



# Approaching Learner Differences with Learner-Centred Teaching in Higher Education

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## Abstract

*Learner differences are expressions of individual students' personal characteristics and their social contact groups. Biographical and personal differences include age, gender, ethnicity, physical qualities, nationality, languages, education, and the like, whereas further differences stem from a person's involvement in and identification with social and cultural communities. On the one hand, such differences may challenge teachers who may feel overwhelmed by very heterogeneous groups; on the other hand, they can provide a rich source of interactive potential in the tertiary foreign language classroom. This contribution reviews selected literature on classifying learner differences and revisits learner-centred teaching as a means of accommodating diverse needs of learners. It is the goal of this review to sensitise teachers to the individuality of their learners and approach the global foreign language classroom from the perspective of learner-centred teaching. A crucial construct to that end is learner interest, which teachers should capture with their materials, activities, and courses. Particularly in higher-education English for specific purposes (ESP) settings, course designs require a focus on learners' individual and professional interests. This contribution, therefore, further reviews good practice of learner-centred teaching to share techniques applied in higher-education language classrooms. Such a learner orientation in educating future professionals may eventually yield mutual gains in teaching, research, and industry for both the educational institution and its students. Well-educated, professionally literate, and self-confident graduates and alumni in global businesses will seek networking opportunities with their home universities and thus promote cross-cultural and transnational cooperation in classrooms, joint projects, and internships.*

**Keywords:** *ESP, learner differences, learner-centred teaching, interest, context, higher education.*

## 1. Introduction

Learner differences stem from individual students' personal traits and learners' involvement in social contact groups. Although some teachers may feel challenged by very heterogeneous groups, learner differences also represent great interactive potential in tertiary foreign language education. This contribution reviews selected literature on learner attributes and positions learner-centred instruction as a way of catering for students' diverse needs. This review aims at sensitising teachers to the individuality of course participants and conceptualises the global foreign language classroom from the angle of learner-centred instruction. The contribution further revisits learner-centred teaching techniques that may be applied in tertiary English for specific purposes (ESP) classrooms.

## 2. Learner differences

Learner differences may be subdivided into personal-biographical and sociocultural traits. It needs to be remembered that in both categories such differences may partly fluctuate and change over time, reflecting a person's private and professional development in life.

### 2.1 Biographical and personal learner differences

Biographical and personal learner differences encompass age, gender, ethnicity, physical qualities, nationality, languages spoken, education, and similar characteristics. In higher education, age plays a rather advantageous role in foreign language learning, as studies of older and younger learners in comparable settings suggest that "older learners are more efficient than younger learners. By using their metalinguistic knowledge, memory strategies, and problem-solving skills, they make the most of second or foreign language instruction" [1, p. 93]. Research also indicates that "adults and adolescents can make considerable and rapid progress in their proficiency in a second language in contexts where they use the language in social, personal, professional, or academic interaction" [2, p. 96]. Apart from age, personal learner differences have been classified according to intelligence, aptitude, cognitive style, personality, and behavioural strategies [3, pp. 131–143]. Larsen-Freeman views differences as contributions that learners bring to the classroom: "who they are (*attributes*: age,



aptitude, personality, learning disabilities, social identities), how they conceptualize second language acquisition (*conceptualization*: motivation, attitude, cognitive style, beliefs), and what they do (*actions*: learning strategies)” [4, p. 13]. Regarding differences as contributions affords teachers instructional scenarios that can draw on learners’ personal biographies and experiences for teaching.

## **2.2 Sociocultural learner differences**

Sociocultural learner differences issue from a person’s interaction and identification with social and cultural communities. Social habitats and cultural contexts shape an individual’s identity and contribute to marked traits that distinguish learners from each other or serve as common ground when such traits are shared by several members of a group. A very useful model of viewing the classroom as part of interconnected and diverse social frameworks is Holliday’s host culture complex, which was originally conceptualised for study-abroad situations but is transferrable to broader educational settings. Holliday’s model consists of several layers, starting with classroom culture as an embedded and interlinked element of “[s]tudent culture”, “[h]ost institution culture”, “[i]nternational education-related cultures”, “[p]rofessional-academic cultures”, and “[n]ational culture (including urban, village, regional and other activity cultures)” [5, p. 29]. Needless to say, student culture further comprises various social and cultural communities of interaction with strong identity-shaping forces, such as spare-time activity groups, sports clubs, and other peer groups.

