# Rethinking Individual Differences in SLA: A Special Issue in Honour of Richard Sparks

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**Introduction to Richard Sparks and the Special Issue**

Richard Sparks is currently Professor Emeritus of Special Education in Mount St. Joseph University's Department of Graduate Education in Cincinnati, USA.  For over 40 years, Richard has had a celebratory career in teaching, researching, and servicing language education. His broad research interests and academic influence span various sub-domains of individual differences in L1 and L2 reading and writing, language learning difficulties, and language aptitude. Richard has published extensively in top journals of language and education, producing an impressive list of empirical studies and thought-provoking theoretical position papers related to key topics and issues in foreign language education, educational psychology, and learning disability. Scholars and practitioners in both language and psychology have read his works with interest and cited frequently many of his influential works on language, education, psychology, dyslexia, hyperlexia, and in particular language aptitude.

Having received professional training in educational psychology and special education, Richard has conducted and published numerous programmatic papers in L1 reading, language learning disabilities, and in L2 education, among which over 95 items are indexed in the *Scopus*

database. According to the latest figure of Google Scholar (as of August 2022), Richard's works have been cited over 10,000 times, with an impressive h-index of 55 (meaning 55 of his publications have been cited over 55 times), and an i10-index figure of 102 (i.e., 102 works being cited over 10 times). In the more specific topic of language aptitude that is central in current applied linguistics (Doughty & Mackey, 2021), a recent survey conducted by Chalmers et al. (2021) found that Richard has produced the largest number of empirical studies among all aptitude scholars in the past 60 years.

Richard's research expertise and academic contributions lie in several key domains in L1 and L2 learning, which he has summarized in his latest monograph published by Multilingual Matters (Sparks, 2022). In terms of theoretical models, Richard is most famous for his language aptitude model of the *Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis* (LCDH) in which he lays out his thoughts on the key determinant of L2 aptitude and L2 learning, which is the learners' mother tongue (L1). To support his point and confirm the hypotheses laid out in LCDH, Richard has conducted systematic and programmatic studies over the last three decades, digging out compelling evidence pointing to the strong relationship between L1 and L2 (Sparks, 2022). Empirical supports highlighted by Richard come from both linguistic and cognitive-oriented studies including L1 reading, cross-linguistic transfer, and individual differences (IDs) in L2 aptitude and L2 learning outcomes.

Over the years, although the role of L1 has been recognized and discussed in language education and bilingualism (e.g., Cummins, 1979), the research topic has been marginalized in most SLA literature, particularly under the influence of communicative language teaching (CLT) which contends that the use of L1 mother tongue should be reduced or avoided. Such an assumption, as argued by Richard (Sparks, 2022), should be revamped (this issue) because an increasing number of studies have demonstrated its positive role in predicting, facilitating, and boosting L2 learning in the long run.

Besides churning out empirical evidence in support of the role of L1 in L2 learning, Richard has also put forward several strong position statements and claims that are thought-provoking. For example, though many people are talking about a foreign language learning disability or FLLD, Richard (Sparks, 2006, 2016) argues that there is not a distinct "disability" that can be called an FLLD, positioning it as a misnomer that is misleading and problematizing its empirical evidence. Another revolutionary thinking by Richard is that L2 anxiety should be considered as a *linguistic* variable rather than a *cognitive* or *affective* variable as previously held by many scholars in both applied linguistics and educational psychology (Sparks, 2022; also see Wen et al., 2023).

**Summary of Papers in This Special Issue**

Needless to say, the contributions from Richard's works and insights therein will make a big impact on applied linguistics and language education research and its implications for teaching and learning practice will be significant. It just happened that 2023 marks the 30th Anniversary of the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH) advocated by Richard. To celebrate this important language aptitude model and many other landmark contributions made by Richard

to the broad fields of applied linguistics, language education, and educational psychology, we are guest-editing this special issue of the *Language Teaching Quarterly Journal (LTRQ)* in honour of Richard! We are glad to have received a dozen papers submitted by scholars from around the world, presenting works that have been influenced or inspired by Richard's ideas and thoughts on key issues. Based on the sorting of topics of these contributions, we organize the individual papers of this special issue into several sections, reflecting the major themes that are related to Richard's academic influence, namely, individual differences in language aptitude and the role of L1, etc. Following this introduction is **an interview with Richard** conducted by the two guest editors of this special issue which discusses Richard's academic background and his career and life. Issues discussed include how he had started his career, the focus of and results of his research, the significance his research studies, and what he will do in the future. Then, in the next paper, Richard presents his **position paper** that reflects on his own academic endeavors in the past 40 years, focusing in particular on the origin and evolution of language aptitude. In this position paper, Richard reiterated his strong position on the positive role of the learners' L1 as a significant determinant of L2 aptitude and L2 learning, in the long run, thus echoing the question raised by the pioneering research of language aptitude Peter Skehan back in 1986.

