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Understanding What Makes Every Language Learner Unique: Individual Differences in Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the individual differences that significantly affect the language learning process and outcomes among learners. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review, six key dimensions are examined: gender, learning styles, foreign language anxiety, age, socioeconomic status, and motivation. These variables are discussed in terms of their influence on learners' cognitive and emotional engagement with language acquisition. The study highlights how gender-based preferences in strategy use and performance, diverse learning styles informed by Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, and varying levels of anxiety all shape the learning experience. Additionally, the age factor is analyzed through the lens of the Critical Period Hypothesis, emphasizing the complex relationship between biological and experiential variables. Socioeconomic background is shown to influence access to linguistic input and educational opportunities, while motivation—categorized as integrative, instrumental, intrinsic, and extrinsic—is underscored as a driving force in sustained language learning. By synthesizing theoretical and empirical findings, the study aims to raise awareness among educators about the importance of adapting instructional strategies to learners' individual profiles. Ultimately, the study advocates for learner-centered approaches that recognize and respond to diversity, promoting more effective and equitable language learning environments.

Keywords: Individual Differences, Gender, Motivation, Anxiety

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1. Introduction

Individual differences refer to the characteristics that distinguish individuals from one another, contribute to human diversity, and result in advantages or disadvantages in various domains. According to Dörnyei (2005), individual differences (IDs) are traits or attributes that enable the differentiation of individuals. However, the concept of individual differences encompasses a broad and complex scope. In this regard, Snow, Corno, and Jackson (1996) question whether the term "individual differences" can be more narrowly defined. They argue that it can and, in fact, has been: most scholarly books and articles on the topic typically address fewer than a dozen key individual difference variables. This limitation stems from the practical focus of differential psychology, which does not concern itself with minor or idiosyncratic traits, even if stable, but rather emphasizes broader dimensions that (a) are applicable to all individuals and (b) serve to differentiate among them (Snow, Corno, & Jackson, 1996).

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The purpose of this study is to examine the individual differences that influence language learning processes under six key categories and to raise awareness among educators regarding the importance of designing course content that takes these differences into account. The categories explored in this study are: gender, learning styles, foreign language anxiety, age, socioeconomic status, and motivation. These dimensions are briefly introduced here to provide a general overview; however, more detailed discussions are presented in the main body of the article.

Gender represents one of the most apparent individual differences. Research suggests that men and women exhibit distinct learning behaviors and preferences (Tatarinceva, 2009). Another critical factor in language learning is the learner's preferred learning style. Some scholars have attempted to develop methods to assess learning styles, while others have investigated the relationships between learning styles and variables such as gender, age, academic achievement, and cultural background (Vaseghi et al., 2012).

Foreign language anxiety is also a significant variable . According to MacIntyre (1999, as cited in Dörnyei, 2005), language anxiety refers to the tension and negative emotional reactions associated with learning or using a second language. Age constitutes another essential consideration, particularly with respect to the critical period hypothesis, which posits that age significantly influences language acquisition outcomes.

Socioeconomic status is another influential factor. As Schwab and Lew-Williams (2016) explain, variations in parental language input, often shaped by socioeconomic background, play a crucial role in children's language development. Finally, motivation emerges as a pivotal component. According to Lennartsson (2008, as cited in Oroujlou and Vahedi, 2011), motivation and the willingness to learn a second language are regarded as considerably more influential than social variables in determining language learning success.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gender

As is widely recognized, one of the most prominent individual differences among learners is gender. Gender differences influence not only individuals' lifestyles but also their cognitive development, communication patterns, and learning processes. According to Tatarinceva (2009), males are generally more visually oriented, more motivated by peer interaction, and less adept at auditory processing compared to females. Conversely, females tend to be more auditory and often perform better in calm and structured learning environments. Supporting this, Tannen (2011) argues that male students are more inclined to engage in public speaking tasks due to the pressure they feel to establish or maintain their social status, whereas female students tend to prefer private conversations, viewing dialogue as a key element of relational maintenance.

