

## INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES: AN ASSET FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

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### Abstract

*The paper presents the individual differences of the learners in the learning and teaching process. The purpose of this paper is to explore how individual learners learn the language with differences. It is a theoretical article which explores learning styles and strategies the second language learners use while learning the language. The available relevant literature has been reviewed, analyzed and linked with life for learning. The paper concludes that student diversity is a natural phenomenon in student learning. Instead of taking it as problematic, it can be viewed as a valuable resource for promoting effective learning and teaching. It is expected that the relevant stakeholders should respect diversity to bring multiple knowledge, experiences and creativity in teaching and learning process.*

**Key words:** *Diversity Multiple Perspectives Input and Intake Maximized Learning Better Output*

### Introduction

English language learners are similar and at the same time different. They are different in terms of many aspects, for example, rate of learning, age, language proficiency level, socioeconomic factor, family education, and ability to learn a language (Tomlinson, 2001). The rate of learning among the students varies according to their ability to learn and their learning styles and strategies. Some are fast learners, some are slow, and others are average. It is really challenging for language teachers to deal with this context (Dhami, 2015). The general concept in practice around the world is that a teacher goes to a class with a single lesson plan and delivers the lessons. The teacher, however, often times forgets to reflect and evaluate if the lesson presented was appropriate for every student. The activity, task or language lesson may not be appropriate for everybody in the class because students have different ways of learning. They have their own learning strategies, and, importantly, what Gardner (1983) calls Multiple Intelligences (MIs).

In most situations, a language teacher cannot teach with a single lesson plan. The teacher would find it

beneficial to prepare a modified version of the lesson plan for mixed-ability students without letting them know. The teacher would have to develop different activities and tasks to suit different groups of students for more effective language learning (Dhami, 2015). The aim of education is to enable each student to attain all-round development according to his/her own attributes. To achieve this, students should be provided with knowledge, suitable assistance and guidance in accordance with their abilities and learning needs, so that they can develop their potential to the full. Each student is a unique individual, different in cognitive and affective development, social maturity, ability, motivation, aspiration, learning styles, needs, interests and potential (Hedge, 2010).

Apart from this, there are other factors underlying student differences. These include innate differences in intelligence, differences in social and economic background, variations in the past learning experiences, and perhaps variations in the level of congruence between the learner and the curriculum. In view of these factors, catering for individual differences is intended neither to narrow the gap between individuals nor to even out their abilities of

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and performance. It should aim for understanding why students are able or unable to learn well and finding appropriate ways to help them learn better (Pandey, 2016).

### **Purpose of the study**

Every learner is unique. It is considered that the learners do not use the same strategies, styles and techniques in the learning process. There are different types of learners. For instance; visual learners enjoy learning through seeing. Auditory learners, on the other hand, enjoy learning through listening. Musical learners learn through music. Kinesthetic learners learn through movement. Taking these views in consideration, the purpose of the study is to explore learning differences of an individual learner in the second language learning process.

### **Research Question**

To accomplish the study, the following research questions were constructed.

- a) What is individual difference in learning?
- b) How does individual difference contribute to learning?
- c) Why is individual difference important in teaching and learning?

### **Methods of the study**

This study is based on qualitative method. An intensive in-depth information and insight has been reviewed. The techniques that are used in this study are document review and reviewing theoretical knowledge. Relevant literature has been reviewed to make the study conceptually and theoretically reliable and authentic. The study is based on secondary sources. The researcher has googled and visited the website in order to obtain information related to the themes of the study. Data are presented from books and articles. The writer has presented his own personal and professional knowledge and experiences to explore individual differences in learning.

Perspectives on individual differences

Review of literature develops perspectives on individual differences in learning. It helps the learners to analyze, compare and link the text. It sharpens the theoretical and conceptual framework of the readers and learners. Books, articles, and theoretical ideas are reviewed, analyzed and linked to explore individual differences in learning. In this regard, Hedge (2010) mentions that every student is an individual. They are different. They have different learning experiences and prior knowledge, cultures, aptitude, learning behaviours, multiple intelligences, motivation, age, gender, and interest. There is growing concern of these individual differences, mainly aptitude, learning styles, and learning strategies and the affective factors of personality and motivation (Ellis, 1994).

### ***Aptitude and interest***

Aptitude is a certain level of knowledge and skill, acquired or learnt, or ability or competence to perform some work. A learner may have a special propensity to learn the particular item. For instance, a learner wants to take English as a major subject. He or she wants to be good at English. It means he or she has developed an aptitude towards English. It is acquired or natural ability (Oxford, 1999). Aptitude is expressed in interest and is reflected in current performance which is expected to improve over time with training.

### ***Learning styles and strategies***

Lightbown and Spada (2006) argue that the term learning style has been used to describe an individual's natural, habitual and preferred way of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills. Oxford (1999) argues that specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques that the learners use to improve skills in second language are defined as learning strategies. Similarly, Ellis (1994) defines learning strategy as a strategy consisted of mental or behavioural activity related to some specific stage in the overall process of language acquisition or language use.

