

# Decision-making Concerning Individual Learner Differences in the EFL Classroom: Perspectives of Japanese Junior High School Teachers

Michael J. Littlemore and Akira Tajino

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## Abstract

Over the last few decades there have been considerable advances in the literature on individual learner differences in foreign or second language (L2) learning. Research shows in what ways learners are different and how these differences can affect their success in L2 learning. While admitting the significance of individual learner differences, few attempts have been made to investigate how teachers actually cope with such differences in the classroom. It is assumed that the way teachers view these individual learner differences may affect their decision-making in planning their approach to particular lessons, the level of language or teaching/learning material to be used, or the design of tasks or tests, which may in turn determine the final overall success of the lessons. The focus of the present paper is on one aspect of this issue; specifically Japanese teachers' views about their classes. It reports preliminary findings of the English teachers' perceptions of their EFL classes at the junior high school level. The data shows that Japanese EFL teachers are more concerned with relatively low achieving students and assumes that their lessons are planned accordingly. The data further suggests that the teachers' attitudes may be affected by the fact that junior high school education is part of the compulsory education system in Japan where credence is given to the belief that it is more important not to leave any low achieving student behind rather than to help high achieving students.

## Introduction

While it is often said that 'students are students', it is true that language learners do vary in many respects, and it is often argued that individual differences in the learners may affect the success of their foreign or second language (L2) learning. Demanding an individualized approach to foreign language instruction itself involves the pedagogical significance of individual learner differences in the language classroom. Individualization, for example:

- 1) implies a learner-centered classroom, in which the needs, abilities, and interests of

each learner determine, as much as possible, the nature and shape of the foreign language curriculum; and

- 2) can be viewed from three perspectives. One can individualize the goals of instruction, the means of attaining those goals, and/or the speed of attaining those goals. An individualized program may involve any of all of these aspects.

(Altman and Politzer, 1971: Introduction)

Over the last few decades there have been considerable advances in the literature on individual learner differences in L2 learning. Research shows in what ways learners are different and how these differences can affect their success in L2 learning. The learners may differ in terms of age, sex, personality, language aptitude, motivation, language learning strategies, and cognitive and affective factors (see, for example, Skehan, 1989; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Oxford and Ehrman, 1993). Although researchers do not always agree on how such individual characteristics should be selected, they seem to share the view that such variations have a considerable influence on language learning success. In a review of the literature on individual differences, Oxford and Ehrman (*ibid.*), for example, imply the pedagogical significance of understanding L2 learners' individual differences by claiming that L2 teachers need to identify and comprehend their students' individual differences in order to provide the most effective instruction possible.

While admitting the significance of individual learner differences, little is known about how teachers actually cope with such differences in the classroom. It is assumed that the way teachers view the individual learner differences may affect their decision-making in planning their approach to particular lessons, the level of language used in lessons or teaching/learning material to be used, or, indeed, the design of tasks or tests, which may in turn determine the final overall success of the lessons. The present paper will deal with this issue; more specifically, the teachers' perceptions of their EFL classes.

### **Focusing on learner variables**

Carroll (1965) proposes a model of school learning with a particular focus on a limited set of variables. The Carroll model considers two major classes of variable: instructional factors and individual difference factors. The former, instructional factors are sub-categorized into two elements: 'time' and 'instructional excellence', and the latter, individual difference factors,

into three elements: ‘general intelligence’, ‘aptitude’ and ‘motivation’. Stimulated by the Carroll study, Naiman *et al* (1978) developed their study of good language learners. They addressed the question of ‘why some learners are more successful than others’ and proposed a model called ‘the good language-learner model’.

Figure 1 shows that the good language-learner model consists of three independent variables (i.e. teaching, the learner and the context) and two dependent variables (i.e. learning and outcome). Given that “for language instruction to work it must be both learning and learner centred” (Ellis, 1992: 16) and that “one crucial aspect of L2 learning is what the students bring with them into the classroom (Cook, 1991: 3)”, the focus of the present paper is thus on the learner variable, which includes the factors of ‘intelligence’, ‘aptitude’, ‘motivation’, ‘attitude’, and ‘personality’. There is research to show, for instance, that those who have an aptitude for languages (e.g. phonemic coding ability and language analytic ability), those who are highly motivated to learn, or those who are risk-takers are more successful language learners. A number of studies are available that have investigated the contribution