Gender roles, shaped through socialization, also contribute significantly to cognitive and behavioral differences between the sexes. According to Zoghi et al. (2013), gender stereotypes are culturally accepted norms regarding appropriate behavior for each gender. These stereotypes are reinforced through family dynamics, education systems, and broader societal expectations, as noted by Eagly and Karau (2002, as cited in Zoghi et al., 2013). For example, boys are often encouraged to be assertive and competitive, while girls are socialized to be nurturing and communicative—traits that directly influence how they approach learning tasks. From a biological standpoint, males and females differ significantly in cognitive abilities and learning preferences. These variations are rooted in physiological differences such as brain structure, hormonal influences, and patterns of neural activation. Keefe (1982, as cited in Zoghi et al., 2013) and Banich (1997, as cited in Zoghi et al., 2013) report that males tend to demonstrate more left-hemisphere dominance, which is associated with logical reasoning and analytical processing, while females often exhibit more bilateral brain activity, contributing to their strengths in language use and emotional processing.

In the domain of language learning, gender-based differences are well documented. Teh et al. (2009) report significant disparities in the use of affective and metacognitive strategies, with female learners more frequently employing techniques such as self-monitoring, emotional regulation, and strategy evaluation. These strategies enhance their ability to manage learning more effectively, particularly in emotionally demanding contexts such as second language acquisition. Viriya and Sapsirin (2014) further argue that gender shapes both the preferences and effectiveness of language learning strategies. Research suggests that females generally outperform males in tasks involving verbal memory, phonological awareness, and the retention of semantic information—skills crucial to mastering a second language. On the other hand, male learners may demonstrate greater risk-taking behavior, which can be advantageous in oral communication tasks and spontaneous language production.

Similarly, Kraft and Nichel (1995) found that while male students often excel in writing tasks requiring structure and argumentation, female students show superior performance in verbal fluency, lexical range, and speech clarity. Maubach and Morgan (2001), in a study with 57 female and 15 male students, identified four notable gender-related learning traits: a preference among female students for reading and producing well-structured written assignments, male students' willingness to take communicative risks, their readiness to engage in spontaneous speech, and their tendency to ask clarifying questions to enhance their understanding (Sapsirin & Viriya, 2014). These findings suggest that although both genders can be successful in language learning, they may achieve success through different pathways and learning behaviors.

Moreover, Oxford et al. (1988) outline several psychological and sociocultural factors contributing to gender-based learning differences. Women, for instance, tend to be more socially oriented, more responsive to interpersonal feedback, and more compliant with classroom norms. They often derive motivation from group cooperation, teacher approval, and social reinforcement. These tendencies align with their generally stronger verbal and interpersonal communication skills, which are advantageous in both receptive and productive language tasks.

Given the multifaceted nature of gender differences in language learning, Zoghi et al. (2013) emphasize the necessity for EFL educators to develop gender-sensitive instructional strategies. By acknowledging the diverse learning needs and strengths of male and female students, teachers can implement differentiated instruction that fosters engagement and equity. Such approaches may include varied activity types (e.g., collaborative vs. independent tasks), gender-balanced groupings, and strategy instruction that supports both risk-taking and reflective learning. Ultimately, an awareness of gender-related learning differences can help educators create inclusive classroom environments that maximize the potential of all learners.

2.2 Different Learning Styles

Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences (MI) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding individual differences in learning and cognitive processing. Challenging the traditional conception of intelligence as a singular, quantifiable construct (i.e., IQ), Gardner proposed that intelligence is multifaceted, comprising at least eight distinct domains: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic intelligences. This theoretical model emphasizes that individuals possess unique cognitive strengths and learning preferences, which shape how they perceive, process, and retain information. For instance, a learner with pronounced bodily-kinesthetic intelligence may excel in hands-on, experiential tasks but struggle in passive learning environments such as traditional lectures. Conversely, a student with strong interpersonal intelligence is likely to thrive in collaborative and socially interactive contexts but may not perform as well in solitary academic tasks.

By embracing the diversity of intelligences, educators can move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction and instead adopt differentiated pedagogical strategies that accommodate a broad spectrum of learner needs. Armstrong (1994) highlights the significance of integrating multiple

intelligences into classroom practice, noting that it not only enhances student engagement but also promotes self-awareness and intrinsic motivation, as learners feel validated for their individual capabilities. Moreover, empirical research by Kornhaber, Fierros, and Veenema (2004) supports the efficacy of MI-based educational practices in improving academic outcomes and fostering inclusive learning environments. Such approaches have been linked to increased student motivation, more meaningful learning experiences, and greater equity across diverse learning populations. The MI framework also informs curriculum development and assessment design by encouraging educators to evaluate students' performance through varied and authentic measures rather than solely through standardized testing.

