

INDIVIDUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN AN EFL CLASSROOM : Some Differences

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ABSTRACT

In the field of education, we do not only concentrate on the knowledge we will deliver, but also consider those who will receive it. Learners play a crucial role in the teaching and learning process because they are integral to it. Learners can differ in psychological, social, and environmental aspects, as well as in their culture and background. However, these differences impact learners' performance in class, as they will develop at different rates, affecting the achievement of the learning objectives. Investigating EFL learners is essential because their diverse psychological, cognitive, environmental, and cultural differences strongly influence classroom dynamics and teaching effectiveness, making it crucial to understand how these variations shape learning outcomes. This research aims to discover suitable teaching strategies to face the differences among individuals and to know the impacts of those differences in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. To address the issues, we have used a qualitative research method through questionnaires with participants from Madagascar and Indonesia. The result of the study has shown us that learners' differences have both positive and negative feedback. To face those, better to use different approaches such as the genre-based approach, differentiated instruction, and good teaching scaffolding

Keywords: *Differentiated Instruction, EFL Classroom, Individual Language Learners, Teaching Approach*

INTRODUCTION

In the process of teaching and learning, three elements are crucial, and all need special attention if we would like to have an effective classroom session, which are the students, the teachers, and the knowledge that we would like to transmit. Those elements are interdependent, and if one fails, the whole objective of the course will fail as well (Hill & Chin, 2018). As the main focus of this research is on students, we will concentrate on individual language learners with all their differences. As human beings, we are born differently. We were raised in a different culture and have our respective backgrounds. Although learners will be combined in one classroom and will all be treated the same, as students, they have their own behavior, beliefs, characteristics, and learning styles, and those differences make all of us unique and special. However, those differences are challenges in the teaching and learning process because even if the teacher prepares the perfect material, it will not suit all individuals' characteristics. Besides, as they have their own learning style and learning strategies, the way learners will perceive a situation and the way they will solve it will be all different (Wahyuni et al., 2021). To solve that issue, this research aims to find

impactful methods and strategies to deal with differences in individual language learners in an EFL classroom. As Cardino & Ortega-Dela Cruz (2020) mentioned in their work, effective teaching strategies require flexibility, creativity, and responsibility to provide an instructional environment to respond to the learner's individual needs. It is crucial, then, to find suitable learning strategies to address learners' differences and also to help teachers deal with those differences

The Complex Systems Theory is the first fundamental theory that addresses the differences among individual language learners. By viewing language learners as part of a dynamic, interrelated system of variables, this approach investigates individual differences in language acquisition. It strengthens the case that learner variables must be viewed holistically rather than in isolation (Verspoor & Lowie, 2021). The second fundamental theory is the Socio-Cultural Theory proposed by Lee Vygotsky, which highlights how individual differences in social and cultural backgrounds can affect language acquisition. This theory emphasizes that individual language learners come from different backgrounds, cultures, and environments, which will affect the language learning process, as all learners originate differently (Rahmatirad, 2020). In this research, we are going to investigate the impact of individual language learners' differences on the teaching and learning process in an EFL Classroom and discover suitable teaching strategies for dealing with those differences.

This research will help both language learners and language teachers overcome differences in the classroom to have effective learning and teaching sessions. It will also give a clear understanding of the importance of individual language learners in an EFL classroom. Last but not least, this research will provide practical teaching strategies for teachers to deal with individual language learners' differences. Individual language learners, according to (Kocaman, 2025), refer to learners who actively acquire a new language and adapt their learning strategies to fit and reach their learning goals. As the term highlights the individual, we understand that those learners differ from one another, and that difference, in one way, makes us unique. However, it also gives both learners and teachers challenges in the teaching and learning process. Differences in individual language learners can be understood in different scopes, such as cognitive, psychological, social, and environmental factors, even if they all have the same status as learners (Srivastava et al., 2024).

Many researchers have been concentrating their studies on giving us clear explanations of individual language learners' differences, as it has crucial importance to

make the teaching and learning process successful. Yang & Gao (2025) emphasized in their work that when teachers are aware of and take into account individual language learners' differences, their teaching process is successful because raising that awareness helps them become not only a teacher but also a psychologist who understands their learners very well and can modify his/her teaching methods according to the circumstances. Those differences can be understood through many characteristics, but what we can say is that learners' variability depends on each individual.

