INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN EFL GROUPS

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INTRODUCTION

The topicality of the research: The main law that manage the human behavior is the "INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES". People are really different may be more than they look like, and we could see that there is no way to be closer to that phenomenon sooner in life than formal education, Individual differences in academically related characteristics can cause failure or success. In peoples' lives most important pursuits; obtaining an education. According to Corno et al. (2002), each individual "has worked out over many years how to respond in her own way to symbol systems and social cues. Each has aptitude for the current situation.

The term 'Individual differences' is defined as "anything that marks a person as a distinct and unique human being". All scientific definitions of IDs assume the relevance of stability: Differential psychology emphasizes individual variation from person to person only to the extent that those individualizing features exhibit continuity over time Yet, even with this limitation the individual can be different in extensive ways, due to the innumerable interactions between heredity and environment that occur throughout one's life span.

AGE DIFFERENCES AMONG LEARNERS

The age of our students is a major factor in our decisions about how and what to teach. People of different ages have different needs, competences and cognitive skills; we might expect children of primary age to acquire much of a foreign language through play, for example, whereas for adults we can reasonable expect a greater use of abstract thought.

One of the most common beliefs about age and language learning is that young children learn faster and more effectively than any other age group. Most people can think of examples which appear to bear this out – as when children move to a new country and appear to pick up a new language with remarkable ease. However, as we shall see, this is not always true of children in that situation, and the story of child language facility may be something of a myth.

It is certainly true that children who learn new language early have a facility with the pronunciation which is sometimes denied older learners. Lynne Cameron suggests that children 'reproduce the accent of their teachers with deadly accuracy'.

Apart from pronunciation ability, however, it appears that older children (that is children from about the age of 12) 'seem to be far better learners than younger ones in most aspects of acquisition, pronunciation excluded'. Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada, reviewing the literature on the subject, point to the various studies showing that older children and adolescents make more progress than younger learners.

The relative superiority of older children as language learners (especially in formal educational settings) may have something to do with their increased cognitive abilities, which allow them to benefit from more abstract approaches to language teaching. It may also have something to do with the way younger children are taught. Lynne Cameron, quoted above, suggests that teachers of young learners need to be especially alert and adaptive in their response to tasks and have to be able to adjust activities on the spot.

It is not being suggested that young children cannot acquire second languages successfully. As we have already said, many of them achieve significant competence, especially in bilingual situations. But in learning situations, teenagers are often more effective learners. Yet English is increasingly being taught at younger and younger ages. This may have great benefits in terms of citizenship, democracy, tolerance and multiculturalism, but especially when there is ineffective transfer of skills and methodology from primary to secondary school, early learning does not always appear to offer the substantial success often claimed for it.

In what follows we will consider students at different ages as if all the members of each age group are the same. Yet each student is an individual with different experiences bot in and outside the classroom. Comments here about young children, teenagers and adults can only be generalizations. Much also depends upon individual learner differences and upon motivation.

A1 YOUNG CHILDREN

Young children, especially those up to the ages of nine or ten, learn differently from older children, adolescents and adults in the following ways:

- They respond to meaning even if they do not understand individual words.
- They often learn indirectly rather than directly – that is they take in information from all sides, learning from everything around them rather than only focusing on the precise topic they being taught.
- Their understanding comes not just from explanation, but also from what they see and hear and, crucially, have a chance to touch and interact with.
- They find abstract concepts such as grammar rules difficult to grasp.
- They generally display an enthusiasm for learning and a curiosity about the world around them.
- They have a need for individual attention and approval from the teacher.
- They are keen to talk about themselves and respond well to learning that uses themselves and their own lives as main topics in the classroom.
- They have a limited attention span; unless activities are extremely engaging, they can get easily bored, losing interest after ten minutes or so.

It is important, when discussing young learners, to take account of changes which take place within this varied and varying age span. Gul Keskil and Pasa Tevfik Cephe, for example, note that “while pupils who are 10 and 11 years old like games, puzzles and songs most,

those who are 12 and 13 years old like activities built around dialogues, question-and-answer activities and matching exercises most".

Various theorists have described the way that children develop and the various ages and stages they go through. Piage suggested that children start at the *sensori-motor stage*, and then proceed through the *intuitive stage* and the *concrete-operational stage* before finally reaching the *formal operational stage* where abstraction becomes increasingly possible. Leo Vygotsky emphasized the place of social interaction in development and the role of a "knower" providing "scaffolding" to help a child who has entered the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) where they are ready to learn new things. Both Erik Erikson and Abraham Maslow saw development as being closely bound up in the child`s confidence and self-esteem, while Reuven Feuerstein suggested that children`s cognitive structures are infinitely modifiable with the help of a modifier – much like Vygotsky`s knower.

But however we describe the way children develop (and though are significant differences between, say, a four-year-old and a nine-year-old), we can make some recommendations about younger learners in general, that is children up to about ten and eleven.

In the first place, good teachers at this level need to provide a rich diet of learning experiences which encourage their students to get information from a variety of sources. They need to work with their students individually and in groups, developing good and affective relationship. They need to plan a range of activities for a given time period, and be flexible enough to move on to the next exercise when they see their students getting bored.

Techers of young learners need to spend time understanding how their students think and operate. They need to be able to pick up on their students` current interests so that they can use them to motivate the children. And they need good oral skills in English since speaking and listening are the skills which will be used most of all at this age. The teacher`s pronunciation really matters here, too, precisely because, as we have said, children imitate it so well.