As in other domains of learning, learners also exhibit diverse learning styles in the context of foreign language acquisition. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) emphasize the importance of recognizing learning style preferences in language classrooms, arguing that these differences should inform curriculum planning and instructional design. According to Benati and VanPatten (2010), learning styles are shaped by a combination of genetic predispositions, prior educational experiences, age, gender, and cultural background. Acknowledging these factors enables educators to adopt a more responsive and inclusive approach to language instruction.

Learning styles are generally categorized into three primary modalities: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Visual learners prefer the use of images, color-coded materials, and diagrams to facilitate understanding. These learners benefit from visual aids such as charts, infographics, and the strategic use of body language by instructors (Alabi, 2024). Auditory learners, in contrast, favor oral instruction and the use of spoken language. For them, teacher intonation, speech rhythm, and listening activities are critical components of effective instruction. Kinesthetic or tactile learners, meanwhile, prefer learning through movement and physical interaction. They excel in tasks that involve modeling, role-play, physical demonstrations, and real-world simulations, although they may encounter difficulties maintaining attention during abstract or lecture-based instruction (Alabi, 2024).

To further explore language learning styles, Stebbins (1993) administered a perceptual learning style preference questionnaire originally developed by Reid (1987). The study involved 660 English as a Second Language (ESL) university students from 63 countries and eight institutions. The results revealed a marked preference among ESL learners for kinesthetic and tactile learning styles, aligning closely with Reid's original findings. Interestingly, both native English speakers and ESL learners showed the least preference for group learning, indicating a general inclination toward more independent or sensory-based modalities.

A comparable study conducted by Riazi and Mansoorian (2008) with Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners similarly revealed a preference for auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning styles over group or individual-oriented methods. These findings suggest that learners in this context tend to rely more on sensory and experiential strategies rather than interpersonal or solitary approaches. Such preferences may be culturally influenced or linked to the instructional methods most commonly employed in their prior educational experiences.

Gender also plays a notable role in shaping learning style preferences. Alsafi (2010), in a study involving 90 Saudi university students, observed significant gender-based differences. Male learners showed a preference for kinesthetic and auditory learning styles, while female learners exhibited more diverse preferences, favoring visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and group-oriented learning styles. These results align with broader literature suggesting that female students often employ a wider range of strategies and modalities in their learning processes (Vaseghi et al., 2012). This gender-based variation highlights the need for educators to design flexible instructional strategies that accommodate diverse preferences within mixed-gender classrooms.

The collective findings of these studies underscore the critical importance of recognizing and addressing learning style differences in foreign language education. As Vaseghi et al. (2012) argue, language instruction should be customized to accommodate the varied preferences and strengths of

learners. Doing so not only enhances instructional effectiveness but also promotes learner autonomy, engagement, and long-term success. By incorporating activities that appeal to multiple learning styles—such as visual aids, auditory exercises, hands-on tasks, and collaborative work—educators can foster a more inclusive and dynamic classroom environment. Furthermore, differentiated instruction based on learning style awareness enables teachers to provide targeted support, thus optimizing language acquisition for all learners, regardless of their individual preferences.

2.3 Foreign Language Anxiety

There is no doubt that anxiety has a significant impact on second language (L2) performance. As Dörnyei (2005) emphasizes, learners often experience a noticeable decline in their L2 abilities when placed in anxiety-inducing environments. Under such conditions, individuals may forget language material they would normally recall with ease and tend to make errors that appear illogical or uncharacteristic. According to Arnold and Brown (1999, as cited in Dörnyei, 2005), anxiety is the affective factor that most frequently impedes the learning process. Similarly, Horwitz and Cope (1986, as cited in Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019) assert that anxiety serves as a considerable obstacle to acquiring a foreign language, interfering with learners' cognitive functioning, attention, and participation.

Language learning anxiety has been widely recognized as one of the most pressing challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners (Alrabai, 2014; Wu, 2010, as cited in Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019). Horwitz (2001, as cited in Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019) argues that most EFL learners experience some degree of language anxiety, though its severity may vary across individuals. This anxiety manifests in various forms, including apprehension, self-doubt, and emotional distress, and can have both immediate and long-term effects on learners' academic achievement and linguistic development.

Oteir and Al-Otaibi (2019) highlight that definitions of foreign language anxiety vary across the literature. One of the most widely cited definitions is offered by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986, as cited in Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019), who describe language anxiety as a specific set of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors that arise in language learning classrooms, stemming from the distinct nature of second language acquisition. Similarly, MacIntyre (1999, as cited in Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019) defines language anxiety as an emotional reaction characterized by stress and fear in the context of learning a second or foreign language.

