

# THE RELEVANCE OF DIFFERENTIATING LANGUAGE LEARNERS – A LEARNER PROFILE

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## Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to throw some light into individual differences learners bring to the learning context - not just their differences which are apparent, such as age, language proficiency, but differences that make a group a community of individuals, each with their own behaviour, preferences, interests and ways of working - and the active role they play. We often view a class as a “fairly homogenous group” (Scrivener, 2005:62), particularly when we have large groups to work with. However, individual differences need to be appreciated and accounted for when it comes to planning for learning.

This study case registers, following the feedback of several interviews to students, how influenced students may be by their surroundings when studying a foreign language and how personal motivations and external factors can work for both the teacher and the learner. This qualitative research approach allows the interviewer to guide with general topic areas providing the interviewee with freedom in how they respond. This paper thus explores the relevance of motivations, interests, good and bad experiences of language learning perceived learning needs and opinion of certain learning activities. The findings and suggested implications for the Language Teacher are then explored reminding us that “As a teacher, I cannot learn for my students. Only they can do that. What I can do is help create the conditions in which they might be able to learn.” (2005:18)

Keywords: Learning, teaching, learner, differences, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

## 1 INTRODUCTION

We live in an age when difference is part of who we are, who we want to be and what surrounds us. So should be teaching and learning – an individual process as part of a group to gain and develop knowledge and skills which “involves treating each learner as an individual, not just as a member of a class.” [1]

This paper alerts practitioners to the relevance of the individuality of our learners and their specific abilities. It shows how influenced students may be by their surroundings when studying a foreign language and how personal motivations and external factors can work for both the teacher and the learner. Through a qualitative research approach interviews were conducted with general topic areas providing the interviewees with freedom in how they respond. This paper thus explores the relevance of motivations, interests, good and bad experiences of language learning perceived learning needs and opinion of certain learning activities through a study case. Finally the findings and suggested implications for the Language Teacher are also explored in an attempt to highlight the importance of perceiving learners’ individual skills.

A lot of us with the dual role of teachers and researchers (not forgetting that the former implies probably a dozen other roles) are most of the time concerned with the correlation between theory and practice in education. This is, I should say, a very noble concern if one does not forget an essential element in all of it – the student. As committed practitioners we must bear in mind that what we do and how we do it will influence the lives of the ones sitting in front of us, day after day. After all, “it is what the learner does, not what the teacher does, that creates learning.” [1]

As we will see in the next sections of this paper, “the ideas that lie behind the notion that we as individual learners have preferred approaches to our learning are based upon research which identifies humans as more or less receptive to different stimuli.” [2] As seen through the elaboration of a learner profile (LP), our understanding of how learning proceeds is also based on one’s different multiple intelligences (MI). This MI theory, developed in the eighties by Howard Gardner, has been a great help to educators and researchers permitting a larger scope of action when dealing with the individual as a receptor of knowledge. As such, and because nowadays it is almost impossible to

picture a class as a unity without taking into account students' MI, trying to define a learner's profile has become relevant to determine students' success and achievements. Each tool in MI is "meant to enhance knowledge and skills across a broad range of students." [3] However, "the multiplicity of intelligences and their utility in the real world is a two-edged sword for schools." [3] If on one hand teachers are trained to pay attention to the individual and his abilities, on the other hand we are faced with numerous barriers such as curricula, time, number of students per class, department planning, and the list would go on. It is therefore important to strike a balance between what the student should be learning and his most relevant intelligences: if we are lucky, and the learner responds well, his understanding is likely to expand therefore allowing him to enhance his abilities and skills.

This paper will show how helpful it is for learners "if they are aware of their own particular learning preferences in order that they can use a particular learning style to suit the particular learning that is being undertaken, and take opportunities to improve their potential for learning when faced with a learning activity that might steer them towards one of their weaker styles." [2]

## 2 METHODOLOGY

In order to collect data for this study an interview was previously constructed and applied on forty different subject to certify its validity and reliability. The decision to conduct a semi-structured interview was based on the greater flexibility that would allow both the interviewer and the interviewee greater. Aiming at qualitative research we thought that the outcome would thus be more positive. The interview took place at home, in an informal and familiar environment so that the process could be as genuine as possible. Our learner, who had previously questioned us on what he was going to be asked, chose English as the language to answer the questions.

