

*Aptitude as a cognitive/affective construct
and its role in the language classroom*

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Abstract

This paper begins with a brief look at developments in individual differences research, in particular Dornyei's (2010) discussion of the individual differences 'myth'. It then moves on to discuss the confusion surrounding the word 'aptitude' and the different ways in which it is used in SLA literature. These sections make clear the necessity of considering both cognitive and affective factors in the assessment of a learner's context-dependent situational aptitude. The main focus of the article, however, is to raise a number of suggestions as to how individual testing of learners' situational aptitude might be used in the classroom in order to improve learner outcomes. It is suggested that analysis of learners could be used to set by aptitude, to reduce anxiety and raise motivation, and to introduce fairer and more motivational grading frameworks. There follows a discussion of the concept of individualization of teaching and learning programs and the advantages it might afford to learners and teachers. These suggestions are intended to provide a basis for future investigative work which will allow theoretical developments to be put to use in language classrooms.

1. Introduction

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), individual differences research has generally been focused on explaining how the processes of learning and acquisition

work, rather than looking for ways to improve them. Teaching methodologies and the materials produced to translate them into classroom practice assume not only the same destination for each learner but also provide each with an identical path towards it. Conventional language courses give learners very little scope to make choices and take no notice whatsoever of the strengths and weaknesses of the individual. All learners are treated alike and the learner whose talents are not developed, whose interest is not aroused and whose thinking is not challenged, simply scores lower in the final, end-of-course test, or perhaps fails it altogether; the usual remedy for which being to take it all over again.

There are two noticeable exceptions to this rule, but both are such commonsense measures that it is questionable whether they are actually the result of research findings or simply a necessity in the expanding textbook and materials markets: they are different books for different age groups, and the clear, if sometimes rather clumsy, attempts to use topics and formats that will appeal to learners, especially teenagers, and raise their level of interest. In both cases, however, although the group of learners is differentiated from other groups, the individuals within the group are treated identically. Children's books may be based on research into how children learn, but all children are assumed to learn alike; teenagers are enticed with celebrity photos, comic-strip romances and a magazine style lay-out, but for the individual who does not fit the stereotype and is not excited by these things, no alternative is on offer.

Sections 2 and 3 below provide theoretical preliminaries setting out the background against which the practical suggestions in section 4 are made. It should also be noted that those suggestions presuppose a regime of individual testing of learners prior to their beginning language courses which is not described in detail. A number of tools do already exist and my own combination of tests is still under construction, a process which is described in a recent paper (Hinton 2014).

2. Individual differences

This section is not intended as a review, however brief, of individual differences research. Rather, it will serve to note certain aspects of that research with underlie the classroom applications discussed below and in particular to highlight an area of debate sparked by Zoltan Dörnyei's exposure of what he calls the *individual differences myth* (Dörnyei 2010). Dörnyei's argument, essentially, is that, given the complex nature of the various individual differences which have traditionally been identified, continued reference to them as unitary and distinct is untenable. He begins by noting that aptitude has generally been considered the most important cognitive factor and motivation the most influential affective one. He believes that a "more fruitful approach is to focus on certain higher-order

combinations of different attributes – or trait complexes – that act as integrated wholes” (Dörnyei 2010: 248). This is because these attributes are “neither stable nor context-independent” (Dörnyei 2010: 251). A further concern is the degree of interaction between them. Dörnyei shows this through examples of how motivation is influenced by and, indeed, dependent on cognition, but it could equally be done by showing how aptitude is affected by emotions.

His response to this is to advocate a dynamic systems approach and try to identify what he calls “constellations whereby the cognitive and the motivational (and also the emotional) subsystems of the human mind cooperate in a constructive manner” (Dörnyei 2010: 265). He has recently further elaborated this method by describing the use of *retrodictive qualitative modeling* (Dörnyei 2014) and Peter MacIntyre has responded to the challenge by conducting a number of studies using his idiodynamic method (MacIntyre and Legatto 2011; MacIntyre 2012).

None of this has to mean, necessarily, that reference to and measurement of, particular attributes is pointless and meaningless. What is essential is that it is understood that they do not operate alone and in isolation and that any examination of an individual which focuses on one element, be it cognitive or affective, is not only gaining an incomplete picture of the individual as a whole, but also an incomplete picture of how the element being studied operates in its interactions and relationships.

