

Faces in a Crowd: The Individual Learner in Multisection Courses

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Introduction

The focus of the fifth volume in the series of the American Association of University Supervisors, Coordinators, and Directors of Foreign Language Programs (AAUSC), *Issues in Language Program Direction*, is on the individual learner in multisection courses. During the past two decades an increasing amount of research has been dedicated to aspects of individual learners (cf. Skehan 1989) and has been accompanied by a focus on the needs of individual learners in curriculum development and instructional practice (cf. Nunan 1988; Tarone and Yule 1989).

For directors of large language programs, in which multisection courses are the norm, this change in focus presents new challenges. On the one hand, we are faced with the need to provide consistency and coherence across sections taught by instructors with varying degrees of talent, experience, and interest in language teaching in order to ensure that the courses in the program are well articulated and that students can proceed relatively seamlessly from one course to the next. On the other hand, we are faced with the reality that one curriculum and set of instructional practices does not fit all students or instructors. As Dekeyser (this volume) warns, "The streamlined curricula [in large language programs] (often designed to be teacher-proof) leave little room for the individual differences in aptitude level, aptitude profile, cognitive style, personality, motivational level, and motivational orientation that characterize the undergraduate population now more than ever before."

The contributions in this volume address this issue in a variety of ways, and many of them provide suggestions for directors of language programs who would like to attend better to individual differences in their multisection courses. Much of the work of the director of language programs in this regard involves sensitizing teaching assistants (TAs) to differences in individual learners and helping them find ways to assist learners with different needs and interests and varying strengths and weaknesses.

The volume is divided into three sections: the first section contains two articles that provide overviews of research on language anxiety and gender issues in second language classrooms; the second section comprises six research studies on learner variables; and the third section offers three articles that deal with the policy and curricular implications that accompany a focus on individual learners.

In the first article, “New Directions in Language Anxiety Research,” Dolly Jesusita Young provides a comprehensive overview of language anxiety research, describing major research findings in the field and suggesting directions for future study. Since it has been shown that language anxiety negatively affects second language performance, as well as having a negative impact on language learning (at both the input and processing levels), Young discusses anxiety-reducing and coping strategies that directors of language programs should find useful in planning curriculum and designing TA workshops.

Lydie E. Meunier seeks to broaden our understanding of gender issues in a second language classroom by examining these issues from a sociolinguistic and anthropological perspective. Following a review of relevant first and second language research, she argues convincingly for the premise that “the socialization process undergone by L2 learners sets various types of preferential cognitive networks, and that gender-specific strategies in SLA [second language acquisition] may ultimately stem from nurture rather than nature, that is, from a possible sociolinguistic transfer out of native genderlects.” She cautions instructors to be vigilant concerning gender bias in classroom interactions, pedagogical materials, classroom activities, and test design.

The next six articles are research studies of aspects of learner variables. Madeline Ehrman begins the section with a well-designed study that examines the weakest and strongest 2–4 percent of a large group of adult students in an intensive language training program at the Foreign Service Institute to determine how they compare in terms of such variables as language learning aptitude, demographics, preferred learning strategies, motivation and anxiety, and personality factors. Her results indicate that the usual definition of language learning aptitude should perhaps be broadened to include not only cognitive skills, but also various personality attributes that predispose learners “to impose their own structure on what they would otherwise experience as chaos.”

Robert M. Dekeyser sets out to determine whether error correction shows a main effect on students’ motivation and anxiety levels and an

interaction effect with several individual characteristics. His results suggest that “individual variables should be taken into account when deciding how to react to errors during oral communication activities in the classroom” since error correction seems to help students with high previous achievement, high verbal aptitude, low anxiety, and low extrinsic motivation, and appears detrimental to the complementary groups. Dekeyser suggests that directors of language programs sensitize TAs to the interactions between error correction and individual differences and encourage individualized treatment within sections.

The purpose of M. Mahodi Alish’s study of the learning strategies used by successful students of Arabic during a three-year intensive summer program is to identify, describe, and classify the strategies used by successful students and determine whether there is a common denominator among the learners in terms of shared strategies. He points out the potential benefits of teaching students about learning strategies so that they can self-direct their learning more effectively and efficiently; this may be especially important in the less commonly taught language programs in which student enrollment is a constant concern.

Sadia Zoubir-Shaw and Rebecca L. Oxford examine gender differences in language learning strategies among university students studying French and find that women surpass men in the use of several strategy categories and use strategies that might be viewed as effective for language learning more frequently than men. They point out that knowing how students function can help instructors tailor instruction and provide workable instructional strategies for both males and females. They, like Alish, emphasize the importance of teaching students to use more and better strategies.

Another contribution to research on gender differences in the second language classroom is the study by Christine M. Campbell and Victor M. Shaw. They analyze changes in anxiety felt by male and female postsecondary students before beginning a foreign language course and after sixty hours of instruction. Their results reveal a significant interaction between gender and the time of survey administration; the level of anxiety in male students rose significantly, while the level of language anxiety in female students dropped slightly. They recommend paying attention to gender differences in the classroom not only by making changes in teacher and student behavior, but also by changing the curriculum itself, providing specially designed courses for anxiety-ridden students so that they can learn ways to enhance their language learning.

In the final contribution in this section, Monika Chavez examines the complex relationship between students' curricular preferences and certain demographic variables (e.g., foreign travel, previous foreign language experience, chosen or intended major field of study, age, language learning success, and gender). Her results underline how difficult it can be for directors of language programs to take students' curricular preferences into account in program design.

The final section of the volume deals with policy and curricular implications resulting from attention to learner variables. The first article in this section, by Susan J. Weaver and Andrew D. Cohen, is based on the premise that language learning will be facilitated if students become more aware of the range of possible strategies that they can use throughout the language learning process. The authors take the perspective that the most efficient way to do this is by providing learning strategies instruction to students as part of the foreign language curriculum. They explain a variety of options for providing student-directed learning strategy instruction, present suggestions for developing in-service strategy training seminars for foreign language instructors, and conclude with a step-by-step approach to the design of strategy training programs.

The article by Ann Sax Mabbott is based on the premise that second language learning should be made universally available and that all students, including those who are labeled learning disabled, have the right to second language instruction. She argues against exempting such students from language requirements and provides suggestions for alternative methods of teaching and assessment that will aid them in their attempts to learn a second language. In addition, she provides material that directors of language programs will find useful when they organize TA workshops or seminars on the topic of assisting students labeled learning disabled to learn a second language.

In the final article in this volume, Cecilia Rodríguez Pino and Daniel Villa describe the development of a student-centered Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) program at New Mexico State University that "aims to identify the individual speakers' instructional needs and his or her knowledge of Spanish and to design a curriculum that recognizes the diverse language abilities of all students and enriches those abilities." The principal goal of the program is the reversal of language shift in the community; thus, the spoken standard of the classroom reflects that of the students' community. The close connections between the SNS program and the

community are maintained through classroom assignments that include ethnographic interviews, sociolinguistic surveys, and oral history interviews, all carried out by students who are expected to take an active role in their own language enrichment.

It is the editor's hope this volume will contribute to a better understanding of individual differences in the second language classroom and begin to help us distinguish the "faces in the crowd." Providing learner-centered instruction in multisection courses will continue to provide a challenge to directors of language programs; some of the contributions in this volume suggest ways in which the needs of individual learners can be better met, even in large language programs.

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