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Scrutinizing Learner Variability in English Language Teaching Classes

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Abstract

Learners are at the centre of concentric rings of the pedagogical spheres. They are not only individuals but also vital members of the communities they come from. In the meta-modern world, mixed communities in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, educational background, and language have been common. This context leads to a heterogeneous group of learners in the classrooms, including English language teaching (ELT) classes. Thus, learner variability is a common currency of the research arena. This article explores the determinants of learner variability that have resulted in diversity in ELT classes. Employing a document analysis method, the contents from the available documents have been critically analyzed to infer the variables of the phenomenon in question. The findings demonstrate the intricacy of biological, psychological, physiological, and social variables that have enforced the facilitators to adapt multi-pronged pedagogical approaches. These variables explored in ELT classes exhibit age, aptitude, motivation, personality, style, affect, and strategy from the prism of learner variability. These findings imply that educators should be aware of learner variability for fostering a congenial and equitable atmosphere for all learners in ELT classes.

***Keywords**:* Affect, age, aptitude, motivation, personality, strategy, style

Introduction

Learner variability is a common currency within the pedagogical world. This phenomenon, thus, is researchable to underpin the causative variables in ELT classes specifically. The main feature of such classes is diversity. For Wahedi (2020), contemporary language classrooms are characterized more by heterogeneity than homogeneity, which contributes to the redesign of instructional materials, the adoption of paradigm shifts in teaching methods, and a holistic educational landscape in ELT. Furthermore, "In today's globalized and digitally-driven world, ELT should move beyond 'traditional ELT' […] towards 'transcultural ELT' recognizing English as a Multilingua Franca (MLF) that interacts with multilingual, multimodal, and multicultural resources in line with translanguaging" (Lo, 2025, p. 1). The debut of metamodernism, thus, is evidence of paradigm shifts in the domain of ELT, which necessitate a drastic change in the teacher educator's traditional mindset.

Given such paradigm shifts, the teachers in the classes do not remain merely the knowledge transmitters. As Neupane (2020) concedes, teachers should be ready to adopt multifaceted roles—as facilitators, counsellors, role models, prompters, administrators, and change agents—to address the learner needs. The role of institutions, policymakers, and families is equally significant.

In practice, homogeneity in classroom composition is rare. Most educational settings present a complex mosaic of learner differences shaped by variables such as age, gender, educational background, cultural context, learning styles, cognitive capacities, motivational orientations, and strategic learning behaviors (Richards & Rodgers, 2003; Gass & Selinker, 2009; Gass et al., 2013; Harmer, 2008a, 2008b). These differences influence how learners engage with instructional content and pedagogical practices, demanding that educators implement adaptive and differentiated approaches.

This article aims to explore learner variability in the prism in the frameworks of seven perspectives of the learners' age, motivational factors, aptitude and intellectual ability, affective variables, learner's style, personality, and strategy.

Methodology

Since this study aims to shed light on the factors influencing learner variability in English language teaching classes, it follows the document analysis method (DAM) as a part of the qualitative research approach. DAM analyses available documents within the domain selected (Bell, 1999, as cited in Al-Jardani, 2012, & Krippendorff, 2013). Based on this very view, this study has selected the domain of learner variability in the documents such as Harmer (2008a & 2008b), Gass et al. (2013), Gass and Selinker (2009), Saville-Troike (2010), Ellis (1992 & 1995), and Brown (1994). These secondary sources were selected using a convenient sampling procedure. The deliberations and discussions are based on the psychological and physiological variables such as age, aptitude, motivation, style, personality, affect, and learning strategy.

Results and Discussion

Remaining within the set framework of the seven variables, this section reviews, synthesizes, analyses, and interprets the issues raised in the domain of learner variability.

Age Differences

Age is a pivotal biological determinant influencing pedagogical decisions. According to Harmer (2008a), learners are categorized by distinct developmental stages, each with specific cognitive and affective characteristics: very young learners (2–5 years) rely primarily on sensory input and struggle with abstract reasoning; young learners (5–9 years) display heightened curiosity and benefit from personalized encouragement; children (up to 14 years) respond to communicative meaning more than linguistic form but require support due to limited attention spans; adolescents (12–17 years) undergo rapid physical and emotional transitions, seeking identity and peer acceptance; young adults (16–20 years) demonstrate a developing capacity for abstract and analytical thinking; and adults (17+) bring intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and experiential knowledge to the learning context.

