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## Dealing with Individual Differences in a Foreign Language Classroom: One Size Does not Fit all

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### چکیده

تفاوت‌های فراگیران زبان که نمودهای بسیار متفاوتی دارد موضوعی چالش برانگیز برای معلمان است تا به همه نیازها، روش‌ها، رویکردها و اولویت‌ها متفاوت یادگیرندگان بپردازند. با وجود این واقعیت که نظرات متضاد و انتقادات فراوانی در مورد موضوع تفاوت‌های فردی به‌خصوص در مورد تأکید بیش از حد بر تأثیر آن‌ها در موفقیت یا عدم موفقیت زبان‌آموزان خاص وجود دارد، این نکته انکارناپذیر است که فراهم آوردن روش‌های متفاوت برای دسترسی دانش‌آموزان به داده‌های ورودی (مطالب ارائه شده) و فرصت‌های متنوع برای نشان دادن مهارت‌ها، توانایی‌ها و دانش، باعث افزایش مشارکت و در نتیجه یادگیری آن‌ها شده و به معلم در درک بهتر نیازها، نقاط قوت و زمینه‌های مناسب رشد یادگیرندگان کمک می‌کند. مقاله حاضر تلاش دارد تا مباحث مختلف در مورد این تفاوت‌ها را مرور کرده و پیشنهادهای و راهکارهای عملی برای پرداختن به آن‌ها در یک کلاس آموزش زبان خارجی فراهم نماید.

**کلیدواژه‌ها:** تفاوت‌های فردی، هوش چندگانه، سبک‌های یادگیری، کلاس‌های ناهمگن

### Abstract

Language learners' differences, which manifest in many different ways, challenge teachers in dealing with all learners' different needs, methods and preferences. In spite of the fact that a lot of controversies and criticisms exist in the literature regarding overemphasizing the role of these differences in the success or failure of certain language learners, it cannot be denied that that providing language learners with different ways for accessing and attending to input and demonstrating skills, abilities, and knowledge improves their engagement and learning and gives teachers a better understanding of their needs, points of strengths, and areas for growth. The present paper aims to explore different arguments which have been put forth about these differences and to offer practical tips and suggestions for dealing with them in a foreign language classroom.

**Keywords:** individual differences, multiple intelligences, learning styles, heterogeneous classes

## Introduction

One of the most important challenges that teachers in all classes usually face is learners' differences and variations. These differences, which can be either inborn traits or acquired skills, make teaching a challenging and sometimes a tedious job for many teachers and an interesting and prevalent topic for researchers. While some aspects of individual differences are widely accepted as influencing the whole academic orientation of a person, some others are considered controversial because of the contradictory results reported in the literature or lack of a scientific basis. However, a general consensus exists that a one-size-fits-all approach does not satisfy the needs of different learners present in one classroom (Borthwick-Duffy, Palmer, & Lane, 1996; Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003; Skehan, 1991).

Finding the right routes to enrich the lesson plans so as to achieve the highest levels of satisfaction considering the diverse needs of different students can be quite an arduous task. As a result, the burden of the work may hinder foreign language (FL) teachers from providing enough support for all these diversities. Now more than ever, the weight of these burdens is crippling for language teachers due to the fact that learning a foreign language is a ubiquitous event which happens intentionally and with many different motivation resources outside the formal classroom borders. The present paper intends to look more closely at these diversities and to offer some practical hints to handle them appropriately.

## Individual differences in a nutshell

Individuals vary in immeasurable and uncountable ways to the extent that



even you cannot find two exactly similar persons. These differences have a lot of manifestations including Styles such as

- cognitive or/and learning, field dependent/independent, left/right brain dominance, visual/auditory/kinaesthetic, ambiguity tolerance, reflectivity/impulsivity, and thinking/intuitive styles,
- personality types (i.e., risk-taker/cautious, self-esteem, anxiety, extrovert/introvert, and judging/perceiving),
- multiple intelligences (i.e., linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, bodily/kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist, and existentialist),
- proficiency levels (i.e., beginner, intermediate, and advanced),
- gender,
- different degrees of aptitude for language learning,
- different ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic backgrounds, and
- even learning and communication strategies.

One of the most important challenges that teachers in all classes usually face is learners' differences and variations



There is a tendency to regard these categories as dichotomies; however, research supports the idea that, in certain categories such as different learning styles or intelligences,

different degrees of each category may manifest as a continuum in different contexts and in encountering different problems (Kirchner, 2017).

A close examination of these categories and subcategories highlights the fact that there are many overlaps and similarities amongst them. Besides, some researchers argue that individual differences are related to just the inborn facets and not the acquired ones, which are not changeable over time, while others expand individual differences to any type of variation that differentiates among individuals. These discrepancies have caused some researchers to criticize the over-categorization and dichotomies provided for individual differences. However, when it comes to the real classroom context, what matters is the practical guide that these studies offer to the real practitioners in a classroom. Given that the diversity in these categories can be confusing for many foreign language teachers, materials developers, and syllabus designers, research needs to offer affordable and practical ways for dealing with individual differences in foreign language classrooms. This is the aim that the present study attempts to delve more deeply into.