All of this reminds us that once a decision has been taken to teach English to younger learners, there is a need for highly skilled and dedicated teaching. This may well be the most difficult (but rewarding) age to teach, but when teachers do it well (and the conditions are right), there is no reason why students should not defy some of the research results we mentioned above and be highly successful learner – provided, of course, that this success is followed up as they move to a new school or grade.

We can also draw some conclusions about what a classroom for young children should look like and what might be going on in it. First of all, we will want the classroom to be bright and colorful, with windows the children can see out of, and with enough for different activities to be taking place. We might expect the students to be working in groups in different parts of the classroom, changing their activity every ten minutes or so. "We are obviously", Susan Halliwell writes, "not talking about classrooms where children spend all their time sitting still in rows or talking only to the teacher". Because children love

discovering things, and because they respond well to being asked to use their imagination, they may well be involved in puzzle-like activities, in making things, in drawing things, in games, in physical movement or song. A good primary classroom mixes play and learning in an atmosphere of cheerful and supportive harmony.

A2 ADOLESCENTS

It is strange that, despite their relative success as language learners, adolescents are often seen as problem students. Yet with their greater ability for abstract thought and their passionate commitment what they are doing once they are engaged, adolescents may well be the most exciting students of all. Most of them understand the need for learning and, with the right goals, can be responsible enough to do what is asked of them.

We will discuss how teachers can ensure successful learning (preventing indiscipline, but acting effectively if it occurs). But we should not become too preoccupied with the issue of disruptive behavior, for while we will all remember unsatisfactory classes, we will also look back with pleasure on those groups and lessons which were successful. There is almost nothing more exciting than a class of involved young people at this age pursuing a learning goal with enthusiasm. Our job, therefore, must be to provoke student engagement with material which is relevant and involving. At the same time, we need to do what we can to bolster our students` self-esteem, and be conscious, of their need for identity.

Hebert Puchta and Michael Schratz see problems with teenagers as resulting, in part, from '…the teacher`s failure to build bridges between what they want and have to teach and their students` worlds of thought and experience'. They advocate linking language teaching far more closely to the students` everyday interests through, in particular, the use of 'humanistic' teaching. Thus, as we shall see in some of the examples, material has to be designed at the students` level, with topics which they can react to. They must be encouraged to respond to texts and situations with their own thoughts and experiences, rather than just by answering questions and doing abstract learning activities. We must give them tasks which they are able to do, rather than risk humiliating them.

We have come some way from the teaching of young children. We can ask teenagers to address learning issues directly in a way that younger learners might not appreciate. We are able to discuss abstract issues with them. Indeed, part of our job is to provoke intellectual activity by helping them to be aware of contrasting ideas and concepts which they can resolve for themselves – though still with our guidance. There are many ways of studying language and practicing language skill, and most of these are appropriate for teenagers.

A3 ADULT LEARNERS

Adult language learners are notable for a number of special characteristics:

- They can engage with abstract thought.
- They have a whole range of life experience to draw on.
- They have expectations about the learning process, and they already have their own set patterns of learning.

- Adults tend, on the whole, to be more disciplined than other age groups, and, crucially, they are often prepared to struggle on despite boredom.

- They come into classroom with a rich range of experiences which allow teachers to use a wide range of activities with them.

However, adults are never entirely problem-free learners, and they have a number of characteristics which can sometimes make learning and teaching problematic.

- They can be critical of teaching methods. Their previous learning experience may have predisposed them to one particular methodological style which makes them uncomfortable with unfamiliar teaching patterns. Conversely, they may be hostile to certain teaching and learning activities which replicate the teaching they received earlier in their educational careers.

- They may have experienced failure or criticism at school which makes them anxious and under-confident about learning a language.

- Many older adults worry that their intellectual powers may be diminishing with age. They are concerned to keep their creative powers alive, to maintain a 'sense of generativity'. However, as Alan Rogers points out, this generativity is directly related to how much learning has been going on in adult life before they come to a new learning experience.

Good teachers of adults take all of these factor into account. They are aware that their students will often be prepared to stick with an activity for longer than younger learners (though too much boredom can obviously have a disastrous effect on motivation). As well as involving their students in more indirect learning through reading, listening and communicative speaking and writing, they also allow them to use their own life experience in the learning process, too.

As teachers od adults we should recognize the need to minimize the bad effects of past learning experiences. We can diminish the fear of failure by offering activities which are achievable and by paying special attention to the level of challenge presented by exercises. We need to listen to students` concerns, too, in many cases, modify what we do to suit their learning tastes.

INDIVIDUAL VARIATIONS

If some people are better at some things than other – better at analyzing, for example – this would indicate that there are differences in the ways individual brains work. It also suggests that people respond differently to the same stimuli. How might such variation determine the ways in which individual students learn most readily? How might it affect the ways in which we teach? There are two models in particular which have tried to account for such perceived individual variation, and which teachers have attempted to use for the benefit of their learners.

If we accept that different intelligences predominate in different people, it suggests that the same learning task not be appropriate for all of our students. While people with a strong logical/mathematical intelligence might respond well to a complex grammar explanation, a different student might need the comfort of diagrams and physical

demonstration because intelligence may require a more interactive climate if their learning is to be effective. Rosie Tanner has produced a chart to show what kind of activities might be suitable for people with special strengths in the different intelligence.

CONCLUSION:

Armed with this information, teachers can see whether they have given their class a variety of activities to help the various types of learner described here. Although we cannot teach directly to each individual student in our class of the time, we can ensure that we sometimes give opportunities for visualization, for students to work on their own, for sharing and comparing and for physical movement. By keeping our eye on different individuals, we can direct them to learning activities which are best suited to their own proclivities.

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