These age-specific features call for designing specific instruction fit for the learners. For instance, Children often require scaffolding within the zone of proximal development (Neupane, 2010), engaging in concrete and experiential activities to sustain motivation and comprehension. Adolescents, navigating a period of physiological and emotional volatility, gravitate toward self-expression, abstract reasoning, and peer recognition (Harmer, 2008a). Adults bring structured learning

goals and prior experiences to the educational setting, which may positively or negatively influence new learning. Pedagogical approaches must therefore be calibrated to age-specific traits, with younger learners favouring play-based methods and adults benefiting from analytical and discussion-oriented instruction.

The general assumption regarding the age influence in SLA is that children are better learners than adults are. It means younger learners can get mastery over SL, but older ones cannot. This is reflected in the *Critical Period Hypothesis* (CPH) that assumes, "There is a limited developmental period during which it is possible to acquire a language, be it L1 or L2, to normal, native-like levels. Once this window of opportunity is passed, however, the ability to learn language declines" (Birdsong, 1999, as cited in Gass et al., 2013, p. 434). This implies that there is a certain critical period (puberty) before which learners are flexible enough to acquire language. Then, their capability of capturing the new information in the form of linguistic data decreases gradually. Thus, it is a common belief that the younger is better.' The term, however, for Long (1990) is "Sensitive Period" (Gass et al., 2013, p. 435).

The pioneer of CPH is Lenneberg (1967), who claimed, "Automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seems to disappear [after puberty], and foreign languages have to be taught and learnt through a conscious and laboured effort. Foreign accents cannot be overcome easily after puberty" (as cited in Gass et al., 2013, p. 435). To put this differently, the automatic acquisition is possible only up to the age of puberty (about 13/14 years). After this age, the learners have to resort to formal/classroom instruction. Yet, native-like control is impossible. Lenneberg has assumed so based on the evidence of Genie, who was deprived of language input and interaction until the age of 13 years and who could not get mastery over language despite the instruction she received after that age (Ellis, 1992; & Saville-Troike, 2010). The cause for this is assumed to be the late starter in learning a language (mainly NL).

Even for SL, this cut-off period applies that late starters generally have a foreign accent. However, not all researchers agree on the cut-off period. For example, Seliger (1978) and Long (1990) believe in "multiple periods" (Saville-Troike, 2010). At this conjecture, Gass et al. (2013) have conceded, "The Sensitive Period Hypothesis predicts sensitivity but not absolute drop-off; such that a learning decline might be gradual" (p. 435). Thus, learners are more sensitive for a certain period/s, after which this sensitivity reduces gradually. This sensitivity does work like switching the light on or off. They have also shown from the review of studies that adults are better than children in criterion scores initially, but children outperformed later. In this connection, Moyer (1999) has conceded, "Late learners may face neurological or motor skill constraints, such as entrenched articulatory habits or restricted perceptual targets for phonetic categories, that render the possibility of native-like attainment highly unlikely or impossible" (as cited in Gass et al. 2013, p. 436). Thus, it is generally agreed among researchers that SL phonology cannot be native-like in adult learners. Even for syntax, adult SL learners cannot achieve mastery, unlike children. This is evident from the studies of Patkowski (1980), Johnson and Newport (1989), Slavoff and Johnson (1995), and Johnson and Newport (1991) (Gass et al., 2013). These studies show that the CPH claim is applicable in SL phonology and syntax.

However, some researchers like Bailystok (1987), Bailystok and Hakuta (1994), Coppieters (1987), and Birdsong (1992) found against the CPH claim (Gass et al., 2013). For them, age is not a determining factor for success or failure in SLA. Further, there is evidence of Polish-born English novelist Joseph Conrad, who started learning English at the age of 18 but has become one of the great signatures of English novelists (Patkowsky, 1980, as cited in Gass et al., 2013). Yet, the compromising view is this, "Younger learners are probably more successful in informal and naturalistic L2 learning contexts, and older learners in formal instruction settings" (Saville-Troike, 2010, p. 84). This shows

that younger learners can be exposed to non-analytic, simplified and natural input. Hence, they become successful in SLA. Nevertheless, adult learners receive analytical, real-world formal knowledge and therefore can be more successful.