### Dealing with different intelligences in a FL classroom

Gardner's (1999) idea of Multiple Intelligences (MI)—completed and explained by other researchers as Brualdi, 1996 and Waterhouse, 2006—revolutionized the way intelligence quotient (IQ) was defined. The most important premise of this theory is that intelligence is not a unitary construct but rather may have many different manifestations. The findings of many studies indicate the over-dominance of certain intelligences especially verbal (also referred to as linguistic) type and ignorance of others in language classes in general and FL learning textbooks in particular. It has been observed that certain language learners' failures in language learning may be due to their not being intelligent according to this particular intelligence type. So how can a language teacher compensate for these incongruities in attending to all intelligence types in a language classroom? The following tips can be used to address all intelligence types.

- Consider discussion groups, word games and crosswords, short classroom speeches and role playing and shows. These are best for verbal or linguistic intelligence types.
- Draw on puzzles and games especially problem solving ones as they are helpful for logically intelligent ones. These activities include strategy games, teasers, and logic games setting the ground in a way that students can ask questions and figure things out.
- Use maps, charts, and illustrations. Drawing, painting and designing, creating 3-D objects, taking them apart and putting them together again (based on oral or written instructions), and using clips, cartoons, and movies are more appealing



for spatially intelligent learners.

- Include role playing, pantomime, and team works which involve (bodily-kinaesthetic) movement in language learning tasks.
- Melodies, songs, rhythms, and choirs are very helpful in motivating musically intelligent language learners at different age ranges. Asking them to write songs and lyrics is a good way to empower both their musical intelligence and writing ability.
- Use communicative approaches for teaching. Interpersonal intelligence is a category which can benefit greatly from communicative approaches to language teaching. They can lead groups and help others in group activities, negotiations and collaborations.
- Draw on personal projects such as independent journal or composition writings and consider silence periods for accomplishing individual projects during the class time as good ways to tackle the high self-esteem of intrapersonal intelligence types.
- Include as much information as possible about natural world, space, animals, and plants. Talking and writing about pets, zoos, natural preserves, and science museums; collecting leaves with their names in English; and creating observation books and sharing their experiences and/or interests about zoos, natural places, science museums, wildlife, gardens, and space (by using binoculars and telescopes) through speaking or writing are attractive activities for naturally intelligent language learners.
- Set the ground for critical thinking and a philosophy-oriented approach towards some topics as life and death to encourage certain learners' curiosity and satisfy their philosophical awareness at an age-appropriate level. Encourage

their questioning and do not get bored or impatient with them (existential intelligence).

### Learning styles can be defined as ways or preferences of an individual approaching a range of tasks or students' methods and theories of learning

The theory of MI has been criticized by scholars in both fields of psychology and education. The first and foremost is the reliance of research on a very broad definition of intelligence and the nine different intelligence categories offered by Gardner. In other words, it is not clearly explained whether these nine categories are fixed and stable or are changeable and can develop over time. All human beings have these nine categories at different levels or degrees of aptitude and not all learning accomplishments and successes can be related inclusively to one's most powerful or dominant intelligence. Another criticism is that MI concept lacks enough empirical support and the literature is filled with correlation studies. In other words, the real operationalization of these nine categories in real classroom contexts in experimental studies are not explored and evaluated enough in education in general, and in foreign language teaching in particular (Furnham, 2009; Klein, 1993; Waterhouse, 2006).

Despite all these, the theory of MI is an attractive and widely-quoted concept among teachers, researchers, and even parents. The fact is that providing language learners with different ways for accessing input and demonstrating skills, abilities, and knowledge improves their engagement and learning and provides

teachers a better understanding of learners' needs, points of strengths, and areas for growth (Tomlinson, 2014).

### Dealing with different learning and personality styles in a FL classroom

Learning styles can be defined as ways or preferences of an individual approaching a range of tasks or students' methods and theories of learning (Brown, 2000; Gardner, Kornhaber, & Chen, 2017). This makes styles different from multiple intelligences which are intellectual abilities. The difference between multiple intelligences and learning styles can be captured by the example that a person with high levels of aptitude in linguistic or verbal intelligence may prefer demonstrations, pictures, lectures, written modes, movies, songs, and many innumerable other ways or styles. In other words, when individuals have a deep understanding of a particular skill or knowledge, they may benefit from many different styles, approaches, and ways of thinking about, analysing, evaluating, and developing it. A careful review of related literature reveals an absence of clear criteria for defining learning styles, lack of evidence on their nature as either stable/fixed entities or incremental/developmental constructs, lack of relevant criteria for their recognition and assessment, contradictory results, and absence of a scientific basis (see Gardner et al., 2017; Kirchner, 2017). However, what is important is the fact that all different types of the so-called learning styles can be attended in a classroom setting to better engage and motivate learners. Here are some tips for a language classroom.