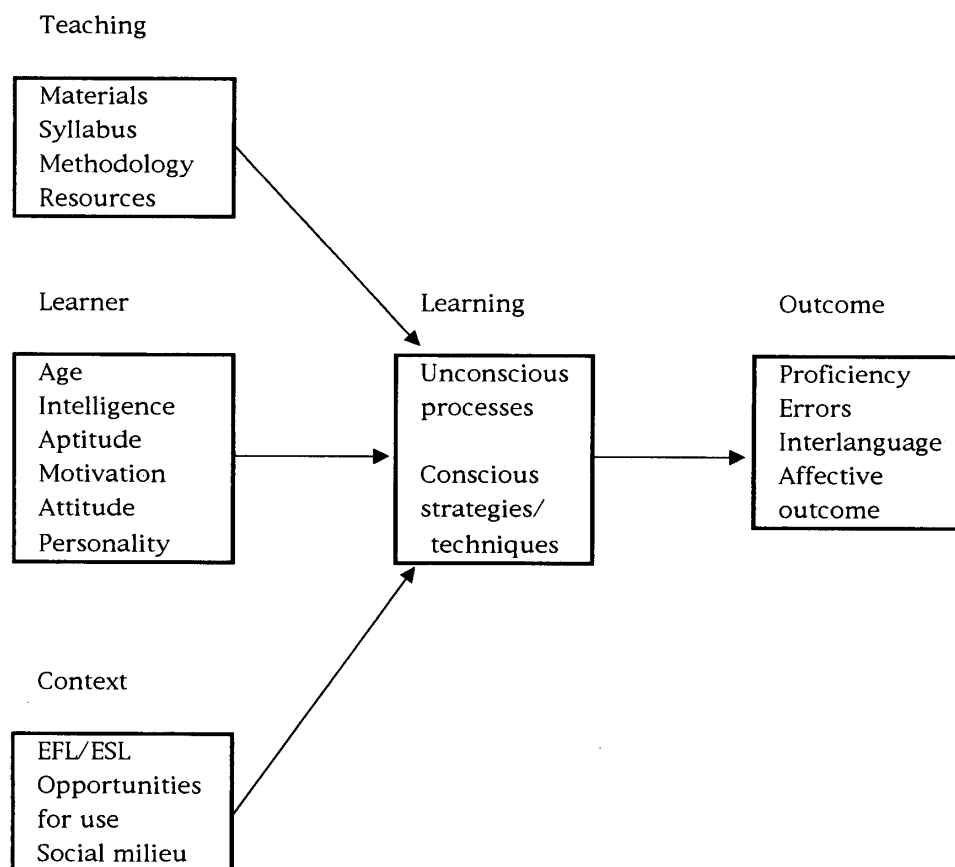


Figure 1 The Good Language-Learner Model (based on Naiman *et al.*, 1978)

of individual differences to L2 learning in this way.

To make their language instruction effective and ultimately more successful, as noted above, L2 teachers are expected to identify, understand, adapt and finally cope with such individual differences in their students. Teachers' attitudes concerning such individual differences may affect a number of methodological decisions they should make before, after or during lessons. They would directly affect, for instance, their lesson plans, the approach to the topic, the timing allotted to each teaching point, the type of materials to be used (e.g. audio/visual), and even the level of home-based self-study. The primary concern of the teachers is to match the level of their lessons to their students' achievement level ensuring the students achieve their potential. In other words, the decisions the teachers make would depend (at least partially) on who they teach; more specifically, the idiosyncratic interests and needs of a particular student, or a group or groups of students.

Studies in the social psychology of education (e.g. Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968) claim that teachers' perceptions or expectations of students can affect students' achievement levels, which are known as 'teacher-expectancy effects'. Although no further discussion will be made here on the complex issue of the cause-effect process, evidence is available to support the belief that the way teachers view students in a class can affect their decision-making for that class (see Rogers, 1982).

### **Individual differences and syllabus design**

One crucial question should be addressed; 'Which or what kind of student(s) do teachers actually mean when they use the word 'student(s)''?. To put it more succinctly, 'To whom do they teach?'. This question in fact takes on a great significance as it is related to issues within L2 learning and teaching; where would syllabus design (e.g. task-matching) begin without asking this question?; and what of the suggestions made by second language acquisition (SLA) researchers for L2 teaching (e.g. 'Krashen's input hypothesis' and 'Pienemann's teachability hypothesis')?

