

Arabski, J. and A. Wojtaszek (eds.) 2011. *Individual Differences in SLA*. Second Language Acquisition. Series Editor: David Singleton. Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 320 pp.

Reviewed by Anna Michońska-Stadnik, University of Wrocław

Research on individual learner differences (ILDs) has been recognised for a few decades now as extremely essential to understanding the second and foreign language learning processes. Numerous publications devoted to such issues as cognitive style, learners' personalities, learning strategies, motivation, age, gender, and other factors appear regularly worldwide. *Individual Differences in SLA* contributes to this fascinating field of study by offering a selection of articles on the role of ILDs in foreign language learning environments.

The book is divided into six parts, each related to a specific subfield of the broad area of ILDs. Part One, "Background Assumptions," consists of two chapters that are more theoretically oriented than the remaining selections in the book. Part Two, entitled "Supporting Learner Autonomy," comprises three research reports devoted to investigating internal and external factors conducive to the development of learner and teacher autonomy in classroom conditions. The third part of the book tackles the issue of learner strategies. Its title is "Learners' Abilities in Strategy Application," and it contains two research reports. Part Four, "Experienced Learners," includes four papers that take a closer look at the impact of individual differences on the language development of tertiary student teachers and trainee interpreters. Part Five, entitled "Individual Character of Phonological Attainment," seems to be the most homogeneous part of the volume in terms of content, and presents three research reports on differential aspects of learning English pronunciation. The last part, "Focus on Language Skills: Reading and Writing," is the largest in this volume, containing six articles. Three of them are related to progress in the reading skill in a foreign language, and the remaining three bring together various research results in the area of the development of the writing skill in English, mostly at the academic level. As the book offers such a variety of research reports, it would seem appropriate to address each chapter separately, and to present some general comments and opinions in the conclusion of this review.

The first contribution in the theoretical part is an article written by Dieter Wolff. Its title, "Individual Learner Differences and Instructed Language Learning: An Insoluble Conflict?," suggests that teachers have failed to devote enough attention to ILDs in instructed learning environments. It seems that teachers in mainstream education concentrate on the abilities of the average learner, who is in fact a virtual entity. Wolff maintains that this attitude prevails due to the teachers' belief in the norm. In my opinion, however, such a tendency on the part of teachers is not really norm-related, but is sustained for convenience. It

is easier to assume that all students are similar in their language processing and to prepare uniform sets of teaching materials than to individualise instruction.

Wolff emphasises the dynamic character of some ILDs that vary over time and among individuals, e.g. aptitude, motivation and learning style. They can be modified under the influence of education and through interaction with others. The author correctly assumes that the degree and scope of these modifications is impossible to predict and accurately measure. As a suggestion for much-needed changes in mainstream classroom instruction, Wolff proposes models of language education based on learner autonomy and content and language integrated learning (CLIL). These models would need to develop a different approach to four parameters, which the author refers to as the *learning content*, the *learning objectives*, the *learning environment* and *social forms of learning*.

Even though it is impossible to disagree with the main tenets of this article, a few critical remarks must be put forward. Regrettably, the list of sources on individual differences, learner autonomy and related issues is seriously outdated. Hardly any of the works cited were published after the year 2000. In addition, I noticed a number of typos, probably resulting from careless editing. As a final comment on this paper I would like to express my disagreement with the statement that learner autonomy is a “teaching/learning model” (p. 13). Learner autonomy is an approach to education and an attitude to life, and as such it deserves more serious consideration.

The second chapter in the background section of the book is Mirosław Pawlak’s “Research into Language Learning Strategies: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead.” It is a survey paper, and the author indicates that its purpose is to systematise areas of research on language learning strategies and suggest directions for future studies. Pawlak makes use of the most recent publications devoted to the issue of strategy-based instruction and research on the variables affecting strategy choice and usage. Most publications make a clear distinction between communication strategies and learning strategies, and Pawlak agrees with this opinion. He also enumerates a few problems that strategy-related research has to deal with:

- a lack of a precise definition of strategies and their vague characterisation;
- a lack of any straightforward decision as to whether strategies belong to individual differences or not;
- too many strategy inventories, which creates confusion;
- the Strategy Inventory for Language Learners (SILL), which is the most popular instrument for measuring individual strategy use, is now seriously outdated.

Pawlak proposes further areas of research on strategy use: studies related to learning language subsystems or the effectiveness of strategy-based instruction, among others. The chapter is well-written, lucid and its systematising role has been effectively fulfilled.