Regarding the age difference and SLA, like CPH, Long (1990), in his sensitive Period Hypothesis (SPH), has drawn these inferences: (a) Both the initial rate of acquisition and the ultimate level of attainment depend in part on the age at which learning begins, (b) There are sensitive periods governing language development, first or second, during which the acquisition of different linguistic abilities is successful and after which it is irregular and incomplete, (c) The age-related loss in ability is cumulative (not a catastrophic one-time event), affecting first one linguistic domain and then another, and is not limited to phonology, (d) The deterioration in some individuals begins as early as age 6, not at puberty as is often claimed (as cited in Gass et al., 2013, p. 440).

The SPH, thus, supports the role of age in SLA but in a different way: There is not a single sensitive period but multiple periods; these periods are marginal lines before and after which learning rate varies; the loss of plasticity is gradual, not casual; and the loss begins at an earlier age than claimed in the CPH. Age is, thus, a crucial factor. Again, why adults cannot achieve native-like control is another issue, which can be addressed in termed of: socio-psychological reasons, cognitive factors, neurological changes, exposure to better input, loss of (access to) the language learning faculty, use it then lose it, a maladaptive gain of processing capacity and learning inhibits learning (Gass et al., 2013, p. 441). Still, another view is presented by Marinova-Todd et al., who claim that CPH (also SPH) is flawed and have argued that CPH claims are fallacies of misinterpretation, misattribution, and misemphasis (Gass et al., 2013). Therefore, age alone cannot be a determining variable for learner differences.

Aptitude and Intellectual Ability

Learners exhibit a spectrum of aptitudes that influence their capacity to acquire language, with some demonstrating greater proficiency than others. Aptitude test outcomes serve as indicators for predicting learners' potential progression in language learning. Skehan (1998) observes that exceptional learners often possess extraordinary memory capabilities, especially for auditory input (p. 234). Furthermore, intellectual ability contributes significantly to successful learning outcomes; Lightbown and Spada (2006) affirm that individuals across diverse cognitive profiles are capable of effective language acquisition (p. 185). Given this variability, educators must formulate inclusive instructional strategies that foster engagement across a broad range of learner aptitudes by cultivating motivating and accessible learning environments.

Aptitude, which is one of the significant variables to cause learner variability, refers to the learner's potential for learning new knowledge or skills. In the language learning domain, aptitude for learning one's first language, at least not for children without cognitive deficits" (Gass & Selinker, 2009, p. 417). Thus, aptitude applies only to SLA but not to NLA because, for the latter, every normal human child is predisposed to the blueprint of NL subconsciously. For NLA, potentiality is not discussed. However, for SLA, the learner is judged in terms of his/her aptitude for the TL acquisition.

Aptitude, as a psychological factor to cause learner differences, comprises these four components (Carroll, 1965): (a) phonic coding ability, (b) inductive language learning ability, (c) grammatical sensitivity, and (d) memory and learning (as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2009, p. 148, & Saville-Troike, 2010, p. 85). The first component refers to the ability of the learner to distinguish what are and what are not the phonemes of the TL s/he is acquiring. For example, Nepali learners of English should discriminate individual English sounds like /p,b,t,d,k,f,v/ and recall them when they are required. This ability, for Skehan (1998), "is concerned with the extent to which the input which

impinges on the learner can become input that is worth processing, as opposed to input which may simply be an auditory blur or only partially processed" (as cited in Saville-Troike, 2010, p. 85). It implies that the learner's phonic coding ability is the capacity to process, store, and retrieve what they hear about SLA. Oppositely, if the learner is incapable of encoding and decoding the auditory input, s/he is said to lack the phonic coding ability. When the learner possesses this ability, the auditory input can be converted into intake.

The second and third components of aptitude are associated with "central processing" (Saville-Troike, 2010, p. 85). Of these two, the former is the capacity to induce or generalize or formulate rules; whereas the latter is the ability to identify the grammatical functions of the constituents (i.e. words in sentences). Combining these two, the learner can restructure or reorganize the elements so as to ensure his/her generalizations. The fourth component is related to the processes of storing and retrieving his/her generalizations in the form of output. In this way, aptitude works in three phases of information processing, like input, central processing and output.