3. What is aptitude?

Although the concept of *language learning aptitude* did exist before his work, and a great deal of new research has been done since, it is John Carroll’s definition and testing of it which is best known and has been most influential. This is somewhat problematic since the definition which he offered does not, by his own admission, match exactly what the test with which he is associated, the MLAT (*Modern Language Aptitude Test*), purports to test. In addition to that confusion, many researchers in the succeeding half-century, have felt that the concept of aptitude should include a number of factors which Carroll did not think integral to it. There are, therefore, three very different ways in which the term *language learning aptitude* can be understood and it is not always clear in the SLA literature which of these ways is being employed.

Carroll (1965) originally defined aptitude as consisting of four separate abilities: phonetic coding, rote learning, grammar sensitivity and inductive learning. Only three of these, however, are actually assessed by the tasks in the MLAT: there is no test of inductive learning ability. If aptitude is what Carroll defines it as, then the MLAT does not fully test it. Yet numerous studies of the effect of aptitude scores on learning use the MLAT as their measurement tool

and Carroll's theory as its support. The difference between these two understandings of aptitude is not vast and the consensus generally seems to be to accept that aptitude refers to Carroll's concept and that the MLAT is a reasonably good test of it.

The situation amongst specialist aptitude researchers, however, is very different. Although Carroll's work provides an important backdrop and is a major influence, these researchers do not regard the word 'aptitude' as belonging to him and are not restricted in their use of it to the bounds he sets. Indeed, some, such as Dörnyei and Skehan, have been scathing in their criticism of Carroll's definition, calling it 'tactical' and suggesting it was created retrospectively to give the tests Carroll used some theoretical weight, when, in fact, they had been decided upon purely through a process of trial and error (Dörnyei and Skehan 2003: 593). The various definitions offered by researchers differ widely from one another, but what they have in common is the belief that foreign language learning aptitude refers to characteristics of the individual learner which affect his facility for learning languages, and that what those characteristics are is very much an open question. Thus Pimsleur (1966) included a measure of motivation in his language aptitude battery; Skehan suggested that traditional aptitude tests predicted success well because they tapped into the ability to handle "decontextualized language" (Skehan 1986: 108) rather than the four elements Carroll proposed, and, more recently, together with Wen that working memory was, in fact, the key element in aptitude (Wen and Skehan 2011); the CANAL-F (*Cognitive Ability for Novelty in Acquisition of Language – Foreign*) theory sees aptitude as dynamic and based on the ability to deal with novelty (Grigorenko et al. 2000); and Robinson (2005: 59-60) has pointed out that "aptitude tests predicting success in early and later learning in language programs will look somewhat different" since he does not believe that cognitive factors alone can account for success at higher levels of language use. Much of this work has been driven by changing attitudes to what constitutes success in language learning. Ellis (1985: 114) notes the possibility that "new measures of aptitude need to be developed, as both the *Modern Language Aptitude Test* and the *Language Aptitude Battery* measure skills that appear to belong more to academic than to communicative proficiency".

This paper will not investigate the relative merits of these conceptions. The goal here is to clarify the way in which the concept of aptitude is understood in the following sections. Carrollian aptitude may be referred to by that name or as 'traditional' aptitude, but I take aptitude to be situational and heavily context-dependent. A measure of aptitude, therefore, is a measure of the ability and potential of each individual to do well on a particular course in a particular language at a particular time. If that course involves speaking, which it generally

does, then the aptitude scale ought to include elements which affect speaking skills, such as readiness to talk and mimicry ability (Purcell and Suter 1980). This last factor has received a good deal of attention in recent years, particularly from Susan Reiterer, whose team has investigated links between brain activity and mimicry ability (Reiterer et al. 2011; Reiterer et al. 2013), and also in my own work on the relationships between mimicry ability, affective factors and pronunciation (Hinton 2013a, 2014). Even if the concept of aptitude being, at its core, a cognitive factor is maintained, it is still clear that without motivation, or in the presence of overriding anxiety, that aptitude will not be mobilized. Even Carroll himself later seemed to accept this (Carroll 1981: 84):

Aptitude as a concept corresponds to the notion that in approaching a particular task or program, the individual may be thought of as possessing some current state of capability of learning that task – if the individual is motivated, and has the opportunity of doing so.

