

# Book Reviews

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## **Capitalizing on Language Learners' Individuality: From Premise to Practice**

*T. Gregersen & P. D. MacIntyre*

Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2014, 259 pages, ISBN 978-1-78309-119-5 (paperback)

When I was a graduate student quite some years ago, I became interested in the topic of how variation among language learners, referred to in psychology as *individual differences* (IDs), influences language learning. But, with a few exceptions, the research findings at that time were quite disappointing, consisting mainly of correlations of isolated ID measures with learning outcomes and not much about the processes of learning and teaching. So I was delighted to come across *Capitalizing on Language Learners' Individuality*, a book in which Tammy Gregersen and Peter MacIntyre bridge the theory-practice divide by reviewing research findings about specific learner differences (the *premise*) and linking these ideas to innovative, ready-to-use classroom activities (the *practice*).

The chapters of the book cover seven ID topics: anxiety, beliefs, cognitive abilities (including aptitude, working memory, and multiple intelligences), motivation, language learning strategies, language learning styles, and willingness to communicate. In each chapter the Premise section first introduces a specific ID through an anecdote of some kind and succinctly summarizes what is currently known about the topic from empirical studies in psychology and second language acquisition. This is followed in the Practice section by 7-18 different classroom activities with detailed instructions. To get a taste of what is included in the book, let's consider the chapter on beliefs. In the Premise section, the review of the literature provides a rationale for taking learners' beliefs seriously. In order to do so, the authors outline a five-step action plan:

- (1) Identify your teacher beliefs; (2) Make student beliefs known to the teacher; (3) Increase student awareness of their beliefs and evaluate them for effectiveness; (4) Address the mismatch between student and teacher beliefs; and (5) Confront ill-advised beliefs. (p. 35)

Categories of learner beliefs that have been identified in the research literature as affecting language learning success are then reviewed; these include beliefs about difficulty of language learning, foreign language aptitude, nature of language learning, motivations and expectations, teachers' roles, and learner approaches to studying. The Practice section gives instructions

for 16 activities that target learners' awareness of helpful and harmful beliefs. I particularly like the debate on L2 aptitude (#4) in which students who responded in agreement with the statement "Some people are born with a special ability which helps them to learn a foreign language" are assigned to prepare arguments *against* this statement for the debate. Another activity that looks promising to me is "Pyramids to Setting Goals and Taking Risks" (#16). In this activity, students work in pairs to brainstorm ideas about risk-taking and goal-setting; the pairs then form groups of four, combine their suggestions, and select the top five. This process is repeated until there is just one set of five suggestions representing the class as a whole. At the end of the lesson students are invited "to continually be setting realistic goals and overtly thinking about how they can take calculated risks" (p. 63). I am sure that many ESL teachers will find the background on beliefs and on the topics of the other chapters very informative and the activities inspiring.

ESL teachers are frequently exhorted to make accommodations for learner diversity in their lessons. Curricular documents do not, however, offer much guidance on how to achieve this accommodation. Clearly, teachers need to understand which IDs are most relevant and how they can impact L2 learning. *Capitalizing on Language Learners' Individuality* is an excellent resource for teachers to become more knowledgeable about specific learner characteristics such as anxiety, motivation, learning styles, and so on. But Gregersen and MacIntyre also draw attention to the complexity of dynamic interactions among different IDs within the individual learner (e.g., some are symbiotic while others are synergetic, p. 78). This means that there is no simple formula for how to accommodate to learner differences! Nonetheless, Gregersen and MacIntyre's book does provide very useful examples of how to accomplish two goals at once: engage learners in meaningful language use by performing different kinds of communicative tasks while raising their self-awareness and thereby helping them to become more autonomous learners. As the title suggests, this book challenges teachers to work toward not only accommodating to learner diversity but also capitalizing on it, thereby enriching the classroom language learning experience.

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### *The Reviewer*

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