
UNIT 1 THE LANGUAGE LEARNER

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction: Learner Factors that Affect Learning in School
- 1.2 The Personal and Unique Quality of Learning
- 1.3 The Student's Readiness to Engage with a New Topic
- 1.4 Interest and Motivation for Schoolwork or Studies
- 1.5 Learner Characteristics that Influence Learning at School
 - 1.5.1 Characteristics Lying More in the Cognitive Domain
 - 1.5.2 Learning Styles and Preferences
 - 1.5.3 Multiple Intelligences
- 1.6 Flexibility in the Curriculum: Valuing Diversity and Promoting Autonomy
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 1.9 Suggested Reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit aims to help extend your understanding and appreciation of

- the various ways in which children (as whole persons) differ from one another;
- the distinction between capacity to learn and alternative styles or modes of learning;
- how some of these characteristics influence children's engagement with the curriculum; and
- special aptitudes that nearly all children have which can make them contributors to the curriculum.

1.1 INTRODUCTION: LEARNER FACTORS THAT AFFECT LEARNING IN SCHOOL

Learning occurs both through natural process of socialization in everyday life and through planned formal instruction in school. Both are important for the development of the child into an adult who is well integrated with society. In this unit we will focus on child related factors that influence learning in school, which is our primary (but of course not only) concern. What are some of the personal characteristics of learners that we need to keep in mind when developing the curriculum and planning classroom activities? Some of the points we discuss relate to school-based learning in general, and some are more directly related to **learning language**.

1.2 THE PERSONAL AND UNIQUE QUALITY OF LEARNING

Learning is an individual process. Even if there is a class of thirty, receiving the same lessons based on the same textbook and monitored by the same tests, each child's learning is a unique process. Schools and classes within them may be large, but it is the progress of the individual – shown in the report card—that children (and parents) are interested in. Even in our mass education system with several lakhs appearing for a Board examination, each answer script is *evaluated separately*. Thus what each child learns from common instruction is our focus of interest. Earlier we tended to think that the new knowledge in a lesson simply got added to a store in the learner's mind. This was called the “jug and mug model” of teaching. Knowledge from the teacher's jug is poured like milk or water into each child's mug. We know now that children's minds are not ‘mugs’ of the same type and little packets of (new) knowledge are not simply received as they are. Even more important is the idea that learners are not only receiving additional packets of knowledge. It is useful to think of each child's development over time as a journey on which many things are experienced, including of course what comes from school lessons. The learning from all these prior experiences is what each *child brings to class* on any day. The new input from the lesson has to be *integrated* with the knowledge that is already there. So, the new learning is not a simple matter of adding little bits. Various personal qualities of the child will affect this process of learning or ‘uptake’ from a lesson. A recognition of this uniqueness – which means diversity in the class – is central to the approach to curriculum and learning. One of the major challenges facing the teacher is to adapt the standard or common material in the text book to suit the qualities or needs of varied learners.

In this unit we take up two themes that might help us understand more about individual differences among learners that we hope common instruction will respond to. One is the notion of readiness for learning - the link between prior learning and what is new in a lesson. The other is the variation in children's *ways of learning* - which is related to *how* they engage with and take in the new knowledge that is presented to them in school lessons. Our focus will be on language learning.

1.3 THE STUDENT'S READINESS TO ENGAGE WITH A NEW TOPIC

All of us have had the experience as students in school of finding certain topics taken up in class ‘difficult’. The basic ideas did not make sense, the explanations did not help and we could not handle the practice exercises or problems. In some cases, a sensitive and resourceful teacher has provided special help in various ways to help learners overcome such difficulties fairly quickly, so that they could keep up with the others. In other less happy cases, the difficulty and lack of understanding was overcome only much later - in remedial lessons, but sometimes never at all. This happens over and over again to many students at all levels. This is because there is a *mismatch* between what the teaching plan for the topic *assumes as available prior knowledge* and what individual students actually have. This is a problem that always comes up when a standard syllabus is covered according to a fixed calendar. Many learners are not ready for the given lesson.