Age-Related Difference

The most common characteristic discussed in other studies is age-related differences. Generally, learning a foreign language is believed to be more effective at a certain age. Other researchers claim that language learning is easier before the age of puberty, and other findings give controversial explanations. According to Anne Trafton, learning a language will be successful if it does not exceed the age of 18; if more than that, a learner will not achieve the proficiency of likely native speakers (*Cognitive Scientists Define Critical Period for Learning Language*, 2018). That is also explained by the Critical Period Hypothesis, which is defined as a short period of language acquisition that is determined by the learners' behavior, occurring between the ages of 2 and 3 (n.d.). However, the acquisition of an L2 is not only dictated by biological explanations such as the development of flexibility in our brain, but it varies depending on circumstance and situation (Griffiths, 2008). Because of those age-related differences, it affects individuals in their language learning, such as in the affective scope, creating different emotional variables, which are language and culture shock and social pressure. Moreover, it is believed that young learners, when it comes to language learning, excel faster than adults; however, Krashen contradicts the fact that young learners do not excel faster than adults in his Monitor model theory. As an adult is already equipped with amazing life experience, knowledge, and the ability to negotiate communication and to think critically and logically, they can create their strategies and progress faster in their language learning journey (Krashen, 1977).

Language Learning Strategies and Styles

The other characteristic of individual language learners that is mostly discussed is individual learning strategies and learning styles. O'Malley and colleagues defined language learning strategies broadly as any set of operations or steps used by a learner that will facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, or use of information. Oxford (1990) described

language learning strategies as specific acts made by the student to make learning easier, faster, more fun, more self-directed, more successful, and transferable to other settings (Srivastava et al., 2024). Thus, those choices of style and strategies vary according to learners' preferences and personalities, and those choices impact the teaching and learning process.

The research article written by Dr. Namita Srivastava, Navodit, and Dr. Vijay Kumar (2014) distinguishes each individual by their cognitive, psychological, social, and environmental factors. Language teachers need to understand those differences to help learners in their language learning and their study progress. Individual language learner differences are defined by different factors such as motivation, age, gender, learning strategies, and personality (Srivastava et al., 2024). Having the same point of view is the work of Sujono in the article entitled “*Understanding the Differences in Second Language Acquisition Processes on Children and Adults*” (2020). His work characterizes individual differences by the psychological aspect, which includes intellectual processing, memory, and motor skills, by the social situation, including the natural situation, like a child who moves to another country and acquires another language, and a classroom situation in which students learn a foreign language in a planned situation. He also defines language learners' differences through other psychological variables such as language and community context, motivation, and attitude (Sujono, 2020).

The Tiered Task or Tiered Assignment

As the main objective of this research is to find impactful strategies to deal with differences in individual language learners in an EFL classroom, there exists already another research report which tries to align with our objective. The research work written by Pradana Akbar Tanjung and Ashad entitled “*Differentiated Instruction in Accommodating Individual Differences of EFL Students*” gives us in detail how differentiated instruction helps teachers in dealing with individual language learners' differences. Ramaila (2025) defines differentiated instruction as a teaching approach designed to facilitate effective learning for diverse students. This method ensures that each student has the opportunity to reach their full potential by tailoring educational activities to their individual needs and showcasing various pathways for language learning within the classroom. This strategy focuses on the content, the process, and the product. For the activity, it emphasizes the tiered task or tiered assignment where instructions are delivered differently to students without neglecting the

objective of the lesson that they achieve. As it takes into account individual language learners' differences, tiered tasks deal with the same concept and skills, but learners will learn at different levels of complexity and sophistication. This strategy was a success in supporting the learning needs of the students while taking into consideration their differences (Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019).

Different research work on a topic means that one issue is worth it to be raised. In the teaching and learning process, considering individual differences is crucial to make the session effective and to help both teachers and learners reach their learning objectives. According to the research elaborated above, what can be said is that individual language learners' differences can be characterized by their age, their learning styles and strategies, and cognitive, sociological, psychological, and environmental factors. The strategies of differentiated instruction are a good technique as they consider individual differences by focusing on the learning objective. However, that strategy still faces challenges as it is considered time-consuming, especially when we are facing a class with a large number of students. It also increases the load as learners have their own needs and their own way of finishing a task. Last but not least, it needs a qualified teacher, as it requires extraordinary work. Those challenges do not mean that the tiered assignment is a failure; it is another way for teachers to stay positive and be creative by exploring alternative strategies to address differences among individual language learners.

While much research on individual learner differences has focused on widely studied contexts, this study contributes a novel perspective by examining EFL classrooms in Madagascar and Indonesia, two underrepresented educational settings. By situating learner variability within these distinct cultural and pedagogical environments, the research offers fresh insights into how psychological, cognitive, environmental, and cultural factors interact, and how teachers can adapt strategies such as differentiated instruction and scaffolding to diverse realities.