The subsequent sections of the book have a more empirical character and they contain mostly research reports. Part Two includes three contributions that are supposed to cover the topic of supporting learner autonomy. The first one in this section, by Hasan Bedir, is entitled “Teacher’s Perceptions of Individual Differences in Turkish Primary School EFL Classes.” It is hard to understand why the paper was placed in this particular section, as it does not provide any insight into the issue of learner autonomy. It seems its content was difficult to categorise.

The author’s research question, set out at the beginning of the report, is rather ambiguous: “What are teachers’ perceptions of individual learner differences?” It indicates that the researcher was curious about the extent to which teachers perceive ILDs as important

to their classroom practice. However, the author's survey on ILDs contained questions that related to both helpful factors and hindrances in the ELT process. It is a pity that the questionnaire was not included in the appendix; a detailed analysis of it could probably clarify the ambiguities that blurred the research context and the interpretation of the results. All in all, the analysis of the answers to the questionnaire revealed *which* ILDs were most important to primary school teachers, and not *to what extent* teachers perceived them as important. The results of the research showed, not surprisingly, that motivation is the most important individual difference, and that it is decisive in successful language learning.

Due to the vague research design, this chapter is rather disappointing. Moreover, numerous stylistic and even grammatical errors, and a few instances of spelling Ema Ushioda's name incorrectly, contribute to my rather unfavourable evaluation of this paper.

The remaining two chapters in this section truly do concern learner autonomy. Chapter 4 — "Learning Autonomy Support by Foreign Language Teachers," by Maria Stec and Anna Studenska — is a research report on how EFL teachers and teachers of other school subjects reinforce learner autonomy. The authors cite some contemporary research reports (on mathematics lessons) that investigated students' opinions on what types of teacher behaviours seem to support autonomy. At the beginning of the research section the authors pose the question: "What is the level of learning autonomy support among FL teachers in comparison with the level of learning autonomy support by teachers of other subjects than FL?" The wording leaves some doubt as to how the question should be interpreted: "the level of autonomy support" is not a clear-cut term; the expression "the level of teaching how to learn" (p. 57) in the next research question is even less clear. Moreover, the authors seem to be somewhat careless with the treatment of their raw data in the report section (pp. 59–60). For example, it appears that female and male teachers make up 110% instead of 100% of the whole population (88% + 22%). Also, when reading Table 4.2 (p. 62) carefully, we discover that there were in fact 207 teachers altogether (141 + 66), not 215 as the authors stated earlier.

The main research hypothesis stated that teachers of foreign languages and teachers of other subjects would differ in many inventory subscales, and this was indeed revealed in the findings. Surprisingly, however, the degree of autonomy support appeared to be significantly higher in teachers of other school subjects than in EFL teachers. The authors believe that more training of EFL teachers is needed to encourage support for learner autonomy.

Chapter 5 is "Personality and Parenting Styles as Predictors of Self-Regulation in Foreign Language Learning," by Anna Studenska. In the author's opinion, self-regulation can be defined as goal-oriented behaviour and the degree to which metacognitive processes are used that allow for an active approach to a language task. This interesting and well-planned research report concerns the interdependence of self-regulation, parenting styles and learners' personalities. The study involved 160 students of pedagogy and art. Three instruments were used: a personality inventory, an inventory assessing the level of self-regulation of learning and a questionnaire on the parenting styles of the participants' parents. Surprisingly, it appeared that there is no significant relationship between the level of self-regulation and parenting style. On the other hand, there is some interdependence between self-regulation and personality, but the correlations were rather low. This article completes the second part of the book.

The third part of the book, "Learners' Abilities in Strategy Application," starts with Chapter 6 — an article by Anna Mystkowska-Wiertelak, entitled "The Development of

Implicit Knowledge through Structured Input Activities: The Importance of Individual Perceptions Concerning Grammar Instruction.” After having a closer look at the chapter, the reader once again has some doubts as to its relation to the main theme of Part Three. It does not develop the issue of strategy application, unless we assume that implicit instruction indeed belongs to the category of learning strategies.