If they do not learn as expected, it is because of this inadequate preparation, and not because of low learning capacity

The standard syllabus for any subject is based on certain logical and reasonable assumptions. The syllabus for Class V builds on the Class IV syllabus, and the Class VI syllabus builds on what is in the Class V syllabus, and so on. The problem in the classroom arises because every child has not properly learnt or mastered everything covered earlier. Teachers often do some revision before taking up a new topic. This is of course useful, but may not be enough. The important concepts that the new lesson or unit will build on need to be identified carefully and revision should target these points. This will enable those who are less prepared or behind others to follow the new material and keep up with the others in class. The important idea about readiness is that it is *not a fixed* characteristic of the child, but a highly variable factor closely *linked to particular topics*. A child might be unclear about certain point of grammar (e.g., She lives in X /She is living in X/ She lived in X). But the same child might know most of the words in a story or poem that comes in the same textbook unit. In other subjects too we will find children having difficulties with ideas related to one topic but at the same time learning quite happily in another area. Thus, the factor of low readiness which may come in different lessons and subjects is not related to any basic ability or capacity to learn. It is *not a fixed* characteristic of the child. A student who shows lack of relevant knowledge in any area, needs to be given specifically planned help. As mentioned earlier this will allow her/him to catch up with others. If sufficient help is provided in the initial weeks of a term, a student’s readiness problem might slowly disappear. This is one of the most challenging areas in pedagogy.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What is ‘readiness’? What are the ways in which this factor can be used effectively by the teacher in the learning process?

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- 2) ‘Readiness’ is not a fixed characteristic of a child. Discuss the statement in the light of what you have read in the unit and understood from your own experience.

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1.4 INTEREST AND MOTIVATION FOR SCHOOLWORK OR STUDIES

All of us must have had the experience ourselves or of those we know well losing interest in studies and wanting to give up - and even drop out - at some time or the other. Fortunately, these negative moods change after some time in many cases. When these students get back to studies, they usually have a large backlog to deal with or may have lost a year. We need to note the distinction between this *general loss* of interest and motivation, and negative attitude students sometimes develop to a particular subject or topic or teacher. This will affect learning in that subject, but the student might be doing quite well in other subjects, and on the whole be happy at school.

The general problem of interest and motivation is not linked to a particular subject or teacher. The negative attitude seems to apply to practically all school activities, which can also lead to getting more isolated and unhappy. There are two possible causes of this condition. One is the feeling that everything is too difficult and that there is no real help from teachers or students (friends). It could be that the student started the term with many gaps in prior learning (readiness), but no diagnosis leading to appropriate action was taken up. She/he would have found lessons difficult to follow from the beginning. Sometimes other children may make fun of such students. Unit tests reinforce the fact of being far behind others, and usually no help to improve is provided. All this can lead to feeling unable to do anything successfully and a sense of worthlessness. (We will discuss this idea again under *self-esteem*). Such loss of confidence often makes a child unwilling even to try, and interest and motivation are slowly lost. Such occurrences are not the individual teacher's fault: the problem lie in the larger system. The already overburdened teacher cannot provide intensive individual attention to each student. However, the teacher can try and adapt the syllabus and materials to some extent. The important point here is that teachers need to convey to 'weak' students that they (teachers) are aware of students' difficulties and are trying to help them. Encouragement can be shown in small ways. The feeling of being cared for matters greatly to such children. Children need to feel they are welcome in school and class, and also that they are respected. The gentle pressure they feel should be to try and keep trying, and not necessarily to succeed.

Low motivation is nearly always a *temporary condition* initially. It can become more pronounced if there is no support. But helping a student to overcome loss of motivation and interest even in one subject area can have positive effect in other areas as well. Thus, we can see the value of creating and maintaining a supportive social climate in classrooms.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Why do students lose interest in school work in general? What can the teacher do to help them renew their interest in their studies?

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1.5 LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS THAT INFLUENCE LEARNING AT SCHOOL

The two factors we considered above –readiness and motivation—are strongly influenced by what happens to the child, in other words, by external events. By changing the environment, a student’s readiness and motivation can be changed. There are also factors which influence learning that lie within the child and seem to be fairly stable. When we describe a person we usually focus on such qualities. As students of literature at high school, we have all written ‘character sketches’ of individuals who appear as characters in plays or stories. The qualities focused on are ones that lie within and do not change. Certain qualities of individuals that are related to their general nature or *personality* are of interest to us in the context of learning at school. We now look at some of these qualities that differentiate different types of learners among children. We must remember that these characteristics *especially of school age children* are not altogether fixed. Though relatively stable they can change gradually —and teachers and peers can contribute to this process.