The literature distinguishes between two primary types of anxiety: debilitating and facilitating. Debilitating anxiety is the more commonly examined form and is associated with negative outcomes such as reduced performance, avoidance behaviors, and emotional discomfort (Brown et al., 2007, as cited in Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019). It may lead to indirect effects such as low self-esteem and diminished class participation, as well as direct consequences such as hesitation and underachievement (Oxford, 1999, as cited in Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019). On the other hand, facilitating anxiety, though less frequently discussed, can play a constructive role by motivating learners to stay focused and perform well (Al-Otaibi & Oteir, 2019). Ellis (1994, as cited in Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019) also notes that moderate levels of anxiety may enhance performance by heightening learners' alertness and readiness to engage.

Foreign language anxiety is typically linked to three main sources: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986, as cited in Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019). Communication apprehension refers to discomfort or fear when engaging in oral interaction, especially in front of others. This form of anxiety is often situational and tied to learners' fear of being judged during speaking tasks (Argaman & Abu-Rabia, 2002, as cited in Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019). Test anxiety, which results from a fear of failure, represents another common source and is exacerbated by high-stakes assessments that require performance under pressure. The third element, fear of negative evaluation, involves learners' concern about being judged unfavorably by peers or instructors, and may lead to avoidance of speaking tasks or classroom participation.

Höl&Kasımi(2022 as cited in highligts In English language classes and broader teaching contexts, both teachers and students often share common concerns. A major issue for many students is the high level of anxiety they experience when speaking in the target language. Overall, anxiety—recognized as one of the most prevalent emotions—has consistently attracted scholarly attention in the field of foreign language teaching and learning (Höl & Kasımi, 2022).

Age may also influence the level of anxiety experienced in language learning. Pawlak (2012) explains that differences in second language acquisition (SLA) between children and adults may partly be attributed to the influence of anxiety. Young children typically exhibit less anxiety due to their limited awareness of language rules and potential mistakes. They tend to focus more on meaning and content rather than accuracy, making them less self-conscious and more confident during the learning process. In contrast, older learners often experience heightened anxiety due to their increased self-awareness and fear of making errors. Furthermore, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991, as cited in Pawlak, 2012) found that learners who experience less anxiety are more likely to participate actively in class, perform better academically, and engage more naturally with speakers of the target language in immersive environments.

Additional research underscores the role of personality traits, cultural background, and previous learning experiences in shaping learners' susceptibility to anxiety. For example, introverted learners may experience higher levels of communication apprehension, while learners from educational systems that emphasize rote memorization may struggle with the unpredictability of communicative language teaching methods. Moreover, gender has also been considered a variable in anxiety studies, with some research suggesting that female learners may report higher levels of language anxiety, possibly due to greater emotional sensitivity or societal expectations surrounding performance (Park & French, 2013).

In conclusion, foreign language anxiety is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that significantly influences learners' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement with the language learning process. It is a critical factor that should not be underestimated. Recognizing its sources and manifestations enables educators to develop targeted interventions, such as supportive feedback, anxiety-reducing classroom activities, and the promotion of a positive classroom climate. Ultimately, addressing foreign language anxiety is essential for fostering a more inclusive, effective, and empathetic language learning environment.

2.4 Age

Muñoz (2010) notes that one of the most extensively researched and debated topics in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) is the influence of age. Shakouri and Saligheh (2012) also emphasize that various theoretical perspectives attempt to explain how age-related variables may contribute to the ease or difficulty of learning a second language. According to Muñoz (2006, as cited in Shakouri & Saligheh, 2012), younger learners tend to perform better on tasks involving oral comprehension and pronunciation, suggesting an early-age advantage in acquiring certain linguistic features. Supporting this view, Muñoz (2010) reaffirms in her study that "the earlier is the better" when it comes to language learning (p. 41).

However, Shakouri and Saligheh (2012) later challenge the simplicity of this claim, arguing that the assumption of age as a deterministic factor in SLA can verge on mythologizing youth, referring to it as "the younger, the myth." While there is widespread belief in the innate linguistic advantages of young learners, especially in terms of phonological acquisition and implicit learning mechanisms, it is essential to acknowledge the complexity of age as a variable. As Johnstone (2002) explains, young children are generally more adaptable, less inhibited, and more attuned to the sounds and patterns of language, which may facilitate early acquisition. Nevertheless, this does not imply that older learners are inherently disadvantaged in all areas of language learning.

