium for the Teaching of Asian Languages, which was conducted within the framework of CLaSIC 2010, deserves special mention. This symposium was initiated jointly by The Australian National University and NUS, and was first held as part of CLaSIC 2008. Following the resounding success of the inaugural symposium, it was expanded in 2010 to include additional partners in the University of Hawaii, La Trobe University and Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. A selection of the 14 papers presented at the symposium has since been published in a special issue of e-FLT, the Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, in December 2011.

The fifteen chapters that follow the introduction to this book were selected for publication based on the expert reviews of a Scientific Committee comprising the following eight distinguished scholars from Asia, Europe and North America: Karin Aguado (Universität Kassel), Naoko Aoki (Osaka University), Anna Uhl Chamot (The George Washington University), William Littlewood (Hong Kong Baptist University), Richard Schmidt (University of Hawai‘i), Elaine Tarone (University of Minnesota),
Weiping Wu (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) and Minglang Zhou (University of Maryland).

We feel immensely indebted to the many who have contributed to the success of CLaSIC 2010 and the preparation of this book. In particular, we would like to thank the following persons and organisations: the Guest-of-Honour, Professor Brenda Yeoh, Dean of the NUS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; members of the Scientific Committee for the selection of papers for this book; the NUS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences for the generous grant (Project No. N-127-000-012-021) in support of the conference; our other sponsors and partners, including the Char Yong (DABU) Clan Association Singapore, the Lee Foundation, the Goethe-Institut Singapore, the Japan Foundation, and the Chinese Language Teaching and Research Fund administered jointly by CLS and the Department of Chinese Studies at NUS; and Nicole Tew, Serah Soon and Beatrice Lam for their assistance in proof-reading and formatting the manuscript. Above all, we would like to salute the untiring efforts and total dedication of our colleagues in the CLaSIC 2010 Organising Committee and the CLS’ administrative support team, who gave of their best before, during and after the conference.

Wai Meng Chan, Kwee Nyet Chin, Sunil Kumar Bhatt and Izumi Walker
Singapore, June 2012
# Contents

Chapter 1
Individual characteristics and foreign language education: An introduction to the book
*Wai Meng Chan, Kwee Nyet Chin, Sunil Kumar Bhatt and Izumi Walker* 1

## Part 1: Cognitive variables

Chapter 2
Attention, awareness, and individual differences in language learning
*Richard Schmidt* 27

Chapter 3
Language learning aptitude and foreign language learning
*Karin Aguado* 51

Chapter 4
Understanding L2 reading: A cognitive perspective
*Swathi M. Vanniarajan* 71

Chapter 5
The effects of motivation and proficiency on pragmatic and grammatical awareness in foreign language learning
*Boonjeera Chiravate* 93

Chapter 6
Differentiated instruction for language and learning strategies: Classroom applications
*Anna Uhl Chamot* 115
Chapter 7
Characterising individual learners on an empirically-developed
can-do system: An application of Latent Rank Theory
Naoki Sugino, Kenichi Yamakawa, Hiromasa Ohba,
Kojiro Shojima, Yuko Shimizu and Michiko Nakano

Part 2: Beliefs, assumptions and attitudes

Chapter 8
Learner language in unrehearsed communication:
Nurturing individual differences in the classroom
Elaine Tarone

Chapter 9
Exploring Australian Japanese language teachers’ perceptions
of intercultural language learning
Caroline Mahoney

Chapter 10
Assumptions about learning and teaching languages amongst
Australian pre-service teachers: A pedagogical process
allowing reflection for teacher learning
Lesley Anne Harbon

Chapter 11
Individual difference and context in study abroad
Phil Benson

Part 3: Motivation, identity and anxiety

Chapter 12
The role of stories in teacher development
Naoko Aoki

Chapter 13
Language identity as a process and second language learning
Minglang Zhou
Chapter 14
Fostering learners’ affective development through process drama
*Indrianti* 273

Chapter 15
Implementing a goal setting program for EFL students: The design, process and results
*Shan-mao Chang, Yi-ting Huang and Hsiu-chen Wu* 301

Chapter 16
A study of foreign language classroom anxiety at a Taiwanese university
*Ming Chang* 317

Authors and their affiliations 333

Index 337
Chapter 1

Individual characteristics and foreign language education: An introduction to the book

Wai Meng Chan, Kwee Nyet Chin, Sunil Kumar Bhatt and Izumi Walker

1 Learner characteristics in second language acquisition and foreign language education

Learner characteristics have always been at the focal point of second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language education (FLE) research, for many of them have been identified through the efforts of countless researchers as determinants of second/foreign language (L2) learning achievement. Much research has been directed at identifying L2 learning processes and how various learner characteristics mediate these processes and contribute to the theoretical models that result (for accounts of major SLA theories and models, see Ellis, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Mitchell & Myles, 2004). For example, in establishing their Socio-educational Model, Gardner and MacIntyre (1992, 1993) attempt to incorporate ten learner characteristics to provide an account of how a second language is acquired. Gardner and MacIntyre (1992) group these ten characteristics into three broad categories – namely, cognitive variables (such as language aptitude and language learning strategies), affective variables (such as attitudes, motivation and language anxiety) and those variables which could affect learners’ cognition or affect (examples given by Gardner and MacIntyre for this category include age and socio-cultural experiences). Others have drawn on findings from SLA research on learner characteristics to propose foreign language instructional models. For instance, Cohen (1998, 2003), in proposing his Styles and Strategies Based Instruction Model, examines how various variables – primarily language learning styles, but also other variables including age, personality, motiva-
tion, prior learning experience and proficiency level – can interact with and influence learners’ strategy use in L2 learning processes.

