

# The Psychology of Language Learner; Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition by Zoltán Dörnyei; Book Review

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## Abstract

By taking a close look at the field of language learning, one understands that the psychology of teachers and learners play a crucial role especially in learning second language, in my Ph.D. study and in the course of SLA, I conducted a paper on the communication strategies and gender differences in language learning, and one of the distinguished resources that I depended on was Zoltán Dörnyei's work. He is the author of 'The psychology of language learner; Individual differences in second language acquisition'. The book published in 2005 then revised and in 2015 published by Routledge and it becomes the primary reference for teachers and researchers of ELT departments around the world. The author presented the highlighted concepts of discussions and topics well formulated. The main objective of writing this book can be seen as an effort to come up with a monograph about the research on individual differences in language learning. Hence to this objective, the author presented a rich literature on the contemporary studies of the field. This paper is an attempt to review, critique the book from different perspectives, give further attention to the literature review, sociocultural understanding, and also, examine the book from philosophical perspectives.

**Keyword:** Psycholinguistics, language learning, English language teaching, Zoltán Dörnyei

## 1. Introduction

Psycholinguistics can be defined in different interpretations, but the simplest definition is finding the relationship between language and mind of human being (Maftoon and Shakouri, 2012). Understanding psycholinguistic and finding its correlation with language learning, conceives language learning as a process involved to individuals in which information is formulated as the learner is (1) exposed to comprehensible input, (2) is given opportunities to both, negotiate, and (3) receive negative feedback (Carlos, 2008). And to address the title of this book, Purba (2018) explains that the concept of 'language learning' is used as numerous scholars believe that a second language can be guided by learning the language "intentionally" and "consciously".

It is clear that psychology becomes an integrated icon with different fields of science, especially, human sciences such as education (Philips, 1992), linguistics (Aitchison, 1990), technology (Leung, 2007), and physiological interpretations, facilitate the proceeding of understanding these fields. In this regard, and for highlighting the relationship between language and cognition, numerous scholars recognize their attention and focus on psychology and language (Peacock, 2001). They believe that

psychology can accelerate understanding and answering different questions about language. One of the main sources of this field is the Book of Zoltán Dörnyei "The psychology of language learner; Individual differences in second language acquisition". Therefore, in this paper, it is tried to evaluate the strong and weak points and examine parts and content of the book.

## 2. Author's Background

Zoltán Dörnyei is a Hungarian–Born British linguist. He is a professor of psycholinguistics in the School of English at Nottingham University in the UK. He is known for his work on SLA, and the psychology of the language learner, in particular on motivational factors in second language learning. He has published over 90 academic papers and 25 books such as Teaching and researching in motivation (2001), The psychology of language learner; Individual differences in second language acquisition (2005), Language attitudes and language globalization (2006), Motivational dynamics (2015). Also, in 2007, he published his book on research methods in applied linguistics. He has also undertaken training in theology; his publications in this area include a research anthology on faith and language learning.

### 3. About this book

This concise book on individual differences (IDs) in SLA presents research on topics such as language aptitude, motivation, cognitive styles, student self-regulation, and personality traits. Its in-depth treatment of the field, will make it valuable to researchers in applied linguistics and second language (L2) studies. At the same time, its straightforward presentation and conversational tone should make it accessible to language teachers and students of L2 pedagogy, interested in understanding more about what individual learners bring to the classroom (Winke, 2006). Psychology of language learners has been considered by many researchers, academics, and those interested in applied linguistics, the first version of which was published in 2005. The remarkable point of this book is that it focuses on language learners in particular, and this is what made the book stand out in its time and turned it into an up-to-date and different contemporary book.

Dörnyei's masterpiece is a book with no pictures, the format, and color of the cover of which is a combination of brown and ochre colors is well designed. Also, it attracts much attention. The font-type, lines, and print quality are in line with modern standards. Characterizations, spaces, spaces between sentence components (words, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives) are all problem-free, diagrams and tables are very clear. Furthermore, there are no spellings or editing problems in the text of the book.

Dörnyei classified his book into eight chapters in 270 pages. Initially, he begins with a brief review of individual differences and defines individual differences IDs and shares the literature about how the concept of individual differences IDs developed. Meanwhile, the author presents the taxonomy of individual differences and explains how he organized groups of IDs. In chapter two the author examines the differences among personalities and distinguishes them in particular from Personality, Temperament, and Mood. Dörnyei moves on to discuss personality and language learning in particular. By dividing the studies into early studies, extraversion and introversion studies, studies that use MBTI, and other studies, the author shows connections within the progression that could shed light on the relationship between personality and language learning.

