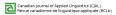Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics (CJAL)
Revue canadienne de linguistique appliquée (RCLA)

Griffiths, C. & Soruç, A. (2020) Individual differences in language learning: A complex systems theory perspective. Palgrave Macmillan

Kelsey Ulrich-Verslycken

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Ulrich-Verslycken, K. (2024). Compte rendu de [Griffiths, C. & Soruç, A. (2020) Individual differences in language learning: A complex systems theory perspective. Palgrave Macmillan]. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics / Revue canadienne de linguistique appliquée*, *27*(1), 151–152. https://doi.org/10.37213/cjal.2024.33311

Griffiths, C. & Soruç, A. (2020) *Individual differences in language learning: A complex systems theory perspective.* Palgrave Macmillan.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-52900-0

Reviewer: Kelsey Ulrich-Verslycken, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Individual Differences in Language Learning: A Complex Systems Theory Perspective presents a wholly contemporary analysis of individual differences (IDs) in second language acquisition (SLA). Griffiths and Soruç approach this topic through a novel lens, positing that IDs in SLA are not isolated phenomena but complex interwoven processes. This argument is developed throughout, scrutinizing IDs through a complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) perspective and hypothesizing that IDs are interrelated such that a change in one will likely spur change in others. The text situates itself firmly in modern discourse on IDs as a multifactorial component of SLA, providing timely insights on trends in second language (L2) research with appropriate considerations for educators and learners.

Two conceptual chapters bookend eleven central chapters that each profile a different ID. Chapter 1 gives an overview of foundational research, parameters for the book, the theoretical perspectives that drive the work, and short synopses of the coming chapters. The authors briefly introduce the CDST perspective of IDs, noting that the text will focus on one ID at a time to mitigate the potential chaos that comes with research in complexity theory, and then outline the eleven profiled IDs.

Chapter 2 examines age as a variable by juxtaposing young, adolescent, and adult L2 learners. The authors note that perceptions of age have shifted over time, with early research often concluding that youth is advantageous for L2 development and more recent research suggesting that since age interacts with varied affective factors, conclusions should seek to contextualize the impact of age on language learning. Chapter 3 explores sex and gender, delineating that while sex is a biological construct, gender is a cultural construct. The authors therefore discuss that the effects of encultured gender on L2 development should not be ignored. The authors contend that the research shows little difference in language learning abilities between the sexes and conclude that gender should be considered as one factor that may interact with other IDs. Chapter 4 focuses on four overlapping, non-malleable IDs: race/ethnicity/nationality/culture. This chapter approaches the IDs through research into culture shock in a foreign country and how it affects communication in the target language, finding that proficiency plays an integral role in understanding how well a learner may assimilate into the target culture.

Chapter 5 considers aptitude, examining learners' capacity for L2 development through profiles of exceptional language learners' IDs and practices, finding overlapping patterns of age, working memory, motivation, time on task, and sociocultural interaction. Chapter 6 explores personality, questioning whether there is a direct correlation between personality and language proficiency. In this chapter, the authors report that motivation, willingness to communicate, and ego were more prominent factors in SLA than personality itself. Likewise, chapter 7 defines learning style as learners' habits and preferences for information processing and suggests that while styles are typically considered stable, learners can be taught to style stretch. Furthermore, this chapter presents evidence that those students who can style stretch tend to score better. Chapter 8 examines learning strategies, considering the role of consciousness and type in strategies and presents

evidence on successful strategy usage. The authors conclude that strategies seem to be teachable but should not be isolated from other IDs in analysis.

Chapter 9 considers autonomy, or a learners' ability to take charge of their own learning. This chapter discusses that while autonomy seems to correlate with successful language learning, it is inseparable from a variety of individual and socio-ecological contexts. Beliefs are explored in chapter 10. This chapter opens with a division of beliefs into five categories (aptitude, language learning difficulties, the nature of language learning, strategies, and motivation), which foreshadows the chapter's conclusion that beliefs should not be considered in isolation from other IDs. Chapter 11 examines affect (feelings or emotions), split into the subcategories of anxiety, attitudes, attribution, empathy, inhibition, and self-concept. The chapter argues that while affect may not be the only factor determining L2 development, it is an ID where the teacher has some influence by creating a particular classroom atmosphere. The penultimate chapter analyzes motivation, which has long been considered a dynamic process that constantly changes in response to factors such as the socio-ecological context, intrinsic and extrinsic variance, goals, perceptions of self, volition, and personal investments of time and energy. Finally, chapter 13 reaffirms the core argument of the book, stressing that IDs are complex and dynamically intertwined processes and that none should be considered as a singularly determinant affective factor in SLA.

The book is well-organized, clear, and perfectly appropriate for its target audience of undergraduate and postgraduate students, practicing teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. As a body of work, it reads effortlessly yet theoretically sound, blending pertinent research with implications for how teachers might recognize and accommodate these IDs in the classroom. The authors do an admirable job of building on the interconnectivity of themes throughout the work, assessing each ID individually while simultaneously scaffolding the central argument of the book until the terminal chapter explicitly divulges a holistic view of IDs.

The work arguably achieves its objective of identifying the complexity and dynamicity of the eleven profiled IDs. However, where the reader may feel satisfaction in the theoretical soundness of the work, the conclusion shies away from making direct suggestions that teachers can implement to better accommodate such holism in the classroom. Instead, it relies on reiterating dynamicity and preaching flexibility. Furthermore, each central chapter presents one or more studies directly investigating the target ID, but many of these studies were conducted in similar socio-ecological contexts. Given that socio-ecological context was expressed as a key feature in the analysis of IDs, it appeared odd that the book would limit its contextual scope in this regard.

Conclusively, this book is an approachable text that seamlessly blends theoretical and practical considerations. It is highly recommended as an instructional text for teachers, a comprehensive collection for researchers, and a thought-provoking introduction to the complexity and dynamicity of IDs in SLA for students.