The bulk of the research done in SLA and FLE has in the past focused on establishing general principles and deriving pedagogical theories and implications from the study of learner characteristics which can be applied to language teaching and learning as a whole. Citing Alexander and Murphy (1999), Dörnyei (2005) describes this as the dominant development trend in education in general, which has primarily sought to “characterize the teachers and students who populate classrooms as ‘learning communities’ and to think in terms of the collective more than the individual” (p. 2). In a similar vein, Skehan (1991) points to the long-standing approach in psychology to study and identify structures and processes common to all people, and states with specific reference to applied linguistics and SLA:

Linguistics, for example, has tended to emphasize common, even universal, features in language (especially syntax), and the autonomy and modularity of the language system. Similarly, in pedagogy, researchers have attempted to identify the general (and even unique) “best methodology,” or best approach to teaching, with less attention paid to constraints on the operation of (say) methodology or the way it may affect people in different ways. In studies more directly concerned with acquisition, researchers have tried to identify universal sequences in development, or common processes such as transfer, cross-linguistic interference, overgeneralization, fossilization, and so forth, that affect everyone in the same way. (p. 276)

Perhaps the most extreme example of this hunt for highly generalisable – and even universal – language acquisition theories and models is Chomsky’s (1976, 1986, 1993) Universal Grammar Model, which is based on a “system of principles, conditions, and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages” and thus “invariant among humans” (Chomsky, 1976, p. 29). Another example is the good language learner research in the 1970s and early 1980s (Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Rubin, 1975, 1981; Stern, 1975). Though these studies were motivated by the urge to explain obvious performance differentials among L2 learners despite receiving the same instruction and sharing the learning environment, the researchers set out initially to seek a set of learning behaviours, essentially strategies and techniques, that are “proven” to be effective and can therefore be taught to less successful learners (Chamot, 2004; Grenfell &
Such efforts were thus essentially directed at finding straightforward pedagogical solutions that would be widely applicable to L2 learners with learning difficulties to help them overcome these difficulties and achieve the desired outcomes.

2 Research into individual differences

Research such as the good language learner studies represents a response to the puzzling question why there are often large differences in L2 learning achievement and why many learners do not succeed in learning a L2 though they are proficient speakers of their respective first languages (Dörnyei, 2005; Segalowitz, 1997). The search for answers to these questions have led to, in Skehan’s (1991) view, a second approach in psychological and SLA research, which attempts to investigate differences in various learner characteristics and to relate these to performance differentials among individual learners. Skehan contends in his book titled “Individual differences in second-language learning,” published in 1989, that this approach had produced far less research than the aforementioned trend towards the study of common processes and the formulation of universal principles of L2 learning. While research into individual differences (IDs) has received much greater attention since the early 1990s, as evidenced by the vast number of studies reported and discussed by Dörnyei (2005) in his comprehensive book on ID research and its implications for FLE, Skehan’s contention about the imbalance in the volume of research generated through the two contrasting approaches arguably still holds true today.

Although the first integrated view of ID research was delivered only in the late 1980s by Skehan (1989), the interest in individual factors which can potentially contribute to one’s learning outcomes and account for differences in attainment levels can be traced to the 1920s and 1930s. In the United States, language aptitude tests were first developed between 1925 and 1930, and applied subsequently in schools for the selection of students for foreign language classes (Spolsky, 1995, cit. in Dörnyei, 2005). This was followed by a second major test development phase in the 1950s and 1960s, during which two large-scale research and developmental projects led to the design and publication of two highly influential tests of lan-
guage aptitude, the “Modern Language Aptitude Test” (MLAT; Carroll & Sapon, 1959) and the “Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery” (PLAB; Pimsleur, 1966). Karin Aguado, in Chapter 3 of this book, provides a brief overview of the development of language aptitude tests since the 1950s, including the MLAT and PLAB, and the components that constitute these tests (see also Dörnyei, 2005).

Two other important ID factors for which there are long research traditions are language learning strategies and motivation. As mentioned above, the good language learner research in the 1970s provided the early impetus for the extensive research on the contributions of learning strategies to L2 learning. In fact, Rubin (1987) traces the beginnings of the language learning strategy research to the studies of Carlton (1966, 1971), which focus on the use of inferencing as a language learning technique. Similarly, early interest in L2 motivation research dates back to pre-1980 days with the pioneering work of Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1972), who take a social psychological view of L2 motivation and postulate the significance of learners’ attitudes towards the target language community for their learning orientations and success.