In fact, Shakouri and Saligheh (2012) caution against framing the discussion as a dichotomy between "the younger the better" and "the older the better." Citing Johnstone (2002), they assert that while it is never too early to start learning a language, it is equally never too late. Older learners often bring cognitive, metalinguistic, and strategic advantages to the learning process, such as the ability to analyze grammatical structures and apply deliberate learning strategies, which younger children may lack.

Muñoz (2010) further argues that much of the public opinion about the ideal age to begin foreign language instruction is influenced by research conducted in naturalistic learning environments—contexts in which learners are immersed in the target language through everyday interactions rather than formal instruction. In her article, Muñoz includes anecdotal perspectives to illustrate this point. For instance, a teacher remarks that multilingual children she has encountered began acquiring their languages at an early age and learned them rapidly. Similarly, a parent of a young English learner in Spain echoes the widespread metaphor of children as "sponges," emphasizing their exceptional ability to absorb and retain new language input.

These observations reflect a common assumption of parallelism between immersion environments and school-based language instruction. However, Muñoz (2010) cautions that the critical variable in studies exploring age effects is not simply the chronological age at which formal instruction begins, but rather the overall duration and intensity of exposure to the target language. Initial exposure at an early age may involve minimal input—especially in instructional contexts where language is taught only a few hours per week. Therefore, the entire span of exposure, including its frequency, context, and quality, may play a more significant role in determining language learning outcomes than the mere starting age alone.

Additionally, longitudinal studies on second language acquisition suggest that early starters do not always outperform later starters in the long term unless the input is consistent and sustained. For example, older learners, particularly adolescents and adults, often make faster initial progress in grammar and vocabulary due to their developed cognitive skills and learning strategies, although younger learners may eventually attain more native-like pronunciation given prolonged exposure (Singleton & Ryan, 2004).

In conclusion, while early language learning may confer certain phonological and communicative advantages, the relationship between age and second language learning success is far more nuanced than the maxim "the younger, the better" implies. Instead, factors such as motivation, exposure quality, duration, learner autonomy, and sociocultural context interact with age to shape the language learning process. Hence, educators and policymakers should be cautious not to overemphasize age as the sole determinant of language learning potential but rather adopt a holistic view that considers a broad range of interrelated factors.

2.4.1 Critical period hypothesis (CPH)

An important implication of age-related theories in second language acquisition is that language learning undertaken after puberty may involve fundamentally different cognitive and neurological processes compared to first language (L1) acquisition. According to Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978), this shift suggests a qualitative transformation in the mechanisms underlying language learning beyond a certain developmental stage. Muñoz (2010) reinforces this perspective by highlighting that when younger and older learners are compared, empirical findings consistently show that early starters tend to outperform late starters, particularly in the long term. These results are frequently cited as empirical support for the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)—a theory first proposed by Lenneberg (1967, as cited in Muñoz, 2010)—which posits that there is a biologically determined window during which language acquisition occurs most naturally and effectively. After this critical period, which is generally believed to end around puberty, language learning may become less efficient and more effort-dependent, especially in terms of achieving native-like proficiency.

The neurological basis of the CPH is often linked to brain plasticity and lateralization. Penfield and Roberts (1959, as cited in Shakouri & Saligheh, 2012) were among the first to propose that the brain is more plastic and adaptable during early childhood, allowing for more efficient language learning. They associated this heightened plasticity with the period before cerebral lateralization is completed—typically before adolescence. As the brain matures and lateralization increases, its capacity to absorb new linguistic structures naturally diminishes. This developmental constraint implies that older learners may need to rely more on explicit instruction, metacognitive strategies, and conscious rule learning than younger children, who acquire language in a more intuitive and implicit manner.

However, the application of the Critical Period Hypothesis to second language acquisition (SLA) remains a topic of ongoing debate. While the hypothesis is widely supported in relation to phonological acquisition—where younger learners are more likely to achieve native-like pronunciation—its validity in other domains such as syntax and vocabulary is less clear-cut. For instance, Shakouri and Saligheh (2012) argue that, contrary to common belief, language acquisition can actually be more challenging for young children in certain contexts, particularly when cognitive maturity and learning strategies are required for complex tasks. They emphasize that age alone should not be considered the sole determinant of language learning success; instead, a range of cognitive, social, and affective factors must be taken into account.

One of the core debates in SLA, therefore, revolves around the extent to which age constrains the ultimate attainment of a second language, and whether a clear-cut "critical" or "sensitive" period truly exists. While the CPH remains influential, more contemporary perspectives favor the idea of a sensitive period rather than an absolute critical one—suggesting that although younger learners may have certain advantages, successful language learning is still possible later in life, especially under favorable learning conditions. This view is supported by evidence showing that adult learners can achieve high levels of proficiency, particularly when motivated and exposed to rich, immersive input.