- Diversify the designs, organizations, and ways of presenting and delivering

new materials (i.e., input). Lectures and explanations as the most common teaching styles are not favoured by all learners (Franzoni & Assar, 2009). Many students get bored and lose attention during long explanations and lectures. Accompanying outlines, pictures, demonstrations, maps, charts, clips, and figures may be more appealing to different groups of learners.

- Include both holistic and detailed types of activities and exercises to tackle top-down and bottom-up styles. Close passages, puzzles, games, and maps where the whole details are provided are examples of holistic activities, while providing step-by-step instructions or finding specific details in a text or image are examples of detailed field-independent activities.

- In comprehension texts (i.e., reading and listening), include both local and global items. Local items are related to scanning for specific content or details while global items relate to searching and choosing main ideas, gist, titles, and messages.

- Auditory, visual and kinaesthetic learning styles are different sensory modalities for receiving and producing input. Overemphasizing lectures, eliciting only oral answers for the asked questions, and requiring students to stay still all through the class time are teaching styles which are not congruent with the diverse learning styles of different learners.



- Include activities that need the immediate impulsion and intuition of the learners (such as speed games and tests, free writings, free chats and discussions without any preparations, on-the-spot teasers, brainstorming, and wild guesses) and those which require reflection and thinking (such as power tests, reflective or prepared writing and speaking, prepared lectures, written or delayed responses, pair and group collaborations before presenting the response, and silence periods during the class time for reflecting and remembering).

- Involve both brain hemispheres in language classroom activities. In addition to using intellectual activities which include memorizing and remembering names, verbal instructions and explanations, and logical and planned activities, use intuitive activities which involve demonstrated, illustrated or symbolic instructions, image and number remembrance, object drawing and manipulation, self-expressions, and free expression of feelings.

- Use analytic tasks, for instance, those that require examining all details in a reading text (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, and content) and draw on synthesizing tasks which involve scrambling sentences and putting sentences and paragraphs together or in the right order to make a paragraph or a text.

- Include a variety of test items such as multiple choice and open-ended, oral, written pictorial, and demonstrative (performance) ones in your tests.

### Dealing with different proficiency levels in a FL classroom

A very common challenge in many FL classes (especially state schools) is to address different proficiency levels in one classroom context. This is quite

common due to students' access to different language institutes and self-study applications, books, and language teaching/learning websites and pages on the Net and social networks. Using a one-size-fits-all approach may have the risk of overwhelming the higher-level students, frightening and pressurizing the lower-level ones, and ignoring the middle group (in case of attending too much to either of the extremes) (Brown & Lee, 2015). As in state schools mostly there is no choice for the teacher to place homogeneous students in the same class, they need to follow certain strategies to deal with this challenge. Here are some tips:

- As language consists different skills, components, learning and communication strategies, and knowledge facets; it is possible that the so-called lower-level students have certain points of strengths in one of these aspects. Identify each student's point of strength and encourage them to develop and broaden it.

- Assign individual tasks to different individuals or group activities based on similar points of strengths that you have identified in some students. A very disappointing strategy is to divide them into groups and give the teacher assistant role to the higher-level students requesting them to work with lower-level ones. Each member of a group must have equal responsibilities and there must be a shift in the roles. In addition, as was mentioned above, it is possible to have homo- as well as heterogeneous groups in order to minimize the disadvantages and take the most out of the group work.

- Draw on the benefits of study skills and learning strategies. Even the lowest level learners can learn to look words up in a dictionary, take notes, or help in preparing a classroom wallpaper and drawing a map

of new vocabulary.

- Do not set the criteria of evaluation on being talkative (i.e., only on speaking ability), reading aloud without making pronunciation mistakes, or over-performing the final oral or written tests. A portfolio of all skills, knowledge facets, competencies, strategies, and attempts can be helpful for the final evaluation.

- Never assign your students weak/strong, good/bad, or high/low labels. Remember that the lower level of some students may be due to their not having access to or affording high quality language institutes and new technologies and this may be their only choice of learning a foreign language. In addition, it should be accepted that not all individuals have equal aptitudes for learning a foreign language and language course is just a subject matter like other courses for many of them. Study skills, learning strategies, and the use of different modalities (i.e., movies, pictures, classroom wallpapers, maps, and graphs) are the best choices for this group of students especially if they themselves are involved in preparing them.

Learning styles can be defined as ways or preferences of an individual approaching a range of tasks or students' methods

## Conclusion

Learning a foreign language is a very complex skill which can be approached with many different theories, methods, and strategies by learners who differ in their language learning aptitudes; levels of multiple intelligences; learning styles; and proficiency, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds. The first step in dealing with all of these diversities is to recognize them, and then to have teaching styles

match these individual differences. It is also important to avoid labelling students as one type or another. Rather, all individuals can be provided with certain activities and tasks tuned for their specific needs. Providing language learners with different ways for accessing input and demonstrating their skills, abilities, and knowledge through different modalities improves their engagement and learning and helps teachers gain a better understanding of learners' needs, points of strengths, and areas for growth and development.

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