If language aptitude is interpreted as a continuous distribution from one end of the inability to the other end of exceptional aptitude, then the next two papers illustrate its two ends, i.e., language learning difficulties in the form of dyslexia and exceptional language performance among polyglots. On the one hand, Tsakalidou provides a brief review of teaching foreign languages to learners with dyslexia in Greece, including major research findings and practical teaching implications. On the other, Wen et al. review the emerging perspective of language aptitude researchers to explore the underlying mechanisms subserving the exceptional language performance among polyglots and hyperpolyglots who can speak a dozen languages other than their mother tongue.

The next two papers are empirical studies reporting on the effects of language aptitude on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Chinese contexts. Zhao and Luo explored the impact of language aptitude on grammar attainment of Chinese EFL learners with different ages of onset and found that language aptitude moderates participants' performance on the untimed grammaticality judgment tests and the metalinguistic knowledge test among the earlier starters, and that higher aptitude learners outperformed lower aptitude learners in the grammar tests. Liu et al. explore the effects of language aptitude and online self-regulated learning on EFL learning outcomes and found a positive correlation among the three variables, in which language aptitude alone (as measured by the grammatical sensitivity and associative memory ability in the MLAT) accounted for a 38.9 % variance, while its combined effects with online self-regulated learning contributed 52.4% of the variance. The results and findings of this study lend support to the strong predictive power of the MLAT and corroborate predictions of Spark's Linguistic Coding Deficit Hypothesis (LCDH).

The next three papers introduce innovations to language aptitude research. Suárez explains the imperative need for designing an aptitude test for young learners and uses the MLAT–Elementary in Catalan as an example. In light of the emerging insights into implicit language

aptitude (e.g., Li & Dekeyser, 2021; Granena, 2020), Tang and Luo further probe the possibilities and outline the looming caveats of implicit language aptitude measurements. Also, in line with the recent trend to incorporate working memory as language aptitude (Wen, 2016, 2019), Azevedo et al. explore the mediating role of working memory in predicting bilinguals' literal and inferential comprehension of digital reading in the Brazilian context.

The next two papers extend from the overarching theme that characterizes Sparks' position on language aptitude, that is, the role of the mother tongue (L1). Building on the emerging theory of translanguaging (Li, 2018), Öztürk and Çubukçu explore student-directed translanguaging in the English-centric classroom in the Turkish context. In a similar vein, Littlewood and Wang reflect on the literature reviewing the role of learners' L1 in the foreign language classroom. Both papers echo Spark's strong position on the important role of the learners' mother tongue (L1), which parallels with that of the advocates of translanguaging, who contend that bi/multilinguals' mother tongue is not just an L1, but a repertoire that consists of all linguistic and nonlinguistic resources (Li & Garcia, 2022).

Finally, the paper by Karacan and Solhi investigates Turkish pre-service English language teachers' virtual teaching dispositions as a new feature of individual differences, while Pawlak concludes the special issue by providing a comprehensive and updated review of the key individual differences factors in SLA in general and computer-aided language learning (CALL) research in particular. Building upon the gist from his recent monograph (Pawlak & Kruk, 2022), Pawlak not only synthesizes the enormous bodies of empirical studies investigating the relationship between individual differences and SLA as well as CALL, but also highlights major findings and the looming challenges that have not just provided the state of the art reviews but also pointed out directions for future research. Such in-depth reviews echo the very theme that runs through most of Richard's widely cited publications over the decades, and aptly puts a perfect end to the special issue that honors his enormous contributions and influence in academia.

Overall, it has been a great pleasure and gratifying experience for the two of us to have this wonderful opportunity to guest edit this special issue of the *Language Teaching Research Quarterly (LTRQ)* in honour of our most devoted and respectable colleague Prof Richard Sparks. Our final hope is that Richard will continue his career with flying colours and produce even more groundbreaking research that will inspire us all and lead the field forward.

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**Ethics Declarations**

**Competing Interests**

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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