Historically, the belief that languages must be learned during early childhood to be mastered effectively has deeply influenced educational policy and curriculum design. For over a century, educators have favored early language instruction, assuming that it aligns with natural developmental timelines and cognitive receptivity (Shakouri & Saligheh, 2012). However, recent research encourages a more nuanced understanding—one that recognizes both the benefits of early exposure and the potential for meaningful learning at later ages, provided that appropriate pedagogical strategies and sufficient input are present.

In conclusion, while the Critical Period Hypothesis offers valuable insights into the neurocognitive underpinnings of language learning, it should not be interpreted deterministically. A balanced approach, acknowledging both age-related constraints and the capacity for language learning across the lifespan, is essential for informing effective language teaching practices and policy decisions.

2.5 Socioeconomic Status

In their influential paper, Hackman and Farah (2009) define socioeconomic status (SES) as a multidimensional construct encompassing various social and economic elements, including power, prestige, hierarchical social standing, and access to economic resources. SES is not limited to income alone but is also shaped by educational background, occupational status, and environmental quality. The authors emphasize that numerous familial, psychological, and community-related factors influencing cognitive and emotional development are systematically associated with SES, indicating that disparities in socioeconomic conditions can lead to unequal developmental trajectories. After clarifying the comprehensive nature of SES as presented in Hackman and Farah's (2009) work, it is essential to examine the implications of these disparities in the context of language learning.

A related yet distinct perspective is offered by Schwab and Lew-Williams (2016), who explore the variability in early language and communication development among infants. While infants are generally recognized as rapid language learners, significant differences in linguistic outcomes exist,

largely shaped by their environmental contexts. The quality and quantity of language input are often influenced by SES-related factors such as parental education, household income, and access to enriched learning environments. The authors argue that early exposure to diverse and complex language is crucial for the development of vocabulary and grammatical competence, yet such exposure is not equally available across socioeconomic groups.

Similarly, Ogunshola and Adewale (2012) emphasize that the intricate relationship between society, education, and the economy plays a foundational role in shaping students' educational opportunities. Their argument highlights how systemic inequalities affect the resources and support systems available to learners, thereby influencing their academic trajectories, including language acquisition.

Ariani and Ghafournia (2016) further investigate the connection between SES and English language learning outcomes. Their findings indicate a significant correlation between students' socioeconomic backgrounds and their performance in English language proficiency tests and academic grades. Specifically, students from higher SES backgrounds demonstrated better performance, which the authors partially attribute to higher levels of motivation and access to educational resources. Supporting this view, Babikkoi and Binti-Abdul-Razak (2014, as cited in Ariani & Ghafournia, 2016) identify SES as a critical determinant of English language acquisition outcomes, noting that learners with more economic and social capital tend to benefit from richer language environments and more effective educational support.

However, it is important to recognize that lower SES does not inherently imply lower language learning potential. Luo et al. (2021) caution against deterministic interpretations, arguing that children from lower SES households may possess equal capacities for language learning compared to their higher SES peers. Nonetheless, these children often receive less linguistically rich input and are exposed to fewer resources, which can hinder vocabulary and grammatical development. The challenge lies not in ability, but in opportunity.

Interestingly, Mattheoudakis and Alexiou (2009) note that students from higher SES backgrounds enjoy a number of advantages over their less privileged peers, including access to extracurricular education, private tutoring, and exposure to foreign languages through travel and media. Ariani and Ghafournia (2016) corroborate this, reporting that learners from the upper and upper-middle social classes attained the highest academic scores, while those from lower classes performed significantly worse. Their data also suggest that students from higher SES backgrounds showed greater academic interest and engagement, reinforcing the notion that educational outcomes are closely tied to social stratification.

Pace et al. (2017) provide further insight into the long-term consequences of SES on language development. They found that children from low-income families consistently scored lower on standardized measures of linguistic ability compared to their higher-income counterparts. These early disparities often extend into later educational stages, contributing to persistent academic achievement gaps. Pace et al. identify three key mechanisms through which SES shapes language development: (1) individual infant characteristics such as cognitive readiness and attention span, (2) the quality of parent-child verbal interactions, and (3) the availability of educational and learning resources in the home environment.