Some qualities appear to be more related to the capacity to learn and solve problems especially in the context of studies at school. A second category is more related to preferences and habitual ways of doing things, i.e. what a person is comfortable with. Feelings and social relationships are covered here.

1.5.1 Characteristics Lying More in the Cognitive Domain

a) General Scholastic Ability

One of the very commonly used words when teachers and parents talk about children in school is ‘bright’. Parents sometimes compare one child with a brother or sister and describe one as ‘bright’ and the other as less so. Teachers also know who the ‘bright’ ones in their classes are. The term is associated with ability to understand and remember what is taught in various subjects, learning quickly and doing well in tests. It is unfortunately often used carelessly as we shall see later in this section. The basis of the term is the notion of *intelligence* - which is well known (but not well understood.) It is true that some individuals consistently perform better in school tests, and are good at solving puzzles and riddles and are adept at memory-based games. They do relatively well on mental ability (or intelligence) tests which have items on reasoning, pattern recognition, problem solving. The mental quality or ability that such tests measure is also called *scholastic aptitude* since this seems to help students to do well in their *studies* which are related to school subjects.

We need to remember that the label ‘studies’ does not include learning in many areas which are seen as important for the holistic or well-rounded development of the child: art, music, dance, sports, drama, team work, caring for others, leadership, and so on.

Obviously, students with a higher level of scholastic ability will perform better in many class activities and tests related to them than others, especially when knowing and remembering what is in prescribed texts and writing long answers are involved. But curriculum transaction today also includes more open-ended activities (not linked to a single ‘correct answer’): dialogues, dramatization of

themes, situations from stories and poems, creating displays/charts, sharing experiences outside school and so on. In this wider context of activities where written answers (to test questions) are only one component, those students with high scholastic aptitude will not automatically have any big advantage. So, we can state that the general level of scholastic ability of students does not influence their language learning in class in a strong and consistent way. This is especially true now, when communication skills are being emphasized rather than knowledge about language. Therefore, teachers should not simply assume that learners who get high or low grades in other subjects will perform similarly in the language class. The earlier discussion about prior learning and readiness is relevant here. Students who have not learnt what is needed as background for new learning will of course face difficulties. This is related to lack of opportunity to learn, *not* to low capacity to learn. While we should be happy about students who are doing well in studies, *we must be very careful not to judge others as low in scholastic ability without proper evidence. We should expect so called scholastically weak students also to do well—especially in the language area.*

b) Language Learning Aptitude

We often come across people who have learnt a number of languages both at school and college and when they have travelled abroad. So, there is a popular idea that some people have a knack for languages, just like having a feel for music or dancing or being good with one's hands. In the second half of the last century the study of languages, especially foreign languages, began to increase—covering more languages and more students. Linguists and psychologists took up research on language aptitude, and two well known tests were developed: the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) of Carroll and Sapon (1959), and the Pimsleur Language Aptitude Battery (PLAB) of Pimsleur (1966). These tests have sections dealing with specific sub-skills like phonetic coding, grammatical sensitivity, sound discrimination, sound symbol association, short term memory after rote learning. *They do not look like language tests* at all, as they focus on some of the 'hidden' cognitive processes that underly the speaking or listening we normally do while using a language. The theory is that if a person gets high scores on these sections, s/he has basic abilities which are a big advantage when learning a new language. These tests were found to be fairly useful in identifying potentially good students of language(s) and those who found language study difficult. They were widely used especially in the USA for several years.

We are interested here in the nature of a basic aptitude for learning language, languages actually, which has implications for pedagogy. Here we find that the two tests have limitations. One is that they contain tasks (items) which look complicated and only someone who has been educated in formal school for about eight years would understand the instructions. The tests are meant for older learners, and so they do not give us any useful data about the 'language aptitude' of primary school children. Secondly, they were developed more than half a century ago. The approach to language instruction then emphasized drills and pattern practice, learning about the system (rules of grammar and pronunciation). Now, with much greater focus on meaning and participation in communicative activities, the processes and sub-skills involved in learning would be different. New aptitude tests need to be developed.