It seems sensible, therefore, to measure as aptitude the extent to which cognitive abilities might actually be utilised in a particular environment rather than the extent to which the individual theoretically possesses them.

4. Classroom applications

This section will outline a number of suggestions for how the results of individual analysis of learners can be put to use in the language teaching classroom. The methods described make use of situational aptitude scores, based on assumed testing of cognitive abilities, such as working memory and the use of language manipulation exercises found in traditional aptitude tests; practical skills such as mimicry; and survey information concerning affective and attitudinal aspects. Issues such as improving motivation and reducing anxiety are not dealt with directly, but rather through their interaction with aptitude. There are, therefore, no motivational techniques or suggestions as to how classrooms might be arranged and classes conducted in order to reduce the levels of stress felt by those learning in them. Such strategies as these, valuable though they might be, lie outside the scope of this paper. It is also important to note that these suggestions are just that: suggestions for further investigation. They are not recommendations as neither their effects nor practicality have been studied, and the intention of this paper is to raise awareness of what might possibly be done and encourage debate on the individualization of language learning rather than to describe tried and tested methodological approaches.

4.1. Setting by aptitude

Setting is the practice of dividing groups by ability in a particular subject, rather than streaming an individual within a school, where he is placed in a higher or lower group for all subjects, or sending learners to different institutions, such as Grammar schools in the UK, based on an overall measure of academic ability or potential. Setting is extremely common in both private language schools and state education systems. Sometimes this is a relatively straightforward process of dividing learners into beginners, intermediate or advanced groups via the use of a placement test to assess what they already know. How successful this process is will depend in large part on the number of groups to be formed and the range of learners' previous attainment: the more groups there are, the less important is the difference between each of them, and, therefore, the smaller are the consequences for a learner inappropriately assigned, and, when initial knowledge varies from the truly advanced to the complete beginner, the necessity of division is clear and the basis for it obvious. Private language schools catering for all types and levels of students will probably find, therefore, that the usual system of placement tests is inevitable.

The situation within schools, however, is far more complex. Every country, of course, has a different system, so I shall take the Polish system as an example, as there is nothing particularly radical or unusual about it. Whilst there is generally no system of streaming or setting for other subjects, it is common practice to divide foreign language classes in two, a more advanced group and a less advanced group. Due to timetabling issues, this division may then be maintained in other subjects as well, increasing the educational consequences of making it. In primary schools, this usually takes place after the third year of study, at the age of 9-10, and pupils are categorized again when they start new schools as they advance through the education system.

The separation of pupils is made on the same basis as in language schools – current ability to complete a pen and paper test. The fairness of making it, however, is far more questionable. Firstly, since there are only two groups, there is a real danger of labelling learners as successes or failures, and, secondly, there are many factors influencing current knowledge which are not indicative of potential for future attainment. These may include poor previous teaching, extended absence from school due to illness, late cognitive development or, with the reverse effect, time spent abroad and access to private tutoring. It should also be noted that the principal rationale for dividing students, that they are at different stages in the learning process, is far less relevant in the school situation. The actual amount of material covered in three years of primary school teaching is not large and the differences in knowledge shown in the placement test may easily

be made up by a talented/motivated learner. The word 'knowledge', let me point out, is used here advisedly: placement tests do not usually set out to assess performance either oral or written, being largely concerned with measuring familiarity with grammatical and lexical items.

It might, then, be appropriate to examine other ways of splitting classes, given that learning is likely to be more effective in smaller groups, than initial knowledge. Possibilities would include dividing by an overall aptitude score or by aptitude for different kinds of learning; one group might take a more analytical, text-based approach and another do more communicative work. This is not to say that pupils should be divided according to their preferred learning style: rather that where the possibility exists to teach in slightly different ways and two groups must be formed from one, aptitude for one way of teaching could be the decisive factor.