According to Desforges (1985), matching tasks to students entails "giving [students] those tasks which optimally sustain motivation, confidence and progress in learning" (p. 92). Similarly Nunan (1988) argues that task difficulty can be determined in terms of not only task and text factors but also learner factors (e.g. 'confidence', 'motivation', and 'prior learning experience'). How do teachers determine task difficulty then? In reality, this is not as easy

to answer as one might at first expect. Nunan (*ibid.*: 74), for example, states:

At present, there is little empirical evidence to guide our decision making on task difficulty. Such decisions will therefore be largely intuitive and subjective.

If that is the case, where does such an intuitive and subjective decision come from? It would be reasonable to think that decisions can be based on the information the teacher has about individual students or a group or groups of students. Such student information may serve a myriad of purposes which in turn would guide content selection or modify a given syllabus and methodology so that it could be matched to the students. These factors only serve to emphasize that teachers' perceptions of student differences do indeed deserve attention. One basic concern of any conscientious teacher is to motivate the students in his or her charge. If a task is too difficult for a particular group of students, for example, the teacher knows only too well that the students may become discouraged and lose interest. Once the students' attention has been lost, the lesson is a failure. On the other hand, neither will the task which is too easy challenge the students and they may lose interest for the same reason. In general, a task is at the right level if it is challenging for the students and most of them can achieve some degree of success most of the time. How can teachers manage this in a classroom with up to forty students?

Nunan (*ibid.*) is right in claiming what is difficult for a particular student may not necessarily be difficult for another student. Similarly, it is quite possible that a task given to the class may be appropriate only for high achieving students, but not for low achieving students or may interest only some students but not others. Much the same argument can be applied in relation to other issues such as lesson planning and test design: i.e. a lesson may be appropriate only for some students but not for others; and similarly, a test may be too difficult for some but too easy for others.

This becomes crucial when we consider suggestions made for L2 teaching by Krashen ('the input hypothesis', 1985) and Pienemann ('the teachability hypothesis', 1985). Krashen (*ibid.*: 4) claims that "people acquire second languages only if they obtain comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input 'in'." He proposes a framework of a theory of second language acquisition in terms of five hypotheses: the acquisition-learning hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the input hypothesis and the affective filter hypothesis. The first, acquisition-learning hypothesis

claims that 'learning', which refers to the development of conscious knowledge of an L2 typically obtained by formal instruction, should be distinguished from subconscious 'acquisition', the spontaneous and incidental process of rule internalization resulting from meaning-focused, natural language use. The natural order hypothesis claims that we acquire the linguistic forms, rules and items in a similar, predictable order such that some grammatical forms appear early and others late. The monitor hypothesis distinguishes the two distinct processes in L2 development and use: 'acquisition' and 'learning'. The hypothesis states that, unlike 'acquisition' which is a subconscious process leading to the development of competence, 'learning' has only one role to play; that is, it serves only as an editor or monitor. The input hypothesis, the central hypothesis of Krashen's theory of second-language acquisition, claims that an L2 can be learnt (or, to borrow his term, 'acquired') only in one way; namely, through 'comprehensible input' — the input (i.e. 'language' available to learners) that can be understood by the learners. He (*ibid.*: 2) states:

... humans acquire language in only one way — by understanding messages, or by receiving 'comprehensible input'. We progress along the natural order ... by understanding input that contains structures at our next 'stage' — structures that are a bit beyond our current level of competence. (We move from '*i*', our current level, to '*i+1*', the next level along the natural order, by understanding input containing *i+1*...).

Krashen argues that such comprehensible input can be utilized only when the affective filter is 'down', such that the learner is not anxious, but rather, motivated (i.e. the affective filter hypothesis). It is, however, possible to argue, from the classroom language teaching perspective, that the input containing '*i+1*' may be appropriate for high achievers, but not for low achievers in such a way that '*i+1*' to the higher achievers might mean '*i+2*' to the lower achievers. It is equally possible that '*i+1*' provided to the lower achievers could mean only the level of '*i*' to the higher achievers.

It should be noted that Krashen's model of L2 acquisition has not been without criticism; for instance, Ellis (1994: 362) has some doubt about the learning-acquisition distinction by saying, "It is clear that 'acquisition', in the sense intended by Krashen, can involve at least some degree of consciousness" and "learning can take place without learners being aware of it". It is, however, generally agreed that the comprehensible input plays a significant role in

L2 learning. One such example is an immersion programme; in some schools in Canada, for example, school subjects are taught in French (L2) to L1 English-speaking children as the medium of instruction.

Similar claims can also be made to the teachability hypothesis (Pienemann, 1985). He (*ibid.*: 37) says:

The teachability hypothesis predicts that instruction can only promote language acquisition if the interlanguage is close to the point when the structure to be taught is acquired in the natural setting (so that sufficient processing prerequisites are developed).