Not unexpectedly, in the early foundational years, research on the various ID factors was confined within the boundaries of the respective fields and there was little interfacing between research efforts in the various ID areas. Neither did researchers take a more integrated view of IDs until the pioneering work of Skehan (1989, 1991) and the efforts of other scholars in the last two decades (e.g. Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Ehrman, Leaver, & Oxford, 2003; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992, 1993; Oxford & Ehrman, 1993).

For an integrated approach to the study of IDs, a good working definition of what constitutes an ID is indispensible. Broadly speaking, an ID could be any characteristic or attribute that “marks a person as a distinct and unique human being” (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 3). However, in order to make IDs more researchable, it is necessary to narrow this definition and to consider which ID factors – out of an almost endless array of differences which may exist between learners – would justify the considerable investment of time and resources necessary for scientific research. As Dörnyei (2009) puts it:

… ID research has traditionally focused only on those personal characteristics that are enduring, that are assumed to apply to everybody, and on which
people differ by degree. In other words, ID factors concern stable and systematic deviations from a normative blueprint ... (p. 231)

Thus, from the perspective of ID research, attention is directed mainly at those characteristics that can be assumed to 1) be present in all or most learners, 2) be relatively stable over time, and 3) demonstrate an impact on learning processes and outcomes that will differ to some extent from learner to learner.

Which of the variables that could possibly affect L2 learning would meet these criteria and thus merit inclusion in an integrated ID research framework? In the first comprehensive discussion of ID research that presents an integrated model and explores the interactions between various ID factors, Skehan (1989) includes language aptitude, motivation and language learning strategies as key variables of his model. That these three factors should form the basis of his model is hardly surprising, given that they have the longest research histories among the various learner characteristics studied in SLA research. To this list of key ID factors, Skehan (1991) later adds a fourth major variable – namely, learning styles (see also Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). Other ID factors touched upon briefly in Skehan’s model (1989) include cognitive attributes such as intelligence and cognitive style, the affective influence of anxiety, and personal variables such as extroversion, risk-taking and sociability. In their socioeducational model of L2 learning, Gardner and Lambert (1992, 1993) distinguish between cognitive and affective IDs, listing intelligence, language aptitude and language learning strategies in the former category, and language attitudes, motivation and language anxiety in the latter. In a more recent paper on the contributions of IDs to L2 learning, Ehrman et al. (2003) – while acknowledging other ID factors such as language aptitude, gender, culture and age – focus primarily on learning styles, learning strategies and a group of affective variables, including motivation, self-efficacy, tolerance of ambiguity, and anxiety.

The most comprehensive account of ID research to date, provided by Dörnyei (2005), also takes a selective focus, paying particular attention to five learner characteristics. Of these, he considers personality, language aptitude and motivation to be “principal learner variables,” which must be closely examined when “addressing individual differences from an educational perspective” (p. 7). Similar to earlier accounts of IDs, Dörnyei also
includes learning styles and language learning strategies in his framework because of the long-standing tradition of research into these factors. He considers five other characteristics – anxiety, creativity, willingness to communicate, self-esteem and learner beliefs – to be of potentially much theoretical and practical importance, but discusses them only briefly, as he believes that insufficient research has been done to date on their role and nature.

The papers included in the present book reflect to a considerable extent the traditionally strong research interest in the three key factors of language aptitude, language learning strategies and motivation. Three of the 17 chapters are devoted to the discussion of language aptitude (Chapter 3 by Aguado) and cognitive variables identified in recent ID research as components of one’s capacity for language learning, such as noticing, attention, awareness and working memory (Chapters 2 and 4 by Richard Schmidt and Swathi M. Vanniarajan, respectively). In addition, in Chapter 5, Boonjeera Chiravate reports on a study of the aspect of grammatical awareness, which is similar to the attributes of grammatical sensitivity and verbal intelligence considered by Carroll (1981) and Pimsleur (1966) to be key constituents of their respective models of language aptitude.

Chapter 6 by Anna Uhl Chamot looks at language learning strategies as a key ID factor and considers how the needs of learners with varying degrees of strategy knowledge and use can be met in the L2 language classroom. The third of the three key ID factors, motivation, forms the primary or secondary concern of four chapters – namely, Chapter 5 by Chiravate, Chapter 13 by Minglang Zhou, Chapter 14 by Indrianti, and Chapter 15 by Shan-mao Chang, Yi-ting Huang and Hsiu-chen Wu. Among the array of characteristics and variables covered in the other chapters in this volume are learner language, identity, anxiety, beliefs, assumptions and attitudes.