Based on these four components of aptitude, the learners vary. Not all learners may have equal aptitude for all these components because they are independent of each other. For example, a learner may have a high level of phonic coding ability but very low grammatical sensitivity. Oppositely, "textual enhancement, especially interactive highlighting, may be a useful pedagogical strategy for L2 learners with limited vocabulary and phonological memory" (Jung et al., 2025, p. 1). Furthermore, a learner with poor inductive language learning ability may exhibit high grammatical sensitivity. Therefore, aptitude is one of the causes of learner differences both in naturalistic and instructed SLA (Saville-Troike, 2010). Further, they influence L2 proficiency, and may be the presence of one or more abilities. To put it in Gass and Selinker's (2009) words," These four (or three) abilities seem to be reasonable predictors of second language learning success in that a person who is excellent in one or more of these abilities would seem to be at an advantage in learning a second language" (p.418). Therefore, aptitude is one of the precursors of L2 proficiency and a determinant of learner variability.

Current researchers (like Dornyei, 2005, as cited in Gass & Selinker) have situated aptitude vis-à-vis motivation.

Motivation

Many researchers agree that motivation is one of the crucial determinants for differential success in SLA. Motivation is a social-psychological factor because it appeals to an individual's cognition as well as social settings. Generally, "Motivation appears to be the second strongest predictor of success, trailing only attitude" (Skehan, 1989, as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2009, p. 426). However, there is less agreement about the construct of motivation and its types.

In general, motivation is an internal drive which forces somebody to operationalize some actions in a particular situation. In psychology, motivation has a rich literature. Nevertheless, in the domain of SLA research, it is related to Gardner, Lambert, and their colleagues. Gardner's (1960) research has been instrumental in establishing motivation as a field of SLA research, and later on, Gardner and Lambert (1972) have defined motivation in terms of the learner's orientation that leads to proficiency and achievement (as cited in Ellis, 1992). Thus, Gardner is a primary researcher to investigate motivation in SLA.

Later on, Gardner (1985) expanded his definition in these words, "Motivation involves four aspects, a goal, effortful behaviour, a desire to attain the goal, and favourable attitudes toward the activity in acquisition" (as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2009, p.426). Thus, motivation comprises four components: goal, effort, desire, and attitude. Firstly, the learner should set the goal to achieve. To

obtain the goal, s/he should perform some tasks in an effortful manner. Only having a goal and effortful performances are not enough; the learner should have an internal drive to achieve the goal, and s/he should have a positive attitude towards the goal. The integration of these four components prepares learners for goal orientation in general. However, for Oxford and Ehrman (1993) and Dornyei (2001), the components of motivation include (a) significant goal or need, (b) desire to attain the goal, (c) the perception that learning L2 is relevant to fulfilling the goal of meeting the need, (d) belief in the likely success or failure of learning L2, (e) value of potential outcomes/rewards.

These points add to Gardner's (1985) goal and desire by perception, belief and value. These additions replace effort and behaviour. However, both sets are more or less the same and converge in the assumption that motivation is associated with other socio-psychological factors.

There are three components in the model of motivation proposed by Dornyei and Otto (1998): practical, actional, and post-actional (as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2009, p. 429). In this model, pre-actional is the motivation-generating stage, which leads to the selection of a goal; actional is the execution stage in which the action is continued towards achieving the goal; and post-actional is the stage of retrospection in which the agent reflects on how s/he executed the action and how it prepared ground for the prospective actions in the future. Further, Dornyei (2006) has conceded motivation as a "dynamic construct" (as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2009, p.428) in such a way that motivation changes over time.

It is noteworthy to make a mention of Narayanan, Nair, and Lyyappan (2008), who have presented distinctive traits of motivated learners like positive task orientation, ego involvement, need for achievement, high aspiration, goal orientation, perseverance, and tolerance of ambiguity (p.486). All these features show the positive orientation of the learners towards achieving the set goal.