In addition to the potential weaknesses of dividing groups by placement tests outlined above, there are two further arguments to be made in favor of aptitude setting, one taking the form of a question, the other an example. Firstly, the question: why are the groups divided? If the answer is only that pupils are better off in smaller groups, then the division could be made alphabetically. That it is not suggests that the different characters of the two groups will be reflected somehow in the activities they undertake in the classroom. And yet, in the Polish system at least, the two groups have the same textbooks, the same program and are prepared for the same examinations until they reach the final school-leaving examination which has a basic and an extended level. How then do the activities of the stronger and weaker groups differ? They differ in the only ways they can, by a slightly faster pace for the stronger and the inclusion of some extra materials which are not part of the official program. There is, however, little reason to assume that those with greater initial knowledge are suited to a faster moving course, or that they are sufficiently motivated to take interest in work which lies outside the requirements of the official assessment framework. A test of aptitude including motivational and attitudinal aspects would appear far more likely to help teachers make an effective division of the class to suit the reality of the situation.

Then there is the example. By taking an extreme case we can see more easily the illogical nature of setting by current knowledge, or indeed current performance. Take a group of 30 learners to be divided into two sections after sitting a placement test. Imagine that one learner who has been studying English for four years ranks 12th on the list and another who started learning just 6 months previously ranks 17th. Which of the two is more likely to flourish in the faster moving group? Even when all the learners are pupils of the same age who have had the same classes, the amount of time and effort actually dedicated to learning may be widely different. There is no guarantee whatsoever that the diligent pupil who

has memorized the basics as instructed by his teacher and parents, actually possesses the talent to move quickly to a higher level of language use.

There is no doubt that setting by aptitude could cause teachers and learners significant difficulties in the short term, especially where differences in knowledge are wide, as some learners may struggle with gaps in their knowledge and others may be bored by repetition of material. However, in situations where the differences in level are not very large, groups brought together by similarities in themselves as learners rather than in their knowledge of the subject may, ultimately, be easier and more rewarding to teach, and lead to improved learner outcomes.

4.2. Reducing anxiety

It was stated at the head of this section that there would be no discussion of general measures to reduce foreign classroom anxiety. Part of what makes that so difficult is that not all learners are made anxious by the same thing: while answering in front of the class is stressful for everyone, a one-to-one conversation with the teacher might be absolutely terrifying for some and reassuring for others. A wide-ranging test of learning aptitude, however, should be able to expose weaknesses in the student's abilities; weaknesses which could lead to failure, which, in turn, is likely to lead to an increase in negative emotion. When a teacher knows about and understands these weaknesses, situations where the learner is set up to fail can be avoided, particularly at the beginning of the course, helping to prevent classroom anxiety building up in the first place.

Take the example of an averagely talented learner who happens to score very poorly on mimicry tests. With this knowledge in mind, the sensitive teacher can guard against exposing the learner to public embarrassment by requesting from him an immediate word repetition. My own studies (Hinton 2013a, 2014) have consistently shown that mimicry ability does correlate with foreign language pronunciation, but it is far from being the only factor, and those who cannot mimic a word at once can certainly learn to pronounce it in time. Being laughed at, or indeed, shouted at in class for 'cloth-eared' attempts to pronounce a new word is unlikely to help. One solution, of course, is to remove all stressful situations from the classroom, but the danger then is that along with the stress all sense of challenge and thus achievement is removed too, as well as the possible contribution of positive anxiety (see Oxford 1999). Knowledge of individual students means that public success can be enjoyed by some without public humiliation being heaped upon others.

Where this measure becomes particularly important is when it is used before the learner has formed any opinion of the language, the teacher and the learning environment in general, because first impressions can be lasting and a

bad experience at the beginning of the study process can have severe long-term effects on the learners affective state.

4.3. Improving motivation

This suggestion clearly has much in common with the one above. Again, it is not concerned with motivational techniques, which would need to be different for each individual anyway, but is based on an assessment of the links between aptitude engagement and level of motivation and may be as much about the removal of potentially demotivating factors as the inclusion of motivating ones. So, one method might be to repeat the process for reducing anxiety in reverse and identify each learner's strongest point. The teacher can then be sure to give tasks to this particular learner which rely on that skill to be reasonably sure of an encouraging result. It might be argued at this point that many learners, unfortunately, do not have any strong points, but that would be to misunderstand the whole concept of individualization: each person has his own strongest point, a skill in which he does better than he does on average. Since each learner's expectations are set by his own previous experiences of learning, the smallest amount of success may be encouraging for the weakest student.