A question should then arise: 'What happens to low achievers if the level of instruction approaches close to the level of high achievers' interlanguage?' The hypothesis suggests that the low achievers could benefit little from such instruction, leaving a dilemma for the teacher. This is in fact an illustration of 'learner-instruction matching' (Ellis, 1994: 711). It suggests, for example, that learners have distinct learning styles and that they will learn most effectively if the instruction matches their own learning style. This question is crucial as it is related to issues such as syllabus design (i.e. what to teach) and teaching methods (i.e. how to teach it). Teacher decision-making of this kind is paramount, no matter what L2 learning/acquisition theory (on which their teaching is based) may be (e.g. interface position or non-interface position) or no matter what their focus and instruction type may be (e.g. form-focused or meaning-focused).

The research questions addressed in this preliminary study on these issues are:

1. Do Japanese teachers have a particular target student or a group or groups of students in mind when they teach their EFL class?
2. If that is the case, how do they decide their target student(s)?

## **The study**

### *The context in which the study took place*

In Japan, English is at present first taught as a foreign language (i.e. EFL) from the first-year of junior high school. It is regarded with great esteem as it is in most cases a

required subject for higher education and/or a key to a successful future career. For example, it was reported that 548,574 out of 553,202 applicants for all national and other public universities and some private colleges/universities took the general English examination in 1997 (The University Entrance Examination Center, 1997). English is, in addition, often required for employment or career advancement. Fujitsu, Co. Ltd. is one of the growing number of companies which stipulate a pass in English tests, including the TOEIC test, as mandatory for their employees (the Asahi Shimbun, June 2, 1996). The significance of English, or more specifically, communication skills in English, is reflected in a series of educational reforms in the public school system to be implemented in the year 2002 (see the National Curriculum Standards Reform, 1998). Examples include the introduction of the 'Period of Integrated Studies' into the public school curriculum, under which English can be taught in 'International Understanding' unit classes at the elementary school level. Another important example is a programme called the JET programme which was initiated by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Home Affairs in cooperation with local governments in Japan. The number of the JET participants has increased year after year, and, as of 1999, 5,835 young college graduates from overseas participated in the programme (CLAIR, 2000).

Although there is a growing movement to emphasize communication skills, one of the most common teaching styles employed by the Japanese EFL teachers at the junior high school level nationwide is still the so-called academic teaching style in which grammar-translation plays a central part.

### *Procedures*

The subjects of this study were 18 EFL teachers from city junior high schools whose teaching experience ranged from 1 year to 16 years. The teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire (written in Japanese) on their target students. The questionnaire consisted of eight questions, all related to the main question 'Who do you teach in class?'. As noted above, the focus of the study is on learner-related factors, including motivation and personality. The present study therefore discusses how teachers' perceptions of these factors affect their target student or students (if that is the case). It should be noted that the factors, intelligence and aptitude, are grouped under a different heading; i.e. 'achievement', as this seems more appropriate for this particular study (see Appendix A). This is simply because it is assumed that the latter is more familiar to the teachers. The teachers may have little knowledge of their



students' intelligence and aptitude, which are usually measured by such specific tests such as the Languages Aptitude Test (MLAT: Carroll and Sapon, 1959) and the Pimsleur-Language Aptitude Battery (PLAB: Pimsleur, 1966).

*Results and discussion*

*Do Japanese teachers have a particular target student or a group or groups of students in mind when they teach their EFL class?*

The data shows that all the teachers have target students in each of their EFL classes. They are a particular group of students rather than individual students. This suggests that the teachers believe in group-orientation and regard a particular group of students as an entity. One teacher in the survey commented that lessons run smoothly with a group of imaginary students in mind. This suggests that teachers may have some image of the classes they teach.

*How do teachers decide their target student(s)?*

The target groups of students for the teachers are neither 'very positive' nor 'very negative' in terms of their attitudes towards learning English. This implies that the teachers pay attention to neither of the two extremes, but show a tendency to pay attention to the more 'negative' aspects. The data on the achievement level of the target students reveals that the teachers are more concerned with relatively low achieving students, rather than high achieving students. 72% of the teachers (13/18) said that their target students (whether real or imaginary) are made up of low (9) and very low (4), with 6 average level students. This questions what happens to high achievers. Do teachers simply expect those high achievers to do well without their assistance? Or do they simply leave high achievers to others such as cram school teachers? This is possible when we consider the fact that junior high school is part of the compulsory education system in Japan in which every single student has the right to study given school subjects including English. It appears to be more important to the teachers not to leave low achievers behind rather than to help high achievers learn at junior high school. The data also reveals that the teachers tend to make their decisions about their target students in terms of their students' attitudes towards learning English: 66.7% of the teachers (12/18) selected such students' attitudes in preference to the other factors, such as personality and achievement. This suggests that teachers are greatly concerned in their lessons with students' motivation, a key to successful language learning (see Corder, 1967). Gardner (1985: 10) states:

Motivation ... refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes toward learning the language.