If we go back to what we noted about children's learning and learning capacity, we find there is a basic problem with the idea of aptitude. *All children learn to*

speaking their home languages long before they start formal school. There is no indication of different levels (low, average, high) of aptitude among children: everyone learns successfully. It is true that when the learning of reading and writing starts in school, there are always different success levels. This is the challenge we face. How can we make the teaching-learning of the written form of language more like the success story of learning to speak the home language? There is no scientific evidence that differences in aptitude for language are a factor in early learning at school. Anyway, our education policy commits us to help children learn *languages* — three in most cases. Aptitude is not a relevant or helpful idea for us. Later when, college level optional and advanced language courses come up, language aptitude test scores can help in choosing to study or not study languages as special subjects. It is in such a setting that the MLAT and LAB were most helpful.

Check your progress 3

- 1) What is intelligence? Do children with scholastic ability/intelligence do well in all subjects?

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- 2) What are the implications of aptitude research for classroom teacher?

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1.5.2 Learning Styles and Preferences

c) Learning Styles

Educational psychologists studying the processes of learning have found that individuals seem to have different styles of learning. These are *not* linked to higher or lower levels of the capacity to learn. They are rather equally natural and effective ways of engaging cognitively with new experiences and ideas. The alternative styles are rather like being left-handed or right-handed, but they are not so sharply different or fixed. A student's typical learning style in class is an orientation or preference for how information and ideas are taken in and processed. But even these styles can and often do change over time, though only slowly. Also, students can have different styles for different types of subject matter or curricular activities. Learning styles are of relevance to us because they influence learning. If there is a match between the teaching style and the student's style, learning will be more comfortable and effective. A mismatch could result in obstacles to effective learning.

Several different ways of describing and categorizing styles have been proposed by various scholars. One survey found there were about 70 such models! Obviously, there is a lot of overlap, because many different words are used to talk about the same thing. We will look here only at a few interesting styles sets of differences that might be relevant when planning for teaching. This overview only provides a general background. Some of the interesting areas in which style differences have been identified are:

i) *Sensory preference*

The word teaching is associated primarily with something the teacher provides or does - usually telling or presenting. Some *input* (received through the senses – listening, seeing and feeling) is central to teaching-learning experiences especially in relation to subject matter in the syllabus. Remember that the same message can be conveyed or presented in different ways. For instance, when we have to give someone directions for reaching a house from the station or bus stand, this can be done in different ways - using words mainly, or words and gestures or a diagram/map. Similarly, when teaching a lesson, the presentation could use different types of sensory input.

One difference among learners is in the way of ‘taking in’ information, i.e., which one suits them best. These are orientations or preferences for the mode of sensory input. The possibilities or options are: visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic.

Visual is based on seeing. Students with this orientation learn best from written statements (on the board or worksheets) and pictures, diagrams, models they can see.

Auditory is based on hearing. Spoken messages (like teacher talk) seem best for some students to learn.

Tactile (relating to touch) and *kinesthetic* (sense of moving body parts) are taken together. Some students learn best when they can touch and feel objects (especially models) or are themselves moving (as in demonstrations and role play).

Most teachers would say that they use all these ‘methods’ at different times during their lessons. And they would be right. The point here is that specific ways of presenting information can be chosen and used in a more planned manner after the teacher comes to know about individual students’ styles. This is especially useful when giving individual attention to students or organizing activity in pairs or small groups. Students also differ in the way they engage with or cognitively process the ‘inputs’ they receive. We now look at these differences in the way children learn.

ii) *Whole or part focused learning*

Some learners tend to focus more on general ideas or the ‘big picture’, while others pay much more attention to the small details. This has also been described as the global versus sequential style of processing information. Some students learn better when the teacher presents and discusses general ideas and assigns related tasks; they may have a tendency to ‘switch off’ when a lot of time is spent on small details. But others may respond well to specifics and details, and feel somewhat lost when the focus is on abstract ideas.