The second possibility is to examine the learner's feelings about the language, the course and himself as a learner and seek to remove or emphasise certain elements in order to create and preserve positive emotional responses. To give an example: the degree to which the importance of the native speaking community is stressed can be varied according to the learner's view of that community, so while it might be a good idea to play on American culture themes with some students of English, others might be more favorably impressed by concentrating on the role of English as an international language, and might even be actively discouraged by images of Baseball games, rappers and Hollywood stars. A brief glance at any modern textbook reveals that great efforts have been made to make it seem appealing to the learners, yet it must be recognised that what is appealing to one is off-putting to others. Obviously, practical constraints limit the extent to which learners' individual preferences can be accommodated in group teaching, and this is a theme I shall return to, but that does not mean that nothing can be done and knowledge of those preferences is not valuable.

4.4. Fairer grading

In the United States, where foreign language courses often form part of the college study program for students of all subjects, traditional aptitude tests, such as the MLAT have begun to be used by those seeking exemptions on the basis

of a learning difficulty (see Reid and Stansfield 2002). The principle has been established at a number of institutions that it is unfair to treat those with low language learning aptitude the same as others with higher scores; it is, after all, not their own fault if they do poorly in foreign language classes. The ethics of this practice are not clear: there is an argument that a degree is a sign of facility in learning and that the foreign language component of the program exists precisely to test the all-round nature of the student's abilities. The process is also, obviously, open to abuse by those who simply want to avoid the effort of language learning, and the justification of using the test result as a basis for the waiver depends wholly on the relevance and reliability of the test used. It is important to remember that aptitude tests aim to assess the rate at which learning might be achieved: there is no reason to suppose that those with low aptitude are incapable of learning a foreign language, given the appropriate amount of effort and support.

That said, it does seem reasonable that in situations where language courses are compulsory, the length of the course is fixed, learners have other subjects to work on too and grading is necessary, such as in schools, the level of learners' aptitude could be taken into account when that grading is done. It would require quite a culture shift for teachers to begin to award marks for effort and progress, rather than simply for achievement, but in the learning of foreign languages, which utilizes such specific intellectual skills and relies so heavily upon affective factors, the awarding of grades based on potential realized as opposed to number of correct answers in an end of year test, could have a significant impact on the actual success of learners. This element, rather than simply introducing more fairness, is actually the most exciting point for teachers and is explained below in the discussion of how such a grading system might actually be implemented.

In practice, the system might look like this: the teacher takes the official guidelines as to what skills the learners should have at the end of the course as an average requirement, not a fixed standard for all. Then, on the basis of initial aptitude testing done at the beginning of the course, the teacher sets individual targets for each learner. Some learners will be expected to achieve more than the average, others less; and, crucially, the requirements do not have to be raised or lowered across the board, one student may have higher expectations in speaking but lower than average in grammar, for example. Although this method would clearly be inappropriate for examinations, which must allow schools, universities and employers to compare the abilities those taking them actually have, it has a number of advantages for teaching. This distinction between teaching and examination is an important one: in Polish schools, at least, it often goes unrecognized.

The advantages for weaker students are obvious. No longer would they be condemned to fight for a bare pass; with sufficient effort they might actually achieve top grades, something which would be a new and hugely encouraging experience. Also, since their strongest points could be emphasized in their assessment, they might actually find themselves moving off the bottom of the class in terms of absolute ability. With the possibility of doing well, rather than simply surviving, before them, the upward spiral of good grades-better motivation-better grades may be set in motion and replace the downward spiral of failure-anxiety-more failure. The suggestion here, then, is that weaker students are likely to achieve more, if the expectations on them are realistic and reachable, and the grading plays to their strengths not their weaknesses.

The average learner would be mostly unaffected, more might be expected of him in certain skills and less in others, but overall he would be looking to reach the same average requirements as before. The most talented learners, however, would also have a lot to gain. Good grades would no longer come so easily, coasting through classes would become a thing of the past, and that feeling of frustration familiar to all who have found themselves studying alongside less able fellows might, to a degree, be alleviated.