"The taxonomical and theoretical complexity of the domain cannot be done justice in a single chapter such as this, as a small library could be filled with publications pertaining to the topic. Therefore, instead of attempting to provide a comprehensive summary, I first focus on conceptual and definitional issues and then describe the 'big picture' by outlining the main trends in contemporary personality psychology. Finally, I narrow the focus down to the relationship between personality and learning and especially language learning."

(Dörnyei, 2005. P. 13)

Chapter three provides for examining the concept of linguistic aptitude and examines the related research trends in the 1990s. Then, he introduced the tests related to the assessment of language aptitude and stated the characteristics of each. There is also an example of each of these tests in the book, and the linguistic dimensions of these tests are discussed. The issues studied in traditional research, affect the variables such as age, first language and intelligence, and have been contrasted with new approaches to language aptitude. The chapter gives detailed elaborations on two widely used aptitude batteries: the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) and the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (PLAB).

In the middle of his book, the author gives more attention to the main objective of the book; it covers motivation in a wider range. Dörnyei (2005) states that, it is appropriate that the coverage of language aptitude should be followed by the discussion of the other major ID variable that has been found to significantly affect language learning success: motivation. (P.65). Furthermore the author of the book shares his observation about this chapter:

This chapter is somewhat different from the others in the sense that when discussing other ID factors I have taken on the role of the informed observer and largely restricted my contribution to a selective review of other people's work, whereas much of the material in this chapter concerns my own research. Ever since the beginning of my Ph.D. research in the mid-1980s, which had been inspired by Gardner's seminal work, I have been actively examining the relationship of motivation and L2 attainment, and therefore my account of the topic will be inevitably subjective. (Dörnyei, 2005. P. 66).

In the fifth chapter of the book, Dörnyei (2005) argues that confusing labels, ineffective measurement instruments, lack of distinction between style and other constructs (e.g., personality), make the study on learning style and cognitive style a "quagmire" (p.120). Also, In this chapter, learning and cognitive methods are introduced. In line with these concepts, models such as Klub's model and related questionnaires have been mentioned. He distinguishes learning style and cognitive style. He states that "cognitive styles can be seen as equivalents of the colors proper, whereas learning styles are the manifestations of the colors in the real world" (p. 160).

Chapter 6 covers language learning strategies and self-determination, a brief description of learning strategies is given and the author takes a look at related literature. Besides, issues such as strategies used by language learners LLs in different cultures are raised, but worse luck, although this topic could be discussed in a little more detail, the author only suffices with one paragraph. Although, reading the subtitle, the author is expected to cite at least a few "learning strategies across cultures" as examples of differences between ethnicities and cultures in employing leaders, but this section ends with only an

example of Soviet immigrants. In the continuation of this section, Dörnyei deals with the effect of gender, field of study and some other variables of individual differences in the use of learning strategies. Related tests for measuring strategies are introduced as in previous chapters and in line with that, issues related to self-determination are discussed.

Chapter seven, which is in fact, can be seen as the last chapter related to individual differences IDs under the general heading of other characteristics of the learner, some very significant and less-studied topics such as anxiety, creativity, communication desire, self-esteem, and learner's beliefs are discussed. I loved this chapter's inclusion, because it opens a great gate for researchers to study these shifting items which tend to have an impact on SLA in a significant manner.

The book ends with Chapter 8, which has only two pages, and as its title suggests, it covers the conclusion of the book, with references, but the work lacks a list of forms, diagrams and questionnaires. Furthermore, the last chapter summarizes the main themes for further studies about individual differences IDs in the future, which are; the atmosphere of second language learning (L2 nature), possibility in optimal structure of the sophisticated methods about shifting items, which contains individual differences, and lastly, the relationship between individual differences and processes of second language acquisition SLA.

#### 4. Evaluation

This book has been written to answer questions about controversial constructs, availability of them and understanding their roles. Accordingly, he states that his key concern in each chapter was to define the concepts in question and to operationalize them in measurable terms, which is also why the text is accompanied by the descriptions of the most important assessment instruments. (p.3)

The author designs the structure of the book on the individual differences expressed earlier by Skehan and Robinson. From Dörnyei's own statements in the introduction of the book, he clarifies that the objective of writing the book is to clarify the concept of variables of individual differences IDs. He believes that:

Most of the ID variables are associated with a complex and rather diverse body of research and theorizing within the field of psychology, and the greatest problem in using these variables in L2 studies has been, in my view, the lack of sufficient theoretical coherence (Dörnyei, 2005, P.3).