When outlining the interview our main concern was to be very clear having in mind that its purpose was to get to know the learner and explore his learning experiences and style, aptitude, motivation and cultural background.

This interview was audio taped.

## 3 THE LEARNER

Our learner, 'Pedro', is a twenty-five-year old trainee lawyer. He completed his degree two years ago and has since been working in an office preparing himself for the bar exam. When asked about the role English had in his life he described it as "determinant and essential". From the start 'Pedro' made it clear that English is not only "a vital tool" for his job, but also something that has made him broaden his horizons and get a better insight into the world that surrounds him. He has recently attended a Japanese course and describes his learning of English as a never-ending process: "reading a lot keeps me in contact with the language."

According to Harmer [4] we will describe this learner as an English Speaker as Other Language (ESOL) student due to the use he makes of English.

### 3.1 Language learning experiences

'Pedro' was not able to describe the exact moment his learning process began. Interesting enough he told us precisely when he had first attended English lessons – at the age of nine, before his 5<sup>th</sup> grade (official age to learn a second language in Portugal in 1991). Without any special guidance this learner did not associate the learning process to the classroom; he thought that he had started learning English before going to school. It seems relevant to mention that in Portugal both television and cinema are never dubbed which means that people have a regular contact with the English spoken language. Subtitles are always used when English-speaking programmes are on and when the well-known series *Friends* was dubbed it was rejected by the Portuguese audience. Having said this, many Portuguese children have their first contact with foreign languages long before they attend primary school.

Our learner attended regular Portuguese state schools where he studied English for seven years as a second language. Being forced to take History and Philosophy in his last year of studies instead of English he decided to sit for the final English exam which was aimed at language students. This decision is linked to the relevance our learner gives to the learning of foreign languages as part of his personal development. Our learner's experience at language schools as extra curricular activities are also worth mentioning: 'Pedro' started attending classes at a language school when he was nine and kept on until the age of seventeen. At thirteen he took his First Certificate Exam and at twenty-two, when he decided to go back again, he took his Certificate of Proficiency Exam and got an A.

Throughout the interview 'Pedro' kept comparing both learning systems and the way he felt/feels motivated towards the learning of the language.

### **3.2 Motivation and aptitude**

Listening to 'Pedro' immediately makes us think how important motivation is when we want learners to achieve success in our teaching. "The strength of their motivation will be a factor in determining how seriously they approach the work" [5], we cannot but have this in mind when we listen attentively to the way 'Pedro' describes his attitude towards the language.

A key factor we learn from him was the way he first approached the language. On his own, when he started watching cartoons/movies and could not make sense of what they were saying, he ran to his mother to ask for help. His next step would be to use what he was learning to play with his Lego so that he would not forget the words. He tells us that it worked "as a reenactment of the movies".

Startled by what he said, we wondered how influenced he had been in language learning by his environment at home as we had in mind that "some children come from homes where education is highly valued, and where parental help is readily available." [4] This is, undoubtedly, a factor which is of major relevance. As teachers we are aware that our learners' social and family background is, most of the time, a key factor to the way they respond to teaching/learning. We are told that the fact that his mother is an English teacher has always helped him because he was free to ask and was more aware of the language. However, he immediately adds that his mother never paid more attention to English than she did to other subjects.

Nevertheless, we must be sensitive to this kind of background and understand that this learner has indeed benefited from it.

The bedrock of motivation for Pedro, we decide, is very difficult to define and indeed we must come back to it in one of the next sections (see Styles and Preferences). Nonetheless, it would be relevant to point out that we would be able to mention both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation as far as this learner is concerned.

As Spada clearly points out, "positive motivation is associated with a willingness to keep learning" [6] and 'Pedro' proves that when he tells us "I like learning languages, not only English, and I like to understand what more and more people are saying". His willingness to know more is like an engine that never stops thus taking him further in his trip.

### **3.3 Personality**

Our learner is apparently a determined, audacious young man. He is not afraid of making mistakes and seems to enjoy a good challenge. The way he talks about some of his teachers confirms that he values intelligence and creativity and that he enjoys being stimulated. He complains that some times he found the classes less challenging than he would have wanted, but somehow most teachers managed to sustain his interest by letting him help others whose language abilities were not so good.