The SL researchers have given different typologies of motivation. For Gardner and Lambert (1959), there are two types of motivation, such as instrumental and integrative; and for Brown (1981), there are three types of motivation, like global, situational, and task (as cited in Ellis, 1992, p. 117). Likewise, Harmer (2008a & 2008b) has distinguished two broad types: extrinsic and intrinsic. Of them, Harmer is more effective. Extrinsic motivation is the type that learners associate the classroom environment with the outside environment, whereas intrinsic motivation is the type which is related to affective factors. Of these two, extrinsic motivation is divided into integrative and instrumental types. Integrative motivation refers to the learner's desire to learn a language to "associate with the people who use it or because of an intention to participate or integrate into the L2 using speech community; in any case, emotional or affective factors are dominant" (Saville-Troike, 2010, p.86). On the contrary, instrumental motivation refers to the desire to learn a language for fulfilling utilitarian goals such as "increasing occupational or business opportunities, enhancing prestige and power, [….] or just passing a course" (Saville-Troike, 2010, p. 86). Hence, integrative motivation is for long-run goals, whereas instrumental is for achieving immediate goals. Ultimately, Skehan (1989) has added resultative motivation to relate one's desire to success or failure in the action performed.

Motivation taxonomy shows that learners have different types of motivation. Accordingly, learner variability is caused. Motivation and L2 proficiency are closely associated in such a way that high motivation results in a high level of L2 proficiency and low motivation results in low L2 proficiency. Thus, motivation is directly proportional to L2 proficiency.

Cognitive Style

Several studies have proved the role of age, aptitude, and motivation in the learners' differential success. However, cognitive style (one of the learning styles, being others affective and physiological) has yet to prove its role for the same. Yet, some speculations about its role can be made.

Cognitive style, for Saville-Troike (2010), "refers to an individual's preferred way of processing, i.e. of perceiving, conceptualizing, organizing, and recalling information" (p.87). Cognitive style, thus, means the way the learners prefer to learn new knowledge. It is a term frequently used in general psychology, although it is relevant in the language learning phenomenon. Cognitive style is associated with other variables like personality, learning strategies, age and aptitude.

Cognitive styles appear in a pair of opposite features. However, they are not in absolutely antonymous forms but relative terms and are presented in a cline, such as (a) field-dependent (FD)-field-independent (FI), (b) global-particular, (c) holistic-analytic, (d) deductive-inductive, (e) focus on meaning-focus on form (Savill-Troike, 2010, p. 87). Out of these five pairs, the first one is more prominent and was introduced by Witkin, Lewis, Hertzman, Machover, Meissner, and Wapner (1954) in a study of how individual perceptual differences relate to general cognitive processes and was only later applied to language learning (Saville-Troike, 2010, p. 87). Thus, FD learners seem global and holistic, whereas FI ones are particular and analytic. To put it differently, FD learners perceive the field as fused, whereas FI ones are inner/self-directed. FD learners are "socially sensitive" whereas FI ones are "not so socially aware" (Ellis, 1992, p.115). Thus, FD learners are more objective (experience based on the field as a whole), whereas FI ones are more subjective and imaginative. At this conjecture, Saville-Troike (2010) has conceded, "FD learners are thought to achieve more success in L2 acquisition via highly contextualized interactive communicative experiences […] and FI learners to profit more from decontextualized analytic approaches and formal instruction" (pp. 87-88). Therefore, FD learners fit in naturalistic settings, whereas FI learners fit in instructed/tutored/classroom/formal settings.

Another dichotomy of the cognitive style is induction or deduction. Inductive processing (bottom-up) involves the formulation of generalizations by observing input, whereas deductive processing (top-down) involves interpreting input in terms of pre-established generalizations or predictions, or assumptions. Inductive style is related to "linguistic-analytic ability" and thus "contributes to success in L2 learning in either naturalistic or instructed circumstances" (Saville-Troike, 2010, p. 88).

The success rate of the learners varies even in terms of styles, like focus on the meaning or focus on form. In this regard, Nova, Fein, and Obler (1988) have found that learners who focus on form may perform better (as cited in Saville-Troike, 2010).

Beyond these five dichotomies, cognitive style is found to be related to other psychological factors like age, sex, aptitude, personality and learning strategies. For example, children, females, people-oriented jobs, group-centred people and holistic perceivers are FD learners, whereas adults/adolescents, males, object-oriented jobs, individualistic people and linguistic-analytic perceivers are FI learners (Ellis, 1995, p. 501). The cognitive style also caters for sensory perceptions like visual, auditory, kinesthetic or tactile. However, they are age-related factors as younger learners prefer "Kinesthetic and tactile modalities" (Reid, 1987, as cited in Saville-Troike, 2010, p. 89).