Thus, learning styles are constituted of different learning strategies or behaviours. The styles are the specific features of the learners that can be made up

various behaviours or tasks. For example, risk taking can be the learning style of a learner. For this style, he or she can be involved in the tasks such as L2 interaction, oral tasks, language games, and language exercises with remarkable possibilities of L2 errors as their risk. Mainly, there are four types of learning styles: visual learners, auditory learners, tactile/kinesthetic learners, and concrete learners. They are briefly described here (Lightbown&Spada).

**Visual learners:** Visual learners learn through seeing. These learners need to see the teacher's body language and facial expression to fully understand the content of a lesson. They tend to prefer sitting in front of the classroom to avoid visual obstructions. They may think in pictures and learn best from visual displays such as diagrams, videos, flipcharts and hand-outs.

**Auditory learners:** Auditory learners learn through listening. They learn best through verbal lectures, discussions, talking things through and listening to what others have to say. Auditory learners interpret the underlying meanings of speech through listening to tone of voice, pitch, speed and other nuances. Written information may have little meaning until it is heard. These learners often benefit from reading text aloud and using a tape-recorder (Gardner, 2010).

**Tactile/Kinesthetic learners:** Tactile/kinesthetic learners learn through moving, doing and touching. They learn best through a hands-on approach, actively exploring the physical world around them. For this type of learning, movement is a must.

**Concrete learners:** Concrete learners process information based on what they see, hear, think, feel and taste. Such learners are empirical in nature. Such learners are good at deriving a new knowledge on a particular subject.

### **Affective factors and motivation**

Affective factors consist of emotion, feeling, motivation, self-esteem, anxiety, anger, frustration and love. These factors are briefly described here.

**Exposure:** The amount of exposure to the new language in different contexts is the major factor that affects language learning. The amount of time the

students spend hearing and speaking English is important in learning English in Nepal. The learners are exposed to listening to the radio, watching television, and reading newspapers. Therefore, English teachers must think of as many ways as they can for their students to speak English in the classrooms and to their classmates. The teacher should consider about teacher talking time and student talking time. Student talking time should be focused on every classroom so that students start speaking more.

**Knowledge outside the classroom:** Children are individuals. Their capacities to learn and the ways they learn are different, even at a young age. Some students find learning vocabulary easier than others. Similarly, their learning styles are also different. Their age, gender, goals, interests, needs, abilities, prior knowledge and family background are different. The possibility of learning from outside classroom is also different. Their experiences at home and in other places can have greater influence on their learning.

**Attitude:** A positive attitude towards anyone or anything that has to do with learning, can have a positive effect in second language acquisition. Attitude includes the way a student feels about the teacher, classmates, classroom, school, and even learning materials. For example, if there is positive attitude towards the English community, the students learn better.

**Age and language learning:** It is generally agreed that young learners learn the language faster than the adult learners. Young children learn new language better than adults. It is agreed that young learners learn better if they get opportunity to use the language more in the classroom. In the same way, if the students do not get adequate exposure in English in the classroom, there will be no chance of learning English better.

**Levels of Anxiety:** Feelings of anxiety are obviously uncomfortable and our students in the process of second language acquisition can feel anxiety due to diverse factors, such as immigration situation, social music. It is based on the recognition of tonal patterns,

pressure to academically perform, school tests or assignments.

**Self-esteem:** Self-esteem is the self-confidence level and self-respect a person has and it can influence learning. Confidence originates from competence. Learning is a must to develop confidence. For instance, the learner develops self-confidence through exposure. When a learner is confident, he or she develops the sense of self-respect.

**Motivation:** Motivation is a driving force in learning. It makes the learner do something. It involves, encourages and inspires the language learners. The mood, effort and efficiency of the learner maximizes through motivation. It is used to indicate the direction of behavior. While learning a second language, some learners do better than others because they are better motivated (Pandey, 2008). It is generally agreed that a hope of success is better motivation than fear of failure. Thus, motivation is regarded as something which initiates, energizes, compels and prompts an individual to act or behave in a particular way for attaining particular goals. Motivation can be intrinsic which comes from within and extrinsic which comes from outside forces. Motivation can also be integrative and instrumental. Ellis (1985) confirms that there can be little doubt that motivation is a powerful factor in SLA. Oxford and Shearin (1994) too, reinforce the view that motivation is one of the main determining factors in success in developing a second or foreign language. However, the nature of the relationship between motivation and successful language learning is less clear.

Ellis (1985) further asserts that we do not know whether it is motivation that produces successful learning, or successful learning that enhances motivation. The large body of work on strategies suggests a link between motivation, use of strategies and learning success. Oxford and Crookall (1989) found in the previously mentioned survey that in contrast to unmotivated students, highly motivated ones made frequent use of a range of strategies and that students who felt they were good language

learners used more strategies than those who viewed themselves as less successful learners.