This orientation is related to a broader factor called *field dependence* – *field independence*. Field dependent individuals are influenced by the context. For example, in a group where most people favour one opinion in a set of possibilities they are more likely to agree with others. Those who are more field independent are better able to see basic facts or arguments by themselves. This does not mean that they are independent thinkers or misfits. Their style of thinking is more analytical, that is all.

iii) *Inductive vs. deductive learning*

Inductive learning occurs when a body of specific facts or data is given and effort is directed to finding pattern(s) or *inferring* a general principle. Tasks involving trying out possible explanations – exploring without knowing beforehand what is the best thing to do—involves such learning. Grammar is often taught inductively in deductive learning, usually a rule or principle is given to begin with, and the discussion is on its implications and applications. Many problems in mathematics and science involve sets of deductions. Here too it is found that some students are more comfortable and learn better with the first of these approaches. They seem to enjoy finding things out for themselves – learning by discovery. Other students are more comfortable when principles and rules are stated, and the challenge is to understand and apply them.

iv) *Convergent thinking vs. divergent thinking*

This dimension is related to the distinction sometimes made between ‘intelligence’ and ‘creativity’. Psychologists who have studied the way people deal with problems that require thinking and analysis have found two broad approaches. The more common one is to analyze the problem logically using relevant knowledge from mathematics or biology or economics, and then *proceed systematically*—step by step towards the solution. There is a gradual progress of narrowing down—or converging—to the solution. This is rather similar to the deductive approach mentioned above. Some people do not go directly to the problem *as given*. They will look at it from different angles and sometimes even try to change or reformulate it. This can lead to unusual or creative suggestions. The process here is one of opening up or widening the discussion. That is why the term divergent is used. Many innovations or discoveries in science and new theories have come from people who were divergent in their thinking. However, both approaches are useful and important. Having convergent and divergent thinking students in the same class is a great resource. The problems introduced in class should allow both types to try their approaches and share their experiences.

These learning styles were mentioned here mainly to illustrate what they are. There are many others. Note, that there are no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ styles. What we have seen are equally useful and effective *alternative* ways of learning. If teachers can organize some aspects of their teaching to match the styles of different students, this could facilitate better learning. To enhance the chances of such matching of styles, teachers need to add more variety to their teaching styles—by including more types of presentations and activities in their lesson plans. They need not know all the names and definitions of several learning styles. Once they have the basic concept, as they interact with successive batches of learners, they will recognize different learning styles. This knowledge can guide them when planning their teaching.

d) **Personality dispositions –feelings, emotions and social interactions**

The term personality is a familiar one. When we talk about and describe individuals, we always say something about their *personality* - their typical *ways of behaving* in their daily lives and especially when relating to others. This is something in addition to and different from their abilities and skills, achievements, status and so on. When students write about ‘my favourite teacher’, ‘my hero’ these personal qualities are emphasized. These are fairly stable qualities or characteristics of a person (referred to as *traits*), and can be seen even in children. The study of personality is one of the major sub-fields of psychology, and involves many different theories and models. Several personality dimensions have been proposed. We will look at a few of them here to get a sense of what personality factors are. They are of interest because they seem to influence learning, but in a different manner than the more cognitive factors we just looked at.

One widely mentioned list of personality dimensions (called the big five) - aspects on which individuals differ - are the following

Extraversion - Introversion

A person near the extraversion end is generally active, energetic, outgoing, talkative and friendly.

Openness – Closed Mindedness

A person high on openness is likely to be curious, imaginative, original and has wide interests.

Conscientiousness – Undirectedness

A person high on conscientiousness behaves in an organized, efficient manner and is thorough and reliable in getting things done.

Agreeableness – Antagonism

An agreeable person is generally good natured, kind, trusting, generous, modest and appreciative

Neuroticism – Stability

A person high on neuroticism is often anxious and insecure, gets upset easily and shows signs of self-pity.

This is only an outline. The descriptions above are not at all complete. They give us a general sense of what psychologists treat as aspects of *personality*. We must note carefully that we cannot put people (especially children) into such categories. Even psychologists who conduct elaborate tests are careful about this. What is important here is that these personality dispositions are fairly stable –almost natural qualities of a person. They are not expressions of conscious and deliberate decisions to act in particular ways—they are like all established habits one does not think about. Some dispositions of children (see examples below) seem to be positive for classroom participation and others less so. The teacher must remember that a child with a certain disposition is *not doing anything deliberately*.