Since the adoption of a more integrated approach to ID research, insights into the nature and contributions of ID factors as well as the ensuing theoretical models have attained a high level of sophistication. For instance, in the area of language learning strategies, researchers have long since rejected the simple, linear view that less successful learners can emulate the success of “good language learners” just by being instructed in the use of “effective” strategies displayed by the latter. Instead, many researchers now recognise that it is not as much the quantity of the strate-
gies available to a learner that makes the difference as the quality of his/her strategy use (e.g. Chamot in Chapter 6 of this volume; Grenfell & Macaro, 2007). The general view held currently is that any given strategy is neither good nor bad, but that strategy use can lead to positive learning outcomes only if the strategies selected are appropriate for the learning tasks at hand, match the learners’ learning styles and are effectively employed (Ehrman et al., 2003). In a recent review, Cohen (2007) comes to the conclusion that “for a strategy to be effective in promoting learning or improved performance, it must be combined with other strategies either simultaneously in strategy clusters or in sequence, in strategy chains” (p. 35). There is also general agreement today about the pivotal role of metacognition, another learner attribute, in effective strategy use. A well-developed metacognition is considered a key prerequisite and a linchpin of successful learning (Chan, 2000, 2010; Macaro, 2001). Indeed, Grenfell and Macaro (2007) describe it as “the orchestrating mechanism for combining strategies effectively in any given situation” (p. 23). Drawing on findings from educational psychology, Dörnyei (2005) relates the effective use of learning strategies to another ID factor, the learner’s capacity to self-regulate, which he views as a “multidimensional construct,” consisting of “cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, behavioral, and environmental processes” (p. 191). The current view of the contributions of ID factors to L2 learning is thus highly dynamic in nature, involving complex processes and interrelations between numerous variables, which cannot be adequately investigated and described through linear correlational research methods seeking to link learning achievement to single ID factors.

Another example of the trend towards a more differentiated and dynamic view of ID factors is provided by the language aptitude research, which began attracting renewed interest among psychologists and SLA researchers in the 1990s. Since then, researchers have been distancing themselves from the view that language aptitude is a “monolithic, static trait” (Robinson, 2007, p. 257) which can be measured by a single, straightforward aptitude test and possesses universal predictive value for all learning situations. Instead, the prevalent view is that language aptitude is very much a complex, multidimensional construct – much like the current notion of language learning strategies – and is closely related to other cognitive variables, most notably working memory, attention and noticing
ability (e.g. Miyake & Friedman, 1998; Sawyer & Ranta, 2001; see also Schmidt in Chapter 2 and Aguado in Chapter 3 of this book). Sawyer and Ranta (2001) explain how these variables are closely interrelated in determining one’s capacity for learning: “Assuming that noticing is crucial to learning, and attention is required for noticing, and attention at any moment is limited by WM capacity, then there must logically be a close relationship between amount of learning and size of WM.” (p. 342)

Robinson (2001, 2007) conceives language aptitude as a collective capacity comprising clusters of IDs, which he calls aptitude complexes, a term he borrows from Snow (1994, cit. in Robinson, 2007). He postulates the existence of four aptitude complexes, which are combinations of five cognitive ability factors, namely, the capacity for noticing the gap, memory for contingent speech, deep semantic processing, memory for contingent text, and metalinguistic rule rehearsal. Each aptitude complex is assumed to be a determinant of a learner’s ability to adapt to a particular learning situation (such as learning through focus on form, incidental learning, and explicit rule learning) and to cope with the specific tasks and task demands typical of this situation. For example, Robinson reasons that the first of the four aptitude complexes, consisting of one’s capacity for noticing the gap and memory for contingent speech, provides key support for learning through recasting in an instructional situation involving focus on form. Key to successful L2 learning is thus contingent upon matching a learner’s strengths in specific aptitude complexes to the conditions that favour these strengths or, in other words, the kind of instructional approach or learning tasks that draw on these aptitude complexes.

What clearly emerges from the above discussion of recent trends in ID research is the complex and interrelated nature of ID factors, which can no longer be considered in isolation, but must instead be studied as constituents of a dynamic system contributing to learners’ ability to adapt to and learn in different environments and under varying conditions of learning. What has also become clear is the influence of the context on learning as well as the interactions of IDs with contextual factors, including the instructional approaches employed and the dynamics of the respective L2 classroom situations (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). Such interactions cannot be

discounted and need to be elucidated through further research, as Dörnyei (2005) reasons:

The most striking aspect of nearly all the recent ID literature is the emerging theme of context: It appears that cutting-edge research in all these diverse areas has been addressing the same issue, that is, the situated nature of the ID factors in question. Scholars … are now increasingly proposing new dynamic conceptualizations in which ID factors enter into some interaction with the educational parameters rather than cutting across tasks and environments. (p. 218)

In Chapter 11, Phil Benson examines precisely the interplay between a learner and the context in which she was immersed while participating in a study abroad programme to show how 1) her experience of the external context negatively affected her perceptions of and attitudes towards aspects of this context and interactional opportunities within it, and 2) how she – in response to this – actively constructed new subjective contexts for interactions and created conditions that facilitated language learning and use.

3 Individual “characteristics” versus “differences”

Findings from ID research have led to efforts in FLE to create more favourable conditions for learning that correspond better to learners’ varying aptitudes, abilities, styles, preferences, motivations, and so forth. This could involve the modest efforts of an informed teacher, sensitive to such differences among his/her learners, to provide some measure of variability and flexibility in his/her L2 lessons and thus opportunities for learners to benefit in their own way. At the other extreme could be teachers or institutions which may undertake more radical attempts to provide “complete individualization so that each student has his or her own unique course” (Cook, 2008, p. 153). One such institutional initiative to put in place a highly individualised programme was implemented at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in the U.S. Established by Madeline Ehrman, the FSI Language Consultation Service provides counselling to students on an individual basis to help them acquire and apply learning strategies that best match their respective learning styles, motivations, as well as levels of anxiety and self-efficacy (Ehrman, 2001; Ehrman & Leaver, 2003). This
individualised programme does not however supplant regular classroom instruction administered to whole groups of students, and Ehrman is quick to acknowledge that “the success of the Learning Consultation Service (LCS) depends on the cooperation of the regular classroom teachers” (Ehrman & Leaver, 2003, p. 403).