The author tackles the issue of measuring learners’ implicit knowledge and quotes different contemporary researchers. Next, she offers a set of characteristic features of both types of knowledge, presented by Rod Ellis in his well-known article published in *Second Language Acquisition Studies* in 2005. Later, Mystkowska-Wiertelak outlines the controversy between cognitivist opinions and views based on universal grammar (UG) on the role of explicit knowledge in SLA. The presentation ends with the assertion that it is difficult to reach an agreement as there are still no adequate measures of the two types of knowledge. Efforts that have been made to establish such measurements are summarised in the next part, with an emphasis on Rod Ellis’s research from 2005 and later.

The aim of the study reported by Anna Mystkowska-Wiertelak was to look at the effectiveness of reception- and production-oriented instruction in relation to the level of development of explicit and implicit knowledge. The participants also completed a questionnaire on their perceptual learning style preferences. The subject of the research was the successful reception and production of English sentences with the “causative have.” Even though the description of the experiment seems to be adequate, some important data are still missing to fully appreciate the researcher’s efforts. First, the reader is not given details of the exact nature of the “structured input activities” and “meaning-based output instruction” involved in the study (p. 102). Second, the tests that were given to the participants were not included in the appendices, which leaves the reader with an incomplete picture of the whole treatment.

The outcomes of the experiment were compared with the learners’ perceptual style preferences. The amount of work done by the author is really impressive. The results show some significant gains in the reception and production of the grammatical issue in question. However, there are still some doubts concerning the validity of the measurement of implicit knowledge. On the whole, all the groups, including the control group, improved in their use of the causative have, which can be attributed simply to the effect of teaching. In other words, the more we practise, the better the results, regardless of the way we are instructed. It also appeared that the most important qualities for successful learning were a positive attitude, general curiosity and eagerness, which was revealed in the interviews after the treatment.

All in all, the chapter is a valuable contribution to understanding the nature of explicit/implicit knowledge, and underscores the importance of individual differences in the process of language learning.

Chapter 7, “Awareness of Cognate Vocabulary and Vocabulary Learning Strategies of Polish Multilingual and Bilingual Advanced Learners of English,” by Agnieszka Otwinowska-Kasztelanic, conforms to the general theme of Part Three. The aim of this chapter is to present research on the awareness of cognates and strategy training in advanced Polish learners of English. The author first defines cognates, as they are found in most European languages and constitute a significant portion of the lexicon of adult learners. Interestingly, plenty of research has been done on English-Polish cognate vocabulary and on how it could be used in teaching practice. However, as Otwinowska-Kasztelanic writes, there has been

too little research to date on the actual effects of activating cognates in Polish learners of English (p. 112). It would seem that beginning learners could benefit a great deal from becoming aware of cognates; immediate enhancement of vocabulary may result in higher motivation and self-confidence (although one needs to be careful with “false friends”). Otwinowska-Kasztelanica states that even if teachers make learners aware of cognates, some learners seem to be unwilling to accept them. She mentions three reasons: language typology and psychotypology, the number of languages used by the learner and individual differences. ILDs include learners’ strategic behaviour in the language learning process.

The study aimed to show that in the case of students of English philology the awareness of cognates should be a useful vocabulary learning strategy (educated speakers). Multilingual students of Cultural Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Warsaw also took part in the research. There were two phases to the study. In phase one the researcher investigated the perceived distance between English and Polish, and the students’ awareness of the existence of cognates. Multilinguals proved to be much more aware of cognates, and they used more vocabulary learning strategies. A quasi-experimental study (phase two) aimed to check the effects of raising sensitivity to cross-linguistic similarities through awareness-training tasks in which the experimental groups were sensitised to the existence of cognates. After the treatment, transfer as a strategy was used by nearly 50% of the students from the experimental groups, which was a significant increase. In oral tasks students from the experimental groups used cognate vocabulary more frequently. This could be regarded as a strategy for coping with anxiety and task difficulty.

Otwinowska-Kasztelanica’s study is an interesting and well-documented experiment that contributes to our knowledge of the use of cognates as a vocabulary learning strategy.

The next part of the book — Part Four — is intended to focus on experienced learners. Its first chapter (Chapter 8) is “A Study of Gender-Related Levels of Processing Anxieties over Three Years of Secondary Grammar School Instruction” by Ewa Piechurska-Kuciel. In this paper gender is treated as an individual difference; however, the article does not really concern experienced learners. Once again, the paper seems to be miscategorised; and as there are a few chapters in the book focusing on gender differences, perhaps a separate part could have been created where gender was the main issue. Nevertheless, the chapter contains a thorough description of gender differences in SLA, and points out more socially than cognitively related behavioural variations between men and women.