Let us consider personality related differences among children. Look at the examples below of different types of learners we might see in a class:

- an extroverted child who is active and talkative and likes to be interacting with others

- a child who is more introverted and does not participate actively in group work,
- a child who is anxious and gets easily discouraged,
- a child who seems inattentive and careless about work and does not complete assignments,
- a child who seems keenly interested in new ideas and activities and enjoys engaging with them

We should recognize that no such ‘type’ is good or bad in itself. Also, as noted already, these ways of behaving are not conscious choices made by individuals. Teachers should appreciate that they represent children’s habitual styles or predispositions, and accept them without judging them. It is true that in the conventional classroom, some types seem not well adjusted. Scolding or putting pressure on a child whose behaviour seems ‘negative’ will not help. As far as possible they should be involved in other activities. There are spaces within the curriculum where a shy and withdrawn child or even the child who seems careless is not a ‘problem’. Remember that a high-pressure competitive classroom is not the ideal, though it is commonly found. The classroom climate can be changed. As teachers understand such predispositions of children and work sensitively with them, these children too can learn successfully; they may also contribute to others’ learning in small ways. And to repeat an earlier point, changes in aspects of personality can occur, but only slowly and based on a lot of supportive interaction.

Some further dimensions of personality

Another aspect of personality which is fairly easy to see is *self-esteem*. This is related to confidence and a capacity to accept challenges, take risks and risk failure without much anxiety. A person with high self-esteem is able to accept criticism, and is not worried about being unpopular at times. Teachers and peers are fortunate when there are such students in class. There will also be others low on self esteem. We can be sure that they were not born that way. They must have been through many negative experiences in the past both in and out of school. Using the many types of situations and activities of the total curriculum to provide such children positive experiences is not very difficult for teachers using the support of peers.

Some people have a marked tendency to be strongly influenced by the opinions of those around them. This disposition is called *social conformity*. While all members of society are expected to generally follow group norms and obey rules and so on, a certain degree of independence and thinking for oneself is also treated as normal and healthy. A child who seems always to watch what others do and say, and tries to follow them and ‘not be different’ would be high on the social conformity dimension. This is not the same as low ability and confidence. Such a student might be getting quite good grades, but may not participate in group activities where each child has to contribute his/her own ideas and opinions, and may try to avoid tasks calling for innovation.

We have reviewed various dimensions on which there are individual differences among students covering both the cognitive and social – emotional dimensions. We will now look at a model which brings many of these and certain other qualities into a comprehensive picture.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) List the categories of cognitive styles mentioned. According to your experience in the classroom, what are the cognitive styles which best bring about second language learning? You may take up case histories of particular students in answering this question.

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- 2) Have you ever thought of your students’ personality dispositions? Go through the register and mark them according to the categories mentioned. Then make an analysis of these categories and the language learning ability of each student.

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1.5.3 Multiple Intelligences

A very interesting new discussion about differences among children with implications for their progress as learners started about thirty years ago, when the psychologist Howard Gardner presented his Theory of Multiple Intelligences (in 1983). In this scheme there are seven *intelligences*, and later on he added two more:

Logico-mathematical, linguistic, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, spatial, inter-personal and intra-personal. Later an eighth one - naturalistic - was added. Still later he added the ninth one-*Existential*. Traditionally we thought of ‘intelligence’ as related only to logical thinking and problem solving. Gardner says that having a feel for words (images, rhymes, striking expressions, multiple meanings) is also a form of intelligence. Similarly, the powerful sense of one’s own body (which dancers and gymnasts have) is related to intelligence. The basic capacity which allows some persons to become good painters, sculptors, designers of visuals is spatial intelligence. It is easy to see what the names musical and inter-personal point to. Intra-personal intelligence is what allows people (even children) to be happy in themselves (accept their strengths and weaknesses, preserve a high self-concept). Some persons seem to have a feel for the many things in the natural world - living things, water, minerals. They not only enjoy nature but can participate with understanding and sensitivity in activities linked to the environment. Existential intelligence refers to the sensitivity and capacity to tackle deep questions about human existence, such as the meaning of life, our place in the universe and questions of life and death.