This book is a substantial resource because, in thoroughly reviewing the literature, the author provides succinct summaries of many prominent instruments used to measure different ID variables (Zheng, 2006).

#### 5. Strengths

Dörnyei's book helps educators and researchers to

provide the tools to further explore ID variables and suggestions on how to structure them. By studying the book, along with its configuration and content, we can point out three positive and basic points:

Firstly, in terms of cognitive resources, sufficient use of basic resources available in the field of second language acquisition, and the use of these resources in the field of psychology of the learner, and, most of the references used are basic resources such as studies of Skehan, Robinson, and Anderson.

Secondly, as mentioned before, and according to the first objective of the book, the author has tried to provide definitions for the concepts in each chapter, and most significantly, he has referred to its literature in a best manner. This characteristic of the Dörnyei's book regulates the reader's mind and the reader comes to a basic understanding of the reasons for introducing and studying the desired concept. In addition theories and approaches are expressed as a complementary process and the overall titles of the chapters with the subheading of each chapter are consistent. Apart from that, at the end of each chapter, the author provides a summary of the contents in the conclusion section, and he expresses his personal opinion on the subject.

Finally, according to the main objective of the author in writing this book, in each chapter, by mentioning the previous researches, Dörnyei has tried to enlighten the reader's mind to some extent about, what has been done so far and to explain the role and possible effects of these variables; Therefore, in each chapter of the book, a large number of previous studies of researches are mentioned so that the author can convince the reader more easily.

#### 6. Weaknesses

Considering that Zoltán Dörnyei's book has been very successful in explaining some concepts such as motivation, but observing some points could make the book somehow unique in the field; therefore, its humble idea to share some viewpoints as weaknesses of the book; Firstly, this work is rich in terms of the number of references used and its bibliography has over 550 titles of books and articles, but almost references of the book are European and American context-based studies, in contrast ,a handful of them are Asian studies, and the book will be speechless in answering some biggest questions, while these studies have been conducted in European and American countries and on language learners in these contexts, if you just change sociocultural contexts, either the results will be the same? Do language learners in Asian contexts (for eg.) have the same attitudes and perceptions to questions of such studies? Overall references of the book classified among European and American and only nine studies carried out in Japan as an Asian context. So, with highlighting the point that, the references of the book have not been well collected , the book has not been able to organize cross-cultural studies, can it provide a correct understanding of concepts such as; personality?

Secondly, Although Dörnyei's book becomes a main resource for Language departments (ELT, TESOL, Applied Linguistics, & Language Studies for eg.) at universities and institutions around the world especially Middle East, it can be seen as weak point when you can't apply same understanding of concepts to language learners, for instance, In Iran, people are expected to refrain from arrogance and express their intentions indirectly, whereas in Western culture, people are encouraged to speak recklessly and directly. In this case, if a researcher from the West carries out a study about the discourse of two Iranian learners, he/she may consider them to be shy people who speak very complexly. However, if the same research is done by an Iranian scholar, the result will not be like this (Pishghadam and Attaran, 2015).

The last important point which can be mentioned is the philosophical perspective of the book. The reader is introduced to a brief history of the concepts presented; but the philosophical understanding of these concepts remains unanswered in his mind. In this book, Dörnyei does not state that concepts such as motivation, intelligence and talent have matured in which period of belief and philosophical school, and what has been the effect of those philosophical thoughts and interpretations on these concepts? Or what were the preconditions for the emergence of these concepts? Moreover, in this book, critical issues are not raised at all, and it seems that the author has sought to mention the concepts in an algorithmic order and to avoid challenging them, which can be seen as a gap of this book.

## 7. Conclusion

Zoltán Dörnyei's book 'The psychology of language learner; Individual differences in second language acquisition', provides a wide vision, to offer an additional review about current developments in expanding shifting items and variables about the differences in language learners. Although, the book can be suggested to be the main resource for students and higher education scholars, researchers and Ph.D. candidates, who engage with psycholinguistics, and ELT teachers and trainers whose objectives, are fulfilled with the needs of dimensional understanding in SLA. However, it should be counted into consideration that this book does not examine the socio-cultural aspects that affect learners and because of the emphasized focus on Westernization, It does not match with the influential of intercultural study flow; Also, the philosophical perspectives of the concepts and how they are shape-upped remain unanswered questions to the reader.

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