In sum, the relationship between socioeconomic status and language learning is both complex and deeply rooted in broader structural inequalities. While linguistic ability is not inherently constrained by SES, access to high-quality language input, educational resources, and supportive learning environments often is. As such, educators and policymakers must consider SES-related disparities when designing language education programs, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their background, have equitable opportunities to succeed. Targeted interventions such as early childhood education programs, parental training, and resource allocation to underserved communities can play a vital role in mitigating the effects of SES on language development and closing the achievement gap.

2.6 Motivation

Motivation is widely recognized as a critical factor that significantly influences success in various domains, including language learning. As Alizadeh (2016) explains, when learners are sufficiently motivated, they are more likely to engage persistently with the learning process, leading to greater achievement. In the context of second language acquisition (SLA), motivation can be understood as the driving force that stimulates learners to initiate and sustain efforts toward mastering the target language. Gardner (1985, as cited in Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011), an influential figure in the field of language learning motivation, defines it as the extent to which an individual strives to learn a language due to a strong desire and favorable attitudes toward the learning process. Conversely, a lack of motivation can result in decreased engagement, lower performance, and a general lack of progress in language acquisition (Alizadeh, 2016).

Given its central role, language educators must be aware that motivation levels vary significantly among students and that instructional practices should be tailored to foster and sustain learners' motivational states (Alizadeh, 2016). A review of the literature reveals that four primary types of motivation influence language learning: integrative, instrumental, intrinsic, and extrinsic motivation (Alizadeh, 2016).

Learners with integrative motivation aspire to identify with the target language community, often aiming to become active members of that society (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011).

Instrumental motivation is often externally induced and may be more prevalent in formal learning settings where performance outcomes are emphasized. (Gilakjani et al., 2012).

Intrinsic motivation is an internal desire to engage in language learning for the inherent satisfaction and enjoyment it provides. Learners are driven by curiosity, interest, or the pleasure of mastering a new skill (Gilakjani et al., 2012).

In contrast, extrinsic motivation is fueled by external pressures or rewards, such as grades, parental expectations, or social approval. While intrinsic motivation is often associated with more enduring engagement, extrinsic motivation can still lead to positive outcomes, particularly when learners internalize the value of the learning task.

Gilakjani et al. (2012) further note that the boundaries between these types of motivation are fluid. For instance, intrinsic motivation may evolve into integrative motivation if the learner develops a strong cultural affinity, while extrinsic motivation can become instrumental when learners pursue language learning to achieve externally defined goals. This dynamic interplay suggests that motivation is not static but can shift based on context, goals, and individual experiences.

In light of its importance, researchers such as Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011) have proposed strategies for educators to enhance students' motivation and, by extension, their language learning outcomes. One key recommendation is the creation of a supportive and welcoming classroom atmosphere. A psychologically safe environment, in which students feel respected and valued, fosters confidence and encourages active participation. Such environments can reduce anxiety, promote a sense of belonging, and increase learners' willingness to take risks in language use.

Moreover, incorporating collaborative learning activities—such as pair work and group discussions—can reduce the hierarchical pressure often associated with teacher-centered instruction and promote peer-to-peer interaction (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011). This approach not only increases engagement but also supports the development of communicative competence in authentic contexts.

Another effective strategy is the personalization of the learning environment. By giving students some degree of autonomy and choice in their learning activities, teachers can foster a more student-centered classroom dynamic. Personalized learning encourages ownership and investment in the learning process, which is linked to greater intrinsic motivation (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011).

In conclusion, motivation is a multifaceted and dynamic construct that plays a vital role in second language acquisition. Understanding the different types of motivation and their implications allows educators to implement more effective, learner-centered strategies. By creating a motivating learning environment, providing meaningful tasks, and supporting learners emotionally and cognitively, teachers can enhance students' motivation and, ultimately, their language learning success.

3. Methodology

This descriptive study aimed to examine the role of individual differences in the process of second language learning by synthesizing findings from previous research. A document analysis method was employed to collect and evaluate scholarly articles, books, and empirical studies relevant to six key factors: gender, learning styles, foreign language anxiety, age, socioeconomic status, and motivation. These dimensions were selected based on their prominence in the literature on second language acquisition and individual learner variability.

To ensure the comprehensiveness of the analysis, peer-reviewed sources published between 1983 and 2021 were included. The researcher systematically reviewed each source to extract themes, highlight consistent findings, and identify contrasting viewpoints. Comparative analysis was conducted to draw parallels and distinctions between studies, especially regarding gender-based learning strategies, preferred learning styles, and the effects of anxiety and socioeconomic background on language performance.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to analyze how individual differences—gender, learning styles, foreign language anxiety, age, socioeconomic status, and motivation—influence language learning outcomes. Drawing from a broad literature base and integrating recent empirical research, several parallel and contrasting patterns emerge.