We will not go into more details about multiple intelligences. The significant idea here is that scholastic aptitude is *only one* among the special aptitudes' individuals have. In fact, other psychologists had suggested even before Gardner that 'social intelligence' and 'emotional intelligence' should also be recognized as special aptitudes some persons might have. The principle that there are different types of aptitudes can be linked to what we noted about the potential for learning that all children have. We see now that often there could also be some special aptitude, which means that knowledge and skill can develop to a level of excellence. Children in schools and classrooms will have different profiles of strengths and interests. We need as teachers to be aware of this diversity and develop the capacity to recognize special aptitudes. But we must be careful not to hastily brand children as strong in one or two areas and weak in all others. We need to nurture their special potentials within our basic commitment to promote the all-round development of each child. No learning opportunity should be held back from any child.

Check Your Progress 5

- 1) "Knowing individual Learner's learning style can help the language teacher devise learning strategies to enhance their performance..." State what the teacher should do to exploit multiple intelligences of the students in the classroom to an optimum extent.

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1.6 FLEXIBILITY IN THE CURRICULUM: VALUING DIVERSITY AND PROMOTING AUTONOMY

In the sections above we have looked at some of the ways in which individuals differ. The focus has been on individuals as persons - who have their own thoughts, feelings, hopes, needs and so on. The focus has been on these psychological aspects, which lie beyond the more obvious physical ones such as sex, age, physical development, health. The survey has been brief and has covered only some of the many possible dimensions of individual differences. Even so we have gained a sense of how vast and rich human diversity can be. A class of 35 or even a small group of 10 has children whose unique personalities will lead to different patterns of learning. This diversity can be seen as a resource now, and we need to try and adapt the 'standard curriculum' to suit individual needs. This is a big challenge of course, but the new approach to the curriculum also has a source of support. This is the principle that the child relates ideas coming as inputs in lessons to her/his life outside the school and thus becomes an active co-creator of new knowledge. This knowledge will be personal and therefore different for different children. In other words, we do not have to try to make every child in a class learn exactly the same things, in the same manner at the same rate which was the underlying principle of the traditional curriculum. In a traditional

classroom, the given syllabus was covered following the required or recommended method. Individual teachers tried to give so called weak students some special help. Those who could not meet the requirements ‘failed’ and dropped out of the system and were forgotten. The RTE made drastic change in this process. Every child had the “right to education of quality” through the elementary stage (till Class VIII), which meant no failures, no dropouts. Obviously, the education in this framework has to be flexible in many ways. It is necessary in a public education system to have an official syllabus and a prescribed textbook. These can have some elements of flexibility, but the real flexibility and adaptation occurs in the day to day transactions in class. This too is not something the teacher does following a detailed lesson plan with many parallel segments – but rather a process based on the joint activity of the teacher and the learners.

Flexible classroom transaction as described above involves learners’ active participation. Active participation is not only doing what is asked for in exercises and tasks which is typically the same for all students. It means importantly that learners *contribute* their ideas and suggestions, ask questions to keep the activity going—and not only give answers to questions already raised by the teacher or in the textbook. This points to initiative and independence on the part of students who are members of a team working together (with their different skills and styles) for the benefit of all. Such cooperative activity is an opportunity both to know about others’ talents, styles and needs and to respect them.

Learner independence and autonomy

These two terms are often used interchangeably. Both point to the capacity to learn on one’s own – without relying heavily on the teacher’s inputs and guidance. Such a capacity is seen as an asset in the broad setting of a learner centred education. It is especially desirable for students of a second or foreign language who do not normally use this language for social communication outside class. Developing communication skills in a second or foreign language will be greatly aided by the learners’ own efforts to extend contact with the language by using or practicing it outside class. The typical five sessions a week of classroom contact can only provide a base. Much more effort by the learner is needed for effective skill development. Even intensive courses of 100 or 150 hours spread over about 6 weeks cannot in any way be complete. So, the learner’s own efforts are important.

Another perspective on learner independence has come from the distance and open learning sectors. For courses in this mode there are no time tabled ‘teaching sessions. Well designed course material is provided – in print and audio-visual media. The student has to find a suitable place and time to ‘study’ –keeping to a schedule of 15 (for example) hours a week. Such courses are thus based on self-managed or self-directed learning. The effort and discipline have to come from within. We can see here that the personal quality of independence or autonomy is important – for all areas of study, not only language. It is also true that the use of modern technology (ICT) in education is linked to modes of learning which are different from students and live-teacher interaction. This is *not* to say that the classroom has no importance any more, but rather that classroom-based instruction has to be complemented as well as supplemented. Here again the learner’s initiative is called upon.