It would then be reasonable to ask whether their concern is a group of highly motivated students or unmotivated students. The data on the attitudes of their target students shows that it is more likely the latter case; i.e. the teachers are more concerned with unmotivated students. This seems to be compatible with the discussion above since the factors, motivation and achievement, are often claimed to be closely related to each other (e.g. Gardner, *ibid.*). All this suggests that Japanese teachers in EFL classes seem to struggle to motivate students whose attitudes towards learning English are negative. Does this mean that the lesson should be deemed successful for the teachers if those students' attitudes change into more positive attitudes? If we accept Krashen's theory, what would then happen to those who are not in their target groups of students? These questions can only be addressed in a future study.

### **Conclusion**

From a perspective of classroom pedagogy, it is essential to address the question 'How can Japanese junior high school EFL teachers cope with such learner differences in their classroom?'. This is a crucial point as it is related to the issue of the level of their lesson or task/test design. There are some important questions which require investigation; e.g. 'Is their lesson level appropriate for the students?' and 'Is the given task or test appropriate for the students?'. In order to clarify these questions, however, it would be necessary to investigate which student or group(s) of students teachers aim to teach. In approaching this question, the present paper has shown that Japanese junior high school EFL teachers tend to have preconceived ideas about their students. The data shows these students to be relatively low achieving with negative attitudes towards learning English. Although little qualitative data is available in this study, it is possible to suggest that the teachers are bound by the constrictions of the Japanese compulsory education system.

It is hoped that with more qualitative data future studies will clarify the issues addressed in the present paper from a more process-oriented perspective, providing more opportunities for teachers to reflect upon the question 'Who are we teaching?'.

## Note

The data introduced in this preliminary study was collected by one of the authors, Akira Tajino. He wishes to thank all the teachers who participated in the study for their cooperation.

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## Appendix A

### Questionnaire Format and the Responses of 18 Junior High School Teachers

1) Do you have any particular target student(s) in mind when you teach in class?

1 yes (18)

2 no ( 0)

Total 18

\* If 'yes', who is/are the student(s)?

1 a particular, real student ( 0)

2 a particular, group of real students (17)

3 an imaginary (not a real) student ( 0)

4 a group of imaginary (not real) students ( 1)

5 others ( ) ( 0)

Total 18

2) Gender of the target student(s):

1 Male ( 0)

2 Female ( 0)

3 Male and Female (18)

Total 18

3) Attitudes of the target student(s) towards learning English:

1 very positive ( 0)

2 positive ( 3)

3 neutral ( 6)

4 negative ( 9)

5 very negative ( 0)

Total 18

4) Achievement level of the target student(s):

1 very high (top 20%) ( 0)

2 high (above average 21–40%) ( 0)

3 average ( 5)

4 low (below average 21–40%)	( 9)
5 very low (bottom 20%)	( 4)
<hr/>	
Total	18

5) Do you keep the same target student(s) in mind when making a test/task?

1 yes	(18)
2 no	( 0)
<hr/>	
Total	18

6) Does each class have such target student(s)?

1 yes	(18)
2 no	( 0)
<hr/>	
Total	18

7) If 'yes', is the type of the target student(s) the same across classes?

1 yes	( 6)
2 no	(12)
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Total	18

8) What factors have been important in your choice of target student(s)? Please rank (if applicable) the following factors from 1 to 2, 3, 4, or more.

Ranking Patterns

ATT > PER > ACH > GEN	( 6)
ATT > ACH > PER > GEN	( 5)
ACH > ATT > PER > GEN	( 3)
ACH > ATT > GEN > PER	( 1)
ACH > PER > ATT > GEN	( 1)
ATT > PER > GEN > ACH	( 1)
PER > ATT > GEN > ACH	( 1)
<hr/>	
Total	18

Notes: Gender (GEN)

Achievement level (ACH)

Attitudes (ATT)

Personality (PER)

Others (OTH)