This study investigated how individual differences—namely gender, learning styles, foreign language anxiety, age, socioeconomic status, and motivation—shape second language learning. The findings from the reviewed literature reveal both consistent patterns and notable contrasts among these variables.

Starting with gender, multiple studies, including those by Zoghi et al. (2013) and Tatarinceva (2009), underline the role of biological and sociocultural influences in shaping learning behaviors. For example, female learners tend to be more auditory and excel in structured, communicative tasks, while male learners are generally more visual and display a higher tolerance for risk in oral activities. Teh et al. (2009) support this distinction by observing that female students use affective and metacognitive strategies more frequently. However, research by Maubach and Morgan (2001) adds nuance to these generalizations, showing that male students often engage in spontaneous speech and clarification-seeking, which challenges the assumption that female learners are inherently more communicative. These findings suggest that while gender can influence learning preferences, individual variation remains significant.

In terms of learning styles, findings are broadly consistent. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), along with Stebbins (1993) and Riazi and Mansoorian (2008), report strong learner preferences for kinesthetic, auditory, and visual modalities. The study by Alsafi (2010) further reveals gender-related differences, noting that female learners often exhibit a wider range of preferred styles, including group-based learning. These findings reinforce the value of designing language instruction that accommodates diverse learning preferences and acknowledges demographic influences such as gender and cultural background.

When considering foreign language anxiety, the literature is notably aligned. Dörnyei (2005), MacIntyre (1999), and Horwitz et al. (1986, as cited in Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019) all emphasize that anxiety—particularly in the forms of communication apprehension, test-related stress, and fear of

negative evaluation—significantly hinders language learning. Oxford (1999, as cited in Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019) similarly notes that such anxiety can reduce learner participation and cognitive engagement. Yet, a more differentiated perspective is offered through the distinction between debilitating and facilitating anxiety. Al-Otaibi and Oteir (2019) suggest that while high anxiety levels are generally detrimental, moderate levels may in fact enhance performance by promoting focus and effort. This illustrates the importance of fostering emotionally supportive learning environments.

Regarding age, the reviewed studies provide a balanced perspective. Muñoz (2010) and Shakouri and Saligheh (2012) argue in favor of early exposure to second language learning, particularly for developing native-like pronunciation and oral comprehension, supporting the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967, as cited in Muñoz, 2010). However, these same authors caution against viewing age as a rigid boundary, acknowledging that older learners often bring valuable cognitive and metalinguistic skills to the learning process. This perspective highlights the interaction between age and other factors—such as motivation, input, and strategy use—in determining language learning success.

The influence of socioeconomic status (SES) is another recurring theme. Studies by Hackman and Farah (2009), Schwab and Lew-Williams (2016), and Ariani and Ghafournia (2016) confirm that learners from higher SES backgrounds typically enjoy better access to language-rich environments, educational support, and resources, leading to more successful language learning outcomes. However, Luo et al. (2021) and other researchers caution against equating lower SES with lower potential, emphasizing that the disparity lies in opportunity rather than capability. This points to the need for equitable educational practices that address resource gaps.

Lastly, motivation emerges as a consistently central factor. Alizadeh (2016) and Gardner (1985, as cited in Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011) identify four key types: integrative, instrumental, intrinsic, and extrinsic. Each plays a crucial role in sustaining learner engagement and success. Gilakjani et al. (2012) note that these motivational types are fluid and may evolve depending on learner context and goals. Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011) offer practical suggestions to enhance learner motivation, including supportive classroom environments and interactive group activities. Together, these findings underscore motivation's pivotal role in language learning and its close connection to both affective and contextual variables.

To sum up, this study affirms that individual differences deeply influence second language acquisition. While common patterns are evident—such as gender-based strategy use or the benefits of early age exposure—important contrasts also emerge, particularly around how these variables interact in diverse learning contexts. Ultimately, the findings call for learner-centered and adaptive teaching approaches that accommodate varied needs and promote equitable success in language education.

Ethical Statement

The present study is a descriptive review and does not involve any qualitative and quantitative data or intervention. Therefore, no ethical issues were involved, and obtaining formal ethical approval was not applicable.

Declaration of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Informed Consent

As the study did not include a participant group, obtaining informed consent was not required.

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