The increased interest and exponential growth in the study of IDs since the 1990s has helped to address to some extent the imbalance in research, which had traditionally favoured the study of common processes and characteristics in L2 learning. Despite the vast inroads achieved by ID research in recent years, this by no means render the “mainstream” approach to focus on universal factors irrelevant or insignificant; in fact, such research continues to perform a key role in informing theory and practice in FLE. For instance, the highly individualised FSI Learning Consultation Service is intended to complement, and not to replace, whole-class instruction with common syllabi and materials for students. Moreover, while such an elaborate programme may be possible at an institution as large as FSI, it would be difficult to implement in standard educational institutions with far more modest resources. The lack of suitably qualified specialist teachers may present another obstacle, as

> it is probably beyond the abilities of most teachers to design lessons involving the kind of matching instruction employed in Wesche’s (1981) study, which used language aptitude tests to identify different learning styles and then sought to match the kind of instruction provided to the learners’ preferred approach to learning. (Ellis, 2005, p. 203)

In truth, both approaches have their rightful places in SLA and FLE research and are equally capable of contributing to instructed L2 acquisition. Lightbown and Spada (2006) provide, for example, an account of how SLA research – especially studies that have focused primarily on the collective – has shaped language teaching methodologies and impacted classroom instruction. While research into L2 motivation has now established its highly individual nature and postulates a close link to a learner’s self-image, or more specifically, to his/her possible selves, there are also

---

2. Drawing on work done in personality psychology, Dörnyei (2005) describes “possible selves” as the “specific representations of one’s self in future states, involving thoughts, images, and senses, and are in many ways the manifestations, or personalized carriers of one’s goals and aspiration (or fears, of course)” (p. 99).
findings that show that group dynamics in the L2 classroom and group motivational conditions can have a significant influence on, and support or override the motivation of individual learners (e.g. Dörnyei, 1997; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Ehrmann & Dörnyei, 1998; Ushioda, 2003). Studies investigating the effect of whole-class intervention on the motivation of collective groups of learners, such as those reported by Indrianti in Chapter 14, and Shan-mao Chang, Yi-ting Huang and Hsiu-chen Wu in Chapter 15, thus remain highly relevant.

Recognising the equal importance of both research approaches, this book presents a range of papers that look at curricular interventions addressing collective deficiencies in learner characteristics as well as variations in individual learning processes and outcomes. The title of the book and the choice of the word “characteristics” instead of “differences” thus reflect the dual perspective it is taking in the study of the contributions of learners’ attributes to L2 learning.

In a quote above (see p. 10), Ehrman and Leaver (2003) allude to the important role of the teacher, the other major actor in the foreign language classroom, in ensuring the success of any programmes that seek to apply the findings of ID research. Indeed, as Ehrman et al. (2003) emphasize, “it is expert teachers with flexible but clear syllabi who can most systematically provide for the individual differences among their students” (p. 324). In Chapter 8, Elaine Tarone describes a programme and materials that are designed to inform teachers about the importance of learner language, an ID factor, and to guide them on the use of unrehearsed communicative tasks in the foreign language classroom to develop learners’ implicit linguistic knowledge.

Of equal significance in FLE are the individual attributes of the teacher, which will undoubtedly influence the way they approach teaching and thus also impact learning processes and outcomes in their classrooms. For instance, the motivation of teachers to teach and the level of their enthusiasm and commitment have considerable bearing on their learners’ motivation (Dörnyei, 2001). As Ehrman et al. (2003) point out, “just as students vary, so do teachers, in motivation, in overall attitude, in self-efficacy as teachers, in teaching/learning style, and in preferred strategies” (p. 324). Other attributes that are of significance include their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning, their self-image and identity as teach-
ers, and their metacognition and self-regulation. Three chapters in this book – Chapter 9 by Caroline Mahoney, Chapter 10 by Lesley Anne Harbon and Chapter 12 by Naoko Aoki – are thus aptly devoted to the description of teacher characteristics and programmes designed to raise teachers’ awareness of these characteristics. Given that its scope extends to the teacher as well, the broader term “individual characteristics” is preferred in the book title to “learner characteristics,” which is more commonly encountered in SLA and FLE terminology.