METHOD

Research Design and Data Collection

This research used a qualitative research method through questionnaires with open-ended questions. This method has been chosen to be compatible with this study, as it provides for a comprehensive investigation of real-world classroom experiences, capturing the voices, actions, and views of instructors and students in the teaching and learning process

(Levy, 2015). Lenna Zipp emphasized that the use of qualitative methods with open-ended questionnaires also helps respondents to be free in answering their questions and for us to get even unexpected responses that may be relevant to our research work (Zipp, 2022). It was employed to investigate how EFL teachers understand differences in individual language learners and to discover what techniques or strategies they use to deal with these differences.

Research site and participants

The population of this research is selected in-service English teachers pursuing their master's degree at the University of Education of Indonesia, selected in-service English teachers who graduated from the Education University of Madagascar (*Ecole Normale Supérieure Ampefiloha, Antananarivo, Madagascar*), and selected in-service English teachers from a public Junior High School of Tsararivotra, Madagascar. Because this study aimed to explore teachers' perspectives on individual learner differences, purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants had relevant teaching experience and represented varied educational contexts. Selection was based on their current teaching level (primary school, junior high school, and senior high school) so that responses would reflect a range of classroom realities.

The number of participants is 11 people, as 3 of them teach in Primary schools in Indonesia and Madagascar, 4 of them teach in Junior high schools in Indonesia and Madagascar, and 3 of them teach in Senior high schools in Indonesia and Madagascar. To address the research questions, data were collected from the questionnaires sent to all participants with their consent.

The questions in the questionnaires were formulated as follows:

1. Do you agree that individual language learners are different? Participants were given a choice between Yes and No,
2. How do you define individual language learners?
3. In what ways do you think individual learners differ from each other when it comes to language learning?
 - Psychological aspect
 - Cognitive aspect
 - Environmental aspect
 - Culture, and background

- Personality and behavior
- 4. As a language teacher, which teaching strategy/technique do you use to deal with individual language learners' differences?
- 5. What is the impact of Individual language learners' differences in an EFL classroom?

Data Procedure

To obtain the data for the research, questionnaires were shared with participants through Google Forms. The link was sent personally to their WhatsApp number for those residing in Indonesia, and for those in Madagascar, the link was sent through the Messenger app and Email. Participants were given 2 days to reflect and give their responses to the questions through the Google Form.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analysed to discover how in-service teachers from Indonesia and Madagascar understand the concept of individual language learners, what differences among learners impact the learning and the teaching process, and how those in-service teachers encounter those differences to make their teaching sessions effective.

To start with, 90% of the participants agree that individual language learners are different, whereas 10% disagree. When participants were asked to define individual language learners, the participants saw them as independent students who are willing to learn a language, who are unique, and who have their own learning strategy. A participant answered: *“Individual language learners are unique in how they learn, based on their background, goals, and preferences. This means they need different approaches to succeed.”*

When participants were asked in what ways they think individual learners differ from each other when it comes to language learning? Psychological aspect, cognitive aspect, environmental aspect, culture, background, personality, and behavior? As they were given multiple-choice questions and could give more than one answer, 40% of them agreed on the psychological aspect, 60% on the cognitive aspect, 50% environmental aspect, 80% on culture and background, and 60% agreed that personality and behavior an aspect of learners' differentiation.

When they were asked about the teaching strategies/techniques that they use to deal with individual language learners' differences, the responses of participants were almost alike, although half of them are Indonesians and half of them are Malagasy. As a teaching strategy, they use differentiated teaching strategies, approaches, and instruction; *“To deal*

with individual language learners' differences, I use various teaching strategies like project-based learning, task-based learning, differentiated instruction, etc". Participants also try to adjust teaching activities and feedback according to learners' character; "I used to adjust my response or my approach according to each student's character. I believe that different characters of students need different approaches to help them learn effectively".

Last but not least, in-service English teachers, acknowledge learners' differences by taking into account learners' comfortable way of learning and by trying to provide a safe environment for them by giving all students a chance to participate in class; *"My strategy is I try to make each student in my classroom feel that they all matter, each of them. I don't focus only on the talkative ones or the active ones, but I try to make an environment where everyone participates, and when any of them has difficulty understanding or doing an activity, I encourage them to ask questions."*

For the impact of Individual language learners' differences in an EFL classroom, according to participants' answers, we can categorize them into two clear sections, which are the positive impact and the negative impact. For the positive one, they assume that both learners and teachers will encounter different teaching strategies and activities, thus, that will awaken creativity; *"The impact of individual language learners in EFL relies on different teaching methods teachers use, collaborative learning, and an inclusive learning environment".* Besides, learners' differences will also help students to become more autonomous; *"That can motivate students to learn autonomously".* For the negative side of the differentiation in individual language learners, participants said that it creates a workload for teachers as they need to maintain the learning goals, it is also time-consuming, especially for a large classroom, and it is a big challenge for teachers; *"The bad one is that it is time-consuming, especially for a large class. Trying to assess the performance of each learner is quite challenging and time-consuming."*

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

This section presents the results of the study, focusing on the impact of individual language learners' differences on the teaching and learning process in an EFL Classroom, and to discover suitable teaching strategies to face that difference. The findings are qualitative data, addressing the research questions. Through the analysis, we succeeded in giving a theme to each response to the questions that needed reflection from participants.