Piechurska-Kuciel’s research results showed statistically significant higher anxiety levels in girls than in boys. It may be presumed that even though boys get more attention than girls in the classroom, teachers generally have higher expectations of girls’ performance, which may then lead to higher anxiety. As gender is an important factor in experiencing emotions towards foreign language learning, the author recommends including information about gender differences in teacher training syllabuses.

Chapter 9 is Joanna Bielska’s research report entitled “Challenge or Threat? A Study of Perceived Self-Efficacy of Polish EFL Teachers.” As long as teachers are regarded as experienced learners, the content of the chapter conforms to the main theme of Part Four. Self-efficacy belongs to the category of individual differences and is defined as beliefs about one’s own capabilities. Self-efficacy is important for successful teaching and learning, but also for job satisfaction and one’s further career (i.e. remaining in the profession). Bielska’s research proved that there are statistically significant correlations between the level of self-efficacy and job satisfaction in the group of teachers investigated. The chapter

is a thorough account of an interesting piece of research into one more aspect of individual differences.

Chapter 10 — “Managing Criticism and Praise by Trainee Interpreters: Looking for Gender Differences,” by Andrzej Łyda, Krystyna Warchał and Alina Jackiewicz — focuses on gender differences again, but this time in trainee interpreters. The title, however, is slightly misleading: it seems to imply that the authors are interested in interpreters’ reactions to criticism and praise, but on reading the chapter we discover that criticism and praise are *included* in the original texts to be interpreted, and the authors are interested in how women and men manage to convey these emotions in their translations. Nevertheless, the chapter presents a very thorough account of the interpreters’ linguistic behaviours. It was observed that female interpreters make use of many more deictic shifts, e.g. from 1st person singular to plural (*mojej* — *naszej*), and also from 2nd person to 3rd person plural (*wy* — *oni*). As a result, the face-threatening impact of criticism and praise is directed at a third party, to make it more neutral. It was also observed that female trainee interpreters used deictic shifts more frequently in negative evaluations, whereas males used them more in positive ones. Moreover, female interpreters were observed to identify more with the audience, which was manifested in the greater number of shifts. The chapter offers a valuable contribution to studies on gender differences in linguistic behaviours.

Chapter 11, “Student Needs Assessment in Teaching English at the Tertiary Level: An Individual Learner Difference Perspective” by Zbigniew Możejko, is rather disappointing. Even though the theoretical introduction appears to be a thorough account of research into learners’ needs, the author’s empirical study lacks precision. For example, one of the research questions in fact concerns students’ expectations about ways of instruction in the English Department, not their needs. Moreover, there is no explanation as to why the 2004 and the 2008 samples of students taking part in the research were so different in number, or why the 2008 sample included only first-year students. Some of the research questions were not, in fact, answered. For example, we do not learn from the research how the fourth-year students’ expectations and needs were met by the syllabus designers. Printing errors (p. 193, figure 11.1) add to the general feeling of disappointment after reading the chapter.

Part Five of the book is devoted to individual differences in phonological attainment, and it consists of three chapters (12, 13 and 14). The first of them, “Regularity and Individual Variation in Native English and Polish Learners’ Wh-Question Suprasegmentals” was written by Andrzej Porzuczek. The study, though very carefully prepared, in fact confirmed a set of obvious facts. In the introductory part, the author notes that suprasegmental, prosodic aspects of speech have recently been getting more and more attention in research and in teaching practice. The study itself aimed at comparing the timing of wh-questions in Polish students and in native speakers of English. The focus was on read speech, with syllable and foot being used for prosodic description. After a year of studying pronunciation, students were closer to native speakers in speech rate and timing, which confirmed again that practice makes perfect (at least a bit better!).

The second chapter in this part, “Time-Limited Verbal Fluency Task with Polish-English Unbalanced Bilinguals,” written by Arkadiusz Rojczyk, does not in fact concern phonological attainment, and it should not have been assigned to Part Five. It is about word production restricted by time and by the sounds /t/ and /p/. The research aim seems to be of dubious value: it is obvious that unbalanced bilinguals would produce more words in

L1 than in L2. No wonder then, that the research results indicated slower word production when switching between Polish and English than when using only Polish. However, there was one interesting finding: there was no essential difference between the L1/L2 and L2/L1 switch trials, contrary to other reported research indicating that activation of L2 first will lower the L2/L1 performance on a switch trial.