4 The structure and contents of this book

The 15 chapters that follow this introduction shed light on the individual characteristics of learners and teachers of foreign languages. These chapters are organised in three main sections, with Part 1 focusing on a broad range of learner variables that are generally considered to be cognitive in nature. The chapters in this section present theoretical discussions of and empirical research into these cognitive variables and how they impact L2 learning. Part 2 of the book includes a collection of papers on the beliefs, assumptions, perceptions and attitudes of students and teachers with regard to L2 teaching and learning. Recent literature generally tends to relate beliefs and assumptions to one’s cognitive knowledge structures (Woods, 1996) or, more specifically, even to metacognitive knowledge (Dörnyei, 2005; Wenden, 1999). They are seen to provide part of the basis for one’s perceptions and attitudes, which will in turn influence their teaching and learning behaviour (Borg, 2006; Woods, 1996; see also Harbon in Chapter 11). The third and the final section of the book, Part 3, discusses the individual characteristics of motivation, identity and anxiety, which are closely related and thus often studied together. For instance, in Chapter 13, Zhou postulates a direct link between a learner’s identity and his/her L2 learning motivation. At the same time, a number of recent studies (e.g. Ehrman, 2000; Horwitz & Young, 1991; Young, 1998) have pointed to a close, but inverse relationship between motivation and anxiety, with a high level of anxiety often leading to reduced motivation, while the lowering of one’s anxiety will usually contribute to improved motivation.
4.1 Part 1: Cognitive variables

The six chapters in Part 1 of the book look at variables that differentiate learners in their cognitive abilities, including two of the two most widely researched ID factors (language aptitude and language learning strategies) as well as the various attributes that have been identified more recently as constituents of aptitude complexes (e.g. working memory capacity, attention and noticing ability). The authors of the chapters examine these cognitive variables theoretically and empirically, or present practical applications derived from research for the language classroom.

In Chapter 2, Richard Schmidt provides a comprehensive account of the Noticing Hypothesis, which states that input does not become intake for language learning unless it is noticed, that is, consciously registered. First proposed more than two decades ago, this hypothesis has generated and continues to generate much further research and discussion, both in support of and in opposition to it. Schmidt reviews some of the evidence for the hypothesis, as well as the major objections that have been raised against it from a variety of perspectives: linguistic, psychological, sociocultural, and philosophical. Thereafter, he focuses his attention on the discussion of how individual differences among learners in their noticing abilities, attention and awareness may be related to performance differentials among L2 learners. He concludes the chapter by explaining how these attributes are related to various ID factors and constructs such as aptitude, working memory, motivation, and implicit and statistical learning abilities.

Chapter 3, contributed by Karin Aguado, is devoted to the construct of language learning aptitude and traces its development since the early work done by Carroll and Pimsleur (e.g. Carroll, 1973; Carroll & Sapon, 1959; Pimsleur, 1966), the creators of two widely used and highly influential language aptitude tests, MLAT and PLAB. Aguado further shows how the early static view of language aptitude as an innate and fixed ability has been gradually revised since the re-discovery of this construct in the 1990s among L2 researchers. In the final part of the chapter, she gives an overview of two recent attempts by Robinson (2002, 2007) and Skehan (2002) to analyse and re-define language aptitude as a highly dynamic and situated complex of related, but different ID variables.
Swathi M. Vanniarajan, in Chapter 4, relates the results of an experimental study on the relationship between L2 learners’ reading performance and their working memory, identified in recent research (see also Schmidt and Aguado in the current volume) as a key variable in L2 learning. The experiment compared the performances of non-native subjects in two L2 reading comprehension exercises – one with limited and the other with unlimited time allowance. The results indicate that the subjects differed greatly in their L2 reading abilities, as indicated by their scores under the limited time condition. When given unlimited time, 13 of the 30 subjects immediately improved their scores significantly. The results of Vanniarajan’s study seem to corroborate earlier research findings that working memory capacity is a key factor contributing to fluency and proficiency in L2 reading. It also shows that L2 readers at the controlled end of the “automatic-controlled continuum” of reading development, who are assumed to have smaller working memory capacities, can overcome this limitation if they are given sufficient time to process all the information in a passage.

In Chapter 5, Boonjeera Chiravate reports on an investigation into how learners’ motivation and proficiency level influence their pragmatic and grammatical awareness in the foreign language setting. She collected data from 120 Thai learners of English as a foreign language, using a contextualised judgement task consisting of 32 scenarios eliciting four speech acts to ascertain the level of learners’ pragmatic and grammatical awareness, which are key attributes contributing to communicative competence. The results reveal that high-motivation learners are more aware of pragmatic errors than low-motivation learners, indicating that there is a positive correlation between motivation and pragmatic awareness. On the other hand, learners’ proficiency level seems to correlate positively with their awareness of grammatical errors, but not with their awareness of pragmatic errors. The results achieved by Chiravate thus seem to support findings by other researchers that learners’ motivation has a positive effect on their pragmatic development.

In Chapter 6, Anna Uhl Chamot makes a strong case for a curricular proposal to meet the needs of individual learners with different levels of language proficiency and learning strategy knowledge in the L2 classroom. Drawing on the findings of language learning strategy and other
relevant research, Chamot highlights the importance of identifying differences in learners’ proficiency and strategy knowledge/use, as well as their personal interests and backgrounds in planning and designing L2 instruction. To cater to their individual needs ascertained through this process, she proposes that the pedagogical approach of differentiated instruction be applied to provide a range of language and strategy learning options. She lists a number of planning and learning activities suggested in FLE research, ranging from complexity ladder to learning stations, to support the implementation of differentiated instruction.