Based on learning styles, the educators should design the instruction. This claim is evidenced in a study of Ethiopia:

i. Secondary school EFL teachers should consider the students' learning style differences and practice them in the classroom.
ii. English language departments should assure that teachers' instructional plans, teaching methods, and selection of teaching aids address students' learning style differences in general and learning style modalities in particular.

iii. Schools should give change-making training and awareness to minimize mismatching between EFL teachers' way of teaching and students' learning style preferences.
iv. Education offices should support the schools' awareness-creating activities and provide all the important manpower and materials. (Yotta, 2023, p. 7)

However, cognitive styles lack adequate empirical evidence to justify. Thus, they have been criticized for not showing their associations with other significant psychological and social factors which cause interlanguage variability.

Personality

Personality is regarded as an important variable that causes differences in learners. It is a stable/static trait of an individual. Thus, personality is a distinctive trait of an individual learner. It is sometimes added with cognitive style to form a learning style. Personality traits, like cognitive styles, appear in dichotomies but in a cline. Rather than absolute dichotomies, personality traits are best interpreted as continua, as illustrated by Saville-Troike (2010), who presents key trait spectrums: anxious–self-confident, risk-avoiding–risk-taking, shy–adventuresome, introverted–extroverted, inner-directed–other-directed, reflective–impulsive, imaginative–uninquisitive, creative–uncreative, empathetic–insensitive, and tolerant of ambiguity–closure-oriented (p. 89). These dichotomies exhibit that personality trait more or less revolves around anxiety factor, which for Ellis (1995), are of three types such as trait, state, and situational; The trait anxiety is 'a more permanent predisposition to be anxious"; the state anxiety is "apprehension that is experienced at a particular moment in time as a response to a definite situation; and the situational anxiety is "aroused by a specific type of situation or event such as public speaking, examinations, or class participation" (pp. 479-480).

Of these types, situational anxiety is much discussed in SLA research. Anxiety is at high or low levels. High-level anxiety correlates with a low level of L2 proficiency, whereas low-level anxiety correlates with a high level of L2 proficiency (Saville-Troike, 2010). Low-level anxiety anticipates self-confidence, risk-taking and adventuresome behaviour in the learners. Saville-Troike (2010) has suggested taking into consideration for interpreting research on anxiety: (a) The direction of cause and effect is uncertain; (b) Instructional context or task influences anxiety level and reporting; (c) Although personality factors are defined as individual traits, systematic cultural differences are found between groups of learners: (d) Low anxiety and high self-confidence increase student motivation to learn (p.90). These points imply that anxiety is directly associated with self-confidence and motivation. As a result of low-level anxiety, learners show readiness to learn L2, and in turn, their L2 proficiency can be high.

The next pair of introversion and extroversion is related to inner-directed and other-directed as well as reflective and impulsive traits. Extroverts are sociable, friendly, outgoing, independent, energetic, responsible and painstaking, whereas introverts show the opposite traits. On this ground, "Some SLA researchers have hypothesized that extroverts would be more successful language learners, but there is no clear support" (Saville-Troike, 2010, p. 90). This implies that extroverts can be speculated to be better L2 learners, but empirical studies failed to support it. This context calls for further exploration of this phenomenon. Unlike these traits, there are few shreds of evidence on the role of traits like being imaginative, creative, empathetic, and tolerant of ambiguity (Saville-Troike, 2010). Despite this, one can speculate on their positive correlation with more L2 success.

Beyond these dichotomies, risk-taking and risk-avoiding are also influential in SLA. Generally, risk-takers are in a more advantageous state than risk-avoiders (Gass & Selinker, 2009). To sum up, personality is one of the determinants of learner differences, although it is closely related to learning strategies.

Learning Strategies

In layman's terms, strategies are the actions undertaken to accomplish some tasks. Accordingly, learning strategies are the actions undertaken to learn language/s. Learning strategies (LSs) are "the behaviours and techniques they adopt in their efforts to learn a second language" (Saville-Troike, 2010, p. 91). Those behaviours and techniques are the choices of the learners. In this regard, Cohen (1998) has defined LSs as 'those processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language […]" (as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2010, p. 439). For Cohen, thus LSs are learner's selected processes for SL/FL learning. Likewise, Oxford (1999) has observed LSs as "specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques that students use to improve their progress in developing skills in a second or foreign language" (as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2009, p. 439). Thus, LSs are any procedures or ways involved in learning SL or FL, to lubricate the learning wheels. They are actions (physical or mainly mental) which are undertaken by the learners to obtain new knowledge in the target language. For example, Nepali learners of English can use a transfer or translation strategy to memorize abstract English terms like love, hate, sympathy, antipathy, pity, pathos, and so on. This way, LSs are goal-oriented and based on the learners' desires.