## **3. Learner-centred teaching**

Even rather homogeneous groups of learners, that is groups with learners who share many similarities, are diverse and bring different experiences to the classroom. As Lightbown and Spada note, “it is not possible for a teacher with 50 students – or even one with 10 students – to customize instruction to suit the abilities or preferences of each one”, and yet “there can be little doubt that an instructional approach that rigidly adheres to a single way of teaching all students and an expectation that all students can learn in the same way will deprive some students of learning opportunities” [6, p. 92]. Particularly in tertiary ESP settings, learners’ individual and professional interests need to be taken into consideration when designing courses, materials, and tasks.

A wider acceptance of learner-centred instruction originated in the wake of communicative language teaching (CLT) [7; 8], together with the recognition that “learning is a student-centred process” [9, p. 22] and with a “focus on the unique contribution that each individual brings to the learning situation” [10, p. 95]. A key idea in that context is learners’ self-concept, “the amalgamation of all of our perceptions and conceptions about ourselves which give rise to our sense of personal identity” [11, p. 97], or, in Mercer’s words, “the beliefs one has about oneself, one’s self-perception” [12, p. 14]. Working with students’ self-concept, teachers can customise instruction and engage learners by creating pedagogical links between course contents and individual participants.

Another key element of learner-centred teaching is the construct of interest: “What triggers interest in language learning in one context – at one time and in one space – may not necessarily stimulate interest in another context (another time and/or in another place)” [13, p. 8]. According to Tin interest is “a knowledge-intensive emotion” [14, p. 277], whereas Dörnyei and Ushioda view interest as a multidimensional concept: “besides its obvious motivational connotations, the notion of interest also involves a salient cognitive aspect – the curiosity in and engagement with a specific domain – as well as a prominent affective dimension concerning the joy associated with this engagement” [15, p. 93]. As Tin argues, interest arises from a student’s interaction with an object of personal significance when this interaction involves “positive affect (positive feelings about the object), value (personal significance of the object), and knowledge (a desire to know more about the object)” [16, p. 277] and when the objects are appraised by learners as “complex, novel, and yet comprehensible” [17, p. 279]. Tin further states that interest “as a personal trait, idiosyncratic motive, or individual interest develops over a longer period of time through repeated experience of situational interest” [18, p. 279], but situational interest can be stimulated by teachers and particularly by teacher talk [19, p. 280].

In a similar vein, Coleman, Galaczi, and Ástruc [20] argue that an interesting methodology supports the development of positive attitudes towards language learning. In this context, Jacobs and Renandya suggest ten elements of student-centred learning, and these are students and teachers as co-learners, student-student interaction, learner autonomy, a focus on meaning, curricular integration, a favourable attitude towards diversity, a promotion of thinking skills by student engagement, alternative assessment, a participatory learning climate, and a classroom harmonising with students’ intrinsic motivation to learn [21, p. 14]. In order to make their courses relevant to learners, therefore, instructors need to be aware of the potential of other subjects in the curriculum for their teaching; use a range of materials, tasks, and activities; vary forms of class organisation (whole class work, group



work, pair work, individual work); welcome diversity as an enrichment to teaching; and remain flexible in terms of teaching strategies and techniques. Tapping into students' thematic interests, indeed, may constitute a central teaching strategy in ESP courses. Furthermore, instructors may design learner-centred programmes by aligning course contents, resources, and assignments with disciplinary requirements and professional demands.

#### 4. Conclusions

Teaching, research, and industry may profit from learner orientation in the education of future professionals because in such contexts individual students can focus on relevant needs and goals, while educational institutions are enriched by tailored course contents. When tertiary course instructors put their learners at the centre of pedagogical considerations, they will lay the foundations for successful careers of their graduates, who, in turn, will have an interest in further cooperating with their home universities. Well-educated, professionally literate, and self-confident alumni affiliated with international companies, therefore, will seek cross-cultural and transnational networking opportunities with their degree-granting institutions through participation in lecturing, joint projects, and internships.

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