In Chapter 7, Naoki Sugino, Kenichi Yamakawa, Hiromasa Ohba, Kojiro Shojima, Yuko Shimizu and Michiko Nakano argue that the language proficiency of individual learners is far too fuzzy and complex a construct to be adequately differentiated by test scores on a continuous scale, as most tests are designed to do. Connected to this is the further problem of providing can-do statements which can accurately describe what these learners are capable of doing in the target language at the various test score levels. They present an alternative method of analysing, classifying and characterising individual learners according to their proficiency in terms of what they are able to perform (or “can do”) in the target language. Using a newly developed statistical model called Latent Rank Theory (LRT), they categorised 40,000 learners – randomly selected from 387,447 senior high school takers of a national university entrance examination – into 10 latent ranks and developed unique can-do statements for each of these ranks based on the learners’ response patterns, the test item specifications and statistical measures of their LRT model.

4.2 Part 2: Beliefs, assumptions and attitudes

The four chapters in Part 2 of the book are connected by their common focus on the more subjective elements among the individual characteristics of learners and teachers. While one’s beliefs and assumptions are generally considered to form part of his/her knowledge structures, they do not however have the status of knowledge that is generally viewed by most people as a fact and is supported by some form of acceptable, factual evidence. According to Woods’ (1996, p. 195), the term assumptions “refers to the (temporary) acceptance of a ‘fact’ (state, process or relationship)
which we cannot say we know, and which has not been demonstrated, but which we are taking as true for the time being,” while by the term beliefs, we mean the “acceptance of a proposition for which there is no conventional knowledge, one that is not demonstrable, and for which there is accepted disagreement.” Beliefs and assumptions are thus situated on the subjective end of the continuum of one’s knowledge structures. Similarly, by definition, perceptions, which refer to the way we experience and understand the world, and attitudes, which describe our predispositions towards certain realities or notions, are also subjective in nature. These four variables are also closely interrelated through their mutual impact on each other. For instance, a learner’s beliefs about the value of a particular language will influence his/her attitudes towards that language and the learning of that language, while a teacher’s assumptions about how languages are learned will undoubtedly have a bearing on the way s/he perceives students’ learning behaviours. The relationship is bi-directional, as the critical reflection and analysis of one’s perceptions and learning/teaching experiences will invariably also lead to the revision and restructuring of one’s beliefs and assumptions.

In Chapter 8, Elaine Tarone identifies learner language as an important learner characteristic and shows how research into the development of learner language has led to the insight that unrehearsed oral interaction can contribute to the growth of learners’ implicit language knowledge and thus overall language proficiency. In the focus of this chapter is the description of a teacher development approach which involves the (student) teacher as an active researcher and challenges his/her prior notions of language teaching. Using video and transcription data collected through learner language research, teachers are guided to observe, and reflect on, how learners’ implicit language ability develops through unrehearsed oral activities. The chapter presents examples in the form of transcripts of such interactions taken from materials developed by Tarone and her associates (Tarone, Cheon, Horii, Khanzadi, & Wang, 2011) to enable this exploratory and inductive approach to teacher education.

In Chapter 9, Caroline Mahoney provides rich descriptions of and insights into individual teachers’ experiences, and explores the factors that underlie their perceptions of, and thus attitudes towards, Intercultural Language Learning (IcLL), the core philosophy of the Australian lan-
language teaching framework, and its implementation in the classrooms. The
data were drawn from interviews with four Japanese language teachers in
New South Wales who participated in a familiarisation programme called
the “Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning in Practice.” Three
factors were identified as having shaped the teachers’ perceptions of IcLL:
their students, the teaching environment and their personal histories. Ma-
honey concludes that despite there being many barriers preventing the im-
plementation of IcLL in the classrooms, IcLL remains relevant in the
NSW context due to the diverse backgrounds of learners and teachers. She
believes that the findings of her study can promote other teachers’ own
critical reflections of their perceptions of IcLL.

Chapter 10 by Lesley Anne Harbon reports on Australian pre-service
teachers’ participation in short-term overseas teaching programmes in In-
donesia, South Korea and Thailand, which gave them not just the oppor-
tunity to experience teaching in contexts very different from Australian
classrooms, but also an understanding of their own assumptions about
teaching and learning. Citing qualitative data collected through reflective
journals, focus group discussions and interviews, Harbon demonstrates
how the overseas teaching experience helped participants to gain an
awareness of their own assumptions and to acknowledge the impact of
these assumptions on their practice. The critical reflection of their prior
subjective notions about language teaching, learners and language learn-
ing, as well as teaching and learning materials led to changes to some of
their assumptions and thus to their teaching practice as well. The author
concludes that the research instruments employed in her study seem suited
as pedagogical tools to encourage and enable such vital reflective proc-
desses among teachers.