Out of different LSs, not all are equally effective and implementational. Thus, the learners' selection of LSs depends on age, sex, aptitude, motivation, cognitive style, personality, the context of use and learning opportunities (Saville-Troike, 2010). Mainly, LSs are either linguistic/non-linguistic, physical/mental, general/specific, and they cause learner variability. The distinctive traits of LSs are noteworthy (Ellis, 1995):

i. Strategies refer to both general approaches and specific actions or techniques used to learn an L2.
ii. Strategies are problem-oriented – the learner displays a strategy to overcome some particular learning problem.
iii. Learners are generally aware of the strategies they use and can identify what they consist of if they are asked to pay attention to what they are doing/thinking.
iv. Strategies involve linguistic behaviour (such as requesting the name of an object) and non-linguistic behaviour (such as pointing at an object to be told its name).
v. Some strategies are behavioural, while others are mental. Thus, some strategies are directly observable, while others are not.
vi. In the main, strategies are directed at specific lexical items or grammatical rules.
vii. Strategy use varies considerably as a result of both the kind of task the learner is engaged in and individual learner preferences. (pp. 532-3)

These features exhibit that LSs can be behavioural, mental, linguistic, non-linguistic, general, or specific; LSs contribute to learning directly or indirectly, and the use of LSs depends on the learner's tasks and preferences. These features also show that LSs and their classifications are fuzzy.

The most widely used taxonomy of LSs is O' Malley and Chamot's (1987) framework, which consists of three broad types: metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective (Ellis, 1995, & Saville-Troike, 2010). This typology is based on the IP model of learning developed by Anderson (1980 & 1985) (Ellis, 1995). For them, cognitive strategies refer to "the steps or operations used in problem-solving that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials"; metacognitive strategies "make use of knowledge about cognitive processes and constitute an attempt to regulate language learning employing planning, monitoring, and evaluating"; and social/affective strategies"

concern how learners elect to interact with other learners and native speakers" (as cited in Ellis, pp. 537-538).

The choice of LS_s depends on other social, psychological, and physiological factors. For example, "Children tend to use more repetition whereas adults use more synthesis, "as females tend to use relatively more social/affective strategies than males" (Saville-Troike, 2010, p. 92). The study of LS_s is beneficial to distinguish good learners from bad ones. The former chooses the right strategies, whereas the latter chooses the wrong ones. For Ellis (1995), good learner traits include: concern for language form, concern for communication (functional practice), active task approach, awareness of the learning process, capacity to use strategies flexibly following task requirements (Ellis, 1995, p. 546). These comments on learner traits are not beyond criticism. For example, proficient learners may do tasks actively and be aware of the learning process. Thus, LSs should be seen along with other variables for exploring differential success in language learning.

Affect

Affect, which is a psychological variable, is "a feeling or emotion as distinguished from cognition, thought, or action" (American Heritage Dictionary, as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2009, p.398). To put it differently, affect refers to feelings and emotions one has about some entities or objects. In the language learning domain, it is the feeling or emotion towards the language the learner is acquiring. To put it in Gass et al.'s (2013) words, affect in SLA refers to the feeling of learners about the language, the people who use it, and the culture in which the TL is used. Thus, three elements come across this context, such as language, culture and people. How the learners feel about these three components is important to explore in SLA, such as language shock, culture shock, anxiety, and affective filter.

Language shock, as a psychological affective variable, is caused by the domination of the TL community. It is the apprehension of SL learners to be a comical character in the TL groups. For Ellis (1992), language shock is the learner's experience of doubt and possible confusion, which, in turn, causes frustration and harassment in L2 use. For Gass and Selinker (2009), language shock is "the realization that, as a learner, you must seem comical to the speakers of the TL" (p. 398). For example, the Nepali language spoken by native speakers of other languages like Gurung, Magar, Maithili, Hindi, and the like may be comical to the Nepali native speakers. As a result, those L2 speakers may have stress, anxiety, and shock. In case of such language shock, NNSs may be disoriented from the TL; they may develop a negative feeling towards the TL, and language learning is affected.