Table 1. Questions from the questionnaires and themes of data analysis

Questions	Themes
How do you define individual language learners?	Independent students have their unique strategies for learning
In what ways do you think individual learners differ from each other when it comes to language learning?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Psychological aspect 2. Cognitive aspect 3. Environmental aspect 4. Culture and Background 5. Personality and behavior
As a language teacher, which teaching strategy/technique do you use to deal with individual language learners' differences?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Differentiated instruction, strategies, and approaches 2. Adjusting teaching activity and feedback according to learners' characteristics 3. Providing a safe environment for learners
What is the impact of Individual language learners' differences in an EFL classroom?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Positive impact: Use of different learning strategies that will result in creativity and learners' autonomy 2. Negative impact: Workload, challenges, and time-consuming

DISCUSSION

The findings directly address the central issues of this study: the impact of individual language learners' differences on the teaching and learning process in an EFL classroom, and the strategies teachers adopt to manage those differences. It can be said that most language teachers agree that their students are all different in many aspects. That variability can be both positive and negative to the teacher and students. In terms of classroom impact, the results show that learner differences generate both positive outcomes, such as creativity, autonomy, and inclusive learning opportunities, and negative outcomes, including workload, time consumption, and challenges in large classes. This demonstrates how variability among learners shapes classroom dynamics and influences the effectiveness of teaching.

A classroom full of different students means that the teacher needs to use different teaching strategies, such as a Genre-based approach, a good scaffolding, an Activity-based, Content-based, and Discovery-based approach (Hattie, 2009). This means that learners' differences will allow the teacher to be creative and use all the existing resources to make the teaching and learning process effective. However, that difference among individuals can be a challenge for teachers as adopting suitable strategies to fit individual characteristics and needs, yet it may not suit each learner (Vajpeyi, n.d.). Besides, using different approaches

and embracing those differences will create workload and time consumption for the teachers themselves, yet handling a classroom, especially with a large number of students, is already a big challenge for them (Ab. Wahab et al., 2024).

With regard to teaching strategies, the findings highlight differentiated instruction, scaffolding, and adaptive approaches as the most effective techniques. Teachers reported adjusting activities and feedback to learners' characteristics and creating safe environments where all students can participate. These practices illustrate how teachers respond to learner diversity in practical ways, ensuring inclusivity and responsiveness in their classrooms.

These results, concerning the strategies used by the teachers to handle individual language learners' differences, align with the work of Tanjung and Ashad (Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019) concerning differentiated instruction strategies. The findings have shown that to acknowledge learners' differentiation and to make the teaching session successful, it is better to use differentiated instruction that suits each individual to allow all of them to learn effectively.

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that individual language learners differ from one another in multiple aspects, including psychological, environmental, and cultural backgrounds. These differences shape classroom dynamics and influence both teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes. The study contributes by highlighting how such variability can be both a source of creativity, encouraging teachers to explore diverse strategies, and a challenge, adding workload and requiring careful adaptation of methods. The findings show that acknowledging learner differences has clear implications: teachers can foster autonomy and inclusivity through approaches such as differentiated instruction, task-based learning, genre-based approaches, and scaffolding. At the same time, these strategies demand significant time and effort, especially in large classrooms, underscoring the need for practical classroom management solutions. By situating the investigation in Madagascar and Indonesia, two underrepresented contexts, this research adds a novel perspective to the literature on EFL education. It emphasizes that learner diversity is not only universal but also context-specific, requiring teachers to adapt strategies to local realities. The contribution lies in providing evidence that embracing learner differences can enhance creativity and inclusivity, while also pointing to the practical challenges teachers face in balancing effectiveness with feasibility.

Limit of the Study and Future Research Recommendations

The plan when designing the research was to have as many participants as we could. We plan to include not only primary school, junior high school, and high school in-service teachers, but also in-service English lecturers, who were not able to participate in the research due to several personal reasons. Besides, we wanted more participants to answer the questionnaires; however, only a few of them have responded. As a result, we only had 11 participants, which is half of those expected. Some participants from Madagascar were also difficult to reach due to technological issues. Because of that, we could not get varied responses to the questionnaires as expected.

As it is mentioned in the impact of the individual language learners' differences using different strategies to embrace that difference is time-consuming, it will be interesting in future research to look for suitable classroom management strategies while considering students' differences, because that is a fact that EFL teachers will always face wherever and whenever.

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