The last chapter in Part Five, “The Acquisition of English Vowel Length Differences before Word-Final Stops by Greek Learners of English,” was written by Ellen Tsiartsioni. It examines the extrinsic length of English vowels produced by Greek learners in the environment of final stops. The feature refers to voiced and voiceless stops as in the *bad/bat* minimal pair. Like Polish, Greek has no distinction between long and short vowels, and thus vowel length involves learning a completely new contrast.

At the beginning of her study, Tsiartsioni presents a few instances of research on the effects of pronunciation instruction in formal EFL settings. Her own research was carried out on three different age groups centred around the critical period of language acquisition. The recording results were compared with bilingual Greek-American children. The sentences children produced were analysed acoustically by PRAAT speech analysis software. The results of the research support the usefulness of instruction in older learners (13–16 years old). Hardly any near-native vowel length was reported either before or after instruction, but still, the research proves the usefulness of phonological instruction in a foreign language context, which seems to have important implications for teachers.

In the last part of the volume, devoted to the impact of individual differences on the acquisition of reading and writing skills, we find six chapters. Chapter 15, “Individual Differences in Foreign Language Reading Comprehension: Gender and Topic Interest” by Sila Ay and Özgür Sen Bartan, concentrates on the reading skills and gender differences in topic interest. The research domain were primary school students (age 12, 13, and 14) at the Ankara University Primary School. The researchers asked both sexes about the topics of the most interest to them. It appeared that girls were mostly interested in fashion and boys in technology. The topic of art was considered neutral by both genders.

The research revealed some interesting findings. For instance, both genders got better marks in reading comprehension when topics were either very interesting for them, or not at all. The worst reading comprehension level was observed when learners were dealing with texts on neutral topics, e.g. art.

One persistent language mistake can be observed in the report. The authors consistently use “interested topics” instead of “interesting topics” (cf. pp. 248, 251, 253 and further).

Chapter 16, “Individual Differences in L2 Readers’ Strategic Behaviour while Performing Reading to Learn Tasks: A Case Study” by Halina Chodkiewicz is a very thorough report on strategies used by four subjects who were M.A. students in English. Reading to learn denotes reading for academic purposes. Students were asked to highlight, take notes and summarise two academic texts of different length. Many individual variations in the use of the above strategies were observed. It is a pity the students’ gender was not treated as one of the individual variables, as three students were female and one male. It could be presumed that some further individual variations might have been noticed regarding gender-related differences in the use of highlighting, note-taking and summarising. The author concludes that for successful reading both language level and subject-matter comprehension play an important role.

Chapter 17 is also about reading: “Current Views on Foreign Language Reading Motivation,” by Liliana Piasecka, aimed to investigate the motivation of university students of English to read academic and other texts in this language. The findings of the research, not surprisingly, support the opinion that students’ motivation to read in English is mostly extrinsic and instrumental. The author also tried to find any existing correlations between intrinsic L1 and L2 reading motivation, but to no avail. The chapter concludes with suggestions for ways to strengthen students’ initial motivation and self-confidence in reading academic texts.

The last three chapters of the book concern individual differences in writing. In the article “From Oral Input to Written Output: On Individual Differences in External Storing of Information,” Danuta Gabryś-Barker concentrates on note-taking and on how students differ with respect to the management of aural input. Jan Zalewski, in “Accounting for One Student’s Failure and Another’s Success on a Written Academic Assignment,” deals with differences between successful and less successful students in their take-home essay structure and content. Finally, in “Online Revisions in FL Writing. General Rules and Individual Differences,” Iwona Kowal writes about self-corrections in students’ written works. It appears that most corrections concern spelling, regardless of the language.

It is now time to offer some general comments on the volume under review. It constitutes a valuable contribution to research on individual learner differences. Most of the chapters are well-written, carefully planned, and contain sound research reports. What is particularly important is the fact that all the research accounts summarise individual variations in learning a foreign language, as opposed to a second language environment. Most of the chapters offer valuable and thorough insights into the issues in focus. However, as already mentioned in the description of specific chapters, some of the articles are inconsistent with the main themes of the sections of the book in which they appear. A separate section devoted to different aspects of gender differences in foreign language learning appears to be necessary, as there are three chapters devoted to this issue. Finally, the reviewer feels obliged to mention the frequent spelling and lexical errors in some texts, which are probably the result of careless editing. Still, the volume will be a useful guide to students in applied linguistics and to young researchers in their selection of interesting and valuable topics for further research.