- 1) What was the difference between the traditional curriculum and the present-day curriculum? What is learner autonomy?

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- 2) How do you make your students more independent in acquiring the second language?

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have made a survey of the various ways in which individuals differ, focusing on those characteristics that might influence how they learn. We saw that two negative factors the teacher often encounters – low readiness to deal with subject matter and low interest and motivation—are caused largely by what *happens to* a student in terms of external conditions. They are not fixed characteristics of the individual and so *can be changed* by providing appropriate stimulation and support.

We saw that there are differences among children in scholastic aptitude and language learning aptitude, but we also realized that the impact of these factors on learning –especially communication skills development - is not very large. So even in a large class with an apparent gap between strong and weak learners (high marks and low marks in previous tests), there would be many activities that all can participate in and benefit from.

We also looked more closely at a few selected aspects of personality: the typical (in a sense habitual) way in which individuals think, feel, behave. These qualities have nothing to do with the capacity to learn, but they can influence the ways in which learners participate in curriculum transaction. This influence covers both what they take in from inputs and what they contribute. The interesting aspects of diversity lie in these personal characteristics. The well-known model of multiple intelligences brings the cognitive and social, emotional and bodily aspects of personality together as possible areas of special aptitudes. It is important to recognize these qualities, and make instruction flexible. Including a variety of techniques and activities will ensure that more learning styles have a match in the curriculum. Finally, we noted the relevance of learner autonomy in education and especially for communication skills.

1.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Readiness refers to the receptivity of a learner (in terms of ability, attitude and interest) to learn new items. All of us have had experience of some students finding a particular topic ‘difficult’. This is because there is a mismatch between the teaching plan for a particular topic and the students’ ability to assimilate and understand it. In other words, some students lack readiness for a particular topic not because of low learning capacity but because of inadequate understanding/knowledge required for the topic.

A student who shows lack of relevant knowledge in any subject must be given specific planned help. This will allow her/him to catch up with the others. If sufficient help is provided, before a topic is taught, a student’s readiness problem might slowly disappear.

- 2) Read Section 1.3 for the answer.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Here are some clues:
 - Subject is too difficult
 - There is no real help from teachers or friends
 - Sometimes other students make fun of such students, leading to low self-esteem.

Teachers can:

- provide intensive individual attention to those students.
- adapt the syllabus and materials to some extent.
- be sympathetic and sensitive to these students.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Intelligence is primarily concerned with reasoning, pattern recognition and problem solving.

Students with higher level of scholastic ability perform better in many class activities. However, they may not perform as well in more open-ended activities such as - dialogues, dramatization of themes, situations from stories and poems, creating displays/charts, sharing experiences from outside school and so on.

- 2) There is no scientific evidence to suggest that aptitude is a factor in early learning at school. Aptitude is not a relevant or helpful idea for teachers at the school level.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) A List of categories of cognitive style mentioned:
 - Whole or part focus learning (field dependence – field independence)
 - Inductive vs. Deductive learning
 - Convergent thinking vs. Divergent thinking

- 2) Do it according to your own experience.

Check Your Progress 5

- 1) Here are some hints:
- Teacher should be aware of the diversity of the children, their strengths and interests.
 - Teacher should recognize special aptitude of the children and nurture their special potential.

Check Your Progress 6

- 1) The traditional concept of curriculum was the standard curriculum which was constructed by so-called experts. The new approach to the curriculum involves the child as well. The child thus becomes an active co-creator of new knowledge. In a traditional curriculum the given syllabus is covered by following a recommended method to be used by the teacher.

Learner autonomy refers to a student's ability to set appropriate learning goals and take charge of his or her own learning. However, autonomous learners are dependent upon teachers to create and maintain learning environments that support the development of learner autonomy.

- 2) Develop communication skills in the second language so that students can use it for social communication outside the classroom as well as independent academic activities.

Encourage online learning using ICT.

1.9 SUGGESTED READING

Gass, Susan, M. *Input, Interaction, and the Second Language Learner*. Routledge, UK, 2017