Tomlinson (1995) asserts that among instructional strategies that can help teachers manage differentiation and help students find a good learning fit are stated here: Use of multiple texts and supplementary materials, Use of computer programs, Internet centers, Learning contracts, Compacting, Tiered sense-making activities and tiered products, Tasks and products designed with a multiple intelligence orientation, Independent learning contracts, Complex instruction, Group investigation, Product criteria negotiated jointly by student and teacher, Graduated task and products rubrics.

#### **Multiple intelligences**

Multiple intelligences is a theory created by Howard Gardner (2010) who asserts that every person excels at a different type of learning. He says that there are multiple types of human intelligence each representing different ways of processing information. In the same vein, Freeman (2010) asserts that teachers who recognize the multiple intelligences of their students acknowledge that students bring with them specific and unique strengths, which are often not taken into account in classroom situations. According to Gardner, Multiple intelligences include the following:

**Linguistic intelligence:** Linguistic intelligence includes the ability to use written or spoken forms of language.

**Logical/mathematical intelligence:** Logical/mathematical intelligence involves the ability to think and analyze problems logically and carry out mathematical problems.

**Visual/spatial intelligence:** Visual/spatial intelligence relies on the sense of sight and being able to visualize an object. It includes the ability to create internal mental images and pictures.

**Bodily kinesthetic intelligence:** Bodily kinesthetic intelligence is the ability to use body or body parts for solving problems. It is related to physical movement.

**Musical intelligence:** Musical intelligence is the potential of composing or singing songs or playing

including sounds, rhyme, rhythm, beats and intonation.

**Interpersonal intelligence:** Interpersonal intelligence is related to understand others' intentions, motivations and desires. It is maintained through person to person relationship and communication.

**Intrapersonal intelligence:** Intrapersonal intelligence involves the capacity to understand oneself. It is related to inner state of being, self-reflection, meta-cognition and awareness of spiritual realities.

**Naturalist intelligence:** Naturalist intelligence enables human beings to recognize, categorize, and draw upon certain features of the environment.

**Spiritual intelligence:** Spiritual intelligence is related to truth and value. It helps learners to be truthful in learning. It respects diversified values of different cultures.

**Existential intelligence:** Existential intelligence concerns with ultimate issues. It deals with the existence of all the creatures on the earth.

**Moral intelligence:** Moral intelligence concerns with the rules, behaviours and attitudes that govern the human life. Through rules making system, one knows what is right or what is wrong. It develops a good decision making skill.

### **Insights**

From the available review of literature, it is explored that every individual is endowed with these various intelligences but teachers need to identify which intelligences are dominant in which learners first, and then design proper teaching learning activities. The activities are different for different intelligences. If the teaching strategies of teacher and learning strategies of students are compatible, better learning takes place there. When there is better learning, there will be more achievement. For instance, a class contains different students with different abilities and multiple intelligences. A teacher cannot address all of his or her students' needs and interests if he or she applies only one instructional plan in teaching. This challenge demands selection of multiple methodologies along with varied activities and tasks. Therefore, it should

be the teachers' responsibility to analyze the classroom needs and develop teaching methods and techniques for diverse students who may not learn in the same way. For instance, some students are auditory, some are visual and some others are kinesthetic. Learners have different intelligences. There are different activities that language teachers can develop on the basis of multiple intelligences for their children. It is found that in diversity, learners from different ethnic and racial groups come to live together where each member gets an opportunity to learn new things and enhance their knowledge. Diversity provides learners with opportunities to learn about multiple cultures, lifestyles and languages. It also promotes social and cultural harmony. It improves the way people think and promotes their thinking. It promotes learners to scrutinize facts, think more deeply and develop their own opinions.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, student diversity is a natural phenomenon in student learning. It is an asset for learning and teaching since every individual receives knowledge from each other. Instead of taking it as problematic, it is viewed as a valuable resource for promoting effective learning and teaching. There is only one unequivocal law of human behavior the law of individual differences. People are more different than they are alike, and there is probably no environment that elicits individual differences sooner in life than formal education. Therefore, culturally and linguistically diverse society is an asset. Diversity provides learners with opportunities to learn about multiple cultures and languages. It is important to have strong sense of cultural sensitivity to ensure harmony among diverse communities. It is agreed that all students can learn. The important thing is that everyone should respect the diversity in the process of learning. To address the needs of students, teachers should provide them with a variety of learning opportunities for effective learning, such as using diversified resources rather than focusing only on textbooks, and making use of a spectrum of

intelligences and multi-sensory experiences to tap the different potential of students. Schools can adopt different modes of assessment to find out the strengths and weaknesses of students before deciding on the appropriate curriculum, and learning and teaching strategies for them.

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