There are, however, two very problematic areas which arise when grading, rather than teaching materials, becomes reliant on individual assessment. Firstly, everyone, meaning students, parents and other teachers, must accept that the system is fair. For this to happen, there must be a high level of trust in the reliability of the tests used. Parent A will not be happy that his child received a B for 90% in a final test, when Parent B's child received an A for 75%, unless the system is properly explained, thoroughly understood and trusted by all involved. This presents a major challenge for researchers. Secondly, even if appropriate tools can be developed, they must, as far as possible, be immune from deliberate abuse. It is easy to imagine how some learners might be tempted to purposely score as badly as possible in order to receive the lowest possible expectations for the coming year, and cruise to a high mark. The obvious solution here runs directly counter to the first point: the less the learner understands about the testing process, the less able he is to 'fix' his results, so a certain opacity in the tools used would be an advantage. A better solution to this problem lies in the wise use of the statistics by the teacher. It was stated above that current knowledge and previous grades do not always match future potential, but where there is a wide discrepancy, there ought to be a reason. If an individual comes across as intelligent, gets good grades in other subjects but seems to take a rather casual approach to schoolwork, then the teacher may treat his very low aptitude score with a degree of suspicion. However, the fact that the score does not reflect his true potential, because he chose that it should not do so, is also

important information for the teacher and is obviously indicative of motivational problems which can then be addressed. The key is the creation of a culture of cooperation and aspiration where pupils are not simply looking for the easy way out. For this reason, such testing may be more effective with younger children and adult learners, and of less value with certain groups of teenagers.

4.5. Individualization of teaching programs

To some extent, the previous four suggestions all involve individualization, and what would be the point of studying the individual learner if they did not? In this section, however, I shall discuss individualization as a concept, as a methodological approach and as a goal of individual differences research. I shall also consider the many practical objections to individual study programs and attempt to show them to be largely unfounded.

In most areas of life it is readily understood that different people need to be treated differently in order to get the best out of them. We do not expect people to be motivated by the same things or to respond in the same way to the environments around them. The concept of man-management would be meaningless if all men reacted in the same way. Yet, largely, education systems treat learners as though they were identical and while teachers may, if they take the trouble, attempt to influence their students by using more or less discipline, a warmer or more distant approach, the material which each learner must cover and the standards to be reached are, in most cases, the same for all. When this is not the case, it is because learners are separated through setting, streaming or attendance at different institutions which is based on previous levels of attainment: rarely are attempts made to tailor the teaching on offer to the strengths and weaknesses of the individual members of each group, or to assess potential for future development.

Individualization as a methodological approach has many attractions, largely because it avoids the drawbacks of other one-size-fits-all ways of teaching. By definition, each individual learns at his own pace, in his own way and covers the material most important for him. No predefined goals are imposed from outside. Communicative language teaching, for example, assumes that the aim of the learner is to communicate, which may not always be the case, and, more importantly, puts the native-speaking community and the native-speaker language model, whatever that means, at the heart of the teaching strategy. This reflects a quite touching naivety, or arrogance, on the part of the native speakers who espouse the system (see Leung 2005; Hinton 2013b) No one, it seems, thinks it necessary to check with the learners if this is of importance to them.

It also seems reasonable to assert that the individualization of language learning is the logical corollary of individual differences research. It is interesting enough to study the effects of motivation or working memory on language learning success in order to better understand the process involved, but surely the ultimate goal of that understanding is to attempt to improve the process, and, since individual differences research shows very clearly that individuals differ greatly in their learning, it follows logically that teachers should reflect those differences in their teaching.

It is worth noting at this point that matching learners with methods has been tried before. Cronbach and Snow (1977) introduced the theory of Aptitude-Treatment Interaction (ATI), and a number of studies were carried out to try to show that teaching methods could be based upon individuals' abilities, with rather inconclusive results (see Ellis 1994, for a thorough review). The weakness of their framework, however, as Snow (1989) later admitted, was in taking only cognitive factors into consideration. The same can be said of a range of studies, again, listed extensively by Ellis (1994), considering factors such as field dependence/independence. Such studies have generally considered one attribute and have not attempted to create a holistic profile of individual learners as is proposed here. This means that any interactions between attributes cannot be identified and it is no surprise that the results of these studies have been somewhat mixed.

Before looking at the potential practical problems with individualization, it is worth quoting Dörnyei and Skehan's (2003: 593) summation of the current situation at some length.

Even though virtually all teachers would quickly agree that learners differ from one another (with the acceptable face of these differences often being referred to as "mixed ability teaching"), the bulk of language teaching materials have assumed that all learners are the same. Certainly a major feature of the language teaching profession over the last 20 years or so has been the rise and rise of the main coursebook series. These series, now produced with immense care and resourcing, necessarily assume that all learners are essentially the same (thereby maximizing sales potential), and so downplay how the individual learner may be catered for. As a result, there has been something of a mismatch between the actual learner variation in real classrooms, and the homogeneity implied by most coursebooks (a mismatch which it has been the teacher's lot to cope with, as best she or he can).