As teachers we know that it is always a complicated task to deal with different learners in a class – the level of challenge we choose to select must suit their needs and when we work with mixed classes (which happens all the time in Portugal) that can become very difficult for the teacher. This learner was, most of the time, motivated by his teachers and he was also given some autonomy which allowed him to evolve and mature as a learner.

'Pedro' works well with other people. He's not a very extroverted person, however he easily fits in a group. He likes to help his peers.

He is a learner who values affective teaching and throughout the interview he mentioned that good rapport between the teacher and the class had been important for effectiveness. He refers to his first English teacher as the most important one as he particularly liked her approach.

### **3.4 Learning preferences and styles**

"The essential engine of a richer, more productive learning environment is communication, two-way feedback from learners to teachers and vice versa." (Scrivener, 2005)

This learner's MI test (cxc1hgy1qmj92229w) [7] has proven to be an interesting tool when exploring his learning preferences – he scored well in the linguistic area and seems to be well balanced in the senses people use mainly in learning. He is word smart which explains why he describes his learning of several languages (English, French, German, Latin and Japanese) as a process he feels engaged in. He is both an interpersonal and intrapersonal learner which does not come as a surprise. 'Pedro' easily fits in a group although he constantly goes back to himself in the search for knowledge; all the way through this interview reading is the activity he always goes back to. He could be considered as the rebel learner according to Tony Wright, the communicative according to Willing quoted by Harmer [8] and the word player according to Gardner's intelligences.

'Pedro' mentions several times that he preferred his lessons at the language school to the ones he had at the state school. He clearly points out that he felt stimulated by an environment where everybody spoke only English and where he could further his knowledge. This is the way 'Pedro' describes his weekly state school lessons: "The teacher would just throw information (at you) and you would have to learn it. There was less communication". Somehow the verb "throw" indicates frustration and sounds unfortunately familiar when we think about a few of our own lessons.

Our learner also indicated that he likes dynamic classes rather than classes which are dominated by the teacher – activities such as role-plays, group work and tasks which are less teacher-centred are described as the activities he most enjoyed.

As teachers we find extremely strenuous to respond effectively to every single type of student we have in a class. Either having students who show many problems in the language or others who are good at it, we find ourselves sometimes in a trap that leads us to planning for the whole forgetting the student as an individual. 'Pedro' stated that having classes with mixed ability students was not in itself a problem. What he found difficult to cope with was the lack of specific tasks to attend students' special needs.

Moreover, he made clear that for him the interaction between students and teachers was the key to achieve success and to motivate him as a learner; he added "encouraging very strict and demanding team work using only English will increase the regularity of English use" – that, along with reading, is for our learner the best way to learn the language.

After all, "a learner with high aptitude may learn with greater ease and speed." [6]

## 4 LEARNING OUTCOME

"Different cultures value different learning behaviours" (Harmer, 2001)

Different languages will motivate different learners; Different resources will motivate wider responses; Different tasks will generate unexpected outcomes; Teachers who differentiate will motivate learners; Difference will motivate learning.

We are now more aware that difference and motivation are crucial in the learning and teaching process. Valuing diversity in the classroom allows students more practice and, hopefully, will provide them with a larger scope of activities which will please more individuals.

Considering our learners' social background and family environment along with other key factors such as age, motivation and language aptitude should be essential when planning our lessons and evaluating our teaching process. They, as we so well understood from Pedro's answers, know better than anyone else how to evaluate teachers and appreciate our efforts when planning and teaching towards their specific interests and goals. Still, one should bear in mind that "learning styles are not fixed traits which an individual will always display. Learners are able to adopt different styles in different contexts." [5]

As teachers we must not forget to see learners as individuals with special needs and aims. Nonetheless, all learners need to feel motivated. Paying attention to our students' objectives and attitudes will help us in our teaching practice and will provide us with the vital tools to achieve effective learning. Teaching can never be looked at without the focus on the learner.

'Pedro' keeps learning the language and is nowadays a motivated self-learner. I do agree that "it is highly likely to be of great value if both teachers and pupils can have awareness of the potential problems that differences in learning style and preference may lead to." [5]

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