Phil Benson, in Chapter 11, presents the results of a study which em-
ployed a narrative approach to collect data on a female Hong Kong stu-
dent’s L2 study abroad experience. The student’s narrations of her expec-
tations prior to and experiences during the overseas stay were captured
through pre-/post-trip interviews and weekly blog postings. When her ini-
tial experiences in her host country ran contrary to her original expecta-
tions and negatively affected her perceptions of and attitudes towards this
context and the interactional opportunities within it, she responded by
seeking alternative interactional opportunities (e.g. with her host family
and with others when making trips out of her place of residence). Benson argues that, in doing so, the student had actively constructed new contexts for interactions and thus conditions favourable for language learning and use. This student’s personal experience of and her response to the study abroad context constitutes the individual difference that forms the focus of Benson’s chapter. In a study abroad situation, where the interplay between a learner and the context becomes crucial for the success of the programme, the effect of this individual difference becomes amplified and can consequently lead to substantial variations in learning outcomes and individual progress – a problem that warrants considerable attention in the planning and implementation of L2 study abroad programmes.

4.3 Part 3: Motivation, identity and anxiety

Part 3 of the book directs readers’ attention to the important and much researched variables of motivation, identity and anxiety. The intricate interrelationship of these factors has been discussed above (see pp. 12–13). The first two of the five chapters in this section discuss the construct of identity and its impact on teacher development and L2 learners’ language attainment, respectively, while the remaining three present pedagogical approaches and measures supported by empirical investigations to address issues related to learners’ motivation and anxiety.

In Chapter 12, Naoko Aoki looks at the topic of teacher development and explains why the narrative approach of storytelling is well suited to guiding teachers to reflect on and effect changes to their teaching. Drawing on extensive previous research on teacher knowledge and teacher development, the author shows that teaching is an expression of the teacher’s identity, which explains why it is difficult to get teachers to change their teaching styles and behaviours. She proposes the use of storytelling, a narrative process she had employed with success in her own teacher education practice, as a means to help in-service teachers make sense of events and actions from their classroom experiences by joining them into stories. On the basis of these stories, teachers can then plan and modify their future actions and behaviours. Aoki closes the chapter by discussing conditions which needs to be fulfilled for teacher development through storytelling to be effective and successful.
Chapter 13, contributed by Minglang Zhou, addresses the relationship between identity, motivation and L2 learning. To clarify this relationship, Zhou proposes a conceptual framework which postulates language identity as a two-way process of constant and dynamic mapping between the multiple identities which an individual has for the various roles he plays in society and the codes (languages, language varieties, registers and styles) available to him in his linguistic repertoire. According to him, each identity will seek to be represented and articulated through a particular linguistic code. Conversely, a linguistic code will need to be matched to an identity or identities to be constantly used. The author further posits that, for successful L2 learning, the newly learned L2 code needs to be underpinned by an identity from the learner’s inventory of identities or requires a new identity to be established. The further construction of this identity provides in turn the impetus for the corresponding development of the L2 code necessary for its articulation. In this way, identity is an antecedent of motivation and creates the need for L2 learning. Zhou argues that individual variations in L2 attainment can be explained by whether one’s L2 knowledge can be successfully matched to an identity.

In Chapter 14, Indrianti provides an account of how process drama was used in an elementary Indonesian as a foreign language course as a means to lower learners’ anxiety and enhance their self-esteem and learning motivation. The participants of this course who signed up for process drama in fulfilment of their project requirement were engaged as a group in the scripting, rehearsal and performance of a play based on an Indonesian folktale of their choice. A range of quantitative and qualitative instruments, consisting of a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and field notes, were used to elicit data from ten volunteers pertaining to their perceived anxiety, motivation, self-esteem and self-efficacy. The analysis of the data produced results which suggest that process drama – with its potential for social interactions, self-expression and creative activities – can contribute positively to learners’ affective development.

Shan-mao Chang, Yi-ting Huang and Hsiu-chen Wu relate in Chapter 15 how a special programme was designed based on the Goal Setting Theory and implemented in a Taiwanese senior high school. The target group of this programme comprised 45 students with low levels of motivation and achievement in their EFL learning. In the course of this pro-
gramme, students were assigned group and individual goals (performance targets for their English quizzes), and were also guided to make study plans and evaluate their own performances. Teacher feedback and rewards in the form of small gifts were also provided in recognition of the students’ improvements, and to enhance their motivation and sense of self-efficacy. The success of the programme was evident not only in the improvements in the students’ grades, but also in the more positive motivations and attitudes they displayed towards English learning and the English tests, as well as their improved relationship with their teacher.

The final chapter of the book, Chapter 16, authored by Ming Chang, focuses on Taiwanese university students’ foreign language anxiety, which has been established in ID research as a major factor contributing to performance differentials among L2 learners. Chang presents a study aimed at identifying the level of anxiety experienced by his sample of 157 EFL learners, as well as the sources of their anxiety. Adopting a mixed methods approach using the “Foreign Language Anxiety Scale” developed by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) and semi-structured interviews with selected students and teachers, he found that a high percentage of the students suffered from at least a moderate level of anxiety, which is caused by three main factors: 1) their fear of failing their tests; 2) their fear of speaking English in public; and 3) their self-perceived low proficiency in English. Among the strategies employed by the interviewed teachers to counter anxiety in their classrooms were the use of group work for increased cooperative learning, providing optimal input that challenges rather than overwhelms learners, and encouraging and supporting more risk-taking in class.

References


Part 1
Cognitive variables