They make clear a number of key points: that teachers are aware of learner differences but are discouraged from catering for them by those who supply the materials with which they teach; that the all-inclusive coursebook, complete with tests and project suggestions, is a relatively recent phenomenon and for

marketing rather than methodological reasons presents a uniform pattern of learning for all members of the class; and, finally, that teachers are victims of this system as much as learners who may find themselves trapped on an inappropriate course of study. It is vital to bear these points in mind in order to counter the obvious objections which both teachers and their headmasters or directors of studies will inevitably raise to individualization: that it is not possible and that they do not have time for it anyway.

Clearly, it is possible to design a course for an individual student based on his own skills and preferences. Not possible, here, then, means, not possible within the current language class system. If all learners in a class must be working on the same thing at any given time, then individualization will be difficult to achieve, but is this really necessary? It is certainly possible to conduct classes where each student has his own task and the teacher circulates, helping and encouraging individually. This is often the case in mixed-ability classes where some students are given more advanced material to keep them busy but the deciding factor does not have to be level of difficulty. The greatest obstruction here is not the teacher's ability to control a class whose members are engaged in different activities, but rather the tyranny of the textbook, which sets out a path that teachers rarely feel bold enough to argue with: once the textbook has been purchased it must be followed.

Holding religiously to the coursebook and associated materials makes life easier for teachers, at least outside the classroom. While school teachers are quick to point out that the number of hours they spend in the classroom is only a part of their total work time, often it is not actually necessary for the language teacher using a modern course series to do any preparation work at all. Materials are provided and the answers to even the simplest of exercises are given in the teacher's book. That is not to suggest that teachers do not prepare their lessons, but for those who have little time or motivation for such work, the coursebook takes the strain. Two things are, therefore, necessary if teachers are to be persuaded to deviate from the book and individualize their teaching: firstly, a process of individualization must be developed which is not overly time-consuming, and, secondly, teachers must believe that their lives, and those of their learners, will become easier and more rewarding in the classroom. The second of these will only be possible if research is able to show that learners are more motivated, more interested and learn more effectively on individualized programs. This will not be easy and will certainly not happen quickly.

The issue of additional workload, however, may be more easily addressed. To begin with, it should be noted that teachers would not be expected to produce 30 sets of materials for each class: it may be enough to have two or three alternatives planned. Secondly, not every moment of every class has to be individualized.

Students of roughly the same level and age, coming from the same educational and cultural background, will probably have quite a lot in common. The degree of differentiation between the programs can be decided by a number of factors, including the amount of time and resources available to the teacher. It is not a question of all or nothing. Indeed, my belief is that even a very small amount of individualization could have significant positive effects. The learner's knowledge that the teacher has thought about him as an individual and planned an activity specifically to suit him must act as a powerful motivator, since we all like to feel special and important. The introduction of the concept of individual learner styles and abilities into the classroom should also help learners to consider their own learning, and understand the causes of their own successes and failures. This awareness should make them more efficient learners and give them a greater sense of control over their own learning.

The final point to make in this section is that the key to making individualization a practical possibility is technology. Both by using materials already available on the Internet and by distributing specially prepared content in digital form, the teacher can give students access to a wealth of materials which goes far beyond the narrow constraints of the textbook. This article will not go into the techniques by which this can best be done but it is clear that at every stage of the process, testing, analysis and program content, computers make individualization viable in ways which would not previously have been possible.

5. Conclusions

Aptitude, then, can be understood in a number of different ways, but there are good reasons to treat it as situation-dependent, varying according to the attitude of the learner to the language being learnt, the methods of the course, the level which he has reached as well as his degree of motivation and anxiety, since all of these things may affect cognitive functioning and efficiency of learning. This is the direction individual differences research is heading in and all that is required is the continued development of tools for measurement and analysis of individuals to help develop programs which cater for their own abilities and personalities. For this to take place, however, it is important to show what the potential impact of such tools might be, and the suggestions for the use of individual analysis described in this paper are intended to raise awareness of and interest in what that impact might be.

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