

Why are young learners' individual differences important?

What this overview was about and why it is important

This overview focuses on young foreign language (FL) learners' individual attributes shown to impact their FL achievement and language learning behaviour. It offers insights into the complex nature of young learners' (YL) individual characteristics, how they interact with one another and with contextual factors, and how they should be researched. Since some individual differences (IDs) are addressed in other chapters in the book, the focus of this chapter are the following IDs: attitudes and motivation, FL learning strategies and FL learning anxiety.

Which studies the researchers chose and why

The author focuses on studies of early FL learning in different contexts. Based on the existing insights which suggest a multifaceted and dynamic nature of IDs and their impact on learning, studies of YLs of different FLs (Albanian, Czech, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Spanish) are analysed taking into account the socio-educational context of FL learning and teaching as well as interactions between IDs themselves.

What the researcher found

- In the early stages of FL learning YLs tend to adopt attitudes of their significant others (e.g., parents, siblings, friends, the teacher). After some first-hand experience in learning and using the FL, they form their own attitudes (mostly shaped by classroom processes).
- YLs' initial attitudes have an effect on future attitudes to FL learning, their FL learning self-concept and cultural outlook.
- Motivational orientations of YLs are generally of intrinsic nature in the early stages and are related to the teaching behaviour of their FL teacher, classroom experience, status of the FL in the curriculum (optional vs. compulsory), and the YLs' biological age.
- Impact of the teacher and of classroom experiences are a long-lasting factor although its strength slowly decreases with the YLs' age.
- YLs' perceived competence as well as autonomy in FL learning play a key role in raising intrinsic motivation.
- Perceived competence of YLs can be enhanced through creating a predictable learning environment, instructional support, moderately challenging tasks and feedback-for-learning.
- Perceived autonomy of young FL learners can be enhanced through offering them freedom to choose content, methods and outcomes of learning the FL and training in FL learning strategies.
- The impact of the FL status and out-of-class exposure on YLs' motivation increases with length of learning.
- Compared to English, teachers of other FLs generally have a more difficult job raising and maintaining motivation of YLs.
- Contrary to popular belief, FL learning anxiety can be experienced by YLs too.
- Anxiety interacts with other IDs, particularly aptitude, motivation, risk-taking, willingness to communicate, linguistic self-confidence and learning strategies.
- Causes of FL anxiety in YLs can include fear of making errors, comprehension problems, assessment practices, perception of difficulty of the FL being learned, changes in classroom patterns and various other aspects of classroom processes.
- Both the FL teacher and peers are reported as strong sources of language anxiety.
- Bilingual YLs tend to experience lower FL anxiety than monolingual YLs.
- Use of FL learning strategies increases with YLs' cognitive development. Besides strategies common among all age groups, YLs use some age-specific strategies such as repetition, mouthing, or those implying physical interaction with the meaning (TPR strategies).
- There is considerable variability in types and frequency of strategies used by YLs.
- Use of strategies are connected with YLs' achievement in a non-linear way.
- Strategy use is impacted by both the immediate learning context and the broader socio-educational setting.
- YLs can be trained in using FL learning strategies.
- Strategy use by YLs interacts with attributions of success and failure.

Things to consider

- The relationship of FL motivation and achievement is complex: differences in findings may be related to the nature and type of achievement measures.
- A more comprehensive insight emerges with increasing the number of variables taken into consideration (e.g. learners' FL learning experience).
- More research is needed to be sure which attitudinal and motivational aspects are shared by YLs of different FLs and which are language-specific.
- There is a need to investigate effects of teacher communication styles (e.g., immediacy and power strategies) and YLs' perception of these styles because emerging evidence suggests that they may cause variability in YLs' anxiety levels.
- Research is needed into YLs' strategy use focusing on each language skill.
- Trainability of different strategies is one of the key aspects to be focused on in future research with YLs.
- In order to fully understand YLs' strategies more comprehensive research is needed that would include all the variables found to impact strategies.

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