

Book Review: Individual Differences and Task-Based Language Teaching (2024), Edited by Shaofeng Li (John Benjamins)

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¹As an L2 learner and teacher, you have often asked yourself why some students acquire a second language (L2) more successfully than others. On the other hand, other students seem to find difficulty with similar material. You might have noticed that some students are quick to engage with a task while others appear to disengage. How can language learning be structured in the face of these diverse responses? You might further question why the L2 acquisition of speaking or grammar (for example) is so easily taught through tasks, while the L2 acquisition of writing or listening comprehension seems resistant to this approach. These questions lie at the heart of teachers, learners, researchers, and policy makers who wish to improve L2 education. Nonetheless, there are two main aspects of L2 learning: Individual Differences (IDs) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). First, IDs are broadly defined as the

¹ This paper is part of a special issue (2025, 3) entitled: Individual Differences in the AI and Digital Era: The Impact of ChatGPT and Beyond (edited by Zhisheng (Edward) Wen, Richard Sparks, and Hassan Mohebbi).

personal characteristics that make learners differ from one another in how they approach and succeed in language learning (Skehan, 1989). While TBLT is defined as an approach that emphasizes learner-centeredness through authentic tasks requiring real communication. Given the well-documented variability in learner performance within TBLT, the recent advancements in technological tools, such as artificial intelligence (AI), highlight the need to extend this pedagogical approach into digitally mediated learning environments. In this regard, AI-driven tools can support task performance through adaptive feedback and help learners adjust to challenging tasks instantly. These adaptations and implementations of AI tools can be more closely aligned with individual learner differences (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Symasek et al., 2025). In other words, integrating AI into TBLT may encourage learners to be more responsive to tasks. However, it is vital to pay close attention to how these tools are integrated into L2 practice as pedagogical mediations, given concerns about inaccuracies and biases. This perspective also provides a useful lens for evaluating how the reviewed volume engages with IDs in increasingly technology-mediated task environments.

Despite its strengths in implementing TBLT in L2 classes, learners exhibit varying performance levels. In this regard, Crookes and Ziegler (2021) argue that the learner's context and individual characteristics are essential in increasing the effectiveness of TBLT. Similarly, recent studies (e.g., Wang et al., 2021) highlight the importance of learners' emotions and motivation in their engagement with TBLT. This confirms the need to account for IDs in L2 teaching practices. As a result, these frequently asked questions are crucial to teachers, learners, researchers, and policymakers aiming to improve L2 education. Previous literature extensively investigated the factors that affect L2 learning, such as IDs and teaching strategies. However, practical responses to some underlying issues need sifting through a considerable body of research and time. Luckily, the edited volume under review is a concise and comprehensive reference dealing with these concerns. In this regard, Shaofeng Li's edited volume "*Individual Differences and Task-Based Language Teaching*" addresses many of these questions and concerns by focusing on the critical role of individual differences in TBLT effectiveness. The volume further explores how motivation, anxiety, aptitude, and working memory impact learners' engagement and success with TBLT.

This book is organized into twelve chapters. One of the book's primary premises is that TBLT is a learner-centered approach designed to promote meaningful language use. However, the success of this pedagogy is significantly influenced by learners' IDs. Many factors affect a successful L2 learning process, and these factors might be intrinsic or extrinsic. In Chapter 1, the author, Shaofeng Li, proposes a framework to help the reader understand how IDs intersect with TBLT. This chapter can be regarded as the master key, as it uncovered the intricate relationship between IDs and TBLT.

One of the key strengths of this edited volume is its comprehensive coverage of IDs. For example, in Chapter 6, the authors, Hye Jin An and Shaofeng Li, examined the

role of working memory in task performance in depth. The chapter highlights that learners with greater working memory capacity tend to perform better on complex tasks because they are better equipped to process multiple pieces of information simultaneously. Therefore, teachers who understand this relationship modify complex tasks to align with learners' cognitive abilities. This interpretation leads to a practical strategy for improving task performance. However, the chapter also raises questions about the flexibility of working memory and whether pedagogical interventions could help learners with lower working memory capacity to improve their task performance. This chapter informs teachers that instruction can foster cognitive development. This understanding of the effects of instruction can be an innovative contribution because it challenges the idea that cognitive capacities like working memory are fixed and unchangeable. Therefore, it gives teachers hope for the potential impact of their teaching.