Learning a language is to acculturate in the TL community. If the learner is disoriented from the TL culture, learning is severely hampered. This context is termed culture shock. A usual example of culture shock can be the context in which a newly married couple go to a restaurant on their honeymoon and talks very little. Therefore, culture shock develops learners' apprehension, tension, fear or disorientation, and in such a context, they may avoid learning TL. This concept is closely associated with Schumann's (1978) acculturation model, which reads, "Second language acquisition is just one aspect of acculturation and the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language" (as cited in Ellis, 1992, p. 251). Thus, for creating a favourable environment for SLA to take place, culture shock is undesirable and so avoidable.

Anxiety is a feeling of uneasiness, fear, doubt or worry. In SLA, it refers to the uncertainties the learner may feel about the language learning process. In this connection, Scovel (1978) has seen anxiety as "a state of apprehension, a vague fear" (as cited in Brown, 1994, p. 141). Anxiety may have "curvilinear effect on performance: Low levels help, whereas high levels hurt" (Gass & Selinker, 2009,

p. 400). It means anxiety is necessary to some extent to achieve success in SLA, although being too anxious is counterproductive.

Anxiety has been classified by many in different ways. For Ellis (1994), anxiety can be a trait, state, or situation. The first refers to a permanent feature; the second to temporary fear caused in a definite context; and the third to the type which is caused in a typical situation or event. Likewise, Dornyei (2005) has distinguished between beneficial/facilitating with inhibitory, debilitating anxiety and trait with state anxiety (as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2009). The former is related to positive/negative dichotomy, whereas the latter is related to individual trait/contextual. Whatever the type may be, the sources of anxiety can be genetics, personal history, learned helplessness, adaptation of first communication skills, and acquired modalities of communication (Daly, 1991, as cited in Narayanan, 2008, p. 490). Anxiety, as an affective variable, causes positive/negative feelings in learners, and SLA is affected.

The affective filter is a Krashen's (1985) concept in the affective filter hypothesis. It is assumed to be made up of affective variables like motivation, attitude, self-confidence, and anxiety (Gass & Selinker, 2009). It is speculated that if the filter is high (strong), it blocks input from reaching the LAD; oppositely, if the filter is low (weak), input enters the LAD easily. The second condition is suitable for a better SLA. Therefore, for a better SLA to take place, the filter needs to be lower.

Conclusion and Implications

Learners are at the centre of all the pedagogical processes. They are not only the members of the classes but also an integral part of communities. Only the territories of the classes and the school premises do not suffice to understand them. To meet this end, the educators should come out to the communities the learners belong to and design instructional materials accordingly.

Learners can be observed from multiple perspectives. This study explores seven prismatic perspectives of learner variability, such as age, aptitude, motivation, cognitive style, personality, strategy, and affect. The chronological age is a crucial factor. To envisage this variable, two views are shaped by the scholars. The first is the critical period hypothesis, which posits the belief that the sooner is the better. Criticizing this assumption, the sensitive period hypothesis advocates for multiple periods that sensitizes learners to learn. However, the age is supplemented by other variables to determine the diversity of the learners.

The second is the perspective of aptitude, which refers to the learner's potential for learning new knowledge or skills. Aptitude applies to second language acquisition because every normal human child is predisposed to the blueprint of the native language subconsciously. Paired with aptitude, motivation situates learners in a cline of high and low preparedness for learning. Motivation is directly proportional to the learner's achievements.

Further, learners' styles, personalities, and strategies contribute to learner variability. Metaphorically, style is an adjective, whereas strategy is a verb. The former is static, whereas the latter is dynamic, adapted to achieve the set goal. Personality is a parameter to situate the learners in a cline of dichotomies like anxious–self-confident, risk-avoiding–risk-taking, introverted–extroverted, among others. Cognitive style is associated with other variables like personality, learning strategies, age and aptitude. Finally, affect refers to the feelings and emotions the learners have about the language they are learning.

Based on the above delineated lenses, learner variability can be better understood for designing appropriate instructional materials and adapting methodologies eclectically. This can foster an equitable learning environment in the ELT classes.

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