The psychology of language learning and the science of the individual

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Research on the psychology of language learning is no different from other social science research in that it has typically assumed implicitly that insights about a population apply to individuals. Arguing against this assumption, Rose, Rouhani, and Fischer propose a "science of the individual." Indeed, a science, centered on individual variability, has contributed an important perspective in many fields, including cell biology, cancer, neuroscience, and psychology.

Along these same lines, over the past two decades, a substantial body of evidence, informed by Complexity Theory and/or Dynamic Systems Theory, has demonstrated that inferring development about individuals from aggregating information about a population is flawed due to pervasive inter-individual variability (e.g., Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). The evidence also points to high degree of intra-individual variability, depending on the spatio-temporal-social context. Both types of variability force us to shift perspectives and to expect multiple language learning pathways.

In this paper, I will argue that focusing on the individual learner does not mean that we have to jettison generalizing (Van Geert, 2011), nor does it mean that we should not report about groups. What it does mean is that we have to adopt new tools of investigation (Harris, 2015), and cultivate new attitudes towards the importance of the individual in language learning. In return, we will be rewarded by new insights into language learning, and we will make possible better interaction between the two discourse communities of researchers and teachers.


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