Similarly, the book investigates the concept of language aptitude. Interestingly, it revisits John Carroll's influential work and evaluates its relevance to TBLT. Aptitude is generally considered a fixed trait, yet Masako Ishikawa and Andrea Révész question this assumption. They suggest that certain aspects of aptitude, such as phonemic coding ability or grammatical sensitivity, may be trainable under specific conditions. This argument is significant because it makes aptitude a predictor of success and a variable that teachers' targeted instruction can influence. The authors in Chapter 5 thoroughly discuss how aptitude could benefit from more empirical evidence supporting the claim that aptitude can be developed, as the argument remains somewhat speculative. This can be noticed as a shortcoming of the volume. In contrast, seeing more concrete examples of how task-based approaches might foster aptitude development in less gifted learners would have been helpful.

One of the common factors that demotivates L2 learners is learning anxiety. Interestingly, in Chapter 2, Hyejin An and Shaofeng Li explore this psychological aspect of an L2 in TBL. The chapter offers a state-of-the-art review of how task complexity and learner anxiety interact. The authors show that anxiety can significantly hinder learning by increasing cognitive load. This finding encourages L2 teachers to create a supportive learning environment where tasks are carefully designed and sequenced to avoid overwhelming learners. Furthermore, the authors make a compelling case for using fewer challenging tasks at the beginning of instruction to build learners' confidence. Although suggesting fewer challenging tasks is more aligned with conventional pedagogical practices, it would also be essential for L2 teachers if the chapter offered further strategies for managing anxiety beyond task design and sequencing. For instance, while the authors suggest that more straightforward tasks can reduce anxiety, they do not fully explore how emotional support from the teacher or peer collaboration might further reduce the harmful effects of anxiety.

In Chapter 3, as authored by Chengchen Li and Jean-Marc Dewaele, task enjoyment is discussed in comparison with general foreign language enjoyment. One specific point the chapter makes is that not all positive emotions are created equal, and that task-related factors, such as novelty and challenge, can elicit greater engagement. The authors argue that task enjoyment can enhance learners' willingness to invest effort, thus improving language outcomes. However, as with the discussion on anxiety, the practical implications for teaching could be expanded. Furthermore, the authors emphasize the importance of designing enjoyable tasks, but they do not provide detailed examples of what such tasks might look like in practice. This is a shortcoming of the chapter, as it leaves the reader wanting more concrete guidance on fostering enjoyment through task design.


Keeping L2 learners motivated is always a huge task. Teachers often complain that their learners are unmotivated at the beginning of the learning journey. However, there are times when learners become demotivated. This might happen because of internal or external factors. To understand this ongoing phenomenon, in Chapter 7, Yoon Namkung and YouJin Kim introduce the concept of grit—defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals—in their discussion of IDs in TBLT. This chapter is particularly valuable for teachers and learners as it focuses on conative factors, which have traditionally received less attention in SLA research than cognitive and affective factors. The authors argue that gritty learners are more likely to persist in completing challenging tasks. This persistence exists even when slow progress is essential in L2 learning, where long-term effort is crucial for success. In this chapter, the authors discuss how task-based activities can encourage learners to become more resilient and perseverant.


One of the most challenging aspects of L2 classes is having various learner proficiency levels directly linked to IDs. In this regard, Jane Willis (Chap. 10) examines how teachers can use TBLT to facilitate IDs in the classroom. Willis provides concrete examples of how tasks can be adapted to fit learners' needs. Although this chapter offers valuable perspectives for L2 teachers, the author did not thoroughly discuss the logistical challenges teachers may face when implementing TBLT in diverse classroom settings, where large class sizes, limited resources, or institutional constraints are major concerns.

Throughout this book, the authors have successfully bridged the gap between SLA research and classroom practice. However, the authors sometimes focus on research rather than the practical aspects of IDs. This makes the book an excellent source for researchers as it is rich in empirical studies and theoretical discussions. However, its high-quality academic writing, tone, and reliance on empirical data might make it less readable for novice teachers or practitioners without a strong background in SLA. In that sense, the book provides valuable insights into how IDs shape language learning. Keeping the aforementioned point of view in mind, the book could do more to offer practical solutions for teachers and practitioners who are less experienced in research.

Altogether, the book makes a significant contribution to the SLA field, particularly by offering a comprehensive exploration of how individual learner characteristics influence the effectiveness of TBLT. One of the noticeable aspects of this volume is its detailed presentation of cognitive, affective, and conative factors and its linking of theoretical insights to practical applications. However, the volume does not address how AI-mediated learning environments may affect the relationship between tasks and IDs. This might have been more beneficial if the book had discussed how adaptive feedback, task personalization, and real-time learner–task interaction can reconceptualize tasks and IDs. This limits its engagement with current developments in technology-enhanced language learning. Despite this limitation, the book offers a strong conceptual foundation for implementing TBLT in contexts with diverse learner profiles. This can be significantly valuable for researchers, educators, and L2 teachers. Therefore, being among the three groups, we can confidently recommend reading this